

# Literary Matters

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY SCHOLARS, CRITICS, AND WRITERS



## FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

I trust that the waning of winter is a relief to all, even those of us who were treated to a milder version of the season than we have met in past years. Whatever welcomes the warming at your door, I hope that it brings with it satisfying times.

I would like to preface my usual introduction of the content awaiting your readership with some insights gleaned from an article by Jonah Lehrer that I read recently in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled “How to Be Creative.” In anticipation of the scoffing that will likely attend hearing of such an aim, I first want to acknowledge that I approached the piece with a great degree of skepticism in response to its suggestion that one who were to read it would be treated to a guide on how to be more creative, feeling that the very notion of teaching a person to be creative is incongruous with the nature and identity of creativity. But, it was recommended to me on the premise that it justified my proclivity for night-owly hours, so I took a gander. Though I do not believe the article did what its headline promised—all Type A’s looking to infuse their stark, straight-lined worlds with some ebullience, be forewarned: you will not put down the paper and suddenly start to fashion furniture out of found objects or write a poem to end all poems—in failing to meet that highest of expectations it set for itself, it did manage to exceed those I had for it.

The author provided an overview of the recent advancements in cognitive science that are leading to a better understanding of what parts of the brain are responsible for producing and practicing creativity, and why particular activities—many of which are familiar to us as stereotypical behaviors of the imaginative eccentric—enhance, whether measured by frequency or felicity, creative output. The section that struck me most was the mounting evidence that exposing oneself to new ideas, interacting with people who hold views that are disparate from one’s own, attempting to solve problems that are not directly related to one’s expertise, and revisiting old issues in a novel way, all lead to greater ingenuity. Greater, but not just in the discrete, dictionary-derived senses of “more in quantity” or “more in quality”: if one considers how distance is calculated—for those who avoid math like it’s leprosy, think back to the chant from Algebra I, “rate times time equals distance”—and is willing to accept “quality times quantity equals greatness” as an analog, this is what I mean by “greater.”

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Using the success of outsiders attempting to solve complicated, longstanding problems in fields other than their own as evidence, as well as anecdotes about the Wright Brothers and Steve Jobs, Lehrer makes a convincing argument that much of creativity is not a result of some inborn spark, unattainable for those to whom it was not bequeathed by breeding, but a practice of drawing together distant notions and combining them in a manner not yet undertaken: “For prompting creativity, few things are as important as time devoted to cross-pollination with fields outside our areas of expertise [...] It’s this ability to attack problems as a beginner, to let go of all preconceptions and fear of failure, that’s the key to creativity.”<sup>1</sup>

Upon reading this article and being so struck by its content, I gained an even greater appreciation for the pieces in this issue of *Literary Matters*, which I already took to be inventive and well formed, but now also see as the *practice* of creativity, rather than only a product of it. The first piece, “Time & the River at the Vermont

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah Lehrer, “How to Be Creative,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 10–11, 2012, C1–2.

Studio Center,” is ALSCW/VSC Fellow Joshua Weiner’s account of his residency at the Vermont Studio Center. Starting with the circumstances that brought him to Johnson, Vermont, and ferrying us through the weeks he spent there, Weiner’s story is evidence of how exposure to the unusual can reacquaint one with creative forces that, though there all along, are often attenuated by the necessary affairs of the everyday.

“Literary Darwinism: A ‘Bargain with the Devil’ or a Source of Professional Renewal?,” a paper by Charles Duncan, examines several publications that use scientific insights about our biological tendencies and evolutionarily-determined characteristics to explicate literary works. Duncan’s piece, which valorizes the practice of Literary Darwinism, reveals the various ways in which literature can be illuminated if it is understood that the concomitants of the human condition influence a text’s characters and themes just as much as they influence the person who wrote it. Both the school of Literary Darwinism and the article itself substantiate the claims that creative solutions may be borne out of amalgamation, and that one may resolve longstanding quandaries by being willing to move laterally, rather than always hurtling forward.

As a final instantiation of creativity arising from the reconfiguration and recombination of existing materials, Brian J. Buchanan’s article, “Cold Comfort: Six Poems in Winter,” finds a point of convergence—winter as both theme and image—in a collection of otherwise unrelated works from poets spanning history and the globe, and uses this shared trait to revisit the pieces, to expose them from a vantage not yet explored. By considering the intent and impact of winter’s presence in these pieces, which characteristics vary and which remain constant, Buchanan not only reaffirms the emotive powers arming each poem, but also lends greater scope and flexibility to the pathetic fallacy that commonly permeates wintery works.

In addition to the feature articles housed in this issue are the recurring News and Announcements and Poets’ Corner sections. This issue’s News and Announcements offer up introductions to the most recent additions to the fleet at the Association’s Boston office. Beginning with a special “Meet the Interns” column, in which volunteer staffers Isaac Goldman and Simon Mendes offer up mini-memoirs, and concluding with a profile on Office Assistant Allison Vanouse, you will be pleased to make the acquaintance of these promising new faces. Closing out the issue is the Poets’ Corner, which holds instances of creativity in the flesh: a poem each from Steven Shankman and Jillian Saucier.

As I write this letter, I cannot help but think back to somewhere around this time last year when I sat down to craft my first address as editor of *Literary Matters*, and was worried about how to begin, and tentative because, until that time, my sensitivities as a writer and my sensibilities as an editor had only crossed paths in compositions that few, if any other than myself, would be destined to read. This being my fourth issue as editor—its release will mark a year at the post—I find my current methods for constructing and compiling the newsletter almost unrecognizable when compared to those I employed at the onset of my editorship. This is, in part, owing to the fact that each issue has come about during times of change for the ALSCW, and moreover, during distinct phases of refocus in my own life as well. Yet I am not so pliable that the circumstances of my personal life or the organization’s natural evolution can be held responsible. What we are really looking at here is growth, adaptation, a natural shifting of behaviors towards what is more suitable, given the requirements imposed by a particular environment. In a sense, I am editing my editing.

I bring this up not because I wish to get all googly-eyed and nostalgic over what is not especially sentimental,

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but because, in thinking about the theme of creativity’s lifeblood being so deeply tied to the defamiliarization of expertise, I wonder how an individual can preserve imagination while pursuing progress. Though it would be a gross misapprehension of Lehrer’s article to deduce that refining a skill invariably stymies inspired or visionary acts, it does seem that we need to be watchful always to ensure that we do not incur myopia when pursuing mastery. I invite those of you who have opinions on the interplay of inspiration and prowess, advice springing from challenges faced during creative endeavors, or anecdotes of successes achieved to submit them, whether as a letter to the editor or in a more elaborate format, for inclusion in the next issue of *Literary Matters*. It is my hope that we can create an ongoing dialogue about the difficulties that those involved in all aspects of the literary field inherently face, and how to overcome them.

I am about ready to wrap up, but must first make a few acknowledgements. I want to express my appreciation to all those who contributed their labors to this issue. I feel continually fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate with and read the work of such talented people. Many thanks to you all for your time and dedication. I also want to congratulate all those who toiled so tirelessly to orchestrate the recently held Claremont Conference, and those who presented there as well. A report on the Eighteenth Annual Conference will appear in the next issue of *Literary Matters*, but I cannot go until then without commending your good work. *Bravos* all around!

With that said, I may now conclude: I hope you enjoy this issue, and I look forward to the next round of submissions headed my way.

All the best,

*Samantha Madway*

## PRESIDENT’S COLUMN

BY JOHN BURT

### 1. Eighteenth Annual Meeting

By the time you read this, the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, being held on the campus of Claremont McKenna College, will be a memory. As I write this, Ben Mazer and Allison Vanouse are in the ALSCW office processing registrations, pulling together the final details of the programs and the posters, and making the last arrangements with the caterers and the event staff at Claremont McKenna. The session panelists and seminar presenters are putting the final touches on their papers; wondering whether to cut one more example to bring their presentations within the time limit; querying whether they really have chosen the best, most accurate, most expressive word in this or that context; and may even be pacing around their rooms reading their texts aloud to see whether the sounds of their sentences are correct. The moderators are pondering what they will say in their introductions, and how they will tie together the different strands of the discussions over which they will be presiding, steeling themselves to keep everyone within the limits of their allotted times. Our friends at Claremont are hard at work finishing arrangements for our meeting, from Ricardo Quinones, who brought us to Claremont and persuaded Claremont to host us; to Cindi Guimond, the Director of Academic Administration, who put the generosity of the College at our disposal; to Max Benavidez, the Associate Vice President of the University, who has handled all our publicity; to Jeannie Scalmanini at the events center, who found us all our rooms and AV equipment; to David Edwards of the Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum and Jennifer Burchfield of Café Bon Appetit, who are preparing our two banquets and our daily refreshments. The Councilors and officers—Tim Peltason, our Treasurer, and Lee Oser, our Secretary, as well as Greg Delanty, our Immediate Past President, and Sarah Spence, our next President—will be preparing for the Council meeting, weighing the finances and practical affairs of the Association. And many of you will be checking your travel arrangements and your hotel reservations and packing your laptops for the trip to Claremont.

