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"it upon your poems as if they could have no other desire than to receive such overbearing attention." Donoghue argues that literature should be read as literature—that is, with disinterested aesthetic appreciation, "as practices of experience to be imagined." These practices are related to such areas as religion, politics, and economics, but they should not be confused with them.

Donoghue's own critical restraint begins with his definition of modernism. For the sake of argument he settles upon one particular meaning, but acknowledges that "a different account of it would be just as feasible." Donoghue links the rise of literary modernism to the growth of cities in the 19th century, specifically to the situation of individuals who found their individuality threatened by mass society and the crowd. In response, the modernist mind turned inward, to ponder the validity of its feelings. Modernism was thus the result of writers perceiving "their development as an inner drama, rather than as a willing engagement with the contents of the objective culture."

Donoghue continues to demonstrate his notion of restraint in his close but never overbearing reading of works by such modernist heroes as Henry James, Wallace Stevens, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. In essays refreshingly free of literary jargon, Donoghue succeeds at making the literature more important than the criticism.

Ironically, Donoghue notes, theorists who judge literature by its political relevance undermine the power of art to affect the world: "The supreme merit of art is that it contradicts the version of reality that obtains in social and economic life." Moreover, "introspection is not the puny, self-regarding act it is commonly said to be but an act of ethical and moral bearing by which the mind, in privacy, imagines lives other than its own. The chief justification for reading literature is that it trains the reader in the exercise of that imagination."

**THE KING OF INVENTORS: A Life of Wilkie Collins.** By Catherine Peters. Princeton Univ. Press. 502 pp. \$29.95

No one unnerves quite like Wilkie Collins. This writer of thrillers and mysteries was to the Victorian age what Stephen King and Ellery Queen are to ours. Even today his novels remind one of the

power of words to immobilize and terrify. Collins (1824–89) invented the "novel of sensation," and his acknowledged masterwork, the hugely popular *Woman in White* (1860), has yet to be bettered. The "'creepy' effect, as of pounded ice dropped down the neck," as his contemporary Edmund Yates put it, comes not only from an ability to spring unearthly images on the reader ("the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments"), but from the way these phantasms crop up in the most everyday of locations. Collins is also known for his precise catalogue of the byzantine moral and sexual codes of his era. As Peters's detailed biography suggests, Collins acquired at least some of his expertise from his own spectacularly polygamous life. He spent most of his adult years with two women, Martha Rudd and Caroline Graves, marrying neither and having children by both.

"Keeping" mistresses was hardly novel, of course, and having a double life never got the average Victorian gentleman barred from any club. But Collins's doubling was different. He never undertook to conceal the staid bohemianism of his common-law marriages. And while Rudd and Graves made little headway in the public world, and the taint of bastardy certainly handicapped his children's rise to respectability in later life, Collins was able to circulate freely among the cream as well as the dregs of London's society.

Unfortunately, Peters is reluctant to make any explicit connections between Collins's life and work. She never asks how an author whose best work depended on titillation, terror, and transgression managed to create for himself a space of unparalleled domestic tranquillity (in fact, two such spaces) outside social boundaries. But Peters does explain why Collins's writing took a nose dive after 1868. A mere 45, he was apparently at the peak of his powers, having produced since 1860 not just his two most famous novels (*The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*) but also such gems as *No Name* and *Armadale*. Most likely, his best work was done during the decade he spent being tutored by and collaborating with Charles Dickens. After his mentor's death in 1870, Collins yielded completely to his penchant for pedantic explanation. Worse, he seems to have forgotten how to combine social analysis with spine-tingling *frisson*.

Collins concluded an 1888 magazine article with

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a sort of guilty pride that he would be remembered principally as the author of "the stuff that raised the famous Blush . . . on the soft round object, sacred to British claptrap—the cheek of a young person." The self-tribute is fitting. In blushes—and in shivers—the body registers the mind's shame, disturbance, or arousal. Perhaps Collins's greatest genius was to determine how to produce such reactions in his readers while avoiding them in his own life.

## History

**THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY: An Intellectual History.** By Forrest McDonald. *Univ. of Kansas.* 516 pp. \$29.95

Having experienced the tyranny of the British king, the Founding Fathers—like most Americans—were ambivalent toward, even fearful of, executive power. But after enduring the absence of a strong executive during the Articles of Confederation, they recognized the need for it. That left them with a problem McDonald calls the "central dilemma of constitutional government." The safety and well-being of the nation, writes McDonald, require a quasi-monarchical figure who can "operate outside or above the law." In his 15th book, McDonald, a professor of intellectual history at the University of Alabama and a leading authority on the Constitution, describes how the Framers avoided their worst fears and still managed to build an office that "has been responsible for less harm and more good, in the nation and in the world, than perhaps any other secular institution in history."

McDonald explains that he undertook this study partially because of the "striking reversal of ideological positions concerning the presidency that has taken place in recent decades." Until the 1960s, liberals generally supported increasing the authority of the executive at the expense of Congress and the Supreme Court, while conservatives stood for congressional sovereignty and local government. During the Vietnam War, the pattern began to reverse itself, with conservatives coming to champion greater power for the executive branch. The result has been a presidency with authority far exceeding the conception set forth by the authors of the Constitution. McDonald sets out to explore "whether the enormous growth of the responsibili-

ties vested in the American Presidency has been necessary, practical or desirable."

McDonald begins his study with a lengthy look at the presidency's theoretical underpinnings in English constitutional law, the writings of various philosophers popular in the 18th century, and the colonial experience itself. He then moves into a discussion of the Constitutional Convention, at which the Founders had trouble coming up with a name for the office. For a time, delegates referred merely to "the Executive." They flirted with John Adams's suggestion of "governor of the united People and States of America," but abandoned it because it smacked of colonial proprietorship. "President," however, was different. The word had been used by informal associations throughout the 13 colonies, and its Latin root gave it the reassuring connotation of "passivity."

No matter what the name, every American knew that George Washington would fill the office. "It is no exaggeration to say that Americans were willing to venture the experiment with a single, national republican chief executive only because of their unreserved trust" in him, says McDonald. Washington at first shied away from the role—he had promised never again to hold public office after resigning command of the Continental Army—but an aggressive letter-writing campaign led by Alexander Hamilton eventually swayed him. The authority of the office rapidly expanded with the election of successive presidents, most notably (and ironically) that of Thomas Jefferson in 1800. But not until the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 did presidential contenders campaign actively and solicit votes openly—marking the beginning of the modern presidency.

McDonald concludes by examining the president's relationship to such areas as legislation, foreign affairs, and image making. Here he becomes less the scholar and more the polemicist. We learn that he dislikes Franklin Roosevelt, believes Richard Nixon will come to be reckoned among the "great" or "near-great" presidents, and admires Ronald Reagan without reservation, crediting him for having won the Cold War almost single-handedly.

All in all, though, this remains a balanced inspection of America's most closely scrutinized political institution. "Though the powers of the office have sometimes been grossly abused,"