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# All the Presidents' Words

*Theodore Roosevelt celebrated the "bully pulpit" as one of the grandest prerogatives of the presidency. But the pitfalls of serving as the nation's voice have contributed to the undoing of more than one of his successors.*

BY CAROL GELDERMAN



**O**n Saturday, November 13, 1993, President William Jefferson Clinton stood in the Memphis pulpit where Martin Luther King, Jr., had preached the night before his assassination. Speaking in Dr. King's very rhythms and cadences, the president exhorted the 5,000 black ministers and leaders at the Temple Church of God in Christ, and by extension all citizens, to look squarely at both how far the country had come in the struggle for racial equality and at the great distance it still must travel. In chilling detail, he described the violence and drug trafficking that ravage cities in which children, afraid of random killing, plan their own

funerals. He warned that the victories of the civil rights movement were being undermined by a "great crisis of the spirit that is gripping America today," that while Martin Luther King would take pride in the election of black Americans to political office and in the growing black middle class, were he to speak today, in all probability he would express utter dismay. Clinton even imagined the words King might have used:

I did not live and die to see the American family destroyed. I did not live and die to see 13-year-old boys get automatic weapons and gun down nine-year-olds just for the kick of it. I did not



*"Yes," Theodore Roosevelt wrote, ". . . most of us enjoy preaching, and I've got such a bully pulpit!"*

ment alone cannot rebuild whole communities, Clinton said. Each American has an obligation to help turn the country's permissiveness and violence around, he concluded.

This was moral suasion on a grand scale, and in the finest tradition of presidential moral leadership. Rising above party and ideology, the president summoned Americans to their highest ideals, and to their personal and collective responsibilities, even as he reminded them of certain home truths. The speech was educational, moral, inspirational—*political* in the finest sense of the word. Yet after an early flurry of favorable comment in the national press, the president's words seemed to vanish from the national consciousness.

The fate of Clinton's words is only partly the result of problems particular to his presidency. It is symptomatic of a larger challenge facing the presidential speech and the presidential speechwriting process. Clinton's difficulties are at least in part a result of his failure to come to grips with what political scientist Jeffrey Tulis has called "the rhetorical presidency."

Until the early 20th century, American presidents addressed themselves chiefly to the other branches of government, not to the people—and even then, most communications were written rather than spoken. The Constitution requires only that the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union." Presidential reticence was not merely a matter of custom. As Tulis writes, it reflected a fundamentally different view of the office. The president was not a popular leader who sought to rally the public and promote a policy agenda. Even Abraham Lincoln rarely addressed the public. Indeed, Tulis points out, during a rare speech on the eve of the Civil War, Lincoln was cheered enthusiastically when he declined to utter a

live and die to see young people destroy their own lives with drugs and then build fortunes destroying the lives of others. That is not what I came here to do. I fought for freedom, he would say, but not for the freedom of children to have children and the fathers to walk away from them . . . as if they don't amount to anything.

The underlying cause of this social decay is unemployment, Clinton continued. "I do not believe we can repair the basic fabric of society until people who are willing to work have work. Work organizes life." Every institution needs to help. Government alone cannot nurture a child, and govern-

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word about "the present distracted condition of the country."

The rhetorical presidency began with Theodore Roosevelt, who famously called the office a "bully pulpit." TR established the idea that the president has a direct relationship with the people. With his successful public campaign for a 1906 railroad regulation measure called the Hepburn Act, which he waged over the heads of Congress and despite the opposition of a majority within his own party, he showed for the first time how the bully pulpit could be used. Roosevelt did not influence much other legislation through his public speaking. Nevertheless, with his penchant for self-dramatization and his need to occupy center stage, he made Washington a major American news center. Yet constraints remained. Tradition still barred him, for example, from taking to the stump for his own re-election in 1908.

**N**ot until Woodrow Wilson took office in 1913 was the rhetorical presidency institutionalized. Earlier in his career, the Princeton professor of political economy and progressive reformer had developed a thoroughgoing critique of the older idea of government. Wilson argued that the only national voice is that of the president, and that the executive, not Congress, is the branch most capable of governing a large modern society. The president, Wilson argued, should use his words to woo public opinion, for he "has no [other] means of compelling Congress" to accept his initiatives.

Although Roosevelt and Wilson wrote their own speeches, the plebiscitary presidency they introduced gave rise to a new speechmaking machinery in the White House. A president who leads a nation rather than only a government must be a loquacious president, and most recent ones have been loquacious to a fault. This change has been abetted but not caused by the rise of

television and other mass media. Gerald Ford, not generally remembered as a man of many words, delivered a speech on average every six hours in 1976 (including such things as press conference announcements as well as formal speeches). Jimmy Carter addressed his countrymen even more often, adding 9,873 single-spaced pages to the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. Ronald Reagan increased this bulk with another 13,000 pages, and Bill Clinton, in his first year as president, spoke publicly three times as often as Reagan did in his first 12 months. Indeed, such garrulousness is the essence of Clinton's rhetorical problem.

All of these presidents could have learned from the example of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the undisputed master of the rhetorical presidency. Although most people suppose that FDR took to the microphone every couple of weeks, the record shows that he delivered only 28 of his famous fireside chats during more than 12 years in the White House. (There were, in addition, messages to Congress and other addresses, some spoken, some not.) He used his words wisely by using them sparingly.

Brevity of this sort has been the exception. Presidents since Richard Nixon have relied upon an assembly line of writers capable of churning out words for them to say on every conceivable occasion. To be sure, even in the earliest days of the republic presidents called on others for help with their speeches—Alexander Hamilton and James Madison helped Washington draft his Farewell Address. But until relatively recently most presidents, most of the time, wrote their own words. Jefferson, the two Adamses, Madison, and Monroe were all highly literate, and Lincoln was probably the master wordsmith of the Oval Office. They wrote speeches that are still a pleasure to read. Others, before and after the Civil War, could have profited from ghostwriters but gamely penned their own dreary pronouncements.

The earliest "ghosts" were kept hidden

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FDR dominated the nation but not the airwaves. Here, he delivers one of his rare radio speeches in 1938.

in the presidential closet. The idea of a president speaking in anything but his own words was unacceptable. Judson Welliver's title was "literary clerk" when he began White House service for Warren Harding in 1921. Few Americans then or later knew anything about him or his job. He is remembered chiefly, if at all, for coining the term "the Founding Fathers." Describing his career in *Who's Who in America*, Welliver wrote: "attached to White House organization, occupying confidential relation to presidents Harding and Coolidge until November 1, 1925, resigned." Herbert Hoover's speechwriter was a man named French Strother. The president denied using Strother's words, yet as many as 21 years after Strother's death they still were showing up in Hoover's prose—giving new meaning

to the word "ghostwriting."

Since Franklin Roosevelt's time, presidential rhetoric makers have been openly employed, though their function has changed radically. A number of these high-profile draftsmen have gone on to become media stars in their own right, including public television's Bill Moyers and William Safire of the *New York Times*, former aides to Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, respectively. Safire's former colleague, Pat Buchanan, has larger aspirations.

**T**here is nothing inherently wrong with the kind of speechmaking machinery that the rhetorical presidency has brought into being. Ideally, crafting a speech is a learning and synthesizing process. It allows a president

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to acquire information, sort through issues, and come to conclusions about national goals and policies. And it helps him find the words to persuade his fellow citizens to follow. FDR and his immediate successors showed that a full collaboration with speechwriters could produce those benefits at least as well as solitary speechwriting once did. Indeed, collaborative efforts may now be essential. As a rule, the more that contemporary presidents have avoided working closely with their speechwriters—even when, like Clinton, they do a lot of their own writing—the more they have tended to find themselves in various kinds of political trouble.

Surrogate speechwriting came fully into its own under FDR. After announcing his intention to seek the presidency in 1932, he began cultivating an informal “brain trust” of advisers who contributed ideas and helped with speeches, including Columbia University professors Raymond Moley, Rexford Tugwell, and Adolph Berle. Several of these brain trusters went on to help run FDR’s New Deal agencies, even while they maintained speechwriting roles. Samuel Rosenman, who conceived the brain trust idea, served as presidential speechwriter during all four of FDR’s terms, yet he did not draw a federal paycheck until 1943. Before that he served as a judge on the New York State Supreme Court, commuting to Washington to serve the president on his own time.

During the war years (1941–45), most of the speeches were drafted by a trio of Roosevelt confidantes: Rosenman, playwright and presidential troubleshooter Robert Sherwood, and Harry Hopkins, a close FDR adviser who also held a number of top jobs in the government, including secretary of commerce. FDR’s speechwriters, in other words, were not merely verbal technicians but presidential aides with close contacts with the president and real policy responsibilities in the administration. The presi-

dent never kept their literary activities secret. Knowing how intimately involved Roosevelt was in their work, the public gradually began to take presidential speechwriters for granted.

Despite the crises that followed one after another in relentless succession during FDR’s occupancy of the White House, the president set aside five or six nights a month to work on speeches. “With his sense of history,” Sherwood said, “Roosevelt knew that all those words would constitute the bulk of the estate he would leave posterity and that his ultimate measurement would depend on the reconciliation of what he said with what he did.”

Roosevelt also understood that as the leader of a democracy, he could move only as far and as fast as the people would let him, and that speechmaking was the indispensable tool for widening his scope of action. By nudging public opinion forward, retreating when he was too far ahead, Roosevelt succeeded, for example, in shifting the country’s mood from isolationist to internationalist. It took three-and-a-half years of carefully constructed speeches to achieve his purpose, from his quarantine speech of October 5, 1937, which stirred a nearly unanimous negative response, to the signing of Lend-Lease on March 11, 1941.

