



POETRY

FOUNDED IN 1912

Review: If a Poem Is like a Picture, What's a History of Poetry like?

Author(s): Harold Fromm

Source: *Poetry*, Vol. 151, No. 3 (Dec., 1987), pp. 296-310

Published by: [Poetry Foundation](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20601458>

Accessed: 24/09/2010 00:17

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=poetry>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Poetry Foundation is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Poetry*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

COMMENT

 IF A POEM IS LIKE A PICTURE,
 WHAT'S A HISTORY OF POETRY LIKE?

A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After, by David Perkins.
 The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. \$25.00

Reading literary history has a certain resemblance to pressing the SEARCH button on a compact disk player: Beethoven's Ninth zooms by in five minutes. The pitch is right and one catches some of the themes, but it all seems to have a strange new meaning and character. Is it insight—or chaos come again?

But if reading literary history seems odd, writing it has got to be traumatic. For today's literary historian begins by discovering that he is in the middle of an identity crisis, both public and private. Indeed, "Who am I?" and "What is truth?" must be his first questions. In the innocent past, it might have been possible to pretend one was simply a scribe of the muses. You summoned Clio, took a few gulps of sack, or threw some rotten apples into your desk drawer, and then you could feel like a vessel of the Lord. You told it like it was (stylishly, of course), knowing all along that Nature and Homer were the same. But today, apples are sprayed with carcinogenic Alar; sack is at best questionable (what with the sulfites and all); and Hayden White, Norman Holland, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Spivack, Rosalind Krauss, Sacvan Bercovitch, Sandra Gilbert, Paul de Man, and God knows who else are lurking—dead or alive—behind the arras, ready to give you a drubbing or a trashing, impugn your motives, deride your point of view, denounce you as a patriarch, a fascist, or, what is worse, a bourgeois saturated with evil and unconscious ideology. Nature and Homer may have *once* been the same. But today's sole axiomatic isomorphism, it would seem, is: "Everything is political."

How can a poor literary historian escape blame in such a savage milieu? If there is no privileged stance, no unmediated reality, no point of view that resembles God's, no "correct" politics (except Critic X's), what would be the wisest path in an environment in which wisdom is only another supreme fiction? To take up the prevailing and noisiest ideology, the one that for a moment is drown-

ing out all the others and will put you onto page one of *Telos*? Or to wing it alone, while invoking a pox on all their houses?

David Perkins has more or less chosen Method Number Two, but he doesn't think it worth the effort to invoke poxes. He doesn't have to. One of the many distinctions of his history is that he doesn't give any of these critics more of a toehold than is useful for his own purposes. He doesn't even invoke most of their names. (Can you believe a book without Derrida in the index? No Foucault or Althusser? No Bakhtin? Not even a little aerie for Terry Eagleton?) Has he even read them? Most likely, for he seems to have read everything; or else he's an even greater virtuoso than he appears to be. But why give these dictators more power than they've already got? Isn't taste totalitarian enough these days? Have you checked the notes and bibliographies of the articles in any recent *PMLA*? They are all the same, whether the subject is "The Pardoner's Tale" or *The Golden Bowl*. Perkins has made the smarter choice: he uses what he likes, employs current ideas when they suit him, doesn't embrace any schools or gurus—and if he can't use them, he consigns them to perdition through benign neglect. Slavish trendies may see all of this as a reactionary sign; but, in the case of someone who knows as much as Perkins, it's not reaction, it's revolution.

The negative side to this is that Perkins has avoided notes and bibliography in the interest of readability. If he does not happen to identify a source in the synthetic web of his text, it is very difficult to find out what it is. His book would be much more useful if it could serve as a starting point for further exploration; but without references, the reader will not know where to look next. Perkins, however, has prepared us for this in his first volume, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, published in 1976:

This book is written both for the general public and for students. Many of the poets and movements it takes up have been discussed at far greater length in works devoted to them as a special subject; on some there are hundreds of books and monographs. I am enormously indebted to these specialized studies, but it would be idle to hope that the authors of them will be completely satisfied by my synoptic treatment.

