Copyrighted material

The Music of What Happens

Poems, Poets, Critics

HELEN VENDLER

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England 1988

This One

Copyrighted image

Copyrighted material

Copyright © 1988 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper, and its binding materials have been chosen for strength and durability.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vendler, Helen Hennessy.
The music of what happens.

Includes index.
1. American poetry — 20th century — History and criticism. 2. English poetry — 20th century — History and criticism. 3. Poetry. I. Title.
PS325.V46 1988 811'.5'09 87-21240
ISBN 0-674-59152-6 (alk. paper)

Copyrighted material

Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction 1

I On Criticism

1. The Function of Criticism *9*
2. Looking for Poetry in America *22*
3. Critical Models: On Geoffrey Hartman *42*
4. Defensive Harmonies: On Harold Bloom *49*
5. The Medley Is the Message: On Roland Barthes *58*
6. The Hunting of Wallace Stevens: Critical Approaches *75*

II On Poetry

7. Lionel Trilling and Wordsworth's Immortality Ode *93*
8. Keats and the Use of Poetry *115*
9. Reading Walt Whitman *132*

III On Poets

10. Seamus Heaney *149*
11. Stephen Spender: Journals and Poems *166*
12. Donald Davie: Self-Portraits in Verse *174*
13. Ted Hughes *197*
14. Czeslaw Milosz *209*
15. John Ashbery, Louise Glück *224*
16. Allen Ginsberg *262*
17. Sylvia Plath *272*

Copyrighted material

18. Elizabeth Bishop *284*
19. Anne Sexton *300*
20. A. R. Ammons: Dwelling in the Flow of Shapes *310*

IV Recent Writing

21. James Merrill *345*
22. Adrienne Rich, Jared Carter, Philip Levine *368*
23. Charles Wright *388*
24. Amy Clampitt *398*
25. Dave Smith *413*
26. Frank Bidart *424*
27. Michael Blumenthal *431*
28. Louise Glück, Stephen Dunn, Brad Leithauser, Rita Dove *437*
29. Jorie Graham *455*

Credits *461*
Index *465*

Copyrighted material

Acknowledgments

In collecting these essays, I felt again the generosity of all those who, one way or another, sponsored them and saw them into print. I am especially grateful to William Shawn, until recently the editor of the *New Yorker*; to Robert Silvers, editor of the *New York Review of Books*; and to Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic.* I thank them for their hospitality, courtesy, and editing intelligence. I regret deeply that Howard Moss, who first welcomed me to the *New Yorker*, should not have lived to receive my thanks for his encouragement and friendship.

During the time some of these pieces were written, I enjoyed a sabbatical leave from Harvard, a Harvard research subsidy, an NEH Senior Fellowship, an ACLS travel grant, and a Rockefeller Foundation residency at Bellagio. These grants were not awarded for the work collected here, but this work benefited from the support and leisure they provided. I thank my referees, who enabled me to have such grants.

My colleagues at Boston University and at Harvard have offered me that conversation and friendship without which no writing can be carried on.

This volume is dedicated to a lifelong friend as inadequate homage to her quick mind, her gift for laughter, and her tender heart.

Copyrighted material

The Music of What Happens

Copyrighted material

Introduction

Most of these essays on critics and poets were written in the last ten years, while criticism was struggling through one of its periodic generational changes. In a 1986 essay in *Raritan,* W. J. T. Mitchell, who edits *Critical Inquiry,* called the present tendency in criticism "a shift in emphasis from *meaning* to *value,*" explaining meaning-centered criticisms as those interested in "interpretations," and value-centered criticisms as those "focussing on the problems of belief, interest, power, and ideology." As master-terms of criticism, *meaning* and *value* (in Mitchell's sense) may seem important to others: to me they seem marginal. The criticism of art should not be chiefly a matter either of interpretation(s) or of discussion of ideology. Of course, criticism may, along the way, make an interpretation or unveil or counter an ideology; but these activities (of paraphrase and polemic) are not criticism of the art work as art work, but as statement. "Art works," said Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, "say something that differs in kind from what words say" (1970; English version, 1984, 263).

Paraphrase, interpretation (in the usual sense), and ideological polemic are legitimate preliminary activities putting the art work back into the general stream of statements uttered by a culture. All of these statements (from advertising to sermons) can be examined for their rhetorics of persuasion and their ideological self-contradiction or coherence, but such examinations bracket the question of aesthetic success. It is impossible, of course, to name a single set of defining characteristics that will discriminate an aesthetic object from one that does not exert aesthetic power, but that is no reason to deny the existence of aesthetic power and aesthetic response. Though aesthetic response is culturally conditioned, and tastes differ even among those within a single culture, nevertheless the phenomenon of aes-

Copyrighted material

thetic response always remains selective. Nobody finds everything beautiful. And no other category ("the rhetorically complex," "the philosophically interesting," "the overdetermined," "the well structured" and so on) can be usefully substituted for the category "the aesthetic."

It is natural that people under new cultural imperatives should be impelled to fasten new interpretations (from the reasonable to the fantastic) onto aesthetic objects from the past. But criticism cannot stop there. The critic may well begin, "Look at it this way for a change," but the sentence must continue, "and now don't you see it as more intelligibly beautiful and moving?" That is, if the interpretation does not reveal some hitherto occluded aspect of the aesthetic power of the art work, it is useless as art criticism (though it may be useful as cultural history or sociology or psychology or religion). There is a parallel with musical performance: all sorts of "interpretations" of a sonata are possible, and their number is theoretically infinite; but unless the interpretation accurately reveals a newly perceived coherence of structure, or a newly exposed line of development, or new harmonic interest, it can make no cognitive or emotional claim to replace an older interpretation; and the musical listener, having heard something merely eccentric or ingenious, will depart dissatisfied.

The aim of a properly aesthetic criticism, then, is not primarily to reveal the *meaning* of an art work or disclose (or argue for or against) the ideological *values* of an art work. The aim of an aesthetic criticism is to *describe* the art work in such a way that it cannot be confused with any other art work (not an easy task), and to *infer* from its elements the aesthetic that might generate this unique configuration. (Ideological criticism is not interested in the uniqueness of the work of art, wishing always to conflate it with other works sharing its values.) Aesthetic criticism begins with the effort to understand the individual work (aided by whatever historical, philosophical, or psychological competence is necessary for that understanding); it is deeply inductive, and goes from the single work to the decade of work, from the decade of work to the lifetime of work, from the lifetime of work to the interrelation with the work of other artists.

What does it mean to describe an art work so that another viewer, reader, or listener will recognize this as a just aesthetic description? It will not do to name each note in a piece of music in sequence, or make an inventory of all the objects pictured and the colors used in

Copyrighted material

a painting, or describe the topic and meter of a poem. Aesthetic description aims at something finer and more analytic than any of these grosser methods. The first rule of thumb is that no significant component can be left out of consideration. A critic must notice not only (to use Seamus Heaney's words from which I take my title) "what happens," but also "the music of what happens," and must perceive the pertinence of both "the mud-flowers of dialect / And the immortelles of perfect pitch." And the second rule of thumb is that the significant components are known as such by interacting with each other in a way that seems coherent, not haphazard.

Critics with an interpretative or ideological *a priori* (by contrast to critics with an aesthetic *a priori*) seem, to someone who knows a poem well, bent on leaving out whatever in a poem is not to their purposes, or on distorting, in the service of argument, what they do find to describe. I have argued in one of these essays against such a reading (a Freudian one by Lionel Trilling) of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode. Both ideological and hermeneutic (or interpretation-centered) critics want to place the literary art work principally within the sphere of history and philosophy, while an aesthetic critic would rather place it in the mimetic, expressive, and constructivist sphere of the fine arts — theater, painting, music, sculpture, dance — where it may more properly belong (as I have argued here in an essay on Geoffrey Hartman).

Critics who see interpretation as their *raison d'être* fundamentally regard the art work as an allegory: somewhere under the surface (as in a biblical parable) there lies a hidden meaning which it is the critic's responsibility (as it was the exegete's duty) to reveal. Such an ultimate disregard for "surface" in favor of a presumed "depth" goes absurdly counter to the primary sensuous claim of every work of art, the claim made precisely by its "surface" (these words, these notes, and no others). An interpretation of meaning or a disclosure of value should be not an endpoint but a means of returning to the mingled freedom and necessity of the words-as-arranged-on-the-page. Form, after all, is nothing but content-as-arranged. Content disarranged (as in paraphrase) leaves form behind, usually unnoticed. And a scrutiny that notices chiefly rhetorical figures and their predictable self-undoing leaves out the larger conduct of the art work — its play with genre, intertextuality, etymology, tonality, levels of aesthetic function.

It goes without saying that there are discursive elements (topics, plot) and ideological elements (belief, interest, position-taking) in

Copyrighted material

every work of art. Art must say something and must care about what it says; and every artist uses "ideas" (as well as images, phonemes, echoes, textural contrast, feelings, myths, and so on) as part of the raw material of composition. The artist uses ideas, that is, as functional parts (rather than as ideological determinants) of the work. "A poem," says Khlebnikov, "is related to flight, in the shortest time possible its language must cover the greatest distance in images and thoughts." ("On Poetry," c. 1920, from *The King of Time,* 1985, 153). In the long run, topicality of statement and situational *engagement* are the first things in an art work to fall to the ravages of time. Every artist feels this with a pang. As the culture ideologically supporting a work decays, the work becomes "merely" (merely!) beautiful. "The Museum Shop Catalogue" by John N. Morris shows the process in action:

> The past is perfectly darling —
> These pretty things that come along with us!
> Mary and Siva house without oppugnancy . . .
>
> Everything here has been imported
> Over some frontier. At last
> It is all a kind of art entirely.
>
> And really they *are* just lovely,
> Perfectly lovely, these things.
> In vain do I deplore . . .
>
> Mary and Siva
> Accompany our lives.
> Although a loneliness persists.
> They are only beautiful now.
>
> (*Poetry* 144, August 1984, 262–263)

That the work of art had something to say and *that* there was an urgency in saying it, remain evident both in its propositions and in its rhetoric; but who except believing Christians could now read George Herbert with delight if truth of doctrine and ideological relevance were the chief basis of aesthetic response?

"With delight" is a necessary phrase for an aesthetic criticism. One can presumably discuss both the *meaning* and the *value* (in Mitchell's sense) of a work in which one has taken no delight whatever (and

Copyrighted material

> public not only, therefore, confuses one with the other, but does not know that one or the other has been committed: not because the news has not got out, but because what counts as one or the other cannot be defined until it happens; and when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a crime or glory of his own. (*Must We Mean What We Say?*, 1976, 191)

Samuel Johnson, in his "Prologue" for David Garrick, said it earlier:

> Hard is his lot, that here by fortune plac'd
> Must watch the wild vicissitudes of taste;
> With ev'ry meteor of caprice must play,
> And chase the new-blown bubbles of the day.

Chasing our new-blown poetic and critical bubbles — some of them very beautiful — is of necessity the work of many diverse voices. I offer these essays in aesthetic criticism as the reports of one voice — confident in its attachment to poetry, but conscious that the art of poetry is far larger than any single description of its powers.