On speechwriting nights the president and his writers gathered at 7:15 in the Oval Office for drinks, which Roosevelt mixed from a tray on his desk. After a half-hour of small talk, dinner was served at 7:45. Dinner over, the president moved to a sofa near the fireplace and read aloud the most recent speech draft while a secretary sat ready to take his dictated revisions and addenda. Together he and his writers tightened and simplified phraseology, eliminated sentences, paragraphs, and often whole pages, and dictated fresh passages to take their place. The president often drew material from his own speech file, a miscellaneous collection of items that he had been accumulating for many years. It included items

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from his correspondence, notes from his reading, memoranda, clippings, and telegrams, as well as suggestions submitted by members of Congress and others. Sometimes a call went out to poet Archibald MacLeish, who served as librarian of Congress during the 1940s, or some other close adviser, to come in and lend a hand.

**A**fter the president went to bed, Rosenman and Sherwood and often Hopkins worked most of the night to produce another draft, which was placed on the president's breakfast tray the next morning. If there was time during the day, they conferred again and got further reactions and instructions from Roosevelt. In the evening, they resumed work in another after-dinner session in the Oval Office. This process continued day and night until they agreed on a final reading copy. Major speeches went through a dozen or more drafts, each of which the president had studied, added to, trimmed, read aloud, and subjected to searching criticism.

By the time he delivered the speech, Roosevelt knew it almost by heart and needed only occasional glances at the manuscript as he spoke. He was often persuasive and sometimes eloquent, displaying a power won in large part by his meticulous involvement in his speeches. Just as important, the men who helped him thoroughly understood his thought and rhetorical style as well as his politics. The speeches were a collaboration, with the president playing a major role.

FDR's next four successors followed very much in his speechwriting footsteps by adopting his collaborative method. Writers for Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, by advising and consulting closely with the president, participated in decision making. These presidents, notwithstanding their considerable differences in personal and political style, all took for granted the

impossibility of separating writing and policy. Policy is made of words, they knew, and words shape thought.

For example, Eisenhower, who as a young army officer had penned several speeches for Douglas MacArthur, spent much energy and time during the first year of his presidency working on his Atoms for Peace speech, the 1953 address at the United Nations in which he proposed a plan for the international control of nuclear power. Its preparation set off a debate within the administration on atomic energy, necessitating 33 drafts of the speech over a seven-and-a-half-month period. The drafts circulated among senior advisers in the Atomic Energy Commission, State Department, Pentagon, and White House. Eisenhower appointed C. D. Jackson, his special assistant for Cold War strategy, to take charge of what would otherwise have become an unwieldy process. Uniting important policy-making and speechwriting functions in one trusted adviser was, Ike learned, a key to mastering the rhetorical presidency.

**K**ennedy and special counsel and chief speechwriter Theodore Sorenson did not have the luxury of seven- and-a-half months to determine the American response to the Soviet installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962. When he learned of their presence on October 16, Kennedy summoned his closest and most trusted advisers. They and the president conferred for the next 13 days and nights. Sorenson played a leading role not only because he wrote the speech but also because he was assigned to draft a summary of all the meetings. Entrusting this responsibility to a single person, he later said, is the only way to ensure that the president gets a clear sense of the emerging policy.

When dozens of meetings reduced the options to two, Kennedy told Sorenson to write two speeches. Drafting, however, led to further questions and meetings. This process, in which each participant repeatedly



LBJ consults with chief speechwriter Harry McPherson in 1968.

prodded, questioned, and elicited alternatives, led finally to a consensus that became the basis of the president's plan, which he announced to the world on Monday night, October 22. "The answer in the Cuban missile crisis," Sorenson told a *National Journal* reporter 10 years later, "was not resolved until it was effectively worded."

In like manner, Lyndon Johnson radically revised his thinking during the course of 14 drafts of his historic March 31, 1968, speech on U.S. policy in Vietnam. The president convened cabinet members, military chiefs, experts among the White House staff, retired generals, and elder statesmen for a series of meetings to consider how best to respond to North Vietnam's surprising Tet offensive, launched at the end of January. The president made it clear from the start that his special counsel and chief speechwriter, Harry McPherson, was to serve as everyone's conduit.

The president made no bones about his stand: "Let's get one thing clear! I'm telling you I am not going to stop the bombing." McPherson had already written six drafts of a speech along those lines. But privately

Johnson was not so certain. On March 22, a group of officials including McPherson met with him to discuss once again the possibility of limiting or ceasing all bombing of North Vietnam. Without the impetus of any discernible change in the president's thinking, McPherson wrote a memo on March 23 recommending a bombing cessation at the 20th parallel with the promise that all bombing would stop if North Vietnam agreed to end military activity in the demilitarized zone. Discussions continued. On March 26 the president chose

March 31 for the speech; on the 28th he told his principal advisers to meet in Secretary of State Dean Rusk's office to polish the speech. The men worked all day.

Knowing that Rusk and National Security Advisor Walt Rostow were unsympathetic to a bombing halt, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, as a last resort, burst forth in an emotional, tightly reasoned, hour-long appeal for jettisoning the speech as written. "It can't be polished; it's all war," he concluded. By late afternoon, his position had prevailed. To bring Johnson around, the group directed McPherson to begin anew with a conciliatory speech. The general counsel sent the first alternate draft to the president at 6 P.M. and then reconvened the group at 6:30 for an hour with LBJ, who still gave little indication of his position. Nonetheless, McPherson wrote a second alternate draft, dispatching it to the White House at 9 P.M.

Johnson agonized, trying to fix on a course of action. Not until the morning of March 29 did he finally make up his mind. He endorsed the second alternate draft. In the little time remaining, he and McPherson wrote three more drafts, trying to make each word as precise as possible. The surprise partial bombing halt, opening the way

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for peace talks, was topped by Johnson's unexpected peroration: "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president."

**T**his was modern presidential speechwriting at its best. For more than a month, the president and his top civilian and military advisers reasoned together in what amounted to a kind of exalted brainstorming. Because all information and opinion were funneled through McPherson, it worked. The continuing debate, discussion, and refinement of ideas clarified the choices and pushed the president and his advisers toward decision.

With LBJ's successor, Richard Nixon, everything rhetorical became a way of making image rather than policy. By the time he ran for president in 1960, 14 years into his public life, Nixon had become convinced that the perceived image of what a president is and does is far more important than the reality. Scattered throughout his presidential memos are comments that reflect this perspective: "Taft infinitely more effective than Teddy Roosevelt, but Roosevelt had personality"; "Ike had been distant and all business but appeared warm and kindly"; "JFK did nothing but appeared great while LBJ did everything and appeared terrible"; "Kennedy was colder, more ruthless than [Nixon], but look at his PR." Endless entries in the Haldeman diaries deal with staff efforts to "create a more friendly image of the P," as Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman routinely referred to Nixon.

Although he surrounded himself with advertising and public relations men such as Haldeman, Nixon made himself the architect of his presidential image as well as his presidency. He created an Office of Communications, an entirely new public relations arm of the White House that fed material to the press beyond Washington. The new Office of Public Liaison coordinated the White House "line of the day": the story that would be emphasized to the press. Of

nearly 550 White House staffers, 20 percent were connected, directly or indirectly, with public relations.

To script the president's effort to "establish the mystique," Nixon established the first formally structured White House speechwriting office, called the Writing and Research Department. Its 12 writers and eight researchers were the first Americans to be listed as such on the executive branch payroll. Nixon referred to his writers as the "PR group." In addition to drafting speeches, they analyzed opinion, drew up lists of remarks for the president to use "extemporaneously" in public appearances, and composed letters to the editor under real and assumed names. They even collected and indexed anecdotes for the so-called Richard Nixon Human Interest Program. (Under "Strength in Adversity" was filed a vignette about Nixon as a young father falling on the ice while keeping two-year-old Tricia safe in his arms.)

**Y**et for all this, the writers rarely assumed a consultative role in policy matters. Unlike their predecessors, from Rosenman to McPherson, these writers had no regular access to the Oval Office; they dealt instead with Haldeman as intermediary. Raymond Price, for example, rarely spoke directly to the president when he was head of writing and research, as Haldeman made clear in a January 9, 1970, diary entry: "reviewed Price's first real draft of the State of Union, . . . a complete disaster . . . led to a new harangue for a speechwriter who can write a Nixon speech. Hard for Ray to hit it right when he has no direct contact with P and no real guidance."

Nixon depended on his writers, but he controlled the content of every speech, spending "incredible hours alone" on drafts, according to Haldeman. But Nixon's understanding of the purposes of the presidential speech was fundamentally different from that of past presidents who did their



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own writing. Nixon frequently wrote speeches (and made policy) in response to data supplied by his speech researchers and pollsters. His method represented an abrupt departure from what had been the accepted purpose of presidential speechmaking. Before Nixon, the speechwriting process was used to formulate policy and attain "so much of it as will receive general support by teaching," as FDR said. Nixon used it chiefly to manipulate public opinion.

The new focus on public opinion often created a disconnect between thought and word. The examples are endless. Nixon speaks of the urgency of passing the Family Assistance Plan but tells his chief of staff that he "wants to be sure it is killed by the Democrats and that we make a big play for it, but don't let it pass." He publicly praises civil rights and privately tells Haldeman he "does not believe in integration."

**I**t may seem odd to speak of parallels between Nixon and Jimmy Carter, but there were striking similarities in their approaches to speechwriting. Like Nixon, Carter kept his writers, including James Fallows and Hendrik Hertzberg, at a distance and allowed them little role in policy. Having never had a speechwriter until his presidential campaign, Carter also insisted on writing for himself as much as time allowed. His experience underscores an important truth about the perils of the rhetorical presidency: who writes presidential speeches—even if it is the president himself—is less important than how and why they are written.

Unlike the calculating Nixon, who used speeches to define his public image more than his public policies, Carter managed to blur both. He had a penchant for combining his own engineer's lists of policy initiatives with a speechwriter's efforts and other material. His most famous speech is probably his disastrous address on Soviet-American relations at the U.S. Naval Academy in June 1978, in which he jammed together pieces of memos from his conciliatory secretary of

state, Cyrus Vance, and hawkish National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. The result was an unhappy amalgam of saber rattling and soothing rhetoric. The *Washington Post* accurately described it as "two different speeches."