Yet, here too is another of this book's strengths—it really *is* written for flesh and blood readers. Its twelve hundred pages (each volume

has about half) not only can be, but ought to be read through from start to finish, for there is a story to be told and a plausible one. While it may be used as a reference book, in reality it is a continuous narrative created to be readable, engaging, enlightening. Perkins's serviceable prose, which sometimes rises to inspired wit and insight, is a model of clarity and unpretentiousness, without jargon, bombast, or so much as a "valorize," though it does have a few quirks of its own. For a certain sort of critic, however, readability is vulgar, *infra dig*, a sop for the rabble. In *The New York Review of Books* of May 28, 1987, for example, Keith Thomas—an Oxford don—reviewing Gertrude Himmelfarb's latest collection of essays is impelled to make a disclaimer: "The literary merits of Professor Himmelfarb's work are obvious. . . . She writes with exceptional lucidity . . . as one who is well-read rather than deeply learned [!]. She does not disdain to draw most of her evidence from standard biographies or easily accessible texts; and she has relatively little new information to offer those already familiar with the period. But although her essays are not works of original scholarship . . ." This is a very familiar comic routine among a certain class of academics who still believe in the eternal verities. One of these verities is that there is a thing called "scholarship" that is serious, sacred, primal, waltzes to the same tunes as divinity itself, and is generally of value beyond question. Finding "new information" from *inaccessible* texts occupies a much holier place in its hierarchy than merely being enlightening, making sense of data, altering consciousness, or being worth reading. (And do inaccessible texts become worthless once they are made accessible?) Since Perkins's book probably has little or nothing that is "new" in it, for this kind of critic it goes without saying that it is a second-order production, in the way that Samuel Johnson's works are inferior to those of Lewis Theobald.

But Perkins's history has already been criticized for giving insufficient attention to the causative role of social forces upon the mentalities, interests, and styles of twentieth-century writers. While alluding to Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, he does not discuss them at length, nor does he have a theory of the influence of history and social institutions on human behavior. Although these forces are present as part of his account, he does not go so far as to make precise claims about their effects on the incarnated works he discusses. In a recent and searching essay about the problems facing literary historians ("Rewriting the History of American Literature," *The New Criterion*, November 1986), James Tuttleton examines old, new, and forthcoming histories of American literature in order to

point out the obstacles presented to their authors by this problem of "critical" historiography (in the Frankfort School sense). He describes how Lawrence Buell, in his recent *New England Literary Culture*, spends considerable energy trying to outwit potential critics by first bowing to Marxists, feminists, minorities, Continental theorists, etc., and then going about the business that really interests him, hoping to avoid censure for being old-fashioned. Tuttleton then expresses his doubts about the forthcoming *Cambridge History of American Literature*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and written by a team of experts who threaten to unmask American ideological fictions in the Marxist-historical manner, quoting Bercovitch as saying that the literary work "can no more transcend ideology than an artist's mind can transcend psychology."

Perkins, whatever censure he may receive, has made a wise decision to limit his treatment of the influence of social and ideological forces (apart from the fact that he probably does not subscribe to any of the reigning ideologies), for in the course of two volumes he is fully preoccupied in providing accounts of more than three hundred poets. As the sole author of a lengthy history meant to be read as narrative, he would otherwise not only have distended his story to a dimension more suited to team-written reference works; he would have risked the even greater censure that inevitably accompanies histories unabashedly ideological, since even ideologically disposed critics never approve of anyone's ideology but their own. One need only recall the case of Peter Gay's recent Freud-dominated treatments of Victorian domesticity and the derision they have provoked from critics who regard Freudian psychology as obsolete. (Amusingly, Bruce Bawer has actually criticized Perkins for trying too hard to be politically "correct," for placating women, blacks, etc. For instance, "He is notably lenient on the left-wing Oxford poets and more than a bit hard on the reactionary Fugitives.") Bercovitch's remark about the impossibility of transcending either ideology or psychology implies more than he might agree to if pressed: namely, that dealing with *social* forces is as speculative as dealing with *psychological* ones. Instead of tracing a putative connection between a metaphorical unconscious and a metaphorical self, Marxist history traces similar speculative connections between metaphorical epistemes and metaphorical historical agents. If a reader happens to be a nonbeliever, the connections can look cripplingly tendentious, if not bizarre. Perkins maintains considerable distance from such a vulnerable procedure.