Copyrighted material

1

The Function of Criticism

Like all other perennial human activities, criticism exists because it gives pleasure to those who perform it. And, like historical and philosophical writing, it also seems to give pleasure to people who, though they do not themselves write it, like to read it. If one function of criticism is to give pleasure to its critic-producers and its reader-consumers (including the artists who create the art it comments on), then to speak of the function of criticism means to look at the nature and range of such pleasures, and how they can be defended.

But there is, other than pleasure, another function of criticism, anciently regarded as the nobler one: to explain some complex state of affairs — whether the relation of parts in an aesthetic whole, or the development of an artist, or the nature of creation in a given historical period. This older conception of criticism has been unsettled lately by a considerable skepticism. Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, refusing to group criticism with other forms of discursive writing, claim it as a creative product, indistinguishable in its aim, means, and end from novels, poems, or plays. As Bloom recently put it, "I behold no differences, in kind or in degree, between the language of poetry and the language of criticism." Bloom adds, as a corollary, that he denies (with Richard Rorty) "that there is or should be any common vocabulary in terms of which critics can argue with one another." In short, criticism for Bloom is expressive, not expository; creative, not discursive; and unamenable to the debates appropriate to the sciences or the humanities.

I want to take up some of these issues here; but since I am a critic incorrigibly unhappy without a text to dwell on, I will use as my guide through this topic some texts by poets and critics who have

Copyrighted material

themselves reflected on criticism and its relation both to art and to life.

My first text comes from John Ashbery's "Litany." Just as every dog has his day, the poet suggests that critics too have their day, an ephemeral one. Every act of criticism is confined to a specific moment by the act of creation on which it is parasitic; as Ashbery puts it, criticism goes to a first night, writes its critique, and becomes itself "music of the second night":

> We know how the criticism must be done
> On a specific day of the week. Too much matters
> About this day. Another day, and the criticism is thrown
> down
> Like trash into a dim, dusty courtyard.
> It will be built again. That's all the point
> There is to it.

Criticism is like civilization; in Yeats's words, "All things fall and are built again," and our pleasure in the building, rather than any immortality in the product, is our motive. The Ashbery poem reaches its most original point in its central Escher-like architectural fantasy, in which pleasure in the art work and criticism of it are at once cohabitors and competitors:

> They are constructing pleasure simultaneously
> In an adjacent chamber
> That occupies the same cube of space as the critic's study.
> For this to be pleasure, it must also be called criticism.

The mutual competing-for-space engaged in by pleasure and criticism appears in Ashbery's certainty that the chamber where pleasure is constructed occupies the same cube of space as the critic's study; and yet Ashbery allows for the successive nature of the two activities (in which criticism follows upon pleasure) by describing the chambers as adjacent ones. Ashbery is here formulating more explicitly the relation between pleasure and criticism which Keats implied in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where the spectator cannot be, at one and the same time, lost in empathetic pleasure and critically mindful of the Urn as an art work in marble. Artists are glad to have created an empathetic pleasure in the spectator; but insofar as the critical act

Copyrighted material

subsequently holds aloof from the aesthetic illusion (of representation, of verisimilitude, of emotion in act) it sets the artist's teeth on edge.

To the artist, "too much conceiving" (to use Milton's words) seems a dangerous state. Milton may have intended only praise when he wrote, as a reader, his sonnet in memory of Shakespeare; but he recognizes that the double critical act of reading Shakespeare and thinking about him turns the reader himself to stone, as he becomes no longer himself but a mausoleum for the spirit of Shakespeare. The reader's own imagination is suppressed by Shakespeare's usurping power:

> Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving,
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;
> And so sepulchred in such pomp dost lie,
> That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

It is this quelling and Gorgon-like power of art that is known to the artist and critic alike. The critic's wish to quell and master arises, when it does, directly as a reaction to the quelling he has himself undergone, described here by Milton and enacted by Keats's speaker as the Urn overmasters him. Each time Keats, as spectator, is quelled by the power of the Urn, he reasserts himself, as critic, by recalling the limits of the Urn's medium — speechless, it cannot declare its own legend; immobile, it cannot allow its trees to shed their leaves; confined, it cannot send inhabitants back to the little town. In this ode Keats is critic as well as beholder, and the ode, itself a work of criticism on a putatively real art work, asserts itself in the Bloomian manner as a rivalrous countercreation, motivated of course by pleasure (the Urn can express a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme) but also by a competitive intent.

It is odd to see terms of pleasure and rivalry come to the fore in remarks on criticism, when for so long the terms in which criticism was discussed were the acquisition of knowledge and a secular evangelism in the dissemination of learning. The Arnoldian notion of criticism as making known the best that has been thought or said has now come under attack. One attack says that the criterion of "the best" conceals a political agenda aiming at an elitist canon-formation. The second attack says that "making known" implies a coercive homiletic intent, rather than a disinterested inquiry or a free

Copyrighted material

play of the mind. Canon-formation, while acknowledged as psychologically inevitable, is seen as anything but innocent; and the Arnoldian tone of moral instruction and high seriousness is found repellent both by those who prefer to see criticism as neutrally explanatory and by those who see it as exuberantly self-expressive.

Oddly enough, the act of criticism has been exempt, on the whole, from delicate psychological investigation. Crude explanations for its existence are not wanting, and they possess the usual quantum of crude truth: criticism is said to spring from the envy felt by the artist manqué, or from the contentious passion of the hostile scholar, or from the moral severity of the secretly complicit Puritan. More recently, Bloom has proposed that the love of poetry is another variant of the love of power, that we read (and presumably write) "to usurp an illusion of identification or possession; something we can call ourselves or even our own . . . The critic too becomes a demiurge."

It is hard, given this Freudian delight in unmasking, to suggest motives for criticism other than the discreditable (if entirely human) ones of envy, competition, defensive reaction-formation, power-seeking, and spiritual parricide. These motives, when successfully enacted, are all powerful sources of pleasure; and no doubt there is criticism that has been occasioned by them, and which bears traces — in the rancor, spite, or triumph of its style — of its origins.

But just as there may be many motives for entering a single profession — medicine, for instance — so too there are many motives for the writing of criticism, and I want to suggest that it is chiefly by its style that we know the motives and the aims of a given piece of criticism. We can shed light on the function of criticism by thinking about some of the styles in which it is done. If a change of style, as Wallace Stevens said, is a change of subject, then the criticism which uses a coercive style is different — has a different subject — from the criticism which uses a diffident style, and both will be different from the criticism which is sadistic, or fantastic, or soberly taxonomic.

The single most interesting thing about criticism, in fact, is the number of styles it has found it possible to voice itself in. The motives and intentions implied by a style like Dr. Johnson's are not the motives and intentions implied by a style like Henry James's. The differences are not to be attributed to the passage of time; they are much more the result of temperament, and of the critic's convictions about the social function of criticism (as we can see by comparing

Copyrighted material

contemporaries like R. P. Blackmur and Randall Jarrell, to mention only the dead). It is invidious to ascribe, as Bloom seems to do, a single set of motives to all writers engaging in the single genre that we call criticism. Each critic attaches himself differently to literature; each sends out different signals to his readers; and we may read both the attachment and the signals in the literary style of the author. In this way, Frank Kermode "reads" Susan Sontag's style as an index to her motives, which he takes to be a passionate defense of certain intellectual heroes: "Sontag uses the word 'avidity' with noticeable frequency. . . ; and the renunciation of avidity, the ceasing to admire it in others whom one desires to emulate, is, given the cultural role she has assumed, all too difficult." Later, Kermode speaks of Sontag's own "avidity for ideas and detail," of the "heat and rush of her prose," of her "avid deference." Her style is very different from his own — the cool, pleasant, understated style of the *causerie*. These antithetical positions imply a difference in the conception of criticism.

At most, we can find a family resemblance between examples of criticism. There is not, nor can there be, something that can be called (as Bloom calls it) "the language" of criticism, which he professes to be unable to distinguish from "the language" of poetry — as if either genre had ever been thought of as having a single language. Poetry cannot be satisfactorily defined as an art that uses language in a special way; on the contrary, it has always been known that any attempt to define it by its language is bound to fail. If poets use metaphor, so do historians and philosophers; if poetry is concise, so are proverbs and maxims; if poetry rhymes, so does doggerel. Whatever distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature, including the writing we call criticism, it is not any special use of language. Nor can we any longer, living as we do in the age of the prose poem, define poetry by an unjustified right margin.

The critics who profess to see no difference between literature and criticism chiefly rest their case on two easily remarked similarities between the two genres — they are both impassioned and they both use "literary language." Ruskin on Turner is surely impassioned, and as surely full of rhetoric and figure; he has certainly, in writing his criticism, written a literary essay. However, we do recognize a difference, not in the use of language, but in the inner organization of parts, between the openly fictive genres (drama, novel, and poetry) and the apparently nonfictive genres (homily, criticism, the philosophical essay). It is probably an error to attempt any single definition

Copyrighted material

in literature, thus creating "the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of the critic and of his reader." The dutiful style of any criticism which forgets the bliss of seeing and writing derives from a Puritan style of self-righteous cultural prescriptiveness which treats knowledge as anything but "delicious." Barthes is amusing and grim on the French deploring of the "national disgrace" (as they call it) of general illiteracy: "Now this national disgrace is never deplored except from a humanistic point of view, as though by ignoring books the French were merely forgoing some moral good, some noble value. It would be better to write the grim, stupid, tragic history of all the pleasures which societies object to or renounce: there is an obscurantism of pleasure."

Ashbery and Barthes concur on the intimate connection between art, pleasure, and criticism. The criticism described by Barthes sets itself fiercely against the criticism which originated in biblical hermeneutics, where the motive of the critic is to interpret a sacred text written or inspired by God. When Deity is the author, that author does not write for the happiness of writing. Duty rather than pleasure must therefore be the critic's impetus also, in such a model. And not the text's power to incorporate, and confer, bliss, but rather its power to incorporate, and impose, sacred truth, is its claim to attention.

These two models are radically incompatible. The Barthian model, centering on bliss, refuses to dispense with the signifier; the biblical model, centering on "truth," finds its true repose in the signified. Though the second, hermeneutical, model could not finally avoid form-criticism, it regards attention to the form chiefly as a means to a higher end. It is from the hermeneutical model, with its persistent allegorizing tendency, that the vulgar notion of there being a "hidden meaning" in literature has arisen. The secular critic stays his eye on the surface; the religious critic chooses to pass through the surface in search of divine meaning. Both sorts of critics are always with us, though under different names. The two critical schools will always remain distrustful of each other, each finding the value of the work of art by a method repellent to the other.

It remains true that the tension between the two schools reminds us of the double nature of the work of art. The hermeneutical critics — who look for meaning, import, philosophy, social truth — remind us of the links between literature and its social and philosophical milieu; the explorers of the bliss of writing remind us of the links between literature and the other expressive arts — music, painting, and sculpture.