I’d like to single out Claremont McKenna College’s wonderful generosity to us. They have provided us the use of their facilities without charge. Beyond that, they have also donated all of our catering and are subsidizing half the cost of our two banquets. Beyond this, everyone at Claremont has been helpful and thoughtful and energetic on our behalf, and has done everything they can to make our upcoming meeting a success.

Finally, I’d like to thank the sixty-three scholars who will be presenting or moderating at our meeting. It is your thought, your creativity, your commitment, and your love of things literary and things of the mind that makes the ALSCW what it is.

I look forward to seeing all of you at Claremont McKenna College in March!

### 2. New Meringoff prizes

The Association has again received extraordinarily generous, and extraordinarily thoughtful, support from Stephen Meringoff, who helped

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## LITERARY MATTERS

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The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW) promotes excellence in literary criticism and scholarship, and works to ensure that literature thrives in both scholarly and creative environments. We encourage the reading and writing of literature, criticism, and scholarship, as well as wide-ranging discussions among those committed to the reading and study of literary works.

us last year. This March, we received from him a \$40,000 donation to support the projects of the Association, as well as a contribution of \$13,000 to match the fundraising that took place this past fall (We owe thanks for some of that latter gift, of course, to you for rising to the challenge of Mr. Meringoff's Matching Grant). Some of this gift will continue to support the annual Stephen J. Meringoff Seminar, part of our program offerings at the Conference; this year our seminar is on Ralph Ellison and will be moderated by Adam Bradley of the University of Colorado. Mr. Meringoff has also given us the support to offer prizes for four other awards—in poetry, in fiction, in criticism, and the Meringoff High School Essay Award. We are in the process of setting up the practical arrangements for these award competitions, so be on the lookout for announcements about these opportunities to have your work recognized by the Association.

### 3. Ongoing relationship with Vermont Studio Center

The selection of the recipient of this year's ALSCW/VSC Fellowship is under way. The applications were received at the VSC on February 15. We look forward to further work with the Vermont Studio Center.

For more information about the Vermont Studio Center and the programs offered, visit the Center's website at <http://www.vermontstudio.org/>, or contact them by email at [info@vermontstudiocenter.org](mailto:info@vermontstudiocenter.org).

### 4. New Editors at *Literary Imagination*

We welcome Saskia Hamilton of Barnard College and Archie Burnett of Boston University's Editorial Institute, the new co-editors of *Literary Imagination*, who will commence their work on the journal this spring. We are grateful for the Herculean labors of Greg Delanty, Sarah Spence, Christopher Ricks, and Tim Peltason in editing the transitional issue of *Literary Imagination*, which has just gone to bed. *Literary Imagination* will have a new look this spring, thanks to a redesign of the periodical overseen by Greg Delanty. Our new financial arrangements with Oxford University Press, negotiated

last year, stabilize our relationship with OUP and have helped put our Association on sounder financial footing.

### 5. Membership Renewals and Conference Registrations

Attendance at the Claremont Conference seems to be in keeping with the attendance numbers at the meetings for the last few years. Three weeks out, we had a little more than seventy registrations, and as the event neared, participants numbered closer to one hundred fifty. Considering that this is the first meeting on the West Coast in many years, at a new time of year for us, and only four-and-a-half months after our last gathering, we have ample reason to be proud of our registration rates.

Our annual dues renewal process started on New Year's Day, and already better than two hundred of our members have renewed, in addition to all of our Lifetime Members. We know that many who plan to renew have not yet made the time to do so. If you have not already renewed your membership for 2012, expect to be pestered by me soon. You can renew your membership at <http://www.alscw.org/member.html>, or you can mail your completed membership form to the Boston office with a check made out to "ALSCW" if you prefer to pay your dues in this manner.

### 6. New Membership Software

We plan to move to a new membership software system this spring, which we expect will iron out some of the practical issues we have had in dealing with our database system, and which will simplify our payment system. We expect the transition from our current online database system to a true membership software system to go smoothly.

I wish you all an exciting and rewarding spring!

Regards,

*John Burt*

## NEW PUBLICATIONS BY MEMBERS

**David Mikics**, editor, *The Annotated Emerson* (Harvard University Press/Belknap Press, February 2012)

**Sean Benson**, *Shakespeare, "Othello" and Domestic Tragedy* (Continuum, February 2012)

**Piotr Gwiazda**, *Messages: Poems & Interview* (Pond Road Press, January 2012)

**Helaine L. Smith**, "'In This Way Lies the Greatest Safety'—Irony, Euphemism, and Gnomical Utterance in *Medea* 1–203" (*The Classical Journal* 107.2, December 2011/January 2012)

*Please send announcements about your new publications to [literarymatters@alscw.org](mailto:literarymatters@alscw.org) if you wish to have them featured in the list of new publications by members.*

# News & Announcements

## MEET THE INTERNS



*Isaac Goldman Profile*

I am a senior at Boston University majoring in English and Political Science. Though I am a native New Englander, my family now hails from St. Louis Park, Minnesota, which, if you engage me in conversation, I will never fail to mention is the birthplace of the Coen Brothers. I dream of becoming a professor of literature and staying in college for the rest of my life.

In addition to my studies and volunteer work at the ALSCW office, I serve on the editing board of *Arche*, Boston University's undergraduate journal of philosophy, and have a Lipper Internship with New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage. As a Lipper Intern, I am responsible for educating Boston public school students about the Holocaust by making weekly visits to different schools in the area and accompanying one school each month on a field trip to New York City for a tour of the museum.

My hobbies include catching up on sleep and changing my plans for the immediate future. I also enjoy movies, music, poetry, and prose. Though I find it nearly impossible to choose my favorites, if faced with the archetypal desert-island scenario, I believe I could live happily with a complete set of Shakespeare's works, Bob Dylan's albums, and *Twin Peaks* episodes. While at times I will reluctantly admit to the technical practicality of e-readers, I will forever remain an uncompromising devotee of the printed page. And if you disagree, ask me about it (I also like to argue).

To contribute to **Literary Matters**, please send articles to [literarymatters@alscw.org](mailto:literarymatters@alscw.org). Content ranges from columns on neglected authors, to interviews with those working in the literary field, to scholarly analyses of a text, and beyond. Please do not hesitate to contact the editor with any questions you may have. Submissions for Issue 5.2 must be received by **May 15, 2012**.

## *Simon Mendes Profile*

I was born on the Upper West Side of Manhattan into a literature-loving family: my mother studied English as an undergrad, my aunt is a writer, and both of my older siblings can frequently be seen reading. When I came to Boston University, I was unsure of what I wanted to study, but I am now cozily settled into my junior year, and am very happy as an English major. Aside from English, I have become increasingly interested in religion and history. All the reading I have had to undertake as an English major has taught me how easy it is to pick up a book and educate oneself on any subject.

I've always had the dream of being a part of the literary world in some capacity after college. Of course, my initial hopes and dreams were to be a creative force, but the reality check came soon enough. Working in publishing and editing would be a great joy, but at this point it is difficult to know what I'd really like to do. My secret passion—though still quite underdeveloped at this stage—is astronomy. For me, there are few greater joys than sitting under the stars and pondering away. While my knowledge of what I'm actually looking at is slim to none, I've reveled when opportunities have been presented to drop what obscure facts about the stars I do know, and I can make all my friends think I'm an expert on what I'm talking about.



## PROFILE ON ALLISON VANOUSE, THE ALSCW'S OFFICE ASSISTANT

Allison Vanouse was born in 1987 in Oswego, New York, to a professor in the SUNY Oswego English department and a civil servant. The geographical peculiarities of her hometown—profoundly beautiful stretches of empty lakeshore, a horizon dotted with nuclear and coal-burning power plants—continue to influence her aesthetic sensibility. She owes much to very early encounters with Shakespeare's plays, the films of Ingmar Bergman, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the work of her older brother, new-media artist Paul Vanouse. Upon leaving high school, Allison received scholarships from the National Shakespeare Competition (as a finalist, she had the opportunity to perform at Lincoln Center) and from the James Joyce Society for an essay about *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

In 2005, Allison enrolled at Brandeis University, where she studied under former Secretary of the ALSCW William Flesch and current President of the Association, John Burt. She moved to Paris in 2008 to study aesthetics under the tutelage of Jacques Darriulat at the Sorbonne, and engaged in a dance composition workshop with Susan Hamlin, formerly of the Martha Graham Company. Her studies were synthesized upon exposure to Peter Brook's production of Beckett's fragment plays, which had opened that spring at *Bouffe du Nord*. Allison reluctantly returned to the United States in the summer to perform at the Berkshire Theater Festival, and finished her term at Brandeis while working on her thesis, assuming artistic direction of a student theater company, and taking on a peer-teaching engagement in Gordon Fellman's class on Marx and Freud.

