

at least judged by this very able translation by John and Bogdana Carpenter. Here he is on Dutch painters:

They can only be envied. Whatever their greatness and miseries, the disillusionments and failures of their careers, their role in society and place on earth were not questioned, their profession universally recognized and as evident as the profession of butcher, tailor, or baker. The question why art exists did not occur to anyone, because a world without paintings was simply inconceivable.

And casting a baleful eye on the present day, he adds:

It is we who are poor, very poor. A major part of contemporary art declares itself on the side of chaos, gesticulates in a void, or tells the story of its own barren soul.

Despite, or perhaps because of, his own experiences in the face of totalitarianism and his resistance to a dehumanizing regime, Herbert is particularly sympathetic to the bourgeois culture of the Dutch. In his own work, homey and solid "bourgeois" materials furnish a refuge from the grand-sounding lies and treacherous behavior of the totalitarian state. We see this theme crop up again and again in his poetry, nowhere more explicitly, perhaps, than in his prose-poem "Objects":

Inanimate objects are always correct and cannot, unfortunately, be reproached with anything. I have never observed a chair shift from one foot to another, or a bed rear on its hind legs. And

tables, even when they are tired, will not dare to bend their knees. I suspect that objects do this from pedagogical considerations, to reprove us constantly for our instability.

When he moves from his own poetry to a consideration of Dutch art, Herbert, not surprisingly, approves its avoidance of grandiose, heroic subjects:

Freedom—so many treatises were written about it that it became a pale, abstract concept. But for the Dutch it was something as simple as breathing, looking, and touching objects. It did not need to be defined or beautified. This is why there is no division in their art between what is great and what is small, what is important and unimportant, elevated and ordinary. They painted apples and the portraits of fabric shopkeepers, pewter plates and tulips, with such patience and such love that the images of other worlds and noisy tales about earthly triumphs fade in comparison.

Simon Schama, the author of a recent bestselling history of 17th-century Holland, *The Embarrassment of Riches*, has called for a revival of narrative history. In *Still Life with a Bridle* Herbert gives us that and something else, a sort of poetic history that is concerned not only with facts but with personalities, not only with events but with the human contained, but not trapped, by them.

—*Witold Rybczynski teaches architecture at McGill University; his latest book is Waiting for the Weekend (1991).*

Portrait of the Artist As an Artist

THE INTERIOR CASTLE: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford. By Ann Hulbert. Knopf. 430 pp. \$25

An advance review in *Publisher's Weekly* professed disappointment with Ann Hulbert's new biography of Jean

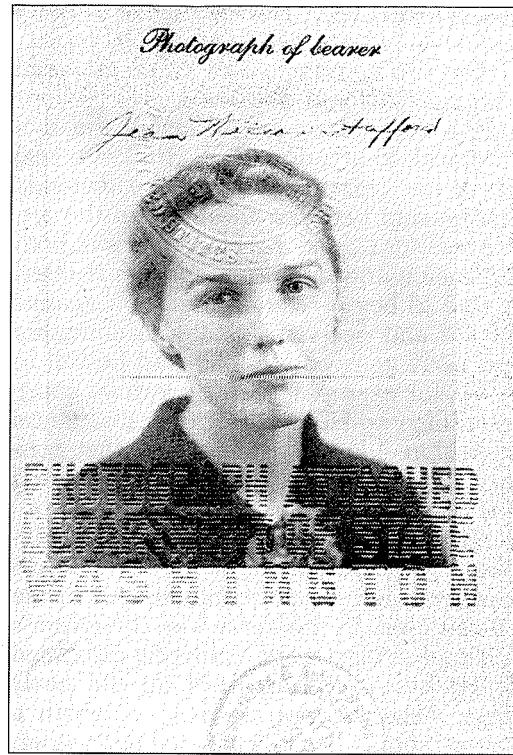
Stafford. Citing the self-destructive momentum of the writer's private life, the unnamed reviewer found Hulbert's treatment "flat," inadequate to the sensational attributes of her subject. In other words, Hulbert, a senior editor of the *New Republic*, had not Middlebrooked her Sexton,

hadn't Goldmanned her Elvis. And once again we find ourselves pondering the biographer's central dilemma: What are the limits of respect? How much do we deserve to know about another person, and what sorts of things? At what point in the investigative continuum does the subject become a private individual with rights?

