

cred text, and themselves as both humble servants and high priests. "To include every available letter seems to mean that the editor has exercised neither choice nor bias, much less engaged in reprehensible interpretation, and to print each exactly as it was written, or as nearly so as possible, is to confirm the purity, the selflessness, the objectivity of the editorial presence." The editor of the letters of the 19th-century decorative artist and socialist thinker William Morris, for example, went so far as to apologize to readers for inserting periods in the text where the great man had neglected to do so.

All of this is worse than poppycock, in Fromm's view. In the name of the disinterested quest for knowledge, editors and others are asserting undue authority over the lives and legacies of their subjects. Last year, for example, there was a great schol-

arly hue and cry when James Joyce's grandson, Stephen, destroyed the letters of his aunt (and James's daughter) Lucia. Stephen Joyce said that his aunt's letters, including a few written to her by Samuel Beckett, were private and had no literary value. But Joycean scholars, Fromm notes, "maintained that any and all material about great writers like Joyce and Beckett belonged to the world, not the family." In fact, she recalls indignantly, when Stephen Joyce said that Beckett had *told* him to destroy the letters, Beckett's biographer Deirdre Bair "flatly insisted that Beckett had not meant what he said."

"If the sanctity of private life and the individual is rejected as a governing principle for biographers and editors," Fromm asks, "what better way to justify profaning both than to 'sell' letters themselves as sacred relics?"

## Riddle Me This

"The Persistence of Riddles" by Richard Wilbur, in *The Yale Review* (Vol. 78, No. 3), 1902A Yale Station, New Haven, Conn. 06520.

"When one doesn't know what it is, then it is something; but when one knows what it is, then it is nothing."

It? A riddle, of course. But poet Richard Wilbur suggests that riddles may be more significant than we think. At their most elegant and effective, riddles speak to us with "the voice of a common thing or creature somehow empowered to express, in encoded fashion, the mystery of its being." Consider this example, which restores for a moment "the wonder" of an ordinary thing:

In marble walls as white as milk,  
Lined with a skin as soft as silk,  
Within a foundation crystal-clear,  
A golden apple doth appear.  
No doors there are to this stronghold,  
Yet thieves break in and steal the gold.\*

The earliest recorded riddles were "found on the tablets of Babylonian school-children" and may have had "a mnemonic use in the education of the young." Riddles were a major form of oral

poetry among primitive peoples, perhaps because they were useful forms of subversion—reminders in tradition-bound societies of the occasional need for "mental adjustment." Their ability to make people consider objects from a new perspective even won riddles a place in the religious rituals of some cultures. In other societies, a condemned or captive man might save his neck or gain liberty by "posing a riddle which his judge or captor could not guess." One of the most famous "neck" riddles was the Greek enigma posed by the Sphinx to Oedipus:

What goes on four legs in the morning  
light, on two at noontide, and on three at  
night?

(Answer: man.)

Solving this riddle saved Oedipus's life and brought him a kingdom, although, as Wilbur points out, he was unable to solve "the puzzle of his own origin" until too late.

Aristotle's *Poetics* speaks admiringly of

riddles as a kind of poetry using "impossible metaphors," and indeed many great poets, from Jonathan Swift to Robert Frost, have employed riddles in their work. Perhaps, suggests Wilbur, this is because "the riddle exaggerates an essential characteristic of poetry. If metaphor . . . is

central to poetry, then the riddle operates near that center." And, concludes Wilbur, "if poetry may be seen as offering a continuing critique of our sense of order, the riddle has its peculiar aptitude for that."

*\*Solution: An egg.*

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## OTHER NATIONS

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### *African Democracy?*

"The Coming of Africa's Second Independence" by Colin Legum, in *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 1990), 1800 K St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

Africa is on the verge of its second liberation. Three decades after they threw off the shackles of European rule, predicts Legum, a veteran journalist, many African countries are about to overthrow their "unpopular, unsuccessful, and undemocratic" postcolonial governments.

After achieving independence during the 1950s and '60s, most African countries adopted European-style parliamentary systems. But only six have remained democratic: Botswana, The Gambia, Djibouti, Mauritius, Tunisia, and ("arguably," says Legum) Morocco. During the past three years, however, popular discontent has led to the end of single-party rule in Senegal and Algeria. In Nigeria, with 100 million citizens the continent's most populous state, the military regime which has held power since 1983 has promised to hand over power to an elected government in 1992.

Leaders in uniform are common in Africa. Since 1963, when President Sylvanus Olympio of Togo was deposed by a military coup d'état, 28 of Africa's 51 states have been taken over by military officers. Most others are one-party states, generally created within the first few months of independence, when the former independence movements split along political, ethnic, or regional lines. New leaders, such as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, argued that single party rule arose out of African traditions of rule by consensus. They also argued that it was needed to restore harmony and to promote rapid and bal-

anced economic development. Both arguments have been proved terribly wrong, says Legum.

Africa's six long-time democracies are relatively serene and prosperous. Few of its single-party states can say the same.

What went wrong? Legum says that some of the single-party states were more democratic than others, but virtually all of them were alike in one important way. Whether they officially embraced capitalism (Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon) or socialism (Algeria and Tanzania), the ruling parties created huge new "parastatal corporations" to control the major "wealth-earning crops, minerals, and enterprises, thereby establishing national priorities for both economic and social development." But the proud new institutions were not equal to the task; they quickly became bloated and corrupt. Most African countries are poorer today than they were a decade ago. Throughout Africa, governments are now cutting their losses by dismantling or selling off these government-owned corporations.

But it is not for want of bread alone that Africans are demanding democracy. Legum credits the African human rights movement, sparked during the 1970s by President Jimmy Carter. "It is no longer possible to campaign for human rights without linking them to the abuse of undemocratic governments," he observes. As in Eastern Europe, a related pro-democracy movement has sprung up, headed by courageous academics, journalists, and