Copyrighted material

I said earlier that I would take up the writer's hostility to criticism. It comes, of course, from being unappreciated or misunderstood; and the history of criticism is full of such mistreatment of writers. But it is also true that the poet is often opaque to himself, and senses in his bafflement an obscure need for the critic, a dependency only sporadically acknowledged which by reaction-formation is itself a hidden cause of the barrier between the poet and the critic. Speaking for all poets, John Ashbery, mildly reproachful and yet needy in the instinctive motions of his art, proffers in "Litany" the idea of a perpetual "new criticism," one acknowledging its own ontological dependency on the artists:

> First of all, the new
> Criticism should take into account that it is we
> Who made it, and therefore
> Not be too eager to criticize us: we
> Could do that for ourselves, and have done so.

Ashbery objects to criticism's taking itself for object: for him, criticism is only the outer rind of poetic thinking:

> Nor
> Should it take itself as a fitting subject
> For critical analysis, since it knows
> Itself only through us, and us
> Only through being part of ourselves, the bark
> Of the tree of our intellect.

Ashbery's final image in "Litany" is one of criticism and poetry engaged in a symbiosis so complete that it becomes an identity, even if a perplexed and perpetually frustrating one:

> The new
> Criticism . . . is us: to inflect
> It is to count our own ribs, as though Narcissus
> Were born blind, and still daily
> Haunts the mantled pool, and does not know why.

Copyrighted material

The obscure but intensely narcissistic and pleasure-filled relation of artists to their own work is fulfilled only when they see the work made intellectually accessible; and the obsessive relation of the critic to that authorial work ensures the production of criticism. The broader public desire for critical mediation of the forgotten, or the new, or even the received objects of cultural veneration also ensures the continual production of writing about writing. If there is anything both Ashbery and Barthes suggest to us, it is that the same chamber holds pleasure and criticism in an inseparable cohabitation. The culture at any given moment may not notice either its contemporary poets or its critics; nevertheless they tirelessly embody and interpret culture, living like spies in the territory of what Barthes calls the *Doxa,* the received opinions of the petrified past. Ashbery's remark to the poet is true of the critic too:

> One can live
> In the land like a spy without ever
> Trespassing on the moral, forgotten frontier,
> In the psalms of the invisible chorus
> There is a germ of you that lives like a coal
> Amid the hostile indifference of the land
> That merely forgets you. Your hand
> Is at the heart of its weavings and nestlings.
> You are its guarantee.

Behind Ashbery's words — "You are its guarantee" — we hear Shelley's claim that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the race; in the invisible chorus we hear an echo of Stevens's secondary choirs; in the hand at the heart of the weavings and nestlings of culture we approach something like Seamus Heaney's conviction of the maternal incubation-powers of the poet, bearing meanings like new-laid eggs to the back doors of houses. In all of these functions the poet is abetted by the critic — at least in those moments when the critics take in the guarantee, hear the invisible chorus, and look for the eggs in the nest.

Ideally, the critic is something other than the scholar. Ideally, he is the artist himself in a moment of dispassionate inquiry; at second best, he is the artist *manqué.* "Everyone can easily understand," said

Copyrighted material

Baudelaire in his 1855 essay on the Exposition Universelle, "that if the men whose task it is to express the beautiful were to conform to the rules of narrow-minded professors, beauty itself would disappear from the earth . . . In the multiple productions of art there is something always new which will forever escape the rules and the analyses of the school!" The critic who is an artist *manqué* will himself be looking for the beautiful bizarre, not the beautiful familiar — or, at the very least, looking for both. The beautiful new is always bizarre: in Wordsworth's more sedate formulation, the artist must create the taste by which he is enjoyed. The bizarre new is what Barthes calls "the writerly" — to the critic as well as to the writer who conceived it, it gives that shock of pleasure which Barthes calls, borrowing the word from Baudelaire, *jouissance.* It is caused, says Baudelaire, by astonishment: "Astonishment, which is one of the great delights (*jouissances*) caused by art and literature, comes from this very variety of types and sensations." The temperaments which seek astonishment are not the temperaments that seek the comfort of the received forms of the past; and so the critic in his *jouissance* finds himself poised uneasily between the artists, who thrive on the new, and the scholars, who are uneasy before it. He has a foot in both camps and is wholly at ease in neither; among artists he senses himself the artist *manqué,* among scholars he feels light-minded.

An ideal criticism would bring speculative thought, life experience, and anterior texts equally to bear on the written work, but no critic's mind can move in these three directions at once. Finally, each critic must choose a single predilection. What Marianne Moore says of poetry and what it provokes in the reader seems true: "[Poetry] must be a distinct distillation of personal experience / that interests me impersonally." The impersonality of the interest provoked is what makes the poem available to criticism: "It compels analysis," as Moore says, "and does not disappear under admiration." Analysis is, so to speak, admiration methodized. But there are two problems inherent in a criticism which regards art as a distillation of personal experience compelling admiration and analysis. The first is that criticism may dwell on the experience — either its biographical origin or its putative universality — to the exclusion of the art which has distilled the experience; or that it will lose itself in admiration and take on the slightly defensive tone of the insecure and evangelistic advocate. "Philosophic criticism," on the other hand, by its very distance from the immediate conditions of life from which the poem

Copyrighted material

arose, and from its speculative rather than admiring tone, avoids these dangers, while of course encountering other dangers peculiar to itself — a tendency to forget the art and gusto of the text in favor of its thought or milieu — or a worse tendency to make itself more important than the text occasioning it.

The origin of criticism is twofold, and both origins bear on the social function of criticism. The first, ignoble, origin is the pleasure of refutation: criticism is the revenge of the student who once, perforce, sat silent while things that seemed untrue were said unrebuked, and poets who loomed large in the mind were ignored in the classroom. In this sense, every generation of young critics refurbishes lapsed reputations and corrects the misperceptions of the generation that taught them. The social function of the aggressive component in criticism is to restore the neglected and discover the new. But the second origin of criticism is the truer one. The pleasure here lies in discovering the laws of being of a work of literature. This pleasure of poetics is not different from the pleasure of the scientist who advances, at first timidly and then with increasing confidence, a hypothesis that makes order out of the rubble of data. The rubble seems to arise and arrange itself into a form as soon as it is looked at from the right angle. That is one way of putting it. Sometimes in literature it is not so much that the rubble of diction arranges itself into a form; rather, what was previously heard as cacophony is now heard as song. It is hard to explain how this happens; it resembles listening to an alien music until its sequences and its intervals begin to seem natural. The music does not so much assume a form as teach itself to us as an intelligible new language, until, like Siegfried, we can understand the speech of birds. The enlargement in being able to hear a new voice, or see a new law of being, seemed to Keats like discovering a planet or an ocean, a revelation comparable to the ecstatic moments known by astronomers or explorers. If discovering Neptune or the Pacific Ocean has a social function, so does discovering (to the public gaze) the poetry of a new poet; or new aspects to the poetry of an old poet. Texts are part of reality, and are as available to exploration as any other terrain.

Wallace Stevens called all the efforts to describe mental objects "description without place." They are, he said, "integrations of the past," and he thought that such efforts to map mental configurations were as important as our maps of the geographical reality surrounding us:

Copyrighted material

as Robert von Hallberg does — assumes that a cultural and social mimesis can be found in poetry. Someone who groups essays on Lowell and Creeley with essays on Tranströmer and Milosz — as Robert Hass, also a poet, does — claims the right to describe poetry written in languages he does not read.

In these books, arguments about basic premises — Is "poetry" a possible object of thought? Is it legitimate to read poems as sources of, or reflections of, cultural practice? To what extent can one "understand" a poem one reads in translation? — are not put forth. There are practical arguments justifying the omission. Two of these books — those by Hass and Smith — are largely collections of reviews or occasional essays directed at the general reader; the third, von Hallberg's, hopes to cover a fair amount of cultural and historical territory. Yet in each case one would have liked some consideration of first principles, some account of stumbling blocks, some justification of the road taken. And one would like to be sure that some of the theoretical questions had been silently put, and satisfactorily answered, before the writing of the essay was undertaken.

Robert Hass, for instance, writes about Milosz (whom he has translated with the help of a native speaker of Polish and of Milosz himself) as though Milosz were writing in English, and as though all it took to understand Milosz were a knowledge of Polish history. Of course Hass wishes to keep his eye on Milosz's long and full career, not to "distract" us with ways and means of translation. But precisely in this eliding of the linguistic and cultural difficulties of Milosz's work — which Hass is better placed to appreciate than the rest of us — something valuable vanishes from the essay. Nor is a joke on the subject of one's own linguistic ignorance a way out of the difficulty. Writing on a (translated) poem by Tranströmer, Hass speaks of looking "across the page, with edified ignorance, at the Swedish." "Edified ignorance," as a phrase, is full of charm, not least the charm of honesty; but charm is not a secure base for criticism. Hass continues, on Tranströmer, in what seems to me a self-contradictory statement: "This is the way I come at *Baltics* which I like to read. I can't know how good a poem it is because I know it only in Samuel Charters' translation, but it is very interesting to me. Tranströmer is one of the most remarkable European poets of his generation." Surely this is not satisfactory. Did Keats know how good Homer was in Chapman's translation? If so, how? How does Hass know that Tranströmer is a remarkable European poet if he cannot know how good

Copyrighted material

the poem is? Does he like to read it because "it is very interesting to me" or is it very interesting to him because "I like to read" it? The reader yearns for something more hard-headed here: a sense of questions asked, by the author, of himself, before he set pen to paper.

In Smith's book, the questions posed and answered before the writing began would have had to be of a different order. Smith tends to press on us large declarative sentences: "Poetry is a dialect of the language we speak, possessed of metaphorical density, coded with resonant meaning, engaging us with narrative's pleasures, enhancing and sustaining our pleasure with enlarged awareness. In comparison to ordinary uses of language, this dialect is characterized by efficient discipline: of sharper imagery, focused symbols, connotative power, deployed rhythmic suggestion." If this is all equally true of the novels of Dickens or Proust or the criticism of Carlyle (as it is), then what is the reason to predicate it only of "poetry"? The prior question might have been asked: Is there anything that can be said of "poetry" that is *not* true of Proust or Dickens or Carlyle, and if so, what? In his wish to praise "poetry," Smith is, here and elsewhere, really praising all imaginative writing, all poesis; but he could have made the extent of his claim clear — or restricted the claim to what is peculiar to lyric.

Robert von Hallberg — to take another example — writes, speaking of the work of James Merrill, "For Merrill, energy, invention, and ornamentation — not signification — are what make poetry." But he does not suggest how signification can ever be said, in speaking of poetry, to be something different from those very qualities of energy, invention, and ornamentation. Nor does he explain where signification could be said to lie, if not in the invention of energetic words which, with their musical and figural ornamentation, correspond to the state of mind in question. Von Hallberg offers, as an example of Merrill's tendency to periphrasis, two lines "describing a ski lift." The two lines seem to him a leisurely self-indulgence: "Economy be damned: Merrill takes time to have fun." The two lines in question are:

> Prey swooped up, the iron love seat shudders
> Onward into its acrophilic trance.