Instead of just warbling his native woodnotes wild, however, Perkins faces the matter of historical forces head-on in his first volume:

Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and Frazer are commonly cited as pillars of cloud and fire that went before the modern mind in its wandering. And the outcome of all this, the argument goes, was the building up of a new, specifically modern awareness—new topics and ways of thinking, new emotions, in short, a new “reality”—which had to be expressed in poetry. In a general way this is undeniable. But these changes took place gradually over a long period of time. They do not explain why the “renaissance” in poetry came when it did; neither do they explain why it came more as a revolution than as a slow, continuous transition. To account for these facts one must keep in mind the extent to which poetic conventions control how and what a poet writes.

Minimally concerned, despite Bawer, with being politically correct, Perkins has instead restricted his speculations to matters that *can* be corroborated by his readers. Through the use of enormous quantities of early editions of poems, of literary histories, letters, published criticism, biographies, and memoirs, he makes claims whose truth or falsity can be checked by reading the poems themselves. Did Hart Crane’s befriending of Allen Tate have an effect on Tate’s own poetry? Did Yvor Winters imitate the poems of William Carlos Williams? There is at least a hope that these claims can be empirically verified. And the reader can do the job for himself, without speculative theories.

Yet it would be misleading to give the impression that Perkins does not relate the productions of his poets to the social and ideological forces surrounding them. He is, in fact, making such associations all the time:

“Moloch,” as Allen Ginsberg calls it, is the vast, entrenched system of economic, political, and ideological power: the government, armed forces, police, business corporations, labor unions, and media. Disgust and fear of this and its manifestations are voiced by approximately half of our contemporary poets; the others are not of an opposite opinion, but are too urbane in style or too personal in subject matter to voice such emotions directly and strongly. But of course “Moloch” seems quite impervious to the fulminations of poets. As one of a huge population, caught like everyone else in the toils of history, of the bureaucratic state, and of the large institutions in which we work, shop, and amuse ourselves, the poet cannot

feel that his or her ideas and desires make any difference. What we experience as our own ideas and desires may, in any case, have been instilled in us by propaganda and advertising.

Without the trumpets and drums of an Eagleton or the tortured, sardonic prose of an Adorno, a passage like this can nonetheless do its work. *En passant* are wry remarks about matters like Robert Lowell's conversion to Catholicism and subsequent defection:

Lowell's conversion followed upon hard reading and thinking, and his motivations were not modish, yet a historian may note that both Lowell's vision of evil and his conversion were in keeping with a trend among intellectuals in the 1940s. Lowell's faith gradually waned. . . . After roughly 1950 God no longer existed in Lowell's universe, though he sometimes mentioned Him unfavorably.

Avoiding the ostentatious self-congratulations of today's messianic ideologues, Perkins simply goes about his business without grandiosity.

Yet with all his neutrality and avoidance of programmatic proclamations. Perkins does have a point of view, which he is not at pains to conceal. In keeping with his remark about poetic conventions controlling how and what a poet writes, he says in connection with Archibald MacLeish, "Poetry depends much more on imagination, intelligence, and sensitivity to language than on personal experience." Or to put it another way, Perkins's history of poetry is a history of *poetry*, that is, an account of the development of an art form as seen from the environs of the workshop. A psycho-biologist might suggest that the poet's high comes from breathing in too much nitrogen dioxide from the ambient pollution, whereas the poet believes he is singing *O Altitudos* to the Mystic Rose and its message for mankind. Perhaps the real source of the poet's song is photochemical smog, just as the real source of Marxisant historiography may be pesticide residues on the zucchini. (Didn't toxic fumes in coal mines make canaries chirp?) Still, there is such a thing as the story of poetry as an art, just as there is a similar story about the writing of history. Would the whole tradition of *The Aeneid* as sublime poetic model be any the less operative if it could be shown that Virgil's art sprang from the leaden drinking cups that pickled the brains of Roman society? Without lifting up the veil of maya, it's still good to know what people *believe* they are doing, whether they are in fact doing

it or not. And in the world of poetry-writing, those beliefs are called poetics. Thus, a history of modern poetry.

These things being so, what *does* happen when Perkins presses the SEARCH button for his particular compact disk? What, after all, is the fast-forward story of modern poetry?

