

ken free of feudal arrangements. Wood minces no words: "Americans had become almost overnight the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world."

How was such a transformation possible without industrialization, urbanization, or even railroads? The engine of change, Wood says, was the republican ideology itself, the founding fathers' vision of a society free from corrupt patronage and servile dependencies. Yet Adams, Madison, and other leaders had expected the new republic to be governed, as ancient Rome's had been, by "notable geniuses and great-souled men"—that is, by themselves. They were both surprised and disheartened as they witnessed the egalitarian forces they had unleashed create not a classical republic but a messy Jacksonian democracy. That democracy would eventually free the slaves, emancipate women, and forge a commercial society of entrepreneurs, all pursuing their own definitions of happiness. Thus, Wood concludes, the Revolution was "the most radical and far-reaching event in American history."

Arts & Letters

HEAVEN AND EARTH: A Cosmology. By Albert Goldbarth. Univ. of Ga. 118 pp. \$20

WHAT WORK IS. By Philip Levine. Knopf. 77 pp. \$19

With newspapers, TV, and nonfiction claiming a monopoly on important public events, today's poets—among them Linda Pastan, Stephen Dunn, and Phyllis Levin—are turning to subjects private and elusive. If there is a "typical" American poem now, it involves a meditation about a seemingly inconsequential corner of one's personal life.

This year's winners of the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, Philip Levine and Albert Goldbarth, respectively, provide exceptions to this poetry of domestic meditation. Levine is identified with a particular subject: work—unglamorous, blue-collar, industrial, assembly-line work. During the late 1940s and early '50s, when in his teens and twenties, Levine worked in the factories and warehouses of Detroit. Later he deter-

mined "to find a voice for the voiceless." In the title-poem of this collection, Levine addresses the reader: "You know what work is—if you're old enough to read this you know what work is . . ." The poet is outside the Ford Highland Park plant, waiting for work, vainly hoping to be hired for the day. Someone in the same line reminds him physically of his brother, who at that moment is at home sleeping off a miserable night shift at Cadillac. Levine realizes he has never told his brother how much he loves him and probably never will. Why not? "You have never done something so simple, so obvious," Levine merely comments, but the *you* is no longer the reader but himself—and everyone who has been too numbed by the toll of hard, repetitive labor to undertake life's other important tasks. No, Levine realizes, "you don't know what [real] work is."

Goldbarth rummages among the "big events" for his subject matter. In "Sentimental," for example, he describes a wedding "in the sap and flyswirl of July in upper Wisconsin." As it turns out, though, the wedding is not a real event but only a kitsch image his class is using to debate the nature of sentimentality. Goldbarth could be called a comic Hegelian (in the same way that Groucho could be called a Marxist). The movement of his poems is from thesis to antithesis to synthesis: He begins with a physical event like a wedding ("Earth"), then he negates its actuality by considering it as a concept ("Heaven"), but finally unites both event and concept in a synthesis or "Cosmology," one meaning of which is structure or organization. Goldbarth structures his poems by tracing his concept through the most dissimilar embodiments of it, in a wild roller-coaster ride through everything from intimate details of his sex life to quantum physics. After discussing the wedding, he then asks, "If a balled-up fidget of snakes/in the underbrush dies in a freeze is it sentimental? No,/yes, maybe. What/if [it is] a litter of cocker spaniels? if we called them 'puppydogs' . . . ?" The freeze reminds Goldbarth of his father's funeral in coldest winter, but by this point, having catalogued all the connotations of sentimentality, he dares—as no other sane poet would—to liken his grief at the funeral to those puppydogs finding their natural voice.

No poet now writing has more fun with lan-

guage than Goldbarth. He observes that the Quechua in Peru have a thousand words for potato—"A thousand! For the new ones/with a skin still as thin as mosquito-wing, for/troll-face ones, for those sneaky burgundy corkscrews/like a devil's dick." Goldbarth envies the Quechua those thousand potato-words, each of which he would employ according to its precise meaning and sonorous sound.

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON.

Vol. I: 1731-1772; Vol. II: 1773-1776; Vol. III: 1777-1781. Edited by Bruce Redford. Princeton. 431 pp.; 385 pp.; 399 pp. \$29.95 each; full set, \$90

The 18th century took particular delight in the familiar letter, and we still read the correspondence of its great practitioners with pleasure. The greatest wit of all, however, is usually not numbered among the epistolary giants. The impression we take of Samuel Johnson from Boswell's *Life* is that of a great talker, not a letter writer—an impression that Johnson himself did much to confirm: "I love to see my friends, to talk to them, and to talk of them; but it is not without a considerable effort of resolution that I prevail upon myself to write."

If we were to read only the letters Johnson wrote until age 59 (which require only half a volume in this new five-volume edition of his letters, three of which are now published), our



impression of Johnson as an *epistolier malgré lui* would be confirmed. His earlier letters were a stopgap measure for conducting business, accepting invitations, and begging favors. But around 1770 Johnson, secure financially and turning aside from strenuous public commitments, discovered a vocation for the form of writing he had earlier dismissed. Especially when writing to his benefactress Hester Thrale, Johnson celebrated matters private and occasional, and he learned to modulate his voice with subtler nuances. Although his earlier letters, even of condolence and sympathy, were full of sententious homily, the later ones express a simplicity and directness of feeling. "The perpetual moralist is present," writes Redford, the editor of the letters, but "he no longer speaks *ex cathedra*."

The purpose of this new edition—which contains 52 "new" letters and corrects errors in previously published ones—is, Redford says, "ultimately to provide the materials for a fresh assessment of Samuel Johnson." The common image of Johnson is that of a jowly, growly English Tory who was, in one description, "the literary embodiment of roast beef and no nonsense." This is hardly the person who wrote cheerfully to Hester Thrale, "I hope to find you gay, and easy, and kind, and I will endeavour to copy you, for what can come of discontent and dolour?" Johnson here comes across as the Christian who tirelessly examines his conscience, the good man who continually performs small kindnesses, a conservative certainly but one neither insular nor jingoistic. This new edition also allows a fresh assessment of Johnson as a practitioner of what he called "the great epistolick art." Far from being an inconsequential, dismissive production, Johnson's letters now seem, along with the *Lives of the Poets*, the great achievement of his literary career in its final phase.

Contemporary Affairs

A CONTINENT OF ISLANDS: Searching for the Caribbean Destiny. By Mark Kurlansky. Addison Wesley. 336 pp. \$22.95

Paradise! That's often how tourists, descending in planeloads, describe a Caribbean island with