Allison graduated in 2009—with majors in English and American Literature, European Cultural Studies, and Theater Arts—summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and with highest honors for her thesis, a dialogue on the context of utterance entitled "How Do You Are?," which was presented as a processional performance through the parking lots behind the university. She received the J. V. Cunningham Writing Award, the Esther Pine Memorial Prize, and a Max Kade Research and Travel Grant that brought her to Berlin and Venice in the summer of 2009.

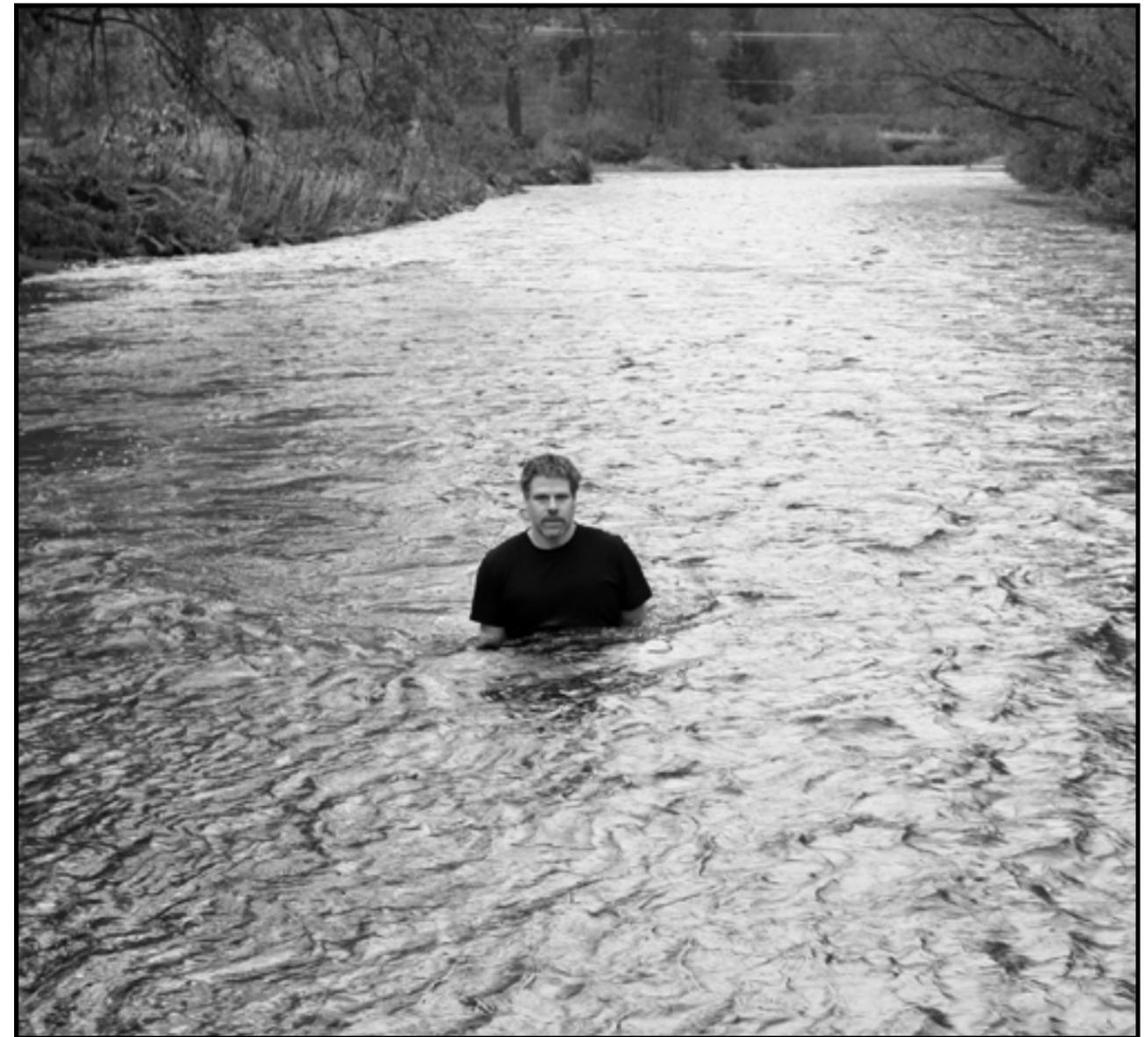
Since graduation, Allison has worked extensively as an actress, spending a term at the Saratoga International Theater Institute, touring New England with ShakespeareNOW!—a company specializing in productions for high school students and the incarcerated—and holding solo performances of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*. Allison frequently collaborates on new plays and performance art, and has shown work at MEME Gallery, The Acteon Project, Mobius Artspace, and Fnord Box, as well as in various alternative spaces. Her most recent play, *Projection*, is set to be published by *Spirited* magazine in March of 2012, and will be produced at 549 Columbus in Boston.



*Allison Vanouse, actress, scholar, and playwright, began her tenure as ALSCW Office Assistant earlier this winter.*

Allison was introduced to the ALSCW's Office Manager, Ben Mazer, after the publication of his play, *The Rain*. A former student of President John Burt, and now a friend of Ben's, Allison was brought into the fold of the Association, and has since been working diligently at the Boston office on member registrations and finances. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with poet Miguel Miró Quesada. 

If you would like to see news of recent honors or awards you have received, notices for upcoming events of interest to ALSCW members, or information about Local Meetings you have hosted/are hosting included in **Literary Matters**, please send materials (photographs, text detailing all relevant information, and so forth) to [literarymatters@alscw.org](mailto:literarymatters@alscw.org) by the submission deadline for Issue 5.2: **May 15, 2012**.



*(Photograph by Howard Romero)*

## TIME & THE RIVER AT THE VERMONT STUDIO CENTER

BY JOSHUA WEINER

For writers who teach, one big problem is finding time—specifically, contiguous blocks of hours—in which to dream and float in imagining duration, out of range, reach, and rut. We may set routines in order to isolate and protect writing time during teaching semesters, but the fence is too easily breached: by students (some beloved, others not so much); by colleagues (especially chairs with new committee assignments); by friends hungry for lunch; and, for some of us, by children, and their homework, and their athletics, and their crises (learning opportunities!). Add to it all the middle class tyranny of repairs, laundry, bills...With the demands of life at home and on the job, carefully erected fences and locked gates turn into revolving doors.

When possible, it's good to blow town.

\*

My town is Washington, DC. Drive ten hours, according to the GPS, and you'll reach the town of Johnson, Vermont, about forty miles east of Burlington and one hundred miles from Montreal. One night last September, I drove through it while looking for it; I then turned around, and drove back through it again. *You have arrived at your destination; your destination is on the left. Now it's on the right. No, you missed it.*

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Johnson is a small town: you can walk through it in ten minutes—maybe less—and the Vermont Studio Center seems to be a lot of it, having renovated typical small-town New England buildings, such as churches, mills, and family houses, into a town campus of artists' and writers' studios. I shared the first floor of a modest old house with another writer (writer-slash-artist), Charlie Kearns, who drove over from the Midwest. Others came from farther away: England, Germany, Poland, Korea, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Japan, Australia, Guatemala, Mongolia. Of the fifty-some artists and writers in residence, one-third came from overseas, an unusually high percentage for this kind of place. Lots of foreigners made table talk more interesting than it might have been; the varying cultural traditions of the different kinds of art-practice complicated my feeling that contemporary art is often pervaded by a kind of internationalism.

I was captivated by the vital materiality and transcendental affects of painting, sculpture, and installations by artists hip to the larger contemporary art world but also deeply invested in their vernacular and indigenous situations (I won't soon forget the life-size deer that Victor Nyakauru, a sculptor from Zimbabwe, was making out of welded rebar and concrete, or the visionary rendering of mountain temples that Karma Wangdi, a painter from Bhutan, dreamt of and then refigured, with hallucinatory intensity, onto very small canvases). There was a lot to find out about, if one cared to, and the open cafeteria at meal times made meeting new people easy. One could also sit at a "silent table" and feel free to withdraw socially over a pretty-good salad. I exercised that freedom perhaps too frequently.