It is not hard to see why a biographer would be drawn to Stafford. The apparent split in her life between high aesthetic control and private disaster proposes the very sort of enigma that lures the outsider forward. Stafford's inner life was one long calvary—it included difficult family relations, a tumultuous marriage to (and divorce from) poet Robert Lowell, alcoholism, and bouts with mental illness. Her published writings on the other hand, principally her three novels, *Boston Adventure*, *The Mountain Lion*, and *The Catherine Wheel*, and dozens of short stories, are vividly lyrical, often exacting in their ironies, and always cut to proportion as if with a gem-cutter's blade. Indeed, more than most, Stafford deserves to be called a "writer's writer."

The split between life and art is, however, ultimately illusory. Stafford, we learn, left mountains of unpublished manuscript in her archives, much of it representing her failed effort to give fictional shape to her own experiences. But never mind. It is the appearance of a puzzle that kindles the biographer's interest—the relation between the literary brilliance and the life that foundered in the background. Hulbert's is the third biography of Stafford since her death in 1979. Though hardly a household name, the writer has been documented more thoroughly than most of her famous contemporaries.

Stafford was born in 1915 in Covina, near Los Angeles. Her father, John Stafford, who dreamed of success as a writer of Westerns, moved the family to Boulder, Colorado, when Jean was six. There he squandered the remains of a family legacy, while his wife, Ethel, rented rooms to students and foraged for an income. Bright and bookish, and herself inclined to writ-



ing, Jean moved from an early adoration of her father to what would become a permanent shame at the foolish self-exposure of his endeavor. (Apparently his pseudonyms, Ben Delight and Jack Wonder, were not concealment enough.) But distance herself as she might, the man and his failures haunted her throughout her life.

From the time of her graduation from the University of Colorado in 1936, Stafford's writing career took on direction and velocity. She went off for a year of study to Heidelberg, Germany, and returned with the manuscript of a finished novel in her suitcase. Soon after, she starred at the annual writer's conference in Boulder, where she not only won high accolades from the presiding eminence, John Crowe Ransom, but also met, and fell in love with, the 20-year-old Robert Lowell. The two had a fierce transcontinental courtship, which hit its first tragic culmination during Stafford's 1938 Christmas visit to Boston. There Lowell crashed the car he was driving, smashing the bones

in Stafford's face; reconstructive surgery could not restore her fine-featured looks.

Stafford's young years were crowded with incident and influence, and Hulbert does a scrupulous job of laying the biographical foundation. But Hulbert's real gift is her understanding of the dynamic relationship between the life and the art. *The Interior Castle*, therefore, gains in both dimension and interest as soon as Hulbert is able to begin reading the work against the life, and vice-versa. Stafford's courtship and early married life (she wed Lowell in 1940), for example, are wonderfully counterpointed by Hulbert's critical discussion of *Boston Adventure*, the novel that Stafford had been working at steadily during this period. The class divisions which undergird the novel acquire a new significance when viewed in terms of Stafford's relations with the chilly bluebloods of the Lowell clan. In the same way, the writer's spiritual struggles are brilliantly exfoliated in Hulbert's commentary on the early story, "The Interior Castle," in which a young woman lies in a hospital bed gathering herself against the frightful intrusion of surgery. Looking closely at Stafford's stylistic shift—from mandarin to colloquial—within the story, Hulbert discovers the experimental mixing of "elevated and lowly diction and imagery" that was eventually refined as one of the trademark features of her prose. It was, she notes, Stafford's need to find a way to give expression to pain that animated these various forays into prose aesthetics.

The Lowell marriage was, to say the least, difficult. Lowell was at the time fervidly Catholic, and Stafford, try as she might to join him, failed to make the full religious connection. She retreated increasingly into drink, while Lowell—himself no mean drinker in later years—hurled sermons at her. There were other problems. Stafford's work found success before Lowell's did. And then Lowell had an affair with the ex-wife of his friend Delmore Schwartz. The union was dead.