**P**reachy, disjointed, and poorly delivered, Carter's public talking, which had landed him in the White House, just as surely propelled him out of it. Had he given at least one of his highly talented writers continual access and the mandate to act as a Sorenson or a McPherson, he likely would have constructed more convincing, focused, speeches—and, perhaps, policies to match.

Nixon's true heir in matters of public utterances, Ronald Reagan, enlarged Nixon's fully synchronized approach to rhetoric. He, too, relied on an amply staffed speechwriting department, as well as an Office of Communications, an Office of Public Liaison, an Office of Public Affairs, and an Office of Communications Planning. His staff also produced a "line of the day" for the nightly television news, either with scripted remarks or packaged events. According to Jeffrey Tulis, Reagan "spent more of his day in photo opportunities and greeting dignitaries than in policy discussion."

As during the Nixon years, pollsters played an important role in the higher councils of the Reagan administration. According to speechwriter Peggy Noonan, chief pollster Richard Wirthlin made it clear to the writers that he had a better "read" on what the public wanted than they did—a point he made in the Oval Office in Reagan's presence. He analyzed a recent speech during which members of a focus group were instructed to press a button when Reagan's words struck an emotional chord. Wirthlin pointed out that early in the speech, when the president said "reach for the stars," everyone squeezed. The word "free" is a good word, Wirthlin said, especially "free man from nuclear terror. . . . When you speechwriters talk about tax reform, that

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is good. It's pro-family, pro-jobs, pro-future, pro-America. Pro is positive."

The parts of the speech that did not work, he continued, were those that lacked a positive note. He singled out a section in which the president spoke about the freedom fighters in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. "The listeners didn't know where these countries are," Wirthlin groused, "and anyway it sounds like we're launching a four-point war. Part of the problem seems to be that the language was so powerful it put people on edge. It made them feel 'down.' It wasn't positive."

Like presidential writers before them, Reagan's were responsible for the style, syntax, and accuracy of what the president said, and in executing these editorial duties, they necessarily served as brokers between policymakers. At times, they influenced policy more than the president probably intended. Sometimes, they unintentionally initiated policy. "What *is* the policy on conservation?" Peggy Noonan wondered before starting a speech on that subject. "Lacking certainty, we intuit." Noonan recounted the frustration of having her prose go through a 25-station review. "It would come back tapioca," she recalled in *What I Saw at the Revolution* (1990), "so I would use the 'hand grenade' technique. I would write a statement embodying an unambiguous, history-making commitment, throw it into the policy making machinery, and sooner or later somebody would knock it down or pick it up. *Then* we would find out what the president's policy was."

What is astonishing about Reagan's insulation from the men and women who wrote for him and about how little he participated in the preparation of speeches is that he launched his political career with a speech, variations of which he delivered starting in his early years as General Electric's spokesperson in the mid-1950s. Here was a man who had experienced unparalleled success from a speech that he had mulled over, written, and rewritten over a

period of years. Yet when he reached the White House, he delivered a packet of past talks to the speechwriting office with the instructions that the writers learn to imitate his style and substance.

What communications scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson asked about Reagan may just as well be asked about other presidents: "Why should we expect someone who embraces the words of others to suddenly become an active, inquiring, scrutinizing manager of information when offered a plan [such as that] for aiding the Contras?" Had Reagan's successor George Bush been more actively engaged in the writing of his own words, for example, he might have thought more carefully about his ill-advised "read my lips" pledge not to raise taxes—and he might still be president.

**Y**et, for all that, Reagan was called "the Great Communicator." One reason he won the label was certainly that he stayed "on message" during the eight years of his presidency. From the night of his first presidential-nomination acceptance speech in Detroit's Cobo Hall to the day he turned over the Oval Office to Bush, he stuck to a few simple themes and repeated them with force and conviction. Not incidentally, Reagan was a great admirer of FDR, even if his overarching goal was to dismantle Roosevelt's coalition and programs. Reagan had come to maturity during the Roosevelt era, listening to the president's fireside chats and memorizing some of their best passages. He looked to his predecessor to teach him how to reach people effectively—even though his rhetoric, unlike FDR's, frequently did not match reality.

Right after Bill Clinton's election, his senior aides procured memos written by Reagan's transition team in late 1980. Included was a proposal by Wirthlin and speechwriter David Gergen for the president's day-by-day schedule during his first 100 days in office. The success of their plan largely depended on political consult-



Only a month into the Clinton presidency, critics began pointing out the perils of garrulousness.

ants and pollsters. Clinton uses these hired hands to an extent that goes far beyond anything Reagan did, and their influence is resented within his administration. "Speechwriting is not on their minds; image-making is," said one speechwriter. Clinton, however, understood all too well how Reagan had brought Congress to heel (for a time) by mobilizing such broad support that it seemed unsafe to thwart him, and he hoped to do the same.

What Clinton and Reagan seemed to have been looking for from the Nixon model was approval of the presidential person as a way to win support for policies. This represents a reversal of the earlier approach. Make good policies, Truman said, and good relations will follow; Eisenhower declared that "the job is to convince not to publicize." But today "presidents have become so audience-driven," communications scholar Roderick Hart has written, that "they unconsciously

use polling data to substantiate the essential wisdom of positions they champion."

President Clinton's wordsmiths, like virtually all of their predecessors of the past quarter-century, bemoan their lack of access to the man for whom they write. Yet in this White House the result has not been the unplanned policy influence of writers. As political journalist Elizabeth Drew observes in *On the Edge* (1994), Clinton "had thought through the nation's essential problems more thoroughly than any of his recent predecessors," and, more than any president in recent memory, he speaks for himself. The night before the signing of the Mideast policy accord in the fall of 1993, for example, he stayed up until 3 A.M. combing the Book of Joshua for inspirational references to use in his address. As former Clinton writer David Kusnet says, "this is a man

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with knowledge of the basic texts of American oratory." Clinton can quote from memory large passages of Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, and JFK. He knows the Bible and Shakespeare. He has all the "right stuff" to be an important national voice. But he has failed to make himself heard.

Early in his administration Clinton told *Washington Post* columnist David Broder that because the nation is "awash with news," he must work harder at being communicator in chief than his predecessors did. But to Clinton, working harder seems to mean talking more. He gave 600 speeches in 1993, and was an ubiquitous presence on television, in print, and on radio. This very strategy undermines his message. Just as putting too much money in circulation causes inflation and diminishes the value of a currency, too much presidential talk cheapens the value of presidential rhetoric. Television reporters tell Clinton's story over his mute gestures; radio talk-show hosts pummel his policies. As the White House itself recognizes, the definition of the president and his policies is now largely in the hands of others. He has lost the ability to shape public understanding, which is the essence of the bully pulpit's power.

Clinton makes matters worse by trying to get back on track with speeches that play to public opinion, creating new disconnects between past proclamations and present ones. Responding to public opinion in a democracy is no disgrace—FDR was a master of it. He probably had a better grasp of public opinion than any other president before or since. His habits of reading, listening, consulting, and yes, even studying public-opinion polls, were not a means of deciding which way to veer but of discovering

how much and what kind of persuasion was needed to bring the people along. Roosevelt believed that the relationship between the president and the people was direct but not reciprocal.

**I**t is possible that we have reached the end of the rhetorical presidency, that Bill Clinton, for all his words, is America's first post-rhetorical president. In an age vastly more complicated than FDR's, an age overwhelmed by electronic words and images, it may be that no single person can serve as the national voice. But it is more likely that the age simply requires a leader who understands how to use words wisely and well, who does not feel compelled to "feed the beast"—who is the master (but not the manipulator) of what might be called the media complex. Television, as Peggy Noonan suggested, must be put in its place. Only by recovering the strengths of an earlier and quieter rhetorical presidency can that be done.

To reclaim the bully pulpit, a president (and it could still be Clinton) will need to do away with the public relations folderol and the separate speechwriting departments. He will need to cultivate a trusted speechwriting alter ego—a McPherson or a Rosenman. He will need to remember that to be truly effective a speech must clarify thought and policy, and that he must educate his listeners rather than merely pander to them. That kind of president could join the small band of America's best presidents, who "were leaders of thought at times when certain historic ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified," as the second Roosevelt, echoing the first, defined moral leadership.

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## CURRENT BOOKS

### Farewell to Modernism

#### THE ORAL HISTORY OF MODERN

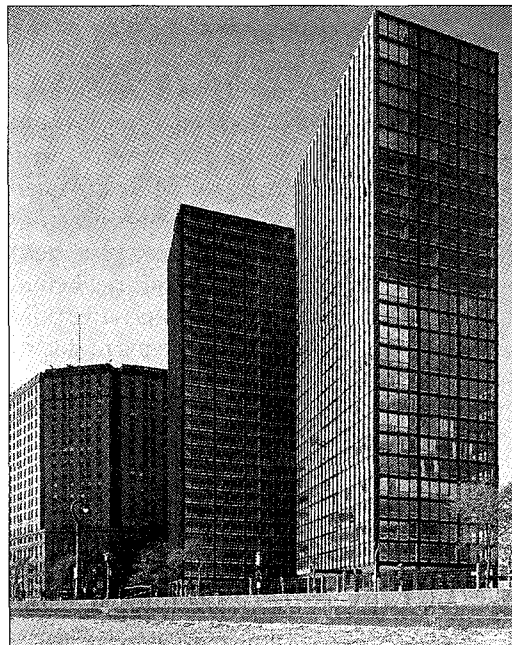
**ARCHITECTURE:** Interviews with the Greatest Architects of the Twentieth Century. By John Peter. Abrams. 320 pp. \$67.50

“Less is more,” Ludwig Mies van der Rohe supposedly said, thus summing up his severe, minimalist approach to the art of building. To which the architect Robert Venturi impishly replied, “Less is a bore.” Venturi’s postmodernist manifesto, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, was published in 1966, a year as good as any to date the end of what is commonly called the Modern Movement in architecture. This movement is remarkable for its pantheon of heroic figures—Mies, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright—and its equally heroic buildings. It is also distinguished by its brevity: beginning roughly in the 1920s, the Modern Movement held center stage barely 40 years.