I had come to the Vermont Studio Center to write a longish poem about Rock Creek, a longish tributary that runs through Washington, DC. I was hoping to complete a new book, and felt that somehow the Rock Creek poem, looming unwritten in my mind, would do it. I had spent the last twenty months reading about the natural history of the creek, the ancient human history of it, and the modern political and cultural history that surrounds it (starting with George Washington's real estate boondoggle). I had notebooks of stuff—facts, sketches, maps, stray lines of aimless musing, blocks of quotations from Whitman's *Specimen Days*, and chemical analyses of the local watersheds. And I now had four weeks to vomit half-digested matter and shape it into a poem of some length. I bought a few bottles of whiskey to share after quitting time, blew steam at the gym up the street at Johnson State College, took some epic "fall color" hikes, but otherwise stayed in my studio—a room in a contemporary prefab building, designed to fit in stylistically and structurally with the old mill buildings nearby, perched on the banks of the Gihon river.

Having a studio on the banks of the Gihon turned out to be a great boon. All the stuff I had been reading about hydrodynamics I could suddenly use from the purview of my desk to read a real river, which, right outside my window, flowed with mesmerizing complexity as it hit jutting boulders, stone beds, and bridge columns, creating all kinds of turbulence, whirlpools, and streamlines shearing off and rejoining. I studied it off and on for hours as I read and wrote through the day.

My mornings started with thirty minutes of meditation in a little on-site zendo created by the VSC founders to sustain their own practice. Often the room was full, but other times I sat there by myself, or with Karma, the painter from Bhutan, who made the whole affair feel very authentic, which I realized was a problem. Just because he had been sitting in meditation for decades didn't make the experience any better or worse, but I sometimes felt special in his presence on the cushion (a mistake), then felt guilty (another mistake), then felt hungry and left the zendo for a plate of hot eggs.

All better. Then, ready to sit again—this time at a desk—in front of a blank page—or in a decent chair—hovering over pages filled with the radiant work of another poet, a real poet, thinking, *if I could only write so well...*

Some writers say that to be very busy and struggling in one's own small way to find time to write and then to find oneself suddenly alone with the work is to confront a kind of personal terror: there are no longer any excuses. I find it is more like being alone in a room with a magic, self-replenishing milkshake: you just don't want to open the door.

When I did, it was often to make another quick visit to the Johnson Wool Mill, just a stone's throw away, where clothes are still made next door to the old mill building; or to meet some of the center's esteemed guests, who stayed for several days at a stretch. It was a good deal to spend time with the Italian poet Patrizia Cavalli, who came over from Rome at the beginning of the residency; and Geoffrey Brock, one of her translators, who came from Arkansas (even farther?); and D.A. Powell, who spent a week towards the end of October, and gave a craft talk somehow deeply personal and casual seeming at the same time as it rigorously adhered to telling a story that joined—persuasively and without pretension—Hokusai and Eisenstein to the writing of his own poems.

I sent them all to the Johnson Wool Mill.

At some point during every residency month at VSC, photographer Howard Romero shows up to take a group photo and individual "studio portraits," a project meant

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to be made eventually into a book. Romero goes around to each studio and takes a photograph of the artist or writer in his or her own working space. When it was my turn, I realized what I wanted to do. I led him out of the building and down the slope to the bank of the Gihon. At the end of October, and on a grey day, water that cold could stop your heart. I made my mind a blank and walked into the river to a shallow bed, crossed my ankles, and sat down in the water. The river swirled around my waist, and I placed my hands down to prop me up against the current. I agree that it looks totally ridiculous. But at the time, it seemed like the best possible answer to the question, what are you working on?

If you can recall what it was like in college during finals week, when it seemed that your entire tribe had stepped into a singular, weird, high-pressure, collective mind-space, an aura of intense individual focus sharpened by the back-sound of a ticking clock, then you'll have a sense of the charged atmosphere at a residency such as the VSC: a feeling of both the limitlessness of being "in the zone" and the urgency of a deadline. There's a shared feeling of common purpose, regardless of where people are in their work, which, in the best instances, supersedes most issues of talent, career, or the inescapable feeling of social vulnerability that attends encounters between artists and writers. It really was encouraging, sometimes even inspiring.

More inspiring still at the end of that month was a performance by the guitarist Bill Frisell, in residence with his wife, the painter Carol D'Inverno-Frisell. Bill Frisell, there for the second fall in a row (and sporting his own Johnson Wool vest), had become friends with a young violinist, Roland Clark, the son of Gary Clark, the VSC's Writing Coordinator. Following a stunning reading by Doug Powell, these two—Clark and Frisell—played together with startling, brilliant intimacy. To hear Frisell's endlessly inventive harmonic searching intertwine with the precocious melodic sophistication of a sixteen-year-old boy from this small-town world of Vermont filled me up to the brim. And I had finished a draft of the poem.

Thanks to the partnership between the VSC and the ALSCW, like Lily Briscoe at her canvas, I'd had my vision. It was time to go. After my last morning of sitting in the zendo, I asked Karma how long he had been practicing meditation. "Oh," he said, "I've never done it before coming here! My first name is my father's horse, and my last name is a monk's I never met. I thought it was all bullshit." We laughed in the new cold. You could taste winter in the air, and I left him to fill my travel mug with fresh coffee. ☕

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Ever since the late 1940s, various schools of literary interpretation have come and gone with alarming regularity, and we seem now to be on the cusp of another revolution of fortune's wheel. Like Mark Twain's obituary, early reports of the death of Poststructuralism may have been greatly exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the calls for intellectual reform articulated, for example, in *Theory's Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2005) are gaining credibility and momentum. Harvard's magisterial Louis Menand sums up the need for change with the terse observation that "university literature departments could use some younger people who think that the grownups got it all wrong."<sup>1</sup> Or, in other words, they could use some new scholars whose truth-claims will prove more reliable and durable than those of their predecessors.

# Literary Darwinism: A "Bargain with the Devil" or a Source of Professional Renewal?

Charles Duncan

Unfortunately, Menand blithely dismisses the exciting new school of literary theory that would most likely accomplish that very goal as a "bargain with the devil"—his contemptuous term for the emerging discipline of consilient literary studies commonly known as *Literary Darwinism* (Yes, I know—"Literary what??" is precisely what I said when I discovered it quite by accident around five years ago). Whether known by its most familiar *nom de guerre*—or by the less common but equally useful terms biocultural criticism, adaptationist literary study, or biopoetics—this bold new program of literary research seeks to produce more reliable and durable interpretations of literary texts by illuminating them through analyses based on various biological and behavioral sciences. During the past few years, the pace of this Baconian revolution in the humanities has stepped up, and the four recent books I discuss suggest that it may well be approaching critical mass.

Jonathan Gottschall's *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008) is a good place to begin. The first half of this provocative little book is devoted to a polemical professional critique along the lines of *Theory's Empire*, but with an even sharper edge. Besides the venial sin of confusing politics with scholarship, Gottschall argues, the mortal sin of our profession is deeply epistemological: a deliberate rejection of the principle of parsimony (or Occam's razor), by which the sciences have made such enormous strides during the past three centuries. In the second half of the book, Gottschall provides three quantitative

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Brian Boyd, "Getting It All Wrong: Bioculture Critiques Cultural Critique," *American Scholar* 75: 4 (Autumn 2006), 18. Boyd's article provides a thorough, robust response to Menand's views, which were published in "Dangers Within and Without," *Profession* (MLA, 2005), pp. 10–17.

case studies that demonstrate how, by "shrinking the space of possible explanation"<sup>2</sup> for literary phenomena from plenitude to parsimony, we can escape the labyrinth we have created for ourselves.

In the first two studies, Gottschall analyzes a comprehensive sample of world folk tales to interrogate the cultural myths that valorize female beauty and romantic love. If those myths were historically contingent, then one would expect evidence of differing cultural norms from a wide historical and geographical base of data. However, the research conclusion—based on data extracted by undergraduate coders ignorant of the research hypothesis—is that the presumed Euro-Western social constructs are actually cultural universals. Gottschall's third case study, which undergirds the other two, tackles the question of gender identity: does it grow out of the sexual dimorphism common to all species, or is it a uniquely human social construct amplified by Western cultural biases? The conclusion is that the heroes and heroines of world folktales conform not only to the gender stereotypes of popular culture, but also to the universal mate criteria discovered by David Buss in his landmark 1989 study of thirty-seven cultures spanning six continents.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, taken together, Gottschall's studies suggest that world folktales embed at some deeply primordial level a Darwinian metanarrative whose theme is reproductive fitness.

In *The Rape of Troy* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Gottschall's major contribution to canonical literary scholarship, he argues that precisely the same theme drives the action of Homer's *Iliad*. According to the conventional wisdom, Menelaus's quest to retrieve his abducted wife is mainly a pretext to seize territory and spoils, and to achieve immortal fame in the process. But from the evolutionary

<sup>2</sup> *Literature, Science, and a New Humanities* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Buss, "Sex Differences in Human Mate Preferences: Evolutionary Hypotheses Tested in 37 Cultures," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 12 (1989): pp. 1–49.

perspective, the conventional wisdom confuses proximate motives with ultimate motives. Combining research from classical scholarship, archaeology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology to support his uncommonly sensitive textual analysis, Gottschall argues that "all forms of Homeric conflict result from direct attempts, as in fights over women, or indirect attempts, as in fights for social status and wealth, to enhance Darwinian fitness in a physically and socially exacting ecological niche."<sup>4</sup> Seen from this perspective, Achilles' rage and refusal to fight is not merely a convenient pretext for the action, but is the crux of the underlying theme.