To begin with, the story is not all that fast. Twelve hundred pages, three hundred poets—even the devoted reader has only one lifetime to spend on this. But Perkins has done what a historian must do—imposed order on his materials and given us a story about Modernism, where it came from, and what has become of it. As he sees it, outdated Romantic and Victorian conventions of poetry and morals were increasingly evaded before the century's end by a migration of writers to prose and the novel. What was left of the will-to-poetry began to be reanimated in England under the influence of the French symbolists. Perkins's first volume traced the ways in which the *fin de siècle* English aesthetes and decadents turned from bourgeois morality, personal utterance, and public patriotism to a concern with beauty, form, art for art's sake—in a word, to the ideals of Pater and Wilde. This emphasis on form and craft carried poetry further still from the popularity it had enjoyed in the earlier nineteenth century, setting the writer apart from the common reader and confining him to a readership of alienated élite, while the mass audience bought novels and, eventually, would turn to the movies, radio, and TV. Because American poetry did not go through the equivalent of an 1890s rebellion, Perkins sees American Modernism as a slightly delayed phenomenon but one involving even stronger reactions against a genteel tradition that had not yet been weakened by avant-gardism. The beginnings of this American protest are traced in the poems of writers like Edwin Arlington Robinson and Stephen Crane.

Before the forces that Perkins refers to as high Modernism began to take over, however, another period of “poetry in rapport with a public” was made possible by such major creative figures as Yeats, Hardy, and Frost, as well as the Georgian poets and War Poets in England. But by 1912, Harriet Monroe's founding of *Poetry* suddenly provided a forum for the eruption of modernist discontent that proved irreversible. In a stimulating chapter about little magazines, Perkins examines the myriad changes that were taking place in the style, subject matter, and manifestoes of “advanced” poets and the ways in which these pioneer periodicals shaped new and more specialized audiences for poetry. Indeed, Perkins at one point remarks that “poetry in the modern world has become so self-conscious and specialized that it is in danger of sealing itself off from life,” but this

was a fear that eventually began to haunt many of the poets themselves. The concluding sections of Perkins's first volume—after discussions of Imagism (especially via the influence of Pound and Amy Lowell), of black poets of America, and of post-World War I poets—take up the early careers of Pound, Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Yeats. These solid chapters, with their mixture of biography, reports on criticism, extremely sensitive readings of poems, and intimations of future developments, reach an inspired culmination in Perkins's rich, detailed, and sympathetic account of T. S. Eliot through the period of *The Waste Land*.

Modernism and After, Perkins's second and concluding volume, begins with Eliot's later career. Inevitably, as there had been some forecasting in Volume I, there is periodically some backtracking to gather up the earlier threads. (It is hard to think that any completely satisfactory structure could be found for an enterprise such as this one, where poets need to be treated several times under different rubrics.) "The principal theme of the present volume," Perkins begins, "is the continuing effort of poets since the 1920s to modify or break away from the high Modernist style." By high Modernist style he means archetypically Eliot and concretely *The Waste Land*, which he regards as the single most influential poem of our century:

For twenty-five years T. S. Eliot exercised an authority in the literary world not possessed by any writer before him for more than a century. By the end of the 1920s his poetry was an inescapable influence on younger poets, and his criticism shaped their work even more pervasively, if only because they read the authors he praised. Twenty years later, *The Waste Land* was still widely regarded as the most radical and brilliant development of Modernist poetry.

Though one poet after another tried to resist this influence, Eliot's presence was not easily shaken off. For the high Modernist style "embodied a major access of reality, both in its subject matters and in the complexity of its perspectives, and it was also formally challenging and proficient in the highest degree." Thus, whatever the poets "said in manifestoes, in their hearts they have been unable either to accept or to refuse the stylistic legacy" that they inherited: to accept it was to be an epigone and to reject it was to seem shallow.

The development of this story inevitably places the New Criticism at the center, for New Critical techniques were designed explicitly to cope with the complexities of a poem like *The Waste Land* as well

as the literary tastes and discriminations to be found in Eliot's own criticism, with its predispositions to French symbolist and English metaphysical poetry. As the critical influence spread from Eliot's essays to I. A. Richards, William Empson, F. R. Leavis, and then to the American group now known as the Fugitives, including Ransom, Tate, and Winters, New Criticism eventually came to be the unquestioned orthodoxy of the academy, not only for professor-critics and students, but for the poets themselves:

Having been taught to explicate, the young poets were explicating for themselves their own poems in the process of writing them. They composed with the same kind and intensity of "reading" that their readers would in turn bring to bear. Wordsworth used to argue that every great poet must create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed, but Lowell, Berryman, Nemerov, and many another starting out were trying to create great poems to fit a taste that already existed. To the extent that they succeeded, recognition came instantly. This agreement between the producers and consumers of a style is a normal feature of the academic in art. As this state of affairs continued into the 1950s, the New Criticism established itself more firmly as an academic orthodoxy, and the desire to break with it became more intense.