Stafford fled their home in Damariscotta Mills, Maine, and headed for New York City, where she checked herself

in for the first of what would be many stays at the Payne Whitney psychiatric clinic. A pattern was established: long cycles of drink and depression—and, miraculously, work—broken by collapses and restorative hospitalizations. From the break-up of the marriage in 1946 until her death 33 years later, Stafford was never far from either the bottle or the place of repairs.

As with any artist who lives past first youth, there comes a point when the biographical focus shifts away from externals, when the story of the life must become the story of the work. This is certainly true in Stafford's case. Though she hardly stopped living after 1946—Stafford had two more marriages, the second of these to the celebrated writer and raconteur A. J. Liebling—Hulbert's account recognizes the displacement of energy from the crush of circumstance to the arena of the white page.

The success of Hulbert's reading of Stafford and her work results from her determined effort to avoid either of the easy paths that open before her. That is, she reads the fictional works neither as veiled acts of self-revelation nor as Eliotic attempts to extinguish the personality. The first approach would, in a sense, discredit Stafford's own artistic resolve—she tried all her life, with only partial success, to hew to Ford Maddox Ford's principle: "that portraiture drawn too directly from life was 'impolite . . .'" The second, of course, violates everything we know about the laws of creative psychology. Try as one might, one never escapes one's experience or the need to release private tensions through representation.

Hulbert, then, reads down the middle, taking both positions into account. If she is able to have it both ways, to an extent, it is because she has penetrated to the core of Stafford's own ambivalence and has there located the secret of her artistic treatment of experience: irony. Bringing Stafford's own pronouncements forward, she writes:

Stafford "had gone all the way back," but what is remarkable is the distance she maintained from the "angry,

wounded child." As the first part of *Boston Adventure* has shown, childhood was a subject that liberated Stafford's great gift: irony. She told an interviewer years later that "My theory about children is my theory about writing. The most important thing in writing is irony, and we find irony most clearly in children. The very innocence of children is irony." And echoing her New Critical teachers, she added, "Irony, I feel, is a very high form of morality."

Here, if anywhere, is the royal road that leads to this writer's sanctum. Stafford's whole career can be read as a product of the tension between the ever-active and unforgiving—if often sedated—pain that was the legacy of her childhood and the distancing strategy that allowed her to tap it. "Tap" is too conservative a word: Stafford took that pain and, in her best work, performed pirouettes with it. Her distancing, not to mention her various feints of displacement and transformation, freed her rage into knife-edged satire and her sorrows into lyricism. When she refused to use these same stratagems, however, when she tried to mine her experience directly—as she did in the mounds of material that remain unpublished—the tension evaporated. Stafford was sufficiently astute as a critic to know when she had failed. Still, that she would persist in the effort to write out of her life more directly, even though she knew better, suggests that displacements, transformations, and the like were but short-term expedients.

As for the wound itself—the hurt or hurts incurred in childhood years that we must suppose were the motive force of the art—Hulbert wisely refrains from hanging her reading upon any simple theory of psychological causation. Indeed, if I under-

stand her biographer's stance, which is never spelled out in so many words, it would be that to some measure all human lives must remain impenetrable and that all explanations are bound to be overdetermined. This is not to say that she does not present Stafford in full biographical dress—we learn a good deal about Stafford's problematic relations with her family, her father in particular—only that she refrains from what might be called the "interpretative fallacy." She chooses instead to let her subtle and inquisitive interpretations of the work echo against what she has been able to disinter about the circumstantial webbing of the life.

No, *The Interior Castle* is not the sensational portrait that some readers may wish it to be. We do not find Stafford limping from one alcoholic bout to the next, nor has Hulbert made any effort to extract catty or embarrassing anecdotes from surviving parties, some of whom surely would have obliged. Instead, we get a perceptive and dignified study, a work which recognizes from the outset how impossibly dense is the braiding of elements in an artist's life. The Stafford that emerges in these pages is not an individual of vivid exterior outlines. We are not regaled with interminable accounts of what she ate and how she dressed. Hulbert's Stafford is an interiorized figure, a complex and cloudy exhalation, a soul struggling to seize the root of the self and be free of pain. Only to the reader who cared for none of this would Hulbert's book seem flat.

—Sven Birkerts is a critic and essayist. His most recent book is *American Energies: Essays on American Fiction* (1992).