Now these two lines are not "describing a ski lift"; they describe one's feelings in committing oneself to that ski lift, a different matter

Copyrighted material

entirely. One feels like Ganymede scooped up in Jovian iron talons; the seat, made for two, resembles those porch gliders or love seats made just big enough for courting; the seat (with no visible machinery in it) lurches upward as though it had a reverse psychosis to acrophobia; one feels abducted, a forced participant in its mad love of heights. "I feel I have been swooped up by a bird of prey, clapped into an Iron Maiden 'love seat,' and made an unwilling partner in a *folie à deux*" is what this passage, very *economically,* "signifies." The "invention" and "energy" and "ornament" *are* its means of signification, and what it describes is a brief moment of panicky inner sensation, not a ski lift. Whether lyric "signifying" is properly the mimesis of a thing (a ski lift) or a state of mind (here, comic panic) is a question that one wants von Hallberg to have faced, if only to make his argument more persuasive.

I am only too painfully aware that exactly these reproaches could be uttered — have been uttered — about my own essays on poetry. And I do know the impossibility of a return to first principles before each sentence one commits to paper. However, we have all recently been put on notice, by the salutary sternness of literary theory, that our terms are likely to be interrogated, and that we might first interrogate them ourselves. And though nobody likes to be reminded of this obligation, I take the reviewer's — and fellow practitioner's — privilege to make the reminder, as much to myself as to the writers under review. Poetic language is itself so finely discriminating that it must impose a practice of discrimination and nuance on its critics as well.

The conduct of any critical argument is evinced as much by its tone as by its premises, as Matthew Arnold knew when he criticized the prevailing tones — evangelistic, assertive, homiletic, denunciatory, hortatory — of the English criticism of his day. He thought it entirely too "Hebraic," and urged a "smiling Hellenistic lightness" (James Merrill's words) on English public discourse. Arnold's own flexibility and sardonic wit can be said to stand for the Hellenic form of argument, over against Carlyle's Hebraism. Eliot's criticism — the most powerful of the twentieth century in English — descended more directly from Arnold than from Carlyle or Ruskin, and it set the "cool" analytic tone of the New Criticism, which aimed at the casual sophistication of the French *causerie* without ever quite attaining it.

It is improbable that any of these three European models — the Hebraic, the Hellenic, the *causerie* — could survive unchanged in the

Copyrighted material

United States in this last quarter of the twentieth century. They were in fact challenged by the lively, intimate comedy and pathos of Randall Jarrell's reviews, so absorbing his reader into the joint enterprise of appreciating poetry that they seemed a letter from a friend. But Jarrell's wit and sureness of taste could not become repeatable; he established no school. The Hebraic model has been of use to Marxist and feminist criticism in their earlier stages, but both have rapidly become increasingly academic, theoretical, and speculative. The gracious lightness of the Hellenistic model has been more visible in the writing of foreigners — Frank Kermode and Roland Barthes come to mind — than in the work of American-born critics. The *causerie* repels the earnest American mind by its relaxation of manner. When we interrogate these three books, we find the Hebraic tone still with us, but wearing its rue with an American difference.

In the work of the two poets, Hass and Smith, a determined effort toward the colloquial (by contrast to the discursive or written model) keeps asserting itself. Academic writing may seem to the poet too enslaved to the head, too unconscious of the body, too much that of the scribe, too little that of the bard, manifesting too strongly the formal written character, too little the genial social utterance. Both Hass and Smith want to rehabilitate the personal essay. Hass's essay "Images," after quotations from Blake and Eliot and Basho, continues: "My wife in the lamplight is rubbing lotion into her skin and examining mosquito bites. That morning we had been lying on warm granite beside a lake the melting snow fed and her breasts are a little sunburned." Two pages later we are back to Chekhov, Williams, Cézanne, Blake, Wordsworth, Machado, and Milosz. A few pages later: "I am a man approaching middle age in the American century, which means I've had it easy, and I have three children, somewhere near the average, and I've just come home from summer vacation in an unreliable car. This is the *selva oscura*." Moments of such bathos mark the difficulties of the tone Hass has chosen. This kind of writing, while wanting to be social, informal, and seductive, is in fact so stylized — in its intimacy to total strangers — as to be unsettling. Or perhaps this is only the Californian manner, and we will all be doing it in a few years. All critics feel some confidence that the course of their sensual life has reverberations in their intellectual life (and vice versa), but it is not certain that interpolated narratives of the one belong in the testimony of the other.

When Hass writes plain criticism (as in his admirable expositions,

Copyrighted material

for the commmon reader, of the work of both Rilke and Milosz), he is interesting, learned, and deft, though sometimes, to my taste, sentimental. He is too fond of coercive words: *terrible, painful, wonderful, terrifying, agonizing, mysterious, shocking, raw, seductive.* Such words not only say "Admire with me"; they are shopworn. I know, from experience, Hass's difficulty here; one wants not only to describe a great writer like Rilke but also to praise him, to draw attention to his qualities in terms the general reader will recognize as praise. Poets feel so keenly that academic teachers dilute the intensity and volatility of poetry that they press ever harder, in their own writing about poetry, to insist on the passional investment that art calls for from its readers.

Dave Smith shares this insistence of tone, especially in urging on us, in two essays, the power of Robert Penn Warren's poetry: "What terror now not to know what had been certain reality, to have to conjecture 'perhaps' and to relive the old contingencies, the old hope of continuity — and what courage to make this choice! . . . For even if the promise of reality will be only the scalding of flesh and the not-knowing, passion is all. Passion is feeling; man is feeling; poetry is feeling. In his self-interrogation Warren rejects his earlier *Tempest* tone and, like Lear, calls on the crack of winds." The tone heard here — a very American one — is that of the lay sermon, in which the spiritual instruction of a pupil is undertaken by a spiritual initiate. What is odd, in both Hass and Smith, is that this celebratory, initiatory, and hortatory tone coexists, as I have said, with remarks from the sensual life of every day. Smith's essay on Richard Hugo begins: "I had been rereading Richard Hugo's poems during the 1979 World Series in which the all but trounced Pittsburgh Pirates made a stunning and memorable comeback to win going away. I remarked to a friend watching that last televised game that Hugo was the George Raft of poetry. I meant to imply that Hugo was a player of tough-guy roles. My friend, without blinking, said that Hugo was instead closer to the manager of the Pirates, or would be if he chewed. We were, I think, both right." A paragraph later, the tone has changed to the academic: "Reading Richard Hugo's *Selected Poems* one discovers a poet of unusual continuity in vision and execution. There are the benchmarks of change and of some evolution, but he does not show the radical alterations of style or thought which mark his contemporaries." A few pages later, we are listening to a lay sermon: "[Hugo's] poems depend upon his own hard self-accusations: he

Copyrighted material

our profession as teachers. The wish to reach out to audiences rapidly becomes a tendency to write down to them. We assume that readers need paraphrases of works written (after all) in their own language, and that they require a rehearsal of elementary moral attitudes. None of us, I fear, escapes such tendencies. But it is worthwhile occasionally to remind oneself that one's writing exists first of all as a way of explaining things to oneself, and not to others. All of us — including the three writers under discussion — become most interesting when we address a question genuinely unanswered when we sit down to write.

There are such questions in each of these books, since each contains an implicit argument about contemporary American poetry. Each of these critics is answering for himself the question "Which recent poets have moved me, or assuaged me, or enlightened me in powerful ways?" There is some overlapping of the answers, and some difference in the perspectives; but these critics (all of them near the age of forty) are essentially defining and defending their own youthful attachments of twenty years ago. These are all really books about the Sixties.

Dave Smith, himself a southern writer, argues for the importance of Robert Penn Warren and James Dickey, as well as for James Wright, Richard Hugo, and Philip Levine. These are all "masculine" poets (though in different ways) and they are perhaps less attractive to women (I speak for myself here) than to men. Penn Warren writes in large elemental terms, with a cosmic sense of the degree to which nature and man are pitted against each other and yet constrained to a symbiosis; he reaches for the grandest of words, the most transcendental of symbols, the most ambitious claims of moral vision (even when that vision is despairing or occluded). His poems open themselves out into long, loose-limbed sequences, ranging far in space and time. Smith loves this large reach in Warren, and writes generously about it, for example in a passage on a poem about migrating geese:

> All bodies of the world's body are husks, vehicles, containers, for that current which may pass through even small wires. Energy is life. Warren is recalling the totemic and hieratic images that for fifty years have served toward defining the condition of

Copyrighted material

> joy: hawk, owl, beasts, lovers, landscapes of crag and sublime contrast . . . It is not, therefore, surprising that even in this ferociously eschatological reexamination of everything, Warren would return to [the migrating] geese, to his feeling for that image of what was moving in the blind darkness. He had felt his passion was mirrored in the unchosen and lyrical yearning of the geese.

As usual, Smith's emphasis — here as in his other essays — is on the poet's repertory of images. Smith is far less likely to examine the poet's words as such — yet this is where an adverse criticism of the poets he admires would begin. Warren's image of the migrating geese in the poem "Heart of Autumn" may in itself be a moving one; but can the same be said of Warren's language about it? In watching the geese, Warren says, he feels himself transformed:

> I stand, my face lifted now skyward,
> Hearing the high beat, my arms outstretched in the tingling
> Process of transformation, and soon tough legs,
>
> With folded feet, trail in the sounding vacuum of passage,
> And my heart is impacted with a fierce impulse
> To unwordable utterance —
> Toward sunset, at a great height.

A reader might well be put off by the tough legs with folded feet, by the awkwardness of syntactic difference between the apparently parallel arms, and legs, by the phrase "my heart is impacted with," by the unpleasing changes of rhythm, and by the nineteenth-century "sublimity" in the words about inexpressibility at the close. A poem can of course survive such difficulties, and perhaps Warren's poem does. But I would like to see greater recognition of the questionable nature both of Warren's language and of his large moral assertions. (Smith quotes approvingly, "Passion / Is all. Even / The sleaziest.") A criticism that loves imagery is likely to slight both phrasing and syntax.

Smith is more willing to concede problems in Philip Levine's writing. His praise reveals some of the qualities he values in a poet, as he says of Levine: "Though he takes on the largest subjects of death, love, courage, manhood, loyalty, etc., he brings the mysteries of

Copyrighted material

experience down into the ordinarily inarticulate events and objects of daily life. His speaker and subject is the abused and disabused spirit of the common yet singular self. He risks the maudlin, the sentimental, the banal, and worse [in order to be] 'A man alone, ignorant / strong, holding the burning moments / for all they're worth.'" In poets like Levine and Hugo, a rough confrontation with the ordinary, in order to make it articulate, stirs Smith's admiration. His fine essay on Hugo — the best, to my mind, in the book — sums up in a quick and excellent portrait sketch the way in which the life of one male writer might speak to that of another:

> Fatherless and abandoned by his teenage mother, Hugo was raised by elderly, severe grandparents in White Center, Washington, then a semi-rural, poor suburb of Seattle. Enforced churchgoing left him feeling he owed something, spiritually dunned all his life. Shy, awkward, and isolated, he believed himself not only the cause of his ill fortunes but also unregenerately weak, worthless, and ever "a wrong thing in a right place." He grew up admiring local toughs for their violent courage. He extended this admiration later to sardonic movie stars, detective heroes, and British Royal Air Force flyers, who seemed to have a stylish, right manhood. He feared, hated, and coveted girls, and compensated by making himself a skilled baseball player, fisherman, and dreamer. His tutelary spirits appeared early and never abandoned him — waters, sky, hills, ocean, fish, birds, and drunks. All meant unimpeachable and continuous acceptance, private dignity, and sweet, if unrecognized, belonging.