By the time of the Sixties and the Vietnam war, "The style of poetry that had been fostered by the New Criticism now seemed lifeless and remote from reality, and young poets looked about for new ways of writing," while older ones underwent radical shifts away from their previous formalist styles. It was this retreat from Eliot that Perkins finds responsible for the great resurgence of interest in Pound, Williams, and Stevens that began sometime before the Vietnam war. Perkins responds to this revival by providing a second and quite extensive treatment of these poets, who had already been dealt with in their earlier phases in Volume I. His sympathies, however, are so broad and deep, that he continually makes good the promise of his introduction to exercise "critical judgments that are many-sided, for in considering so many gifted poets, I cannot identify with only one or a few." And so, after outlining the harmful effects of the New Criticism, he is impelled to add:

We should keep in mind, however, that if this poetry was academic, it so idealized and manifested intelligence that it

remained admirable even when it ceased to be interesting. If this poetry and criticism formed a new Genteel tradition, analogous in some ways to that of the later nineteenth century, nevertheless, in contrast to the period of Whitman, the Genteel pole of American literature now attracted the strongest talents. And the artistic discipline of that style persists to the present moment as an essential element in the greater poetry that has been written since, often by the same poets.

Much of *Modernism and After*, then, deals with the strophes and antistrophes generated by the New Criticism, polarities sometimes presented as Open vs. Closed Form, Charles Olson vs. John Crowe Ransom, early vs. later Lowell, and so on. Movements that do not quite fit into this opposition—the Auden circle in the Thirties, the New Romanticism of Dylan Thomas, the Confessional Mode, feminist poets, the more recent black poets of America, the Meditative school of Ashbery and Ammons, etc.—are treated in chapters of their own, though even these branches ramify, after all, from the same great rooted tree.

For all his receptivity to a very wide range of poets, Perkins can be straightforwardly disapproving when the need arises. So, after noting that Auden's late poems "are written for cultivated people to enjoy without much effort," he concludes his well-considered account of Auden by freely acknowledging "the fatal fact that, though it is intelligent, amusing, graceful, and gracious, this work is not very exciting." And while a profound admirer of Pound's *Cantos*, he nonetheless finds "long stretches" of them "boring." Of Robert Duncan he writes, "Since I make a large claim for Duncan, I should acknowledge plainly that he can and often does write horribly. Many passages are hopelessly vague, inert, rhetorical, empty, or clichéd." And after quoting a specimen line, he adds, "Edgar Guest would hardly have put it differently." Similarly, though a supporter of Williams, he sums up his opinion of *Paterson* by saying, "Readers of the poem who consult their own feelings as they read, rather than the arguments of specialist defenders, will probably find that if they go on to the end, the cause is conscience rather than interest or pleasure." Interest or pleasure, indeed! Will Perkins be tarred and feathered by the *real* scholars, who would never stoop to such soft-core sentimentalities when only the "inaccessible" is truly admirable?

Other examiners of this history will doubtless raise questions about the amount of space that Perkins devotes to each poet, the evaluations he makes of their work, his positioning of them in the evolution of

Modernism, his readings of their aims and qualities. But a rather different theme in this fast-forward picture has particularly engaged my attention, namely the matter of poetic manifestoes: the statements, slogans, and programmatic claims about what poetry is or should be. These agendas, though part of the stock-in-trade of poets since classical times, force themselves with curious, even desperate boldness upon the reader's attention in a swiftly moving overview like this one. Yeats's Blavatskian spooks who brought him images for poetry and midwifed *A Vision* and Eliot's somewhat more debonair spooks—classicism, royalism, and Anglo-Catholicism—provide us with a bang-up beginning that would appear difficult to match.