Forty years is not a long time to reinvent architecture. But that is precisely what the early modernists set out to do. Their aim was to design buildings that owed nothing to the past and belonged distinctly and unmistakably to the 20th century. This ambition was in great part a reaction to the Victorian revivals of historical styles that had characterized architectural design during the late 19th century. Although the public generally liked neo-Elizabethan and neo-Flemish homes as well as Classical public buildings such as the National Gallery in Washington, many architects were dissatisfied with combining and recombining styles from the past. They felt that a modern age called for its own modern architecture. To this end, they generally ignored the well-established Classical architectural tradition that had nurtured architects as disparate as Freidrich Schinkel, Stanford White, and Edwin Lutyens. They did away with con-

ventional notions of ornament and decoration and instead found inspiration in such industrial prototypes as factories, steamships, and airplanes. Their aim, insofar as it was possible, was to make buildings machinelike. The results, from the Centre Pompidou in Paris to Boston’s City Hall, were sometimes refreshing, sometimes merely bizarre, often functionally implausible, but always strikingly original.

Despite the stylistic clichés that are commonly associated with modern architecture—flat roofs, pipe railings, and blank white walls—the Modern Movement was more than a fashion. It was truly a movement, that is, a loose grouping of people with a broad range of ideas. This diversity is made evident in historian John Peter’s *Oral History of Modern Architecture*, a collection of interviews with 59 of the most notable architects of the Modern Movement. What is surprising in Peter’s *Oral History* is not how much agreement there was among different modernist architects, but how



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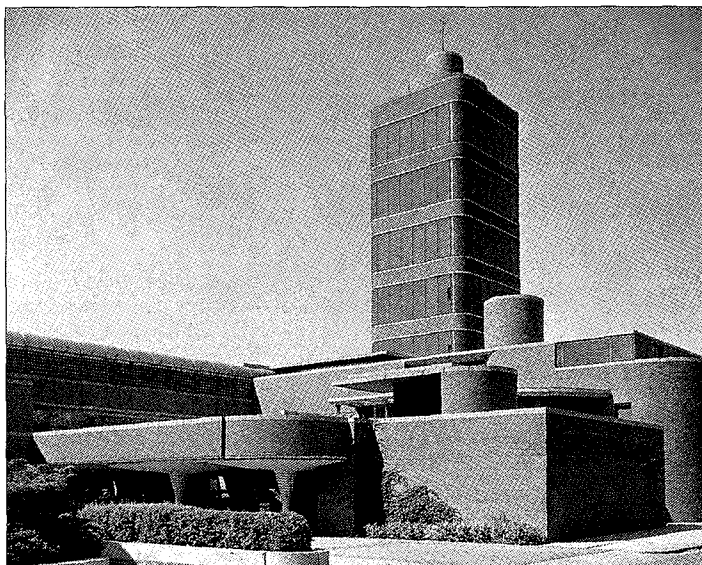
little. The Modern Movement was a very big tent, indeed.

Practicality, for example, is generally held to be integral to modernist design, and the Swiss designer Max Bill piously tells Peter that "what influenced all my thinking in doing architecture is always the human need." Mies, however, had a very different opinion: "The sociologists tell us we have to think about the human beings who are living in that building. That is a sociological problem, not an architectural one."

"Ornament is a crime," the Viennese modernist Adolf Loos famously wrote—a sentiment echoed by Le Corbusier's "I have been at war with decoration for a long time." But Willem Dudok, a Dutch early Modernist, is less doctrinaire: "Ornament is so elementary in the human desire," he observes.

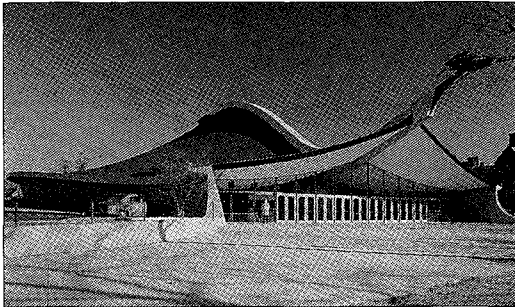
"Form follows function," wrote Louis Sullivan, but even this tenet was not universally followed. "I don't think that architectural form always should be practical or so," says the Finn Alvar Aalto in his fractured English. "There exists practically no culture in the world where it's only utility that commands."

The conversations with Peter also suggest that, though city planning was a preoccupation, here too there was no agreement. Le Corbusier denounces cities such as New York, London, and Paris as monstrous and proposes instead an urbanism of tall buildings and parkland. But his disciple, the Brazilian Oscar Niemeyer, who built many of the public buildings in his country's new capital, Brasília, seems unable to summon great enthusiasm for that soulless city, except to praise it for its lack of pollution. Louis Kahn orates unintelligibly about



transforming Philadelphia through the use of enormous parking structures, thankfully never built. Wright, who, despite his 80-odd years, understood that cars, telephones, and television may have made the traditional city obsolete, proposes a horizontal automobile city. "It's inevitable," he proclaims. (Forty years later, San Jose, Phoenix, and Houston have proved him right.) Understandably, most of the architects do pay lip service to the need for formal planning. But Mies is less sanguine on this point: "There are no cities, in fact, anymore. It just goes on like a forest . . . It is gone forever, you know, the planned city."

**M**any interviews Peter recorded in his *Oral History* make unsatisfactory reading because the ideas expressed are so banal. Great architects, while they are often great talkers, are not necessarily great thinkers. Many of the conversations deal with abstractions—pious political ideals, vague generalities, half-baked social theories—rather than with the specifics of architecture and construction. Architects are trained to build buildings, not new societies, and while the Modern Movement heralded the new age,



it also seriously misinterpreted it.

Progressive in their aesthetic theories, modernist architects steadfastly held on to a principle that was, in effect, medieval: the ascendancy of the Master Builder. (An oft-repeated image in Bauhaus publications was the Gothic cathedral.) In their minds, at least, architects stood at center stage, ready to make—and unmake—the world around them.

But modern consumer society is much too complex, dynamic, and discordant to be guided by an individual vision, let alone the individual vision of someone as autocratic as Le Corbusier or Wright. Moreover, consumers are not passive; they impatiently make demands, often unexpected demands. They are not interested in being lectured to, and they want more choices, not fewer. The inability to anticipate the volatile and heterogeneous nature of consumer society was, finally, the Modern Movement's fundamental flaw.

It did not take long for the improvised ideology of the Modern Movement to begin to unravel. One already senses in Peter's interviews with younger modernist architects such as Minoru Yamasaki, Philip Johnson, and Eero Saarinen the beginnings of postmodernism, that is, a dissatisfaction with dogma, a tentative acceptance of the past, and a desire to broaden the architectural palette. By the 1960s, Yamasaki (designer of New York City's World Trade Center) was already producing a kind of neo-Gothic modern,

and Johnson had built a spate of museums that were defiantly neo-Classical in composition and used not raw concrete but hand-carved travertine.

But it was the mercurial Saarinen, the most gifted designer of his generation (he was only 51 when he died), who probably deserves the greatest credit for pushing design beyond the confines of the Modern Movement. He achieved this in a set of extraordinary buildings: Dulles International Airport, the CBS Building in New York, and the TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport. In the Stiles and Morse Dormitories at Yale University, not his best work but ambitious sorties into historicism, he created a kind of Italian hill village in New Haven. As early as 1956, Saarinen told Peter: "God knows I am very, very enthusiastic about Mies van der Rohe and the almost common vernacular style that he created and that we all accept as a fine thing. However, I cannot help but think that it's only the ABC of the alphabet, that architecture, if we're to bloom into a full, really great style of architecture, which I think we will, we have to learn many more letters."

Saarinen was right. The orthodox architectural vocabulary that fills *The Oral History of Modern Architecture* was, finally, too meager to carry the Modern Movement into the future. I don't think Saarinen understood, however, that there was no going back once the apple cart was upset. As soon as architects started questioning the narrow tenets of modernism, it was every designer for himself. Having severed its links with the past, modernism left architects with little to fall back on.

The schools of architecture, which had already once drastically remade their curricula to suit the Modern Movement, were not much help. The result has been a sense that anything goes. A bewildering array of architectural ideas confronts the public on every street corner: buildings that meticu-

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lously recreate bygone styles, buildings that try to remain faithful to Modern Movement ideals, buildings that resemble Braun toasters, and buildings that look like they fell out of the sky and never quite got pieced together. Less may have been a bore, as Venturi claimed, but the replacement has turned out to be not so

much complexity and contradiction as confusion and anarchy.

—Witold Rybczynski is the Martin and Margy Meyerson Professor of Urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book, *City Life*, will be published this fall by Scribner.

## Midmorning in the New World Order

**TEMPTATIONS OF A SUPERPOWER.** By Ronald Steel. Harvard. 144 pp. \$18.95

**WORLD ORDERS, OLD AND NEW.** By Noam Chomsky. Columbia. 311 pp. \$24.95

History seems to allow no time-outs. With unnerving rapidity, the winning of the Cold War has already turned to ashes in the mouths of the "victors." The "New World Order"—that glad, confident morning—is now clouded over with doubts and fears more shapeless than those that darkened the days of superpower confrontations. The Cold War, it seems, was the good war. As well as stifling ethnic and religious conflicts worldwide, it gave the protagonists a clear sense of purpose. Yet obvious as it may seem, Americans have had trouble grasping the point made in both of these books: the Cold War was more an advantage than a menace to the United States.

Beyond making that point, however, these two books could hardly be more different. Ronald Steel, a professor of international relations at the University of Southern California, displays a cool, skeptical pragmatism as he discusses America's efforts to define its new world mission. Noam Chomsky, known almost as much for his anti-establishment political commentary as for his pioneering work in linguistics, practically bristles with outrage at the politicians, public, and—to him, most unacceptable of all—intellectuals who

have assented to America's foreign policy, both past and present.