In a passage such as this, Smith's narrative talent and gift for description carry the reader into Hugo's sensibility with consummate ease. James Wright's poetry of the depressed Ohio working class moves Smith to another form of identification; and he can say of Dickey's "wandering hero" that though he is "engaged in motorcycling, hunting, flying, climbing mountains, or making love," nonetheless he is "like most Southern writers, divided in his loyalties to the self as macho realist and the self as intellectual."

It is clear that these were the poets on whom Smith depended in the Sixties and Seventies for spiritual kinship and sustenance. He can read other poets with appreciation — there are commendations here of Sylvia Plath and May Swenson, for instance — but those are admirations from a distance. The question, "How can a man act and

Copyrighted material

yet think, plunge into nature and yet live in the mind?" is the most urgent one for Smith and for the poets he most warmly recommends to our attention; this question generates his canon.

Robert von Hallberg's central question has to do with what he calls "culture poetry" — a poetry that speaks from, of, and to the center of its own culture, rather than from an adversary position. Von Hallberg argues against the view which supposes that the poet must always be an outlaw, speaking from the margins of society to a coterie of other marginal listeners, occupying himself with esoteric or hermetic concerns. Von Hallberg wants to prove that there have been, between 1945 and 1980, many American poets who shared the general experience of other American citizens, and wrote about those central experiences in an accessible language embodying centrist positions, political and cultural. This is an interesting and fresh argument, and von Hallberg makes a persuasive case for it, up to a point.

Von Hallberg is writing a sociology of literature in the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies while leaving out the chief protest movement of that era, the Beats. Of course he excludes them a priori, since his intention is to write about poets taking positions at the center of things and writing of widely shared experiences. But his chapters nonetheless cry for the inclusion of the Beats, whose positions may now seem more central than they did at the time. A chapter on "Tourism" that leaves out Ginsberg's poems of Europe and India, a chapter on "Pop Culture" that leaves out the Beats' original incorporation of pop culture, a chapter on "Politics" that leaves out the Beats — these are impoverished chapters, finally.

Because the topics of von Hallberg's book are so interesting, one wants to see them fully treated; and a full treatment of tourism, politics, and pop culture in poetry between 1945 and 1980 would be good to have. However, von Hallberg wants to exclude "outlaw" poetry, and so the Beats must go. But what dictates that Ammons be excluded, and Ed Dorn included? One must simply take von Hallberg's canon as the grouping of poets who have meant most to him — Turner Cassity, Ed Dorn, John Hollander, Anthony Hecht, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Charles Gullans, Robert Creeley, Robert Pinsky, James McMichael — a selection that has the virtue of originality and new combinations. Lowell and Merrill are rather uneasily accommodated in the argument, since von Hallberg slights Merrill's

Copyrighted material

poems of sensuality (not a centrist experience?) and Lowell's poems of domesticity and divorce in favor of Merrill's poems about tourism and Lowell's about politics (the topics under which they are treated). Von Hallberg — with tastes resembling those of Yvor Winters for the rational and the metrical — in effect compiles a selective anthology of contemporary poetry to show that various common American activities — going abroad, engaging in political action, participating in pop culture, living in suburbs — have entered American poems. (Von Hallberg argues as well — perhaps truly, but I think unconvincingly — that systems analysis too has entered American poetry, notably in the work of Robert Creeley.)

Von Hallberg raises, by the topics he chooses, the question of what lyric poetry ought to be doing about social questions. He tends to praise poets (Charles Olson, for instance) for a "commitment to didactic, discursive poetry" and to suggest that social structures and positions are ripe material for poetry: "As a subject for poets, the recent history of intellectuals is rich, complex, and central to the national culture. Moreover, most of the audience for poetry comes from this class, which makes the analysis and representation of the subject all the more compelling." Though von Hallberg is right in fearing that poetry can thin itself out to insignificance when it forgets the social and public life, I think his notion of social responsibility in poetry is too narrow. He laments: "From the end of World War II until the early 1960s American poets had *little to say about* the differences between the intelligentsia and the working classes . . . Poets seldom *spoke of* the one corner of the class structure that concerned them most directly" [italics added]. "To have something to say about" and "to speak of" — von Hallberg's verbs — suggest that the only way poetry can include political and social realities is to make statements about them. This is the criterion used by Allen Tate when he remarked that Keats's ode "To Autumn" was a beautiful piece of style but had *little to say.* (Geoffrey Hartman has shown that it has everything to say about social change in the way it alters the structure of the Greek cult hymn and attitudes of worship.) It may be that discursive "speaking of" is not lyric's way of embodying social realities. "In truth," said Yeats, "we have no gift to set a statesman right" — but he did not mean by that, as his work shows, that one could not embody political and cultural realities in verse. Von Hallberg limits the means of lyric when he wants from it discussions of the class structure or differentiations between the intelligentsia and the working classes.

Copyrighted material

experiences we all share (love, grief, and so on), and a believable rendering of those (very intangible) experiences in language. To clothe common perceptions in striking language, not to enunciate striking perceptions, is the function of poetry. Every perception, without exception, does indeed, in poetry, need to be rendered strikingly; it does not need to be rendered striking. All poetic language is language strenuously composed beyond the requirements of information, and therefore striking, perhaps most striking when most apparently "transparent."

One of the most provocative of von Hallberg's chapters takes up explicitly the question that the two other books under discussion here take up implicitly — the question of the poetic canon. Von Hallberg believes that critics consciously set canons (the books that should be read, or studied in school, or anthologized) in order to establish standards of judgment for an audience, and that they thereby cooperate in an ultimately political objective: "Canonists worry about what will enable a community of readers to distinguish first- from second-rate thought and expression. A national canon stands as proof that such distinctions can be made so as to command assent; that the nation asks from its writers support for its policies, at the very least its educational policies; that one national objective is to preserve, by education, a hold on the past and a claim on the future." I don't think that most of these assertions hold water. In the issue of *Critical Inquiry* (of which von Hallberg is an editor) devoted to the question of the literary canon, Hugh Kenner established, briefly and clearly, what to me seems the truth of the matter — that canons are not made by governments, anthologists, publishers, editors, or professors, but by writers. The canon, in any language, is composed of the writers that other writers admire, and have admired for generations. The acclamations of governments, the civic pieties of anthologists, the hyperboles of marketing, the devotion of dons, have never kept a writer alive for three or four hundred years. It is because Virgil admired Homer, and Milton Virgil, and Keats Milton, and Stevens Keats, that those writers turn up in classrooms and anthologies. And writers admire writers not because of their topics (Blake and Keats thought Milton quite mistaken in his attitudes) but because of their writing. And writers admire writing not because it keeps up some schoolmasterly "standard" but because it is "simple, sensuous,

Copyrighted material

and passionate" (as Milton said) — strenuous, imaginative, vivid, new. The canon is always in motion (as Eliot reminded us, and as formalists have always known) because new structures are always being added to it by subsequent writers, thereby reshaping the possibilities of writing and of taste; but the evolving canon is not the creation of critics, but of poets.

As for the nation asking from its writers support for its policies, at the very least its educational policies, it is hard to imagine any free modern nation either making such a request or obtaining such support (dictatorships are another matter). No writer of any substance would support what passes, in most modern nations, for elementary and secondary education in the humanities — rote learning, indifference to the mother tongue, and a complete absence of genuinely subversive, fanciful, imaginative, or critical thought. Von Hallberg genuinely wishes — as who does not — that America could export a coherent high culture along with its pop culture. And perhaps in time that may happen. But it is not so easy to have a canon here as in a comparatively tiny and homogeneous European country. The very diversity of taste in these three books suggests that we have, for the contemporary scene, an Yvor Winters canon, a southern male canon, and a Californian canon. One could easily add a women's canon, an East Coast canon, a black canon, a Naropa canon of Buddhist writing, and so on.

Robert Hass's Californian canon is a polyglot one. Like von Hallberg (they were both trained at Stanford), he admires Wright, Creeley, McMichael, and Lowell, but he adds Tranströmer, Brodsky, Milosz, and Rilke, judging them to be normal possessions for the younger American poet. As indeed they are, along with Neruda, Amichai, Vallejo, Zbigniew Herbert, Trakl — the list could be extended almost indefinitely. The contemporary American poet-critic is far more likely to read across — in world poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — than to read back in English verse. (A well-known poet and teacher of creative writing remarked to me, unashamed, that he had never read George Herbert.)

Most of the aspiring young poets in creative writing classes know no poetry by heart. It looks as if the classical and English canon may be slipping out of our grasp, to be replaced by a modern canon of unrhymed and translated pieces. This will surely not stop the mighty workings of the imagination, and Hass's book demonstrates how powerfully Milosz and Rilke have entered his ways of thinking about

Copyrighted material

poetry. And yet what can substitute, in a poet, for a hoard of poems in the mother tongue, known so intimately that they become nature, not art? (Of course it is even better if the poet has three or four mother tongues, as Milton did.) In this way, Pope was nature, not art, to Byron; and Tennyson to Eliot; and Shakespeare to Browning. Can Rilke in translation be nature in the same way to Hass?

The anxieties revealed by these books center on the use of poetry and the claims that may be made for poetry. The ritual and liturgical uses of poetry have so far vanished that it seems unlikely that they will reappear.

None of the three writers dares claim only an aesthetic value for poetry. Von Hallberg wants a directly civic value, Smith and Hass want an ethical value, all three want a strongly mimetic value and a strongly communicative value. These are of course questions not to be settled in a review, but I myself think aesthetic value, properly understood, quite enough to claim for a poem. No matter how apparently mimetic it may look, a poem is an analogous not a mimetic imitation, algebraic and not photographic, allegorical and not historical. What it represents, ultimately, is its author's sensibility and temperament, rather than the "outside world" — but of course that sensibility and temperament have been shaped by the historical possibilities of the author's era. Thus, in representing a sensibility, the poem does represent a particular historical moment. The poem ingests, it is true, the outside world (which it uses for its images, its symbols, and its language), but it does so, as Marvell said, in order to color everything with the mind's color, reducing to zero ("annihilating," said Marvell) the entire creation into its own mentality:

> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Doth straight its own resemblance find;
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other worlds and other seas,
> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.