In contrast, Pound, in one of his more temperate early incarnations, wrote that "Poetry must be *as well written as prose*. Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (i.e. simplicity). There must be no book, words, no periphrases, no inversions." Williams told Harriet Monroe that poetry must be "at any moment subversive of life as it was the moment before." "The next step of the argument," Perkins remarks, "could easily follow: 'Write carelessly,' says a voice in *Paterson*, 'so that nothing that is not green will survive' " and he then characterizes Williams's doctrines as "conceptual moilings." Laura Jackson believed that poetry should uncover "reality as a whole," that poems should be "precisely somewhere in precisely everywhere," while Robert Graves hung much of his output upon the myth of the White Goddess. Stevens spoke of supreme fictions and the power of the imagination, but Perkins finds his essays "vague and muddled." Robert Lowell, as he underwent his transformation from New Critical formalism to free verse confessionalism, reported that he had started some of his poems in *Life Studies* "in very strict meter, and I found that . . . regularity just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, 'I'm a poem.' " But Perkins reminds us "that in poetry 'life' must be an illusion produced by art." Charles Olson's reaction to New Critical perfection was "open form," which focused on the speeding flux of time, the unstable moment. "At least in theory," Perkins explains, "writing a poem was for these poets not different from any spontaneous act of living." Olson's instructions were "Get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen . . . one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"

Perkins's summary of the poetics of Olson and the Black Mountain

group as a whole casts light on a recurrent bit of dogma about “nature” that we find throughout literary history:

These poets sought a physiological justification for their line breaks. Lineation follows, they argued, the writer’s natural breathing; where the voice pauses for breath, the line breaks. The line, Olson says, “comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes it, at the moment that he writes.” Upon such lineation these poets bestowed a mystical sanction. Because it is determined by bodily processes, they argued, breath rhythm is continuous with the deep nature in man as in all organic existence. “Whoever has rhythm,” said Olson, “has the universe.”

Galway Kinnell’s attempt to unite with “nature” provided its own underlying poetics: “If you could keep going deeper and deeper, you’d finally not be a person . . . you’d be an animal; and if you kept going deeper and deeper, you’d be a blade of grass or ultimately perhaps a stone. And if a stone could read, [poetry] would speak for it.” And Robert Bly’s position, recalling Williams, was that poetry, since it doesn’t emerge from the rational mind, is not or should not be written with craft. “American craft-talk has been connected with the poem as a dead object, as a dead object and constructed. But the whole genius of modern poetry lies in its grasp of flowing psychic energy.”

And completing a circle that began with Yeats, we arrive at James Merrill’s Ouija board and the doctrines it generates. “Does Merrill believe,” asks Perkins, “that the dead continue to exist and communicate with him through the Ouija board? And that there are, as the Ouija board states, nine stages of life after death? As elements in an imaginative work, such propositions need cause no difficulty; as beliefs of the author, they are incredible, and undermine our faith in his intelligence.” Ten years earlier, in the first volume of his history, speaking of Frost’s skepticism of all beliefs, he had concluded: “Other major writers of the twentieth century—Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, Lawrence—were committed to beliefs, but the beliefs to which they were committed do not always give one much confidence in the balance of their minds. If Frost was skeptical, or at least remarkably provisional and wary, he is also one of the few significant writers of the twentieth century whose work seems consistently to preserve poise and sanity of mind.”

What then is a reader of poetry to make of all of these manifestoes, provisions, proclamations, and tendentious poetics running the gamut from spooks to spontaneity, arcana to Anglicanism? What to do with all of this Enabling Moonshine? Was Plato right after all—that the poet, to put it somewhat coarsely, is simply bananas?

Belief-systems have had a variety of flourishing periods in the history of the West. Homer's gods gave good value while they lasted, and even a little bit of doubt didn't do much harm to Greek drama. Imperial Rome, Christianity, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, nineteenth-century science—while these stabilities provided a stance from which the poet (and everyone else) could speak, during their rises and falls it was always more difficult to find a foundation upon which to make vatic, or even common-sense, utterances. After Wordsworth, a period of real trouble settled in, and except for a few short-lived eruptions of certainty, like Nazism and Stalinism, this trouble has shown little sign of simply going away. That Yeats had to import ghosts to run his machine did not bode well, even though the ghosts performed splendidly. But they also created serious problems having to do with the cultural status of the poet/priest. Though the poems were sensational, a minimally judicious person would not have been inclined to trust Yeats with a plug nickel. Such distrust as this must ultimately cast a backshadow on the poetry and force a separation between the esthetic and the moral that was by no means necessary in the case of Wordsworth. What Wordsworth was *really* talking about in *The Prelude* may have been completely inscrutable, since he had mastered the cadences of thought without having real mastery of thought itself. But if it was ultimately sublime balderdash, it inspired great trust and the reader was apt to feel that though it didn't make much rational sense once you began to look into it, perhaps Wordsworth was on to something too deep for comprehension. Wordsworth may have had his problems, but very few readers have ever thought of him as a charlatan.