Though he does not share Chomsky's indignation, Steel does wonder whether the United States can "find a way back from the Cold War." After all, in American political life the Cold War was, he writes, "our society's central focus" for three generations. America's all-consuming effort to contain communism revealed its underlying missionary character. (Revolutionary France, Steel points out, possessed a similar sense of unique destiny.) But this evangelical zeal aside, the Cold War occurred at a unique historical moment in the international power system, when America's reach was—or seemed to be—global.

Immediately after World War II, America arrived at a definition of national security that was practically without precedent. Throughout history, great powers have defined their security essentially in terms of neutralizing immediate military threats. But to the formulators of postwar U.S. policy, national security meant shoring up democracy wherever it was threatened in the free world. Here was, quite possibly, an historical first—traceable to what Steel unkindly calls the "loose rhetoric" of Woodrow Wilson—in which national security, the ideal of universal peace, and a liberal-democratic world order were all inextricably linked.



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Chomsky has a word for this policy: "interventionist." Its key article was summed up in Winston Churchill's assertion that "the government of the world must be entrusted to the satisfied nations, who wished nothing more for themselves than what they had." Chomsky will not allow that Churchill's noble expression was ever anything more than a justification for the strong to oppress the weak. He never entertains even the theoretical possibility that a great-power system could be beneficial or provide a fruitful stability. To him, the concept of stability has been so perverted by the governments of the satisfied nations—preeminently by the United States—as to have blighted its value altogether.

Chomsky is alternately enraged and mystified by what he sees as the self-righteousness of mainstream America. His passionate defense of the weak against the strong crudely reverses the old realist maxim, *Might Is Right*. To him, the weak are never in the wrong, the strong always are. Up to a point, his constant reversal of mainstream assumptions is bracing. Beyond that point (which is reached quite soon), it is simply paralyzing. His relentless attack on American altruism also compels him to take a dim view of the future. The only way America can become good, in Chomsky's view, is by becoming weak. And even if the United States ceases to be a superpower, it will remain too strong for its own or anyone else's good.

Steel's prognosis is hardly so pessimistic. Yet if the problems of superpower status during the Cold War were great, he sees those of a lone superpower as being even greater. The value of Steel's work lies in his attempt to find reasonable guidelines, reasonable limits, for international action in the post-Cold War world. To assay those limits, he investigates the "shibboleths"—stability, leadership, and democracy—that recently guided American foreign policy. Those principles, uncritically followed, will, he believes, burden America with a limit-

less, impossible agenda in world affairs.

But such principles may prove useful in the future, Steel thinks, if they are rationally analyzed rather than, as in the past, waved as battle flags. Leadership, if it is not too jealous of its status, can be a good thing. Stability, like peace, is clearly a good thing unless manipulated to obstruct necessary change. America's great weakness in the past—and here Chomsky is surely right—was its reluctance to tolerate or accept as democratic anything it found disagreeable beyond its borders. This monopoly of definition, if it persists, is bound to foster endless problems.

Steel's concluding chapter is fittingly titled "What America *Can* Do." What America can do, what it should do—these are questions that many others besides Steel are asking. Was there a legitimate principle behind America's (and other nations') intervention in Iraq, and, if so, when and how should it be applied elsewhere? What role, if any, should America assume in Bosnia or Rwanda? "Do we have any obligations to these troubled lands?" Steel asks.

To begin to answer this large question, he lays down a couple of general principles: it is not America's responsibility to counter aggression everywhere in the world, but genocide should not be tolerated. Yet his gloss of this no-genocide rule shows the difficulty of translating even so basic an imperative into physical action. America should have intervened in Rwanda and Cambodia, he argues, but it is right not to do so in Bosnia because the genocide there takes place "in the context of a traditional war over territory." Such a distinction seems ready-made for confusion and deception. Likewise, by asserting there is "no unconditional right of self-determination," Steel leaves the problem of deciding under what conditions America should act as intractable as ever.

Steel's minimal prescriptions do not supply the United States much of an international agenda in the post-Cold War world. But then

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he believes America does not need much in the way of a huge global agenda. Of the analyst at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D. C., who wants "to defend legal order at the far reaches of the globe" on the grounds that "massive breakdowns in the civil order are too dangerous for the entire [global] system," Steel scathingly remarks, "Perhaps this distinguished scholar has not noticed the 'massive breakdowns in the civil order' that have taken place a few blocks from his imposing office."

Steel minces no words when he says that America's overriding duty is to face up to its internal problems. After all, America's rivals today—the industrial megalith of Japan, the nimble trading states of Southeast Asia, the emerging colossus of China, the giant emporium of a uniting Europe—do not want to bury capitalism. To the contrary, they want to do it better than Americans do. "While we struggle with our role of superpower," Steel comments, "they concentrate on productivity, market penetration, wealth, and innovation: the kind of power that matters most in today's world. In this competition we are—with our chronic deficits, weak currency, massive borrowings, and immense debt—a very

strange kind of superpower."

Finally, what are Steel's hopes for this international order in which America so strangely operates as a superpower? His search for a viable future leads him ultimately not forward but backward, into the past. The phrases "concert of Europe" and "balance of power" have an archaic 19th-century ring to them, but Steele finds them the brightest beacons for the 21st century. The role of global policeman is dangerous, but that of traditional "great power," for all Chomsky's labeling of it as naked imperialism, is actually quite useful. If security interests can be redefined less extravagantly, as was done within the balance of power, and if groups of powers can cooperate regionally, as was achieved in the concert of Europe, there is a genuine prospect for a "new world order"—one, Steel believes, that will not be vitiated by ideological polarization. Oh come back, you satisfied nations Churchill spoke of, come back.

—Charles Townshend, a former Wilson Center Fellow and a historian at the University of Keele in England, is the author of *Making the Peace: Public Order and Public Security in Modern Britain* (1993).

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## OTHER TITLES

### *History*

**THE FORBIDDEN BESTSELLERS OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE.** By Robert Darnton. Norton. 409 pp. \$27.50

Pornography exploits women—and men, children, and dogs. Such, at least, is the conventional wisdom today, and people who agree on little else, feminists and fundamentalists, right-wing conservatives and gay rights activ-

ists, can at least agree that pornography represents the worst and most reactionary forces of society. Yet, venturing into an 18th-century underworld of penurious hack writers, nervous publishers, and police-dodging peddlers, Princeton University historian Darnton has discovered a forbidden erotic literature that was, in fact, enlightened, philosophical, and progressive.

For two decades Darnton has been elaborating a thesis about the French Revolution



that is itself somewhat revolutionary: namely, that the cultural origins of the Revolution lie beyond the witty *politesse* of the canonical Enlightenment, in the smutty, scandalous, and highly popular works of the so-called *Rousseaus du ruisseau* (Rousseaus of the gutter). In *The Business of Enlightenment* (1979), Darnton described how respectable publishers in France or just beyond its border sold illicit reading matter through such techniques as "marrying" or "larding" (splicing the pages of, say, *Fanny Hill* in French in between those of the New Testament). Now Darnton advances beyond the mechanics of book production and distribution to analyze the contents of these "hot" best sellers. The most popular illicit books of the pre-Revolutionary period (1750–89) were strange hybrids of materialist philosophy, explicit pornography, political slander, and radical utopianism. Darnton scrutinizes three books in particular: an ultra-racy novel, *Thérèse philosophe*; a political utopia

with the forward-looking title *The Year 2240*; and a libel (one of many) of Louis XV's mistress, *Anecdotes of Madame the Countess du Barry*. Clearly, the line between smut and "serious" thinking was less sharply drawn at that time than today. In *Thérèse philosophe*, women and their lovers (usually priests) discuss fine points of materialist philosophy and utilitarian ethics between bouts of mutual masturbation, thus putting into practice John Locke's proposition that all knowledge comes from the senses.

The question that Darnton gingerly circles is whether books, these or any others, actually make revolutions. His cautious, indirect answer goes something like this: books can offer readers stories that they understand in relation to their own "cultural frames," which in turn may affect their behavior. The political slander aimed at Louis XV, his mistresses, and his hated ministers influenced readers' perceptions of the political upheavals of the late 1770s, and in this indirect way possibly—but only possibly—contributed to the onset of revolution. Darnton's "indirect causation" does not, in fact, much alter our basic understanding of the French Revolution. But by resurrecting works too explosive to have been included in the classical anthologies—yet works that 18th-century readers found nearly as *philosophiques* as Montesquieu's political theory or Diderot's *Encyclopédie*—Darnton has permanently altered our understanding of the Enlightenment that preceded the Revolution.

#### THE DE-MORALIZATION OF SOCIETY:

From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values.

By Gertrude Himmelfarb. Knopf. 314 pp. \$24

In the nine previous books that established her as a leading historian of the English Victorians, Himmelfarb insistently but discretely held up the Victorian past as a mirror to our modern ills. There is similar scholarship in *The De-Moralization of Society*, but the reticence is gone: now the past argues openly with the present (and wins). We have, Himmelfarb

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pointedly suggests, a lot to learn from the Victorians, and we are only in second grade.

In elegant prose, the professor emeritus of history at the City University of New York shows how thoroughly we have misunderstood the Victorians—their family life and sexuality, their feminists and reformers, and much else. It was, she emphasizes, a society united, despite class fissures and other flaws, in its belief in “hard work, self-help, obedience, cleanliness, orderliness,” and in its pursuit of that all-important social glue, “respectability.” The Victorians, in other words, agreed on the virtues.

Thus even those who pushed against Victorian orthodoxy—and they were numerous—accepted and honored the larger values of Victorian society. The novelist George Eliot insisted on all the proprieties of married life—including the title “Mrs. Lewes”—even though Mr. Lewes, with whom she lived for 24 years, could not marry her. (He was unable to obtain a divorce from his wife.) “If there was one common denominator among” feminists of the period, Himmelfarb writes, “it was the belief that liberation—whether by means of the suffrage, or work, or education, or property and divorce reforms, or birth control—should not be purchased at the expense of ‘womanliness’ and the ‘domestic virtues.’”