Even the civic, even the ethical, take on, in the achieved poem, that suffusing green — and so become not the civic or the ethical

Copyrighted material

but "Wordsworth's sensibility in an ethical moment" or "Lowell's sensibility musing on civic virtue" — another of the protean "fire-born moods" of the mind (Yeats), another waving of the various light in the mind's plumes (Marvell), another unique snowflake (Merrill), "another bodiless for the body's slough" (Stevens). Naturally, all kinds of ethical and civic topics turn up in poetry, as do trees and flowers and ladies' eyes; but they are all material for the transformation into green. Once they are "greened," they enter into the dynamic system of relations within the poem, and their allegiance is reordered in that magnetic field, which extends outward to the entire *oeuvre* of the poet, and thence to culture itself. The referentiality of language in a poem is more inward than outward, even when the topic of the poem is a civic or ethical or mimetic one.

This does not mean that a poem has no subject but itself or language; on the contrary, a poem may very well be about one's mother, or the march on Washington, or the Warsaw ghetto. But it is about such things as they figure in the psychic and linguistic economies of a particular temperament and body of work; and those economies are taxing, subtle, and complicated systems to describe. No short essay can do them justice; not even many books (when a great poet is in question) can do them justice.

Because language is the medium of poetry, and language cannot, when used according to any of the possible rules of its coding, *not* communicate, there is, it seems to me, no need to worry about poetry's "communicating" itself. All poems grow easier with time, even *The Waste Land.* And there is no need to worry about "universality" or speaking for everyone. "The true poem has a single human voice . . . yet it is also the echoing voice of all men and women," according to Smith. This is to claim too much: "It is the vice of distinctiveness," said Hopkins, "to become queer." Perhaps all good poems are in this sense very odd, in order to be distinctive, to serve a restricted group of readers (as perhaps Smith's own "masculine" poets do) in order to represent the very distinctions upon which experience and language depend.

In trying to speak for "all men and women" the poet risks losing selfhood altogether. The United States is probably one of the less coherent nations of the world, and poets rightly feel uncertain about their canon, their audience, and their culture. Eight thousand years from now, when American culture is as old as European culture now is, our descendants may find themselves in possession of a consoli-

Copyrighted material

dated and homogeneous culture. For the moment, we have to be patient with our own diversity, and even rejoice in it.

All three of these books contain ambitious and successful essays inviting the reader to appreciate the poetry that the author admires. I think especially of Smith on Hugo and Wright, of von Hallberg on Pinsky and McMichael, of Hass on Milosz and Rilke. The two books by poets both contain personal essays as well, among which Hass's reflection on images and Smith's fragment of autobiography ("An Honest Tub") help to define the poetic vocation as they experience it. All three books are uneven and uneasy as they protest too much, in terms not well defined, the value of poetry. Their very uneasiness seems to me a sign that criticism assuming an authoritarian and impersonal voice (which may conceal, as we know, many private anxieties and a personal program) is being challenged in a revealing, awkward, and morally hortatory American style, confiding and hectoring at once. It sets all the old questions of commentary up for investigation once more, and that is surely what each generation of critics is born to do.

Copyrighted material

of civilized conversation, a restricted or accommodated style fearful of the more speculative extravagances of the mind — and a "pastoral" model of criticism, which is based on the needs of the immature flock of students rather than on the "theological" demands of sophisticated interpretation.

If this were only a description of a literary-critical quarrel, it would be of limited interest. But Hartman's argument, though conducted on a literary-critical base, is really an argument against American taste in culture and American educational practice — and is probably sounder in its broader cultural attack than in its more theoretical plea for a different sort of critical act. Hartman's most intense question is, in fact, not only a literary one; it is equally a philosophic or religious or psychological one — the old question, What have we done with the gods? For Hartman, this question can be asked: How is the part of our imagination that used to occupy itself (to put it crudely) with thinking up gods now occupying itself? What replaces, in literature, the sacred? What, if anything, has replaced the binding authority of a sacred book? And if interpretation used to be the attempt to discover what the divine Word meant, what parallels can we find between that older activity and the interpretation of texts as we now engage in it? Finally, the activity of commenting and speculating on texts used to be justified by the sacredness of the text and the ultimate concerns of religion; can we now seriously justify this activity at all?

These are not new questions, religiously or philosophically speaking, but they have not been invoked in the Anglo-American critical world until recently. (The poets, of course, have thought of little else, but the critics who raised the point abandoned it, in Hartman's view, too quickly and too easily, with references to "the poetry of religion" or "emotive language.") Hartman sets himself squarely against the aesthetic and social line of literary study (from New Criticism through Leavis and Frye), which has governed the past several decades in the English-speaking world. And he also sets himself emphatically (though tacitly) against those who would place the study of literature within a wholly secularized study of linguistic signs, who see commentary as a form of decoding rather than as a form of hermeneutics, the interpretation of sacred texts.

Our American pragmatism and delight in evidence make us suspicious of the hermeneutical model, which discovers under or within the text at hand another, "truer" text, or what the original text

Copyrighted material

"really" means (as the Song of Solomon, for example, though it appears to be a love poem, was found by allegorizing exegetes to be a text concerning the love of God for the soul). This model, by which a text recedes into more and more analogies of itself, is dear to the speculative and playful and historical mind of Hartman, who sees the allegorizing tendency of the human intellect, as it is displayed in history, to be irrepressible; it becomes the basis for "philosophical" criticism. By contrast, the prevailing mode of rhetorical and grammatical commentary, embodied in what Hartman calls for convenience "practical" criticism, seems to him, for all his ritual politeness, a poor thing, absurdly reductive of both the mind and the text. He calls the conflict of practical with philosophical criticism "a real war, which has lasted for more than fifty years and has intensified in the last decade."

Hartman writes as a teacher of American university students who have not grown up in that architectural and civic context which surrounds Europeans and reminds them that art always issues from a historical, religious, and philosophical ground. It is no use, Hartman argues, giving our students a piece of literature and asking them to "read" it; they haven't the cultural equipment to read it. The "close reading" of the text becomes ludicrous when the student has no idea of the view of man, nature, God, and history underlying it. Hartman, in his pity for our cultural nakedness, therefore proposes a program that would reinstate the literary text in a continuum of other texts, exposing the student (and, in the case of graduate students, the prospective teachers of the next generation also) "not only to literature narrowly conceived but also to important texts in philosophy, history, religion, anthropology, and so forth." This is disarming; who could object? But Hartman's next sentences betray the oddity of his intellectual position: "If we [departments of literature] give special attention to fiction and poetry it is because they are insufficiently examined elsewhere, and not because they are privileged. In exchange we must hope that other departments of knowledge will augment their interest in fiction and poetry, and in interpretive methods developed by us."

Like all utopias, this view of historians and philosophers teaching poems and novels while teachers of literature expound texts in philosophy and history has an ingenuous appeal, the more so since this sort of cross-fertilization is already, to some extent, taking place. And as Hartman stands before us wreathed in the names that, in small

Copyrighted material

print, wander across his book jacket (Carlyle, Eliot, Bloom, Benjamin, Arnold, Frye, Burke, de Man, Derrida, Freud, Empson, Gadamer, Auerbach, Leavis, Iser, Lévi-Strauss, Lukács, Coleridge, Richards, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Brooks, Bourne, Ricoeur, Adorno, Ransom, Pater, Blackmur) he is himself a representative of the plenitude of intellectual possession for which he speaks. He predicts that though we once dissociated literature from "thought-systems of a religious, political, or conceptual kind," we are now "returning to a larger and darker view of art as mental charm, war, and purgation," and that his program follows a logical result of this intellectual advance.

But is this true? Has there ever been a critic — even one in the Anglo-American tradition of practical criticism — who did not regard art as "mental charm, war, and purgation"? Two different questions are at stake here: what art *is* (in the experience of the artist or the audience), and how it is best talked about (by the commentator), whether as experience or as artifact. And must the answer be a matter of mutually exclusive alternatives? Surely it can be suggested that a philosophical and poetic mind like Hartman's will prefer one approach, an ethical mind like Leavis's another, a scientific mind like Richards's another, a synoptic mind like Frye's another. And yet Hartman's claim is not so easily dismissible, because he attacks us, and our educational system, on another ground. We have provided our students, he says, with a criticism (and consequently with a range of thought) originating out of only one "text-milieu": "Every literary theory is based on the experience of a limited canon or generalizes strongly from a particular text-milieu. To take the metaphysical poets as one's base or touchstone, and to extend their 'poetics' toward modern poetry and then all poetry, will produce a very different result from working from Cervantes toward Pynchon, or from Hölderlin toward Heidegger." In too placidly restricting ourselves in this country to a limited canon of reference, we limit the ways we think — and here Hartman touches a nerve, and we feel the justice of the accusation. The terrible poverty that our writers have felt — the poverty that, as Wallace Stevens puts it, amounts to our owning a bare gray jar in the wilderness of Tennessee instead of a Grecian Urn in the British Museum — is still with us, a conceptual as well as a monumental or architectural poverty. It is linked to our uneasily coexisting New World arrogance and New World humility; it produces our naïveté.

Copyrighted material

If we possessed an ampler range of thought (and Hartman wants to import into our culture the Frankfurt School and the Hegelian philosophical tradition as well as a broad canon of European literature), our discourse would be deeper, fuller, and freer — and our society, as a result, deeper, fuller, and freer, too. Hartman envisages ambitious essays, written by a new breed of commentator, that would be in themselves literature; "interesting prose," "severe intellectual poems," he calls these essays, thinking of Pater, Valéry, Ortega, and Freud as models.

Like all manifestos, this one reflects its author — his own canon (German and French rather than, say, Russian or Greek in spirit), his own practice (the speculative essay), his own concerns (interpretation rather than explication, the sacred rather than the secular, idealism rather than empiricism), his own origins (European), his own poetics (Romantic rather than neoclassical), his own stylistic preferences (for the decorated, the whimsical, the deliberately exaggerated rather than for the "accommodated," the conversational, the decorous), his labor "to stay within [the negative or indeterminate] as long as is necessary" rather than to come to a firm, demonstrative end of argument. But it is Hartman's very one-sidedness that gives his book its force. To our assertive American wish for fact and certainty, he recommends a subtler and more dialectical play of mind; for our Anglo-American formation, he urges a forcible dose of modern European thought; against our post-Enlightenment skepticism, he proposes a rethinking of the origins and function of the sacred: "If what remains of religion is its poetry, what remains of poetry is its heterodox theology, or mythmaking. As all poetry and indeed all writing . . . is scrutinized by the critical and secularizing spirit, more evidence of archaic or sacred residues comes to light . . . The sacred has so inscribed itself in language that while it must be interpreted, it cannot be removed." To this Hartman adds, in the most disputable of all his remarks, that "one might speculate that what we call the sacred is simply that which must be interpreted or reinterpreted." This statement, by its deep nostalgia, begs the whole question of the difference between art and religion: to Hartman, it seems that "representation is the only Presence we have."