Gottschall's hypothesis situates human behavior squarely within a universal paradigm: across all known species, fierce intra-male rivalry for mating opportunities is the norm. The sociobiological rationale for this widely observed behavior is provided by Robert Trivers's parental investment theory, which predicts that the "lower investing" sex will always compete—to the death, if necessary—for preferential access to the "higher investing" sex.<sup>5</sup> The occasional species, such as seahorses, for which sex roles are reversed only help to prove the rule.

Moreover, since the competition will axiomatically favor the most dominant males, it will also tend to favor polygynous<sup>6</sup> mating, especially given a scarcity of environmental affordances—explaining, for example, why monogamous mating is so rare among nonhuman mammals, or why eighty-three percent of the world's societies remain polygynous. In the

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<sup>4</sup> *The Rape of Troy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Robert L. Trivers, "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection," in *Sexual Selection: The Descent of Man, 1871–1971*, ed. Bernard Campbell (Chicago: Aldine, 1972), pp. 136–79.

<sup>6</sup> Polygynous is preferable to "polygamous" not only because it is the more precise term, but also because it calls attention to the fact that polygyny is historically a common mating practice, whereas polyandry is extremely rare—see, for example, Bobbi S. Low, *Why Sex Matters: A Darwinian Look at Human Behavior* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 57–76.

resource-scarce environment of the archaic Hellenes, where polygyny was synonymous with aristocracy, the incentives for young men to prove their worthiness in combat would have been very high, just as among modern day primordial societies like the Yanamamo of the Amazon basin. For the victorious, the reward would have been a “direct fitness payoff” in proportion to their valor: captured slave women and enhanced marriage prospects back home. For those who fell nobly, there would have been an “indirect fitness payoff” for their kin in the form of enhanced social status. As for those who fought poorly or ran, one can turn to Helen’s contempt toward Paris for a trope of the kind of evolutionary justice that would have been their fate.

The cultural ecology of Homer’s world seems so remote from New York Society’s gilded age that we might suppose there could be few, if any, behavioral homologues. But Judith Saunders suggests just the opposite in her definitive new contribution to Edith Wharton scholarship, *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens*:

Edith Wharton may seem at first glance to be an unlikely object of attention for Darwinian literary analysis [...] Beneath the polished surface of her fictional worlds, however, readers can observe her characters competing fiercely for desirable partners, questing aggressively for status and resources, and plotting ruthlessly to advance their relatives’ status in life.<sup>7</sup>

There is even a homologous link with the *Iliad*’s back-story, but with an ironic twist, for in Wharton’s Olympian social ethos, it is the women who typically compete for the approval of a relatively limited number of suitable mates. Factor in the despotic power of the Gotham clans, conspicuous consumption as the criterion for personal fulfillment, and the timeless clash between male and female

<sup>7</sup> *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2009), p. 1.

reproductive strategies—which guarantees that many of Wharton’s female characters will become mistresses—and you have a formula for what Saunders describes as “much personal unhappiness located in norms whose function is to support evolved adaptations and behavioral strategies, but whose operations exact a high psychological or social price” (p. 188).

An example from Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (D. Appleton, 1920) will illustrate the power of Saunders’ well-crafted arguments: the adaptive logic of Ellen’s decision to sacrifice her adulterous love for Newland Archer. By reading through a Darwinian lens, Saunders shows that Ellen’s decision is neither as altruistic as readers might suppose, nor as much of a concession to the patriarchal establishment as literary scholars might suppose. At the level of what Joseph Carroll calls “the deep structure of literary representations”—in other words, the structure of elemental, species-typical motives and dispositions that lurk beneath the surface of a text—it is much more like Sophie’s choice.<sup>8</sup>

Like Newland, Ellen wants a new life of sexual and emotional fulfillment, but these are classically proximate motives generated by a human emotional system designed to promote reproductive success. More importantly, her biological clock has been ticking for a long time, and although she cannot be sure whether the infertility is hers or her womanizing husband’s, the high social costs of mate-poaching could be worth the gamble—or at least they would be if May were not a kinswoman. However, since May is her cousin, “Ellen is pulled in diametrically opposite directions by the operations of two powerful sets of evolutionary forces—the impulse to compete for the best available mate and thus enhance direct fitness, and the nepotistic impulse to assist kin (and thus enhance indirect fitness).”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “The Deep Structure of Literary Representations” in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 103–116.

<sup>9</sup> Saunders, *Reading Edith Wharton*, p. 94.

Unlike Sophie’s choice, however, this is a prisoner’s dilemma that can be resolved at the level of biological self-interest (although not without exacting, as Saunders says, a “high psychological price”). May’s announcement of her pregnancy is obviously a powerful incentive for Archer to give up his romance with Ellen and return to the fold. But there is an equally important flip side for Ellen: it is a dire warning that she had best withdraw a risky bid to maximize her fitness in favor of a smaller, but safer, investment in her genetic posterity.

Another salient feature of Saunders’ book is the way she generously interweaves quotations from postmodern Wharton scholarship so that “readers can see how biosocial interpretation extends, refutes, enriches, or reconfigures insights derived from other critical perspectives.”<sup>10</sup> What she implies, and as the quotations themselves confirm, is that postmodern Wharton critics have achieved their best insights not by virtue of their critical methodology, but by reading through the simple Darwinian lens with which evolution has equipped us—the intuitive folk psychology that bonds them much more viscerally to the text and its author than to any school of current literary theory. Since folk psychology is merely the vernacular equivalent of evolutionary psychology, how much better if such insights could be married to a theory that refines them, amplifies them, and brings them into alignment with the best scientific thinking about human nature!

And that is the central thesis of the superb new anthology *Literature, Film, Evolution: A Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2010), edited by three of Literary Darwinism’s most formative thinkers—Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall. With thirty-eight well-chosen selections ranging from seminal evolutionary thinking to cutting-edge biosocial criticism of literature and film, the book offers a thorough introduction to the theory and practice of Literary Darwinism. Besides

<sup>10</sup> Saunders, *Reading Edith Wharton*, p. 3.

the editors’ own significant contributions to the volume, the contributions by other major scholars such as Michelle Sugiyama, Marcus Nordlund, Ellen Dissanayake, and Daniel Nettle provide a field guide to some of Literary Darwinism’s best thinking.

The book includes some sharp criticism—as it must—of current literary theory. However, the invitation it extends to the profession could not be more genial, open handed, and exciting:

If the impulses behind this anthology were to become active across the humanities, this would constitute an epistemic revolution expanding the scope of both the sciences and the humanities [...] We have no illusions that our formulations are fixed and final, but we have felt the excitement of making new discoveries and look forward to more. We have all been inspired by the exhilarating sense that we are joining together in an intellectual adventure of great scope. We invite you to join us.<sup>11</sup>

The five-part ground plan resembles a tree of knowledge: Foundational scientific texts serve as the roots, evolutionary theories of the origin and function of the arts are the trunk, models of applied Darwinian literary theory stand as the branches, and explications of specific works are the leaves. At the very top, some promising new growth reflects an even sharper convergence of the methods of science and those of the humanities.

In the essay with the most far-reaching implications, Joseph Carroll and his research associates display the findings of an exhaustive statistical study of reader responses to canonical British novels. The study concludes that the novels depict a cooperative social ethos resembling that of early societies of hunters and gatherers, wherein the protagonists are

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall, introduction to *Literature, Film, Evolution: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 17.

defined by their behavioral inclination to promote the ethos, and the antagonists by their inclination to sabotage it. Besides providing a wholly new take on this body of literature, this should come as good news to those who still believe that Darwinism concerns itself only with the “survival of the fittest”—in the crude sense famously associated with Social Darwinism—and consequently, that Literary Darwinism must be a safe haven for neoconservative thinking. Actually, though Literary Darwinists cluster more toward the political center than most current literary theorists, Literary Darwinism is apolitical and accommodates scholars from across the entire political spectrum.

Some twelve years ago, Nancy Easterlin, one of the original champions of Literary Darwinism, declared that “Humanists and social scientists, including literary theorists, who ignore the implications of evolutionary theory and biology do so at the cost of the increasing irrelevance of their disciplines.”<sup>12</sup> While such an assertion might have seemed cavalier at the time, in light of recent publications such as those I have discussed, it seems more prophetic than presumptuous.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, by anchoring its methods in well-established biological and behavioral sciences rather than changing political fashions, Literary Darwinism promises to renew the profession by infusing it with an accumulating body of scientific knowledge that is not likely to be displaced for a very long time, if ever.