The Victorians presided over a century of social progress, including not just a rising standard of living but even declining levels of crime and illegitimacy. Again, Himmelfarb argues, it was the Victorians’ extraordinary moral consensus that allowed this to happen. Under the New Poor Law of 1834, for example, they carefully distinguished between the independent but impecunious poor and the completely dependent pauper. The poor man could still claim a measure of respectability; the pauper was stigmatized, and was entitled to relief only at the workhouses (which were not quite as bad as those depicted in Dickens’s harrowing portrait, Himmelfarb says).

Himmelfarb says that it is our “reluctance to speak the language of morality, far more than any specific values, that separates us from the Victorians.” She traces this “de-

moralization” to what Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 1880s called the death of God. Nietzsche, she says, foresaw that this “would mean the death of morality and the death of truth—above all the truth of any morality.” Henceforth there would be no virtues, only “values”—one pretty much as good as any other.

In reality, the Victorians were already beginning to live off dwindling religious and moral capital when their queen took the throne in 1837. G. K. Chesterton observed that the Victorians were the first generation that “asked its children to worship the hearth without the altar.” Which leads to a question: to achieve the *re*-moralization of society urged by Himmelfarb, would it be enough to learn from the Victorians and, as she suggests, to apply their lessons to public policy, requiring welfare recipients, for example, to work? Or does the restoration of a moral society require a renaissance of religious conviction? That important question is never really engaged in this otherwise wise critique of our de-moralized society.

**THE NIXON MEMO.** By Marvin Kalb. Univ. of Chicago. 248 pp. \$19.95

**THE HALDEMAN DIARIES.** By H. R. Haldeman. Putnam. 698 pp. \$27.50

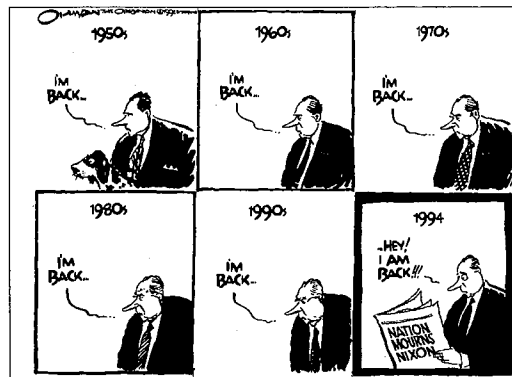
“There are no second acts in American lives,” F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed. Obviously he never met Richard Milhous Nixon. The only president ever forced to resign, Nixon (1913-94) by the time of his death was eulogized by the news media as “the most important figure of the postwar era.” How Nixon managed his apparent metamorphosis from dishonored ex-pol to elder statesman is chronicled with righteous gusto by Kalb, a former diplomatic correspondent who was once placed on Nixon’s “enemies lists.”

Fittingly for a politician who rose to prominence as a redbaiter, Nixon’s post-Watergate road to rehabilitation led through Moscow. Using the same genius for self-promotion and disregard for ideological consistency that had allowed him to begin normal-

izing U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China in 1972, Nixon in 1992 reversed his opposition to aid packages for Boris Yeltsin's Russia (which he had previously denounced as "counterproductive Western painkillers"). Essential to Nixon's strategy was his uncanny ability to manipulate the media. Kalb unravels the symbiotic relationships that Nixon cultivated with news outlets such as *Time* (where current Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott called himself Nixon's "case officer"), the *New York Times* op-ed page (which swallowed Nixon submissions as if they were bon-bons), and the TV networks (where Ted Koppel said "interviewing Nixon is one of the most fascinating political experiences").

The "Nixon memo" of Kalb's title refers to Nixon's carefully orchestrated dispatch on March 10, 1992, to 50 opinion makers blasting the Bush administration's Russia policy as "pathetically inadequate." Given Nixon's growing stature and his proven access to the media, neither President Bush then nor President Clinton later dared to alienate an elder statesman capable of asking the politically damaging question, Who lost Russia? While history may discredit Nixon's acuity as a Russia analyst (in 1991 Nixon was observing, "I doubt that Yeltsin wants Gorbachev's job"), his stage-management of the Russian question put Nixon, Kalb writes, "finally back in the big leagues."

Kalb's analysis would likely not have displeased Nixon, who once told his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman that "mystique is more important than content." There is an odd irony here. Kalb, for all his animosity toward Nixon, has not only explained but contributed to the former president's rehabilitation. Haldeman, who professed to admire Nixon and whom Nixon in turn said he "loved," may have all but ensured that the 37th president's rehabilitation will be temporary. Each evening Haldeman repeated into a tape recorder what Nixon had said and done that day, and there never has been a portrait of a president such as those tapes reveal. (These 700 pages are, in fact, but a fraction of the "diaries" available on CD-ROM.) Nixon's well-known dislike of



blacks and Jews, both individually and in general, is recorded here in detail; more surprising is his sheer lack of knowledge of both domestic and foreign policy. Almost every major domestic innovation for which the Nixon administration is credited—from education to welfare, from environment to consumer protection—was passed, Haldeman reveals, despite Nixon's secret opposition. The mystique of Nixon's second act, as Kalb shows, might have been new and improved; under the rhetoric, Haldeman reveals, the substance had not changed.

### Arts & Letters

**WALTER PATER: Lover of Strange Souls.**  
By Denis Donoghue. Knopf. 347 pp. \$30

Hearing of Walter Pater's death, Oscar Wilde reportedly said, "Was he ever alive?" Donoghue might answer, "Why, he lives still." In this eloquent and wonderfully nuanced book, Donoghue makes large claims for Pater, the languid 19th-century Oxford don who smuggled subversive Continental notions of art for art's sake into traditional Britain and, in so doing, helped conjure into existence artistic modernism.

Donoghue, who holds the Henry James Chair of Letters at New York University, writes against the current fashion in biography, in which the accreting volumes can double as doorstops. His book is not only of relatively modest size; it gets the proportions

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right. The discussion of Pater's works, twice as interesting as his personality, fills twice the space of the formal biographical section. For, in truth, there was little outward excitement to Pater's life. He was born in London in 1839 and educated at Oxford, where, after becoming a fellow of Brasenose in 1864, he remained till his death in 1894. Occasionally he visited the Continent with his two sisters. But these were brief interruptions in the routine of the quintessential—cartoonish even—homosexual Victorian don, the type of committed nonbeliever who nonetheless toys with the idea of taking holy orders. His outward life might be compressed into a single sentence: he taught, he thought, he wrote. Displaying minimal social charm, he was the taciturn guest you would have dreaded sitting next to at dinner. But do not mistake the scale of the physical life for its true dimensions. In his mind, on the page, Pater made a life of continuous event. He created himself as a work of art.

Pater is most famous as the author of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873; later retitled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*). The conclusion to his *Studies* was thought, in Victorian England, nothing short of dangerous. Pater's essentially pagan fervor might mislead young men, it was worried, as when he argued for the importance of self-realization, of experiencing the moment profoundly: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy," Pater wrote in phrases that became famous, "is success in life." That so wan and self-effacing a personality should have measured his worth against fire and Dionysian transport is ironic indeed.

Why should we still care about Pater? To begin with, he is reckoned by some a master of English prose, and by some measures he indisputably is: the form is prose, the words are English, and Pater is masterful at putting them together in certain lush, idiosyncratic patterns. Whether today's reader will take pleasure in the patterns is another matter. Donoghue makes the strongest case for their appeal. He explains that the techniques of delay in Pater's sentences "mark refusal to live by the rhythms of public life, commerce, and

technology." This is ingenious, as is his assertion that Pater's truest existence was lived out in prose: "He was, sentence by sentence, a textual self in the act of becoming, of making itself, improvising itself from one intense moment to the next." For many readers, though, a Pateresque sentence approximates pushing a large rock up a hill and wishing finally, in exhaustion, that the thing will simply roll backward, flatten you, and end the ordeal.

But there is other evidence to argue the man's enduring importance. Donoghue believes that Pater, more than any other English writer, made available the disjunction of sensation from judgment and thereby intuited the form of modern literature we find in the early work of Yeats, Joyce, and Eliot. Pater was modern literature's first act, Donoghue argues, and "the major writers achieved their second and third acts by dissenting from him and from their first selves." In the end Donoghue appears to surprise even himself by advancing the claims of aestheticism, "for all its risk of triviality, exquisiteness, solipsism," against our dominant contemporary critical theory that understands every work of art as merely illustrative of a certain ideological formation. Finally Donoghue admires the shy Oxford don for his audacity in proposing a so-called "higher morality," which was "to treat life in the spirit of art."

**THE BIRD ARTIST.** By Howard Norman.  
*Farrar, Strauss.* 289 pp. \$20

"My name is Fabian Vas. I live in Witless Bay, Newfoundland. You would not have heard of me. Obscurity is not necessarily failure, though; I am a bird artist, and have more or less made a living at it. Yet I murdered the lighthouse keeper, Botho August, and this is an equal part of how I think of myself."

With these sentences, short, flat, and unpretentious, begins what may be the past year's most successfully realized novel. *The Bird Artist*, like Norman's earlier *The Northern Lights* (both were nominated for the National Book Award), are novels of the unfamiliar, transpiring in a terrain simpler, harsher, and stranger

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than the one most readers call home. Here the landscape is Newfoundland at the start of this century, and Norman fills it with characters (Fabian Vas, his parents Alaric and Orkney, Romeo Gillette), with places (Witless Bay, Richibucto, Trespasey), and even birds (teals, kittiwakes, mergansers) whose peculiar-sounding names reverberate exotically, to suggest a world apart. Each page is a repository of the sensory images of bygone Newfoundland: villagers in the crabapple light of dawn, dressing fish for salting, the odor of codfish blowing down from the flats. But *The Bird Artist* is, foremost, a novel for the ear. Norman favors pared-down sentences and broken dialogue, most of which convey some odd, savory turn of phrase that salts—hermetically seals—the story in its own packing of language. This language, at once simplified and oddly poetic, creates the temporal rhythms of an earlier time, and that time, that different rhythm in human relationships, is the real subject of this novel.