Hartman is fundamentally as unhappy with the language of French linguistic criticism and that of Russian Formalism as he is with the language of the Anglo-American literary tradition. His book amounts to a plea for a cohort that will read what he has read, be enabled by

Copyrighted material

what has enabled him, profit from what he has profited from, see the importance of the sacred as he sees it. The plea is made reasonable, and even compelling, by the exquisite, original, and profound essays on literature that Hartman has written over the past thirty years (*The Unmediated Vision, Wordsworth's Poetry, Beyond Formalism,* and *The Fate of Reading*). And yet we can imagine another plea, equally addressed to the cultural poverty of our students, equally a call for reform in the curriculum. The maker of this plea would come wreathed not in the names of the company that includes Hegel, Freud, and Benjamin but in the names of musicians, painters, sculptors, and architects — names from that milieu in which literature is perhaps more at home than it is with philosophy, social thought, and religion. In that milieu of the arts, literature appears, over against the sacred, as an element quintessentially profane — embodying, as Yeats said, impulses diametrically opposed to the cultic, communal, ritualized impulses served by religion. In such a model of instruction, the critic is an interpreter not as the exegete of a sacred text is an interpreter but, rather, as a pianist or a conductor is an interpreter, holding up the work in a new and coherent manifestation, revealing it in one of its many possibilities, held together like a waterdrop by its own conflict and resolution of forces. Such a model is not incompatible with Hartman's psychoanalytically inspired wish to see in the work of art "the iconoclastic within the iconic," the "stratum of legitimate, sacred, or exalted words purifying a stratum of guilty, forbidden, or debased words." But it does imply an analysis terminable rather than interminable, as every performance of a musical work implies final choices of emphasis and color.

As a polemicist, Hartman presses for that substance which has comforted his own "seduced yet disbelieving" critical mind, and he dismisses — courteously, even apologetically, but ruthlessly — all rival systematic claims, sweeping aside with them that irrefutably stubborn tendency of literature to remain, unlike the other arts, language-bound. We cannot take on German or French as our mother tongue or our mother culture. But if Hartman exhibits the inescapable "blindness of insight," as Paul de Man has called it, he nonetheless puts deadly questions to our present cultural presuppositions and educational arrangements.

Copyrighted material

and revisionism proper) and a threefold process of cosmic creation (*zimzum, shevirath ha-kelim,* and *tikkun*).

These are indeed strange bedfellows to poetry in English. But it will be remembered that Bloom has always wanted a theology to support his literary theory, from his initial use of Martin Buber in his first book to his present wish — understandable to anyone with imaginative hunger or impatience — to see whether we possess other ways of interpreting the cosmos besides our Platonic and Aristotelian ones. The fantasy-creation (as Bloom allegorizes it) found in the Lurianic Kabbalah, which includes God's initial contraction of himself to make a space for creation, a subsequent disruption of the creation or "breaking of the vessels," and a final "restitution," gives Bloom an imaginative model for what he has chosen to present as the *ur*-pattern of all post-Enlightenment lyric — a pattern in which Speculation and her Sixfold take on a suspicious resemblance to our old acquaintance Beginning-Middle-and-End, even if called by the Bloomian names of Limitation-Substitution-Representation.

In the incessant rhetoric of Bloom's pages, the fifty analytic terms and the fifty or so patron saints of Bloom's critical and poetic canon (ranging from Vico to Derrida, from Milton to Ammons) play hide and seek, now obscured in dense allusiveness, now rising in Emersonian aphorism.

Bloom's literary model for his chapters, the lay-sermon, implies that his aim is to win converts to his way of seeing poetry. Though his terminology has not been widely adopted, his notions have exerted powerful influence (and even consequent anxiety, to judge by reviews). Because of Bloom, we can never again refer quite so complacently to "an allusion to" an earlier poet, nor can we speak of the appearance of "Miltonic" or "Keatsian" diction in a later poet without being put on our guard. Such intertextual echoes result, as Bloom has conclusively shown, from the many ways in which a poet manifests his struggle with antecedent style — a struggle which is varied, serious, continued, protracted, and profound, caused by the equal pressures of the apprentice's love (Keats's "Shakespeare and the Paradise Lost every day become greater wonders to me") and the adult poet's self-assertion (Keats's remark on Milton, "Life to him would be death to me"). Though even in the most respectable books about poetry facile metaphors of "adaptation" or "assimilation" by a younger poet of the work of his predecessors still appear, they will be looked on, after Bloom, with a far more critical eye.

Besides alerting us to the intense feelings underlying intertextual

Copyrighted material

reference among poets, Bloom has, notably in this new volume, formulated a theory of the progress of a given poem as the overt or covert expression in language of a series of psychic defense mechanisms. Not everyone will see, with Bloom, these defenses as a self-choreographed sequence, relatively inflexible, always and everywhere the same (except in proportion) in poem after poem. But the problem to which Bloom here turns his attention — what it is that causes a poem to change, from moment to moment, its gait, its mood, its tone, its pattern of images, its type of reference to antecedent poetry, and so on — is the most profound problem in a theory of lyric, and one to which no fully developed answers of a satisfactory sort have been given (though Kenneth Burke, among Bloom's predecessors, pursues the question throughout his work). It may be that not all changes of posture in longer lyrics are most profitably seen as maneuvers of defense on the part of the poet against errant and anxious impulses of his own psyche, but Bloom's is at least a plausible line of thought to follow, and one which any counter-theory must take seriously.

Both of the chief conflicts described in Bloom's account of the writing of poetry — the poet's struggle with his (internalized) poetic models, and his struggle with his own psychic resistances — have the merit of being deduced from visible elements in a text, whether a poetic echo of some sort, or a clear jolt or alteration in the structure or progress of the text. A theory of poetic functions based on identifiable happenings in a text would seem, surely, preferable to a theory based on some putative "reader" (or even "superreader," for such has been postulated) with an even more putative set of "affective responses."

The sort of mind fertile in conceptual organization must inevitably interest itself less in those minute particulars which obstruct themselves as soon as the mind begins to generalize. On the other hand, the opposite sort of mind, one which rejoices chiefly in the infinite individuality of literary data, is helpless to combine them into any workable mass. Bloom's conceptual bent, combined with his uneasy relation to language itself (apparent in his mannered prose) often causes his pages about a text to be, especially by comparison with the exquisite lines quoted, needlessly clotted. His wish to compress his readings of the poems of two centuries leads him to write in what he calls his "shorthand," the metaphor itself suggesting the unreadable:

Copyrighted material

> Let us map *Tintern Abbey* together. The poem consists of five verse-paragraphs, of which the first three (lines 1-57) form a single movement that alternates the ratios of *clinamen* and *tessera*. The fourth verse-paragraph is the second movement (lines 58-111) and goes from the ratio of *kenosis* to a *daemonization* that brings in the Sublime. The fifth and final verse paragraph is the third and last movement (lines 112-159), and alternates the ratios of *askesis* and *apophrades*. To abandon my own esoteric shorthand, lines 1-57 shuttle back and forth between dialectical images of presence and absence and representing images of parts and wholes. Lines 58-111 alternate images of fullness and emptiness, of gain and loss, with images of height and depth. Finally lines 112-159 move from inside/outside juxtapositions of the self and nature to an interplay of images of earliness and lateness. This is of course merely a very rough revisionary pattern, but it is there all right, in *Tintern Abbey* as in hundreds of good poems afterwards, down to the present day.

Such passages alternate with a more relaxed mood in which Bloom juxtaposes poems, not always well. To the sublime central passage of *Tintern Abbey* (in which "the burthen of the mystery" is lightened and "with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of Joy, / We see into the life of things") he compares some modern lines, which begin:

> I am still completely happy.
> My resolve to win further I have
> Thrown out, and am charged by the thrill
> Of the sun coming up.

These lines come, Bloom tells us, from "John Ashbery's beautiful *Evening in the Country,* one of the most distinguished descendants of *Tintern Abbey.*" If these lines seem more distinguished to Bloom than they may to others, it is perhaps because Bloom is delighted to find writers — like Ashbery — who worry in verse about their own "belatedness" with respect to previous poetic achievement. For the same reason, Bloom is "obsessed," as he puts it, with Browning's labored poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" because Roland is a "belated" figure who follows a host of failed predecessors. Bloom's estimation of certain passages will strain the agreement

Copyrighted material

of readers who value him for his subtlety in theoretical proposals. When Bloom writes of a poem by Browning, "Eros crowds the poem, with an intensity and poignance almost Shakespearian in its strength," the subsequent quotation will not easily persuade readers to concur in Bloom's judgment:

> Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red
> On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its
> bed,
> O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base
> his head?

More disquieting in the pages of *Poetry and Repression* is a certain insistence that this "antithetical criticism" must conflict with received ideas about many famous poems. Bloom twice affirms, for instance, that "the youthful Harlot's curse," at the close of Blake's "London," refers not to the syphilis which, contracted by the husband who infects his wife and thereby his unborn child, "Blasts the new-born Infant's tear," but rather to the harlot's menstruation. This reading is not, so far as I can see, in any sense proved, but only, in two passages, asserted:

> The harlot's curse is not, as various interpreters have said, venereal disease, but is indeed what "curse" came to mean in the vernacular after Blake and still means now: menstruation, the natural cycle in the human female . . . I want to reject altogether the customary interpretation that makes "curse" here a variety of venereal infection, and that makes the infant's condition a prenatal blindness. Instead, I want to reaffirm my own earlier interpretation of the Harlot here as Blake's perpetually youthful Harlot, Nature, *not* the human female, but the natural element in the human, male or female . . . [Blake sees] how another curse or ban or natural fact (menstruation) blasts or scatters another natural fact, the tearlessness of the new-born infant.

It is regrettable that passages like this may distract readers from the real excellence in Bloom's formulation of larger questions.

For the most part, Bloom's wider meditations on poetry surprise, enlighten, and invigorate. In my own judgment, the chapters in *Poetry and Repression* on Milton, Blake, Shelley, Yeats, and Emerson are more rewarding than those on Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Whit-

Copyrighted material

man, and Stevens. The line of stern public prophetic poets from Milton through Blake to Shelley and Yeats is more congenial to Bloom than the more flexible, inward-looking, and sinuous line of poets from Spenser through Keats and Tennyson to Stevens and Eliot. Wordsworth, while aspiring to belong to the first line, was temperamentally of the second, and therefore also eludes, to some degree, Bloom's grasp. But even when writing about poets less congenial than his Protestant prophets, Bloom makes comments, hears echoes, and sees linkages that powerfully support his central theoretical commitments, and that rebuke less well-read critics. One looks forward to each new book by Bloom as a repository of vivid engagement with poems, with thoughts and arguments springing up on every page, and as a source of provocative ways of thinking about poetry. The running argument in *Poetry and Repression*, for instance, about the appearance of the sublime, while too complex to present fairly in summary, will make readers pause in the future when they come upon passages of poetic sublimity, at once so solacing to the imagination and yet, as Bloom shows, so suspect in their origins. (Briefly put, Bloom's hypothesis is that the more hyperbolical the sublime, the more anxiety it is repressing; Bloom's choice of instances of sublimity, and his unravelings of the amount of psychic material they are at pains to resist, form a small book-within-a-book which is brilliant, revealing, and convincing.)