<sup>12</sup> “Making Knowledge: Bioepistemology and the Foundation of Literary Theory,” *Mosaic* 32, no. 1 (March 1999): pp. 131–147.

<sup>13</sup> Other valuable contributions to Darwinian literary theory and practice during the past few years include Marcus Nordlund, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Love: Literature, Culture, Evolution* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007); Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Emotion* (Bloomsbury, 2009); and most recently, Joseph Carroll, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), another magnum opus by Literary Darwinism’s principal architect, which joins his earlier works as a game-changing contribution to literary studies.

What is more, Literary Darwinism promises to help restore literature to its proper place of honor in the spectrum of human knowledge—an ancient pedestal at the base of which is inscribed the motto “*dulce et utile*.” For far too long, the study of literature has been monopolized by scholars who seem to believe that, save to the extent it discloses not-so-conscious prejudices and emotional biases, literature is ultimately valueless and devoid of intrinsic meaning. In contrast, two leading evolutionary psychologists, John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, speak to the rock-solid value of literary texts that say what they mean and mean what they say (Although they have narrative texts in mind, I am quite sure that the thrust of their endorsement embraces poetry and drama as well):

By unleashing our reactions to potential lives and realities, fiction enables us to feel more richly and adaptively about what we have not actually experienced. This allows us not only to understand others’ choices and inner lives better, but to feel our way more foresightfully to better adaptive choices ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

*What? Through the magic of vicarious experience, reading fiction is actually good for us?* A traditional humanist hardly could have made the point more forcefully. Thus, it should be evident, if it is not already, that Literary Darwinists share much common ground and common cause with traditional humanists, and eagerly hope that many will accept the open invitation to join forces. 

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Michelle Scalise Sugiyama, “Reverse Engineering Narrative: Evidence of Special Design,” in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 187.

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I have long felt that I would rather warm up from winter cold than cool down from summer heat. There’s something excitingly elemental about coming in from frigid weather, kindling a fire, maybe taking some tea or a dram. To get warm is to best bitter elements. It takes work, unlike passively cooling off.

At times in my reading life, I want winter. My mind’s weather turns chill, and I seek a corroboration, a correspondence with some other cold front, some frost drama of a poem of winter, in which winter is a season as well as a spiritual condition, outward climate reflecting inner.

The six poems I consider here are works I have read again and again for years, in a wintry frame of mind and out of it, with mixtures of exaltation, surprise, solace, and fear. Each for me passes Robert Graves’ test for true poetry—it raises the neck hair. And Emily Dickinson’s: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry.”<sup>1</sup>

My disordered poetic sensibility insists on yoking these six poems in a way that of course their authors—Ted Hughes, Wang Wei, Thomas Hardy, Robert Lowell, Graves and Dickinson—never signed up for. But I hope to describe a progression of recognitions in these poems, a progression involving a bracing tension between harsh reality and heartening strength, by way of comparing elements in them. A way of warming up, I like to think. Maybe something more, something glimpsed in mists of the inexpressible.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Higginson to his wife, August 1870, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:472–4.

**“February,” Ted Hughes**

Hughes was famous, and oft criticized, for being primarily a poet of primitive, bloody nature and, more precisely, of animals, which he loved. In his verse, he worked to get at the essence of animals, often while expressing a view of nature as being hostile and indifferent to humankind and indeed to itself. But this preamble fails to prepare us for the force of “February.”

This poem embodies—or disembodies—the wolf at the door. Of traditional, tamed images and effigies of wolves, says the first of six unrhymed, free-verse quatrains, “none suffice.”<sup>2</sup> A photograph has overwhelmed the poet, or a “him” we might take to be the poet:

*the hairless, knuckled feet  
Of the last wolf killed in Britain.  
(5–6)*

The image frightens him far more than any other thought of wolves, so much so that, entering his dreams,

*...these feet*

*Print the moonlit doorstep,  
or run and run  
Through the hush of  
parkland, bodiless,  
headless....  
(8–10)*

The wolf’s feet “siege all thought,” (12) pulling the poem’s “him” not just into obsession, but a non-human world, a wolf world of an anguished, spectral hunt. The last dead wolf, quartered by some hunter, now roams disembodied in search of his slaughtered self, his lost world:

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes, “February,” in *Lupercal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), line 4.

# COLD COMFORT: SIX POEMS IN WINTER

By Brian J. Buchanan



These feet, deprived,  
Disdaining all that are caged, or storied, or pictured,  
Through and throughout the true world search  
For their vanished head, for the world

Vanished with the head...  
(17–21)

At this point, our bones are chilled by a savage spirit world that carries us into a deep recognition, perhaps in our primeval mind. And remember, it's February. But there is much worse to come as we are driven further into ear-popping terror by those preternatural feet:

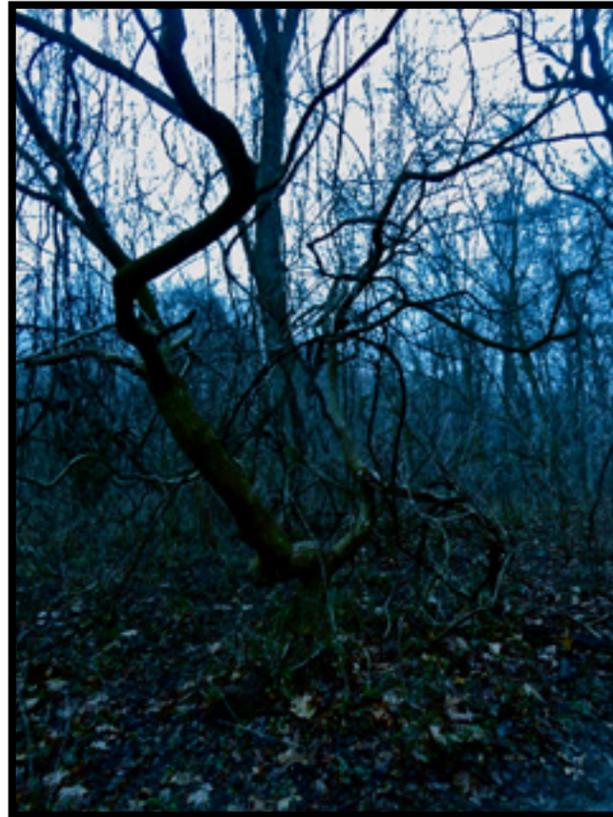
Now, lest they choose his head,  
Under severe moons he sits making  
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world.  
(22–24)

Here the poem ends, and I have dulled its force by breaking up the rush at our jugulars of its last two stanzas. But think of it: The "him" of the poem—like our frightened ancestors who disguised themselves on All Hallows' Eve to avoid being snatched away by spirits of the dead—dreads that the searching wolf *may seize his head for a replacement*. His only possible protection is making wolf masks. *See? I'm a wolf, too*, he says to the bereft wolf spirit.

As terrifying as this is, there's more to it. For in making masks of wolves—under the horror of the extinction of wild British wolves—he works urgently in his verse not only to conceal himself but also to appear as a wolf. The disinherited beast has found a cowering yet intense human spokesman. That his masks are many, their "mouths clamped well onto the world," suggests that he does not merely pose as a wolf—he takes a bite out of us. The speaker mediates, none too sympathetically, between a furious lost world and ours. For him, the mask making is a desperate refuge, hardly a solace. And it provides no defense for us as readers. The vanished wolf has loped into our innermost being and has gotten us after all.

Is there any comfort, any redemption to be found in this wolf-extinguished winter? None that I can find. To survive nature's eventual, inevitable rage, the man must become as a wolf. That he does so through masks of poetry leaves us in wintry terror. As A. Alvarez wrote, Ted Hughes' poetry "is adequate to the destructive reality we inhabit."<sup>3</sup> "February" is the winter of our disinheritance of nature, and the frightening consequences it portends. A bitter forecast it is.

<sup>3</sup> A. Alvarez, review of *Crow*, by Ted Hughes, *Observer*, quoted in *Crow*, Fab Lib 1st ed. (1974; London: Faber and Faber, 2001), inside cover and online at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Crow-Life-Songs-Ted-Hughes/dp/0571099157>.



#### "To Secretary Su," Wang Wei

Where Hughes' dispossessed, discarnate wolf becomes a fearsome presence in "February," this next stunning winter poem presents a radical absence of a different order.