Eliot's failure of nerve, and his defection from responsibility to his times by retreating into a theological Marie-Antoinettism (like Jerry Falwell and Ronald Reagan today, who are less to blame because their endowments are so painfully small), were an only too depressing harbinger of the grave problems to be faced by Modernism and, now, by Postmodernism. We have moved from quiet to noisy desperation, and advanced cases of this disease—shall we call it Yeats's Complaint?—can now be found even, perhaps especially, among the critics and sages, as well as the poets. New belief systems must be invented every year or two, like manufactured articles, to keep the

Gross Intellectual Product moving along. The stunning brilliance of a critic like Stanley Fish is tied to his uncanny ability to retool his metaphysics and epistemology every few years—fish tails out, sloped hoods in—since without philosophical foundations it is not possible to say a thing.

Nowadays, what we really expect not only from intellectuals but from more ordinary people is opinion rather than belief. Beliefs are residues from slow-moving or stable periods, when things held still long enough to get them into focus and one could at least pretend that they were heaven-sent. At present, beliefs are apt to seem signs of stupidity rather than wisdom. Opinions, on the other hand, can be held just long enough to do their work—like sexual fantasies conducing to a climax—and once they have produced their payoff, have enabled you to get it on, so to speak, they can—indeed must—be discarded as intrinsically worthless. Poets need their Enabling Moonshine like everybody else. As long as one does not attempt to trace the clues back to God, no real harm is done, perhaps. So we are told that poems must sound just like prose or, on the contrary, must bear no relation to prose. They are supreme fictions or, to put it otherwise, they are indwelling Nature itself. They must be very carefully crafted or, perhaps, they should instead be tossed off like entries in an artless notebook.

This Enabling Moonshine has a three-way relationship to the art of poetry. With regard to the poems that it actually enables, they can be undisputed masterpieces, as in the case of Yeats, whose poems suffer very little from his doctrines and might not even have existed without them. With regard to the concept of the imputed author, the voice behind the poems that we have in mind when we normally say “Yeats,” it does not have to present us with insuperable problems as long as it is understood as the identifying name for a poetry-producing mechanism, abstract and phantasmal, rather than the name for an actual person in the world. In the early nineteenth century, Wordsworth could still successfully function as both living prophet and imputed poet, at least until his lapse into Christianity, but by the end of his era the split between these two roles became unbridgeable. Tennyson was a master technician but otherwise pathetically confused, and Arnold’s stature does not derive principally from his poems. Yeats recognized the handwriting on the wall and took direct and conscious measures to deal with it. His success was remarkable—unless we try to turn *him* into a Wise Man.

With regard to any flesh and blood author who actually lived and wielded the pen that wrote the poems, he is hardly worth thinking

about because, even if he were alive, it is very improbable that we would ever have to eat breakfast with him, live in a house with him, or watch him succumb to alcoholism and philandering. As far as just about everyone in the world is concerned except his intimates, the carnal author is less real than his poetry or the imputed author behind it. (Robert Frost's bad press does not appear to have done much harm to his poems.) If he were frequently to appear on TV, the danger could arise of his becoming too "real" for his own good. But generally speaking, as anyone acquainted with a creative person well knows, there is no clear-cut relationship between the person who mows the lawn and our experience of his created works. We never "know" the author, just some oddball who writes poems.

Perkins is well-equipped to cope with such profusions and contradictions since his sensibility can easily negotiate prosodic variety without sacrificing a tough-minded skepticism of contrived poetic theory. Nor is he frightened by the postmodern Fun House. Yet his book ends suddenly, foregoing any grand summing up. Perhaps, then, in the final reckoning, one might venture to say that what is lost by today's pluralism of opinion in the absence of belief is the possibility of hierophantic utterance enjoyed by poets of yore. But what, after all, could today's hierophant possibly say that would not throw us into fits of hysterical laughter?

H A R O L D F R O M M