If Bloom slights, in favor of his "intertextual relations," what Keats called "the holiness of the heart's affections," another undeniable force in the shaping of poetry; if he asserts that he is opposing T. S. Eliot's and Northrop Frye's more gentle view of benevolent "tradition" while in fact he shares, in a more combative way, their emphasis on the interaction between poetic fathers and sons; if he, scrutinizing poems as analogues of each other rather than as distinctive and remarkable separate appearances, neglects to remind us how different each great work of art is from any other one, nonetheless he is pressing us to a fresh look at masterpieces, offering us new ways to view them, and, above all, challenging our familiar responses, readings, terminology, and proprieties.

However, he is adamantly doing all of this entirely on his own terms, and he demands a sophisticated reader who knows how far-reaching a penumbra of literary meaning shades out from every word, every turn of syntax, and every trope in a great poem.

Until the literary meaning of a poem is understood — and about

Copyrighted material

5

The Medley Is the Message: On Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes died in a street accident in Paris in 1980, at the age of sixty-four. *The Rustle of Language* (1986) and *The Responsibility of Forms* (1985) collect, in English translation, articles and reviews written between 1961 and 1980 — work produced, that is, during the second half of Barthes's publishing life (his first essay, on the *Journal* of André Gide, was published in 1942). These two collections can perhaps provide the pre-text (as Barthes would have said) for a posthumous consideration of this remarkable man, a writer at home neither as a novelist (though he aspired to fiction) nor as a university professor (though he taught university students) nor as an intellectual (though that is the title by which he was known).

Those of us who have felt sympathetic to Barthes over the years have on occasion received a portion of the ridicule directed toward him. "How can you like that silly homosexual?" I was asked by an eminent literary critic in tones of impatience and revulsion, when I ventured to praise Barthes's hymn to reading, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). The remark manifested, besides homophobia, a suspicion that Barthes was "not serious." Barthes knew that *les gens sérieux* excluded him from the inner circle of their company, perhaps for the same reason that they excluded his beloved Michelet, the historian on whom he had written a short book in 1954: "Our languages are coded, we must not forget: society is forbidden, by a thousand means, to mingle them, to transgress their separation and their hierarchy; the discourse of History, that of moral ideology (or that of philosophy) are to be kept pure of desire: by not reading Michelet, it is his desire we censure. Thus, because he blurs the discriminatory law of 'genres,' Michelet fails first of all to be given his place: serious people — conformists — exclude him from their reading."

Copyrighted material

As usual, Barthes's language here has oblique sexual and class references; generic miscegenation, linguistic morganatic marriages, are feared by the *gens sérieux,* whose defenses are those of their race, class, and religion. Any wall breached threatens the breaching of all. And yet it is not only the mingling of codes in Michelet that Barthes claims as his own; it is also the opulence of Michelet's sensual language, always ready to "indulge itself" (as the detractors would say). Barthes quotes Michelet on insects, a "purple passage" almost unthinkable in a present-day historian; the insects are "charming creatures, bizarre creatures, admirable monsters, with wings of fire, encased in emerald, dressed in enamel of a hundred varieties, armed with strange devices, as brilliant as they are threatening, some in burnished steel frosted with gold, others with silky tassels, lined with black velvet; some with delicate pincers of russet silk against a deep mahogany ground; this one in garnet velvet dotted with gold; then certain rare metallic blues, heightened with velvety spots; elsewhere metallic stripes, alternating with matte velvet." "Yes, in Michelet the signifier is sumptuous," Barthes concludes, praising that excess in expression visible when the author's pen loses itself in the athletic joy of writing. Because the interminging of codes, and the insertion of vertical metaphor into the horizontal argument, are sins against those virtues of "logic" and "clarity" so highly valued by the French, we can see Barthes's career as a long rebellion against the intellectual and institutional practices in which he was raised — and which, even in his late years, he could never entirely escape.

The intellectual formation of a French child attracted to literature is hardly imaginable to Americans. We are unfamiliar with those sacred French institutions the *cahier* (the notebook in which never a blot can appear), the *dictée* (the oral dictation in which faults of spelling and punctuation are subsequently mercilessly reproved), the *manuel littéraire* (a potted version of literary history) — all the furniture of the school and the *lycée.* Barthes himself knew very well how little he could escape from this training. He amused himself in his late "autobiography," *Roland Barthes* (1975), by setting himself compositional subjects of the sort set for French students: "Arrogance," "Ease," "Money," "Coincidence," "Friends." The characteristic Barthesian fragment — a paragraph complete in itself, unlinked to a longer discourse — arises in part from the *dictée,* in part from the *pensée* (the most French of all literary forms).

The instruction in composition received by the French child derived still, in Barthes's day, from Renaissance methods, with their base in

Copyrighted material

the logic, grammar, and rhetoric of the trivium. The first systematic act in treating any subject was to divide it into manageable parts along some logical axis — temporal, hierarchical, structural. Whence the inevitable beginning of almost any Barthesian essay — "X may be divided into two [or three — rarely four] parts [or divisions, or motives, or effects]." This factitious divisibility-of-everything is counteracted by Barthes in his purposeful use of mélange, often directed by a purely arbitrary principle (he will, for instance, consider together homosexuality and hashish because they both begin with *h*). Because logic — the system of divisibility — voiced itself as the Law in school, it became for Barthes the symbol of patriarchy, violence, the father, while intermixture became the symbol of the mother and of the aesthetic.

In *Roland Barthes,* he wrote about himself, under the heading "Aesthetic Discourse": "He attempts to compose a discourse which is not uttered in the name of the Law and/or of Violence: whose instance might be neither political nor religious nor scientific; which might be in a sense the remainder and the supplement of all such utterances. What shall we call such discourse? *erotic* no doubt, for it has to do with pleasure; or even perhaps: *aesthetic,* if we foresee subjecting this old category to a gradual torsion which will alienate it from its regressive, idealist background and bring it closer to the body, to the *drift.*" But this is a late utterance. Before Barthes could write in such a way, he had to come under the sway of a succession of "Laws" — among them Marxism, semiology, anthropology, psychoanalysis — each of which he would (as he had with logic) in turn appropriate and repudiate, thereby alienating himself from the true believers in each camp. Accepting various discourses first of all as "solutions" or "truths," Barthes came to see them, later, as competing languages in a world made up of those very languages of culture. Other people seemed able to locate themselves within one or the other of these group discourses or sociolects; for himself, he was, as it were, "traversed" by them (he was their traversal, as he said), but they exited as they had entered. Of what, then, was he himself constituted, if not by one or another of these grids through which to see the world? He realizes (in *Roland Barthes*) that he is formed by the mother tongue, by French itself — with all its infinite lexical and discursive variety. "This is not," he points out, "a national love" in the patriotic sense; rather "the French language is nothing more or less for him than the umbilical language."

Copyrighted material

Now a writer who loves words — all words, single words — for their materiality and for their image-inspiring power is at the furthest remove from someone who loves "ideas." If Barthes became attached to various ideologies, it was perhaps because these intellectual comets bore as their train a cloud of new words, new apparel for the world. The full lexicons of Marxist, anthropological, Freudian, and semiological discourse were at least as much an occasion for the reveling play of his imagination as the systematic ideas of Marx, Freud, or Saussure. Yet if the anarchy of the lexicon appealed to Barthes, so did, paradoxically, the logical austerity of syntax. (He once defined himself as "the dream of a pure syntax and the pleasure of an impure, heterological lexicon.") The logical and "syntactic" side of Barthes made him eager to engage in intellectual debate; the dispersive, "lexical" side made him "spoil" the logic of debate with "digressions" into various discourses, "indulgences" of language, what he called the "skids" and "drifts" of argument. The authors for whom he felt the most intense sympathy reflected one or the other of his two sides: Racine for austerity of syntax, Michelet for sensuality of language, Robbe-Grillet for a prose freed from connotation, Brecht for a superb materiality of staging.

"Received opinion" — what Barthes called the *Doxa* ("Medusa: who petrifies those who look at her") — was his enemy. It is hard to say which Barthes hated more as a young man, the concepts of the manuals of literary history in use in the *lycées,* or the language in which those concepts were expressed. In an excoriating lecture called "Reflections on a Manual" (1969), Barthes sets out the poverty of the all-purpose concepts by which the irrepressible verbal energies of literature are academically codified: "the authors, the schools, the movements, the genres, and the centuries." There is, he begins, "the archetypal paradigm of our whole literature, *romanticism-classicism* . . . occasionally amplified into *romanticism-realism-symbolism.*" He continues, ironically, with the absurd characterizations of the centuries: "The sixteenth is overflowing life; the seventeenth is unity; the eighteenth is movement; and the nineteenth is complexity." The fatuity of these nouns is matched by that of the blanket descriptions offered by the manual: "There is 'exuberant' opposed to 'restrained'; there is 'lofty art' or 'deliberate obscurity' opposed to 'expansiveness'; 'rhetorical coldness' to 'sensibility.'" These stereotypes enraged Barthes by their falsity, as they pretended to encompass all authors equally in their facile "understanding." How adequate is it to say of

Copyrighted material

François Villon that he manifests "a witty nature concealing a tragic sense"?

But what Barthes (in his quasi-Marxist phase during the 1960s) addresses more savagely than the vapid crudity of the ideas animating French literary history is the censorship visible in the literary manual — a censorship of questions about class, sexuality, the functions (social, symbolic, or anthropological) of literature, and competing literary languages (including the spoken language). He criticizes as well the nationalism that pervades French literary consciousness ("We are presented with a kind of shiny image in which king and literature reflect each other"), and the naive psychology that is presupposed in literary evaluations ("For instance, du Bellay will be praised for having produced certain sincere and personal cries; Ronsard had a sincere and profound Catholic faith; Villon, a cry from the heart, etc.").

As a student, Barthes had been exposed not only to the puerility of the literary history found in school manuals, but also to the prescribed form for writing about literature — the *explication de texte*. When I was myself obliged to practice it, in the late 1950s, the form it took (as I recall) was as follows: one was obliged to detach from the poem its main animating idea (called, significantly enough, the *idée-mère*), then to list the *idées secondaires* deriving from the "mother"; then to give the *fond* (or general content) followed by the *forme* (or prosodic structure).

This improbable recreation of the text as a logical structure of ideas, separated into form and content, would of course eventually be repudiated by anyone of sensibility who had perceived, in literature, the essential inextricability of ideas, content, and form. Barthes's own commentaries on books or paintings combat the *explication de texte* in various ways. In *S/Z* for instance (his commentary on a tale by Balzac), he fragments the text into short phrases, and reads serially, piece by piece — a process that seemed nothing short of deranged to various readers who did not realize that to emphasize the temporal and incremental quality of reading was one way to rebel against the spatial quality of the "structure of ideas" required by conventional French explication. Elsewhere, as in his essays on painting, a delighted discourse glances over the field of vision in a wayward, musing, and irregular way: nothing could be further from systematic exposition.

Though a parallel has often been drawn between Barthes's writing

Copyrighted material

ISBN 0-674-59152-6

Copyright