Poet and translator David Young's anthology, *Five T'ang Poets*, says that the Chinese poet Wang Wei served at court, fell from grace, worked as a minor official, and went into partial retirement on his estate. His wife died when he was young. "It was a life in which periods of retirement and solitude were interspersed with official duties and travels," Young writes.<sup>4</sup>

This short poem is addressed as if it is a note to the secretary who tried to visit the speaker at his place near "an empty village" but who "came down that stony road / for nothing."<sup>5</sup>

"[N]o one to meet you / at my cottage," (6–7) the poem says, leading us to sense an imminent apology to Secretary Su for a forgotten appointment. Far from it. Rather than apologizing, the poet tells what the

<sup>4</sup> David Young, *Five T'ang Poets* (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1990), page 24.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Wei, "To Secretary Su," in *Five T'ang Poets*, trans. David Young (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1990), p. 29, line 3; lines 4–5.

secretary encounters instead of a host: fishing boats frozen fast on a riverbank, a "hunting fire ... burning on the plain" (10). The silence of a vast night, we are told, is broken by

only the howls of gibbons  
and a far-off temple bell.  
(13–14)

That's it. It doesn't sound like much until you read it straight through, as I urge you to do. You will find yourself becoming Secretary Su, standing in a breathtaking vacancy that contrasts sharply with whatever court business you have. The speaker never says where he was when Secretary Su visited, or what he was doing, or why he failed to meet his guest. He seems to be swallowed up in nature's wintry emptiness.

The speaker's reticence regarding his whereabouts can be taken several ways. We can read the poem as a sympathetic acknowledgment—though without remorse—of the secretary's utter loneliness in his host's unexpected absence. The poem may be saying, *Welcome to my world. This is what life is like for me*. Or the refusal to explain anything can be viewed as an insult. Then again, the poem may simply be a statement of fact concerning our ultimate aloneness in nature. Friends disappear. The official world of politics and administration confronts overpowering, void nature, into which the speaker vanishes.

The final two lines about the gibbon howls and the temple bell, however, introduce sound into the silence. The savage cries of the animals contrast with the distant ringing from a temple. Wang Wei was a devout Buddhist, and in the temple bell we hear at least the prospect of comfort, in humanity and even spirituality. Still, from the point of view of the secretary and the reader, such comforts lie far away: gibbons, which can be fierce creatures, may stand between us and the temple, and given the cold, deserted vastness that confronts us, the sound of the bell offers little solace.



#### "The Darkling Thrush," Thomas Hardy

Hardy's was a predominately wintry mind. Unable to accept religious faith, though he mourned its absence, he also tended to look upon transformative, Wordsworthian blazes of imagination with doubt. "But moving within the distrust of imagination," David Perkins wrote in 1959, "there is also the questioning, tentative openness of Hardy."<sup>6</sup>

That "tentative openness" of the divided soul that was Hardy's can be seen in "The Darkling Thrush." In this poem, writes Claire Tomalin, Hardy "manages a perfect balance between his unbelief and his nostalgia for the faith in which he had been reared."<sup>7</sup>

The poem, published in 1900, presents three elements: a speaker, winter; and a bird. It is a winter of miserable, desolate exhaustion, made more deathly by dusk, "[t]he weakening eye of day."<sup>8</sup> The landscape's music appears ruined:

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres...  
(5–6)

But suddenly the thrush announces himself: In the third stanza of four-three-four meter and regular *abab cdcd* rhyme, he sings. The lines cannot be quoted too often:

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
Upon the growing gloom.  
(17–24)

I find these among the most thrilling verses in English, lines to be shouted into the teeth of a blizzard. "Blast-beruffled plume" rouses the poetic nerves. I take profound courage from the song of the bird's full heart, from the image of a frail old bird giving his stalwart answer to winter. The bird's answer is not just defiance, but cheery defiance. Hardy is impressed enough to have rendered the thrush and his song in such monumental poetry, yet his speaker cannot participate fully in the bird's joy.

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<sup>6</sup> David Perkins, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," in *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> *Thomas Hardy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), p. 278.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush," in *Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. John Crowe Ransom (New York: Collier Books, 1974), p. 25, line 4.

“So little cause for carolings” (25) is evident in the surrounding bleakness, the speaker says in the fourth and final stanza, that the thrush must know something the speaker does not:

*Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.  
(31–32)*

The “cause” of the thrush’s song, considered scientifically, has to do with mating and, more likely in winter, defense of feeding ground. Hardy does not avail himself of naturalistic explanations. Even if he did, on the evidence of the poem, the thrush’s joy and hope would remain the joy and hope of the bird’s own continuance, in part by means of his very song itself, which sends a signal that the present territory belongs to him.

What fascinates me, and perhaps decades of readers and anthology editors, is that despite the speaker’s *seeming* inability to reach the realm of the bird’s “joy illimited,” we readers reach it through the poet’s highly crafted verse. Which raises the question, Does the speaker, and does Hardy, partake of the bird’s song after all? How could he not, having thrilled us with his rendering of it? Perkins holds that although the speaker “obstinately” maintains a stiffly disciplined distance from the thrush’s experience, as suggested by the strict versification, “some latitude is still allowed” to the “carolings.”<sup>9</sup>

“In this respect, the poem is rather unusual for Hardy,” Perkins says, for “[h]e is more likely to present the visionary experience without faith” (p. 154). I, however, am not sure Hardy exhibits faith in this poem; it feels more like uncertainty about faith that does not quite deny faith’s being possible. The strict meter and rhyme, even as they keep the speaker at a distance from the thrush’s joy—



as Perkins notes—at the same time echo the four-three-four structure of many Protestant hymns. In this metrical parallel, common in Hardy’s work, we can see the balance of opposites in Hardy’s spiritual nature of which Tomalin speaks. The poem’s final line, “And I was unaware,” is ambiguous. The poet has given us the thrush’s “joy illimited” but stops short of embracing a “blessed Hope.” In the dead of winter, in the winter of his soul, the speaker at once acknowledges the existence of joy and resists the notion that, at least for him, it may also encompass hope.

<sup>9</sup> “Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation,” in *Hardy*, p. 154.

### “Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue,” Robert Lowell

This poem appears in Lowell’s second book, *Lord Weary’s Castle*. Brooding during a World War II blackout, the poet thinks of childhood and Christmas, and casts a baleful eye at the image of Hooker, a Civil War general, whose statue is taken to be a symbol of war. In three nine-line stanzas of *abab* rhyme ending in a rhyming couplet (stanza two’s rhyme scheme is a bit irregular), the poem harnesses the cold, sterile warrior to the idea of blighted innocence, of original sin: “hell’s / Serpent entwined in the apple in the toe” of the speaker’s childhood Christmas stocking “[t]o sting the child with knowledge.”<sup>10</sup>

Hooker and his machinery of combat represent the force under which “the long horn of plenty broke like glass” (8); it is a wintry force, this “blundering butcher” (16), his “heels / Kicking at nothing in the shifting snow” (4–5). We feel the chill of frigid metal: “His heavy saber flashes with the rime” (12).

The poem then likens the “Man of war” (20) to the speaker’s father, as the Christmas-stocking theme returns. “I am cold” (17), the speaker says:

*I ask for bread, my father gives me mould;  
  
His stocking is full of stones. Santa in red  
Is crowned with wizened berries.  
(18–20)*

The childhood ideal of Santa’s kingship and gift-giving power is withered by time. It is tempting here to read an additional meaning of “father” as God, were it not for the final couplet:

*But we are old, our  
fields are running wild:  
Till Christ again turn  
wanderer and child.  
(26–27)*

The ending puts forth a hope for redemption in this winter of sin and loss—a return of Jesus, a new Christmas, a restored Christ-child, His itinerant ministry of salvation, His welcoming of children and exhortation to all to become like little children. This winter hope seems much stronger than the birdsong of hope of which Hardy’s speaker is unaware, or the faraway ding of a temple bell in Wang Wei’s poem, or a desperately sewn wolf-mask in Hughes’. Lowell’s line is prophetic, with a touch of Yeats in it, and like true

<sup>10</sup> Robert Lowell, “Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue,” in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1946), p. 23, lines 2–3; line 4.

prophecy, it acknowledges that the event may or may not happen because it is up to us—because it is possible if we have faith, impossible if not.

But how much of a suggestion of faith is in this last line? The bitter tone of the rest of the poem works against it. As the critic Adam Kirsch wrote, “The strength of *Lord Weary’s Castle* is that it subverts its own religious symbols.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, as Kirsch shows, Lowell was a poet of great violence. Yet, in this poem, the violence seems suspended, frozen like Hooker’s statue, and balanced in perfect tension with the possibility of redemption. The final line strikes with a force equal to that of Hooker’s frost-whitened saber. *Don’t rule this out*, the line seems to suggest. It is, perhaps, a way out of the spirit’s winter.

### “Mid-Winter Waking,” Robert Graves

Throughout his life, Graves wrote under the influence of a series of Muses, women in whom he believed the White Goddess—the lunar Muse worshipped since the Old Stone Age—manifested herself for a time. “The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse,”<sup>12</sup> he wrote in the introduction to *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.