Curiously, the most lauded novel of 1993—Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-, National Book Award-winning *The Shipping News*—is also set in Newfoundland. This may be more than a coincidence. Literature is filled with idealized, semifictional countries—Blake's Golgonooza, Yeats's Byzantium, Rilke's Russia (glimpsed from the speeding train compartment of a six-month visit)—that, at best, seem like places you might look up in an atlas. In this comedy about a semirecluse, a remote land, and a slower-paced era, Howard Norman has also created a mythic, visionary country, a weather and terrain of his own, where human society is reduced to essentials, people are stoic and humorous, and decency and integrity are the meaning behind everything. Most characters in *The Bird Artist*—except Fabian's mother in her ill-fated adultery with the lighthouse keeper—have learned the hard lesson that Fabian's drawing instructor has drummed into him. "Granted, cormorants can look eerily like a fossil bird come alive in your harbor, there," the instructor says of Fabian's draftsmanship. "Nonetheless, they are worthy of everything but your poor drawings of them. Bird art must derive its power

from emotion, naturally, but emotions have to be tempered and forged by sheer discipline, all for the sake of posterity."

**THE HOUSE OF PERCY:** Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family. By Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Oxford Univ. 454 pp. \$30

According to some of its more legend-prone members, the Percy family in America was descended from Harry Percy, the Hotspur of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*. Even if they have been deluded in that belief, the saga of this talented and tormented southern family betrays a grand Shakespearian sweep. The six generations of Percys that Wyatt-Brown studies enact a tale full of sound and fury—of senators, military heroes, and literary writers, of honor and bigamy, of eminence and madness and early death.

In his earlier *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982), Wyatt-Brown, a historian at the University of Florida, established himself as the authority on the traditional values of the South. Here he focuses on the Percy family—a clan he likens in some ways to the Yankee Adamses—because in it he finds southern culture writ small. If myth making, the ethics of honor, and the pathology of depression obsessed the Percys generation after generation, they have characterized southern preoccupations at large. Examining this extended group of relatives, beginning with Charles in the late 18th century, Wyatt-Brown anatomizes history in its smallest particulars, showing how general cultural values are recapitulated in families and individuals and at what cost.

*The House of Percy* illuminates, above all, the process of writing, of how for many Percys creative expression eased the pain of an inherited predisposition toward melancholy. Writing allowed brilliant Percy women, such as Sarah Dorsey (1829–79), release from the confines of southern culture when there were few other avenues of escape. Both the father and the grandfather of

the novelist Walker Percy (1916–90) committed suicide, but Walker wrestled a similar depression to fruitful issue in *The Movie-Goer*, *The Second Coming*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In such novels he resolved his ambiguous feelings toward two father-figures—his guardian-cousin, Will (a poet and memoirist), and his real father, LeRoy—by inditing rather than indicting them. Rarely have the interconnections among family history, regional history, depression, and creativity stood more clearly delineated than in Wyatt-Brown's efforts to trace how an American family—whether descended from the Northumberland earls or not—turned itself into an aristocracy of conscience and talent.

**HEBREW AND MODERNITY.** By Robert Alter. *Univ. of Ind.* 192 pp. \$27.95

The rebirth of the Hebrew language is popularly considered a tale at once thrilling and weird: an ancient tongue, lost as a living language two millennia ago, fossilized in liturgy, was resurrected from the dead by a few enthusiasts on the soil of modern Israel. But as Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative languages at the University of California at Berkeley, makes clear, the story is more complicated and, if possible, even weirder. He tells of a language that, far from having died out of daily usage, lived "a flickering intense half-life" through all the years of Diaspora, which began in 586 B.C., a language in which Jews continued uninterruptedly to compose not just prayers but secular literature and poetry. Oddest of all, during the 18th century a group of dedicated Yiddish-speaking writers called the *nusakh* began to compose realistic novels in Hebrew, inventing a conversational

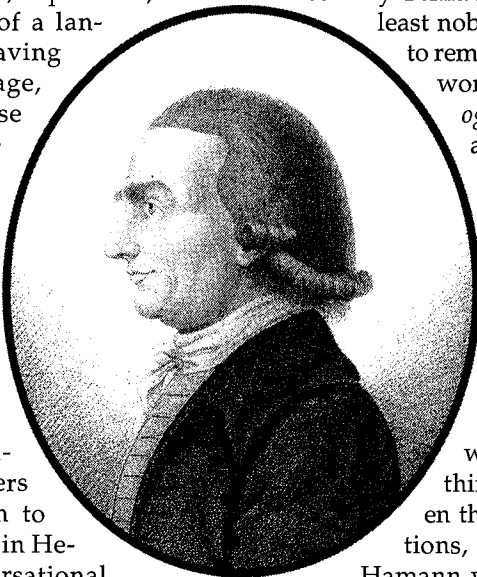
style for a language that no one conversed in. In large measure, Alter argues, this made possible the birth of Zionism and the modern tongue.

Alter's essay on the *nusakh* offers not just literary analysis but restored history. Even in Israel, few know that modern Hebrew literature did not result from Zionism but preceded it. In other essays, Alter analyzes modern Israeli novelists such as S. Y. Agnon and David Grossman and the poet Yehuda Amichai, to discover how an ancient mode of expression has been converted to modern, colloquial literary uses. Indeed, Alter suggests, if "postmodern" literature typically unites different, even discordant perspectives, voices, and eras in one work, then Hebrew, in which ordinary conversations can carry echoes of Ecclesiastes or the Book of Judges, makes a surprisingly congenial medium for postmodern poetry and fiction.

### *Philosophy & Religion*

**THE MAGUS OF THE NORTH:** J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism. By Isaiah Berlin. *Farrar, Strauss.* 144 pp. \$21

Johann George Hamann (1730–88) is an 18th-century German thinker that nobody, or at least nobody since Goethe, appears to remember. The very titles of his works hint why. In *New Apology for the Letter H*, for example, Hamann attacked a respected German theologian who had suggested omitting the letter *h* wherever it was not pronounced. Hamann, to the contrary, celebrated the ghostly *h* as embodying the unpredictable, the element of fantasy in God's world, the beauty of everything incomprehensible. Given the nature of his preoccupations, the puzzle is not why Hamann was forgotten but why Sir





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Isaiah Berlin, the Magus of Oxford, the octogenarian historian of ideas, has devoted a small book to reviving him.

At the very moment Diderot and his fellow Encyclopedists in Paris were erecting their edifice of rational knowledge, in Königsberg Hamann was advocating the idiosyncratic over the systematic, the bizarre over the daily, and the scarcely believable over the commonly accepted. And it is exactly this contrariness that interests Berlin. Hamann was the first European thinker to formulate a rebuttal of the Enlightenment that was not grounded on strictly religious premises. His fundamental insight was that the supposed universality of Enlightenment rationality tends not only to deny religious faith but to negate the validity of what all individuals uniquely see, hear, and feel for themselves. Consequently, Hamann opposed science, and even common sense, even when they produced useful results, fearing their suffocating effect upon the individual's autonomy.

At times Hamann comes off sounding like an early D. H. Lawrence, offering the same heady cocktail of antiscience, romanticism, and individualism. However, readers of this small volume will likely find Hamann's intelligence less intriguing than Berlin's. Berlin's complexity of mind, neither strictly Enlightenment nor "Counter-Enlightenment" (a word he coined), enables him to hold contradictory ideas simultaneously. He thinks that Hamann's irrationalist spiritual vision (so unlike Berlin's skepticism) does possess "intrinsic value," even though Hamann carried it into a fanaticism that imperils social and political life. Hamann's brand of fanaticism—a dangerous mixture of anti-intellectualism, anti-Semitism, fideism, and populism—would grow over the next two centuries "until it finally reach[ed] a point of violent hysteria in Austro-German racism and National Socialism." Yet it is for his positive as well as his negative qualities that "Hamann repays study," Berlin concludes. "He struck the first blow against the quantified world; his attack was often ill-judged, but he raised some of the greatest issues of our time by refusing to accept their advent."

## Contemporary Affairs

**BLACKS AND JEWS: ALLIANCES AND ARGUMENTS.** Ed. by Paul Berman.

Delacorte Press. 303 pp. \$22.50

**JEWS AND BLACKS: Let the Healing Begin.** By Cornel West and Michael Lerner. Grosset/Putnam. 226 pp. \$24.95

Of all "emigrant groups" in America, blacks and Jews have come closest to sharing a common sociological experience: both historically were victims of persecutions, and both minorities were long regarded as outcasts by the dominant culture. For much of this century American Jews and blacks co-operated in an unofficial alliance, one that began with the supporting links between W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Crisis* and Abraham Cahan's *Jewish Daily Forward* and continued through the close friendship of those moral prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr. Why, then, since the late 1960s, did black-Jewish relations go so bad?



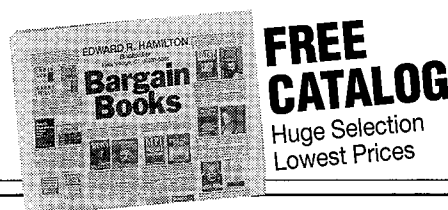
Paul Berman's anthology helps answer that question. Its essays show how the black-Jewish consensus of the civil rights era (perhaps romanticized even then) broke down amid acrimony over affirmative action, black nationalism, and the fear of crime. Black and Jewish intellectuals in the 1960s began to articulate diverging visions. Set forth here are the classically inflammatory essays—Norman Podhoretz's "My Negro Problem—and Ours" (1963), James Baldwin's "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White" (1967), and Cynthia Ozick's "Literary Blacks and Jews" (1972)—that give a startling sense of how many steps it took to reach the current state of perplexed resentment and hostility. Baldwin, for instance, concluded his essay conciliatorily: "If one blames the Jew for not having been ennobled by oppression, one is not indicting the single figure of the Jew but the entire human race, and one is also making a quite breathtaking claim for oneself. I know that my oppression did not ennoble me. . . ." This tone did not last. More depressing than their essays themselves are the 1993 afterwards appended by Podhoretz and Ozick, in which they come across as dramatically more one-sided and unforgiving than when they wrote the essays.