When Graves wrote “Mid-Winter Waking” in 1940, he was emerging from what had become the manipulative and destructive Muse influence of the poet Laura Riding (a manipulation that Graves tended passively to allow) to find solace and inspiration with Beryl Hodge, a “gentler” Muse, according to Richard Perceval Graves’ biography of the poet.<sup>13</sup>

The transformation of the speaker suggested in this three-stanza poem represents itself as nothing short of a miraculous arrival in a restorative, pastoral fairyland. It is essentially a medieval-romance poem of magical deliverance, in this case from the winter of a Muse-turned-poisonous. It begins:

*Stirring suddenly from long hibernation,  
I knew myself once more a poet...<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> *The Wounded Surgeon* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1948), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess, 1940–85* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Graves, “Mid-Winter Waking,” in *Robert Graves: The Complete Poems*, ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 398, lines 1–2.

Upon this waking, the poet finds himself

*Guarded by timeless principalities  
Against the worm of death, this hillside haunting...  
(3–4)*

This last phrase suggests Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in which the speaker meets “a faery’s child,” loves her, places her on his steed, hears her “faery’s song,” believes himself loved, and falls asleep in her “elfin grot,” only to awake alone “[o]n the cold hill’s side” after the “horrid warning” of a dream.<sup>15</sup>

In Graves’ poetic mythology, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” suggests abandonment by the Muse and resulting desolation. Yet, unlike the narrator of Keats’ ballad, Graves’ mid-winter poet finds in his lover

*...sudden warm airs that blow  
Before the expected season of new blossom,  
While sheep still gnaw at roots and lambless go—<sup>16</sup>*

It is still winter, but now the poet feels the breath of spring, ahead of schedule, with the prospect of new verse symbolized by or arising from spring. He awakes to find

*...her hand in mine laid closely  
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.  
We stared in silence all around us  
But found no winter anywhere to see.  
(12–15)*

Here the poem ends. Though tough winter remains, it has vanished for the lovers. They have undergone a magical transformation that leaves them—and us—hushed in wonder. In this poem, love possesses the power to nullify winter even with the season just half-over. It proclaims love as a way out of the spiritual winter within which the speakers or characters in the other poems exist and against which they contend.

(continued next page)

<sup>15</sup> John Keats, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 535–536, line 14; 24; 29; 44; 42.

<sup>16</sup> Graves, “Mid-Winter Waking,” in *Robert Graves*, lines 8–10.

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Poem No. 442—"God made a little Gentian,"  
Emily Dickinson

In Thomas H. Johnson's edition, the poem begins

God made a little Gentian—  
It tried—to be a Rose—  
And failed—and all the Summer laughed—<sup>17</sup>

Then, "just before the Snows" (4), a "Purple Creature" (5) grew "[t]hat ravished all the Hill" (6) and all ridicule ceased. "The Frosts were her condition" (9), the final stanza says, the flower failing to reach its full glory "[u]ntil the North—invoke it" (11). The poem ends with, "Creator—Shall I—bloom?" (12).

The first possible reading of this poem takes the gentian as botanical specimen. Strictly on the level of botanical drama, an analysis of the poem might go like this: A lesser fringed gentian, which can appear as early as June, or a closed gentian, which would wait until August, bloomed but was greatly outshone by roses and other larger, showier flowers (note how the dash in "It tried—to be a Rose" accentuates both the flower's effort and the rose it failed to become). Along came autumn, though, and then the fringed gentian—the "Purple Creature," which can bloom as late as November—carried the day as other flowers withered in winter's onset. The speaker startlingly reveals herself as "I" in the last line, asking her Creator whether she too shall bloom.

No doubt for many readers, the "I" invites an understanding of these verses as a metaphor or allegory for Emily Dickinson's solitary, lovelorn life. In a 1973 essay, Richard Howard said Dickinson, in her limited social relations, "used flowers to speak for her, since after all they spoke so significantly to her."<sup>18</sup> But Dickinson herself warned against such readings, spurning in a letter the assumption that the "I" of her poems was herself. "It does not mean—me—but a supposed person."<sup>19</sup>

Granting that, we may say nonetheless that the flower speaks for the "I" of the poem, at least, who feels she has not bloomed, and seems timidly to ask whether she might. She has tried and failed to be a rose, which we may read as trying and failing at love, and hears the ridicule of society at the winter of her seclusion. And yet, this winter, unlike those in the other poems explored in this essay, proves to be neither an adversary nor a

<sup>17</sup> Emily Dickinson, "God made a little Gentian," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), pages 211–212, lines 1–3.

<sup>18</sup> "A Consideration of the Writings of Emily Dickinson," in *Paper Trail: Selected Prose, 1965–2003* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 2004), p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, July 1862, quoted in Richard Howard, "A Consideration of the Writings of Emily Dickinson," in *Paper Trail: Selected Prose, 1965–2003* (New York: Farrar, Staus and Giroux, 2004), p. 6.

hostile condition for the gentian but, to the contrary, the gentian's veritable Muse—"The Frosts were her condition," the very "North" of winter bringing out her beauty, discountenancing the rest of flower society. The abrupt breaking away from the tale of the gentian by the "I" suggests potential identification with the flower in spite of the implied declaration of separateness. The nursery-tale diction in the treatment of the dismissive flower world also works well to distance both the gentian and the "I" from it.

What we know about Dickinson still nags at us, though, as we read this poem. Allen Tate called her a poet of "personal revelation," and counted her artistry as "the effort of the individual to live apart from a cultural tradition that no longer sustains" her.<sup>20</sup> What is revealed in Dickinson's poetry, and what is the nature of the living apart? Consider this: Northrop Frye reported that after the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom Dickinson appeared to have loved, took a church in San Francisco called Calvary, she styled herself "Empress of Calvary," the distant church becoming "the center of a drama of loss and renunciation."<sup>21</sup>

We see the loss in "Gentian," but the renunciation is less obvious until we think of how winter functions in the poem. Winter is the gentian's triumphant element that simultaneously humbles the summer flowers and brings the gentian to bloom. This winter, this renunciation, this "Nothing," as Dickinson wrote elsewhere, "is the force / That renovates the world."<sup>22</sup> As Howard says, Dickinson's poems "are just that renovation, the negative force which made life accessible to her."<sup>23</sup>

In this poem, winter serves as that negative force, the paradoxical "condition"<sup>24</sup> of triumph after loss. Winter summons a life different from that of the rest of the world. The "I" leaves off wondering whether she can, and asking whether she shall, flourish in that life and blaze out in glory amid her wintry solitude.

#### Final thoughts

These six poems present a range of exploits and outcomes—from chill horror in Hughes and Wang Wei, to uncertain hope of redemption in Hardy and Lowell, to the magical salvation of love in Graves, and finally, and perhaps most magnificently, to an affirmation of winter itself as a potential garden in Dickinson. In their different ways, they open us to astonishing, thrilling, revelatory, contradictory, often ambiguous ways of looking at winter, which represents adversity and spiritual crisis. 

<sup>20</sup> Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," in *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), page 292.

<sup>21</sup> *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1986), page 195.

<sup>22</sup> "Poem No. 1563," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955), page 650, lines 4–5.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Howard, "A Consideration of the Writings," in *Paper Trail*, page 23.

<sup>24</sup> Emily Dickinson, "Gentian," in *The Complete Poems*, line 9.

#### "IN MEMORIAM, DONALD S. CARNE-ROSS (1921-2010)"

The clipped voice, nasal, nearly baritone.  
Frumpled Italian suit, sometimes an ascot—  
a black one spotted with large, pink polka-dots.  
Oxford degree, though a self-inflicted bad one  
(a polyglot, he despised the English school).  
Mournful, large eyes peering out behind thick glasses:  
Leopardi in Texas, goatee too long, not neat.  
His gestures awkward, speech like a fallen angel's,  
chopping the air with his pale, stubby hands.  
A Brit, but not quite donnish—Dionysian, rather,  
and deeply humble in his abiding love  
of gems of verses gathered up from the dark,  
"dark with excessive bright," of Pindar's *aigla*  
*diosodotos* bestriding the abyss.  
D. S. C-R, or Donald, never Don—  
though a Don Quixote, perhaps, mad for grand utterances,  
For the nobility of literature, for a brilliant  
cosmos of letters and sounds he would evoke  
with the magic of his vanished eloquence.  
He loved the ghosts of greatness, and now is one.

-Steven Shankman



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#### "PLOT IN WINTER"

Draw the rosebush that buds white  
haunting stars, which have shot forth  
for five springs demure and miniature.  
Next sketch the graft: craggy sprays  
dragging fists of petals and pigment.  
Shall blue blooms feathered in gilt  
erupt above their wilting sisters,  
and perfume the lawn  
with the scent of your skin?

-Jillian Saucier



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