In *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin*, Cornel West, a professor of African-American studies at Harvard University, and Michael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun*, parlay their friendship into a dialogue about prejudice, American culture, and their perceptions of each other's histories. They begin with personal experiences. West grew up tough and unruly, beating up white students for lunch money. Lerner was just the kind of brainy white kid who got beat up. At one point Lerner entertains a paranoid fantasy about black anti-Semitism massively, brutally out of control. Ultimately, though, Lerner offers a liberal, if peculiar, reason for why Jews must shun antiblack sentiments. "If Jews can turn their backs on the suffering of

blacks," he writes, "they would be embracing a worldview that is indistinguishable from the rest of American life—so in that case, why bother to stay Jewish, with all the attendant hassles, risks, and separations from others?"

**ART LESSONS:** Learning from the Rise and Fall of Public Arts Funding. *By Alice Goldfarb Marquis. Basic. 304 pp. \$25*

Thirty years after its founding in 1965, the debates over the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) have settled into a familiar pattern. Conservatives condemn NEA-funded projects as alternately too elitist or too compromised by popular culture. They object most strenuously when taxpayers' money is



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used to support works they find offensive, such as the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe. Meanwhile, the endowment's liberal defenders argue that, under the NEA, the arts have helped to reverse decades of urban decline and to bring self-esteem to the disadvantaged. To the left of that left, many avant-garde artists simply view NEA funding as their due; denial of a fellowship, in their opinion, amounts to government censorship. With a new, conservative Congress threatening to put the NEA out of its misery, the time is ripe for a thoughtful analysis of the American experiment in public arts funding.

Marquis, the biographer of the Museum of Modern Art's *Alfred Barr* (1989), does not provide it. *Art Lessons* is a relentlessly negative portrait of financial sloppiness, cronyism, personal scandal, and tolerance for mediocre art by administrators who love to proclaim the arts' social value. In Marquis's telling, the NEA was born of a coalition of Rockefeller Republicans, Kennedy liberals, and philanthropic businessmen who saw themselves as missionaries bringing a European-style culture to a benighted populace stupefied by sports, television, and other mass media. Thirty years later, she claims, the NEA has become a hopelessly inefficient, corrupt bureaucracy, enslaved to a constituency its own funds have helped to create while indifferent to the public at large. Despite its founders' missionary zeal, the audience for "high art" remains as limited as it was at the end of the Eisenhower era. The time has come, she concludes, to abolish the NEA.

Marquis's critique may hold true for certain big cities—America's half-dozen "cultural capitals" located mainly on the two coasts. The arts in such places would be little different if the NEA did not exist. But with her penchant for scandals, she ignores NEA-sponsored projects at the local level—the repertory companies, exhibitions, children's theaters, and art education programs that have changed the face of the arts in America's middle-sized cities and small towns. Moreover, Marquis's unbounded attack gives little thought to the overall predicament of art in a market society. Opera, the symphony, and art museums will likely survive with private patronage, while all else, from folk artists to avant-garde composers, will succumb to com-

petition from commercial media with huge advertising budgets and an eye to equally huge profits. The results will hardly appeal to moralists. MTV, for example, has certainly done more to disseminate vulgar taste than the worst NEA projects. Rather than write yet another chronicle of its scandals, Marquis might have more profitably entered the debate about what stands in the way of a reformed NEA promoting a healthier cultural life in America.

**IN THE BELGIAN CHATEAU:** The Spirit and Culture of a European Society in an Age of Change. By Renee C. Fox. Ivan R. Dee. 339 pp. \$28.50

Fox, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, helped to create the disciplines of bioethics and the sociology of medicine in such path-breaking works as *Experiments Perilous* (1974) and *Spare Parts* (1992). During the late 1950s, when she visited Belgium to do research, she discovered, beyond her professional interests, a culture that intrigued her. For the next 35 years, she kept returning in an attempt to fathom what within that "conventionally 'bourgeois' society" corresponded to some "buried strangeness" within herself.

History explains some of Belgium's mystique. In 1831, following the revolt of the Catholic provinces of the southern Netherlands, the great powers of Europe created a new country. The united Kingdom of Belgium brought together two distinct and potentially divisive linguistic and ethnic communities, the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish. What held Belgians together, in addition to external threats, were collective sentiments and symbols (which they usually deny they have)—common associations not simply with church and monarchy but with mundane objects, from the red brick of their houses to the Congolese rubber plants within them, the latter hinting at former colonial greatness. Indeed, it is the extraordinary, almost numinous sense of the house, the home—understandable in a country where security has been endangered in repeated invasions—that strikes a deep chord within Fox. "It was inside the Belgium house," she writes, "that

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I found Belgium and both the professional and the personal meaning of my search."

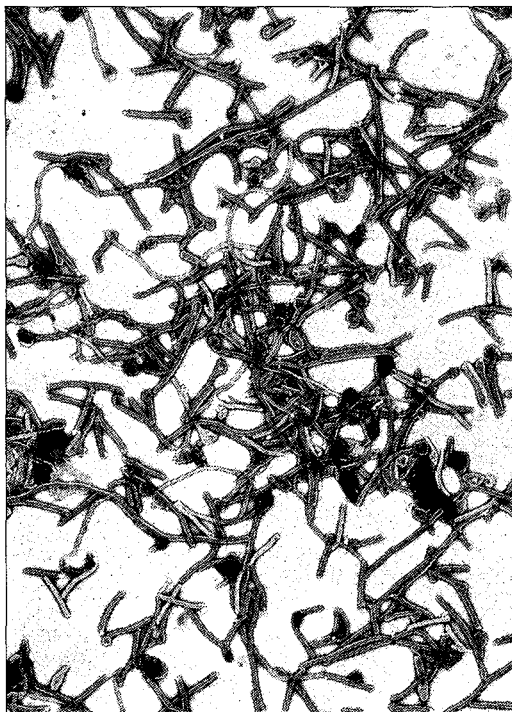
Ironically, Fox's quest for the essence of Belgian identity took place during years when profound internal changes threatened to dissolve the social and cultural glue that has held this "artificial state" intact. Belgium's internationalized postwar economy, the fading memory of its wartime experience, and the loss of its colonies are all working to erode a once-strong sense of national solidarity. In sensible, bourgeois Belgium, one now enters an Alice in Wonderland world where everything happens in double. Each town has separate shops for Flemish and Walloon customers; a street postbox has two slots, one for letters in French, the other for those in Flemish; and activists in Flanders are even pushing for a separate system of social security. The beloved country Fox examined threatened to disintegrate under her very microscope. History kindly intervened, however, to provide her study with a happy ending. The unexpected death of King Baudoin on July 31, 1993, provoked an outpouring of mourning that transcended particularistic loyalties, suggesting that all Belgians were a national family once again. The question, though, remains: *Après Baudoin, le déluge?*

## Science & Technology

**THE HOT ZONE.** By Richard Preston.  
Random House. 300 pp. \$23

**THE COMING PLAGUE:** Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance. By Laurie Garrett. Farrar, Straus. 750 pp. \$25

In 1993, Stephen King spooked American television audiences with *The Stand*—an eerie, seemingly implausible story about a deadly virus that quickly annihilates most of the human species. A year later, King described the nonfictional *Hot Zone* as "one of the most horrifying things I've ever read." The central drama in *The Hot Zone* occurs in a "monkey house" in Reston, Virginia (19 miles from Washington, D.C.), where animals imported for scientific experimentation are routinely quarantined. In 1989, before scientists at the "monkey house" realized that the extremely lethal Ebola virus was killing



hundreds of monkeys, some humans became infected. Fortunately, life is not (or not always) a Stephen King movie, and this strain proved to be the single variety of Ebola that does not harm humans. *The Hot Zone*, written by *New Yorker* contributor Preston, has topped the best-seller lists and inspired the movie, *Outbreak*. Yet even critics who dismiss it as simply a nonfiction thriller acknowledge that it has drawn widespread attention to the "newly emerging" viruses and bacteria that are changing our very understanding of the modern world.

Plagues and pandemics were, quite simply, not supposed to happen in the hygienic late 20th century. During the early 1960s, scientists proclaimed that they had all but won the war against infectious diseases. Research biologists tended to focus on what was happening under their microscopes and ignored what was changing in their own human world. In *The Coming Plague*, medical journalist Garrett connects Ebola and other diseases such as AIDS, Lassa fever, and the "flesh-eating" streptococcus bacteria that killed Muppet creator Jim Henson to the larger political, social, and ecological landscape

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that promotes their spread. Late-20th-century humankind, she argues, lives in a habitat unlike that of any of our ancestors. Air travel allows viruses from Africa (such as HIV) to “jump” to other continents in a matter of hours. In Third World cities, malnutrition combines with wretched sanitation to turn urban citizens into human petri dishes. And the destruction of ecosystems affects not only tropical rain forests but even Connecticut, where deforestation, by driving tick-bearing feral animals into the suburbs, has greatly increased the incidence of Lyme disease.

At midcentury, during the heyday of medical infallibility, one lone dissenter wrote, “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world.” The dissenting voice was Albert Camus’s, in his novel *The Plague* (1948). Almost 50 years later, many people now wonder how close the world is to the “coming plague”—say, an airborne version of HIV. No one, including Garrett, can say, but she presents a frightening scenario of world health professionals ill prepared to identify and control diseases that nimbly spread, evolve, and become resistant to drugs. Garrett reminds her readers how the early reluctance of governments to grapple quickly with AIDS contributed to its rapid spread. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control has recently created a model “emerging infections program”; still, Garrett wonders whether what any one country does can enable it to “stave off or survive the next plague.” During the 1960s, people such as Marshall McLuhan predicted that the world would soon be one big village. For viruses, at least, the prediction has come true.

#### **AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS:**

Seven Paradoxical Tales. By *Oliver Sacks*. Knopf. 315 pp. \$24

Ask not what disease the person has, but rather what person the disease has. By following this maxim (learned from his parents), neurologist Sacks has brought a degree of humanity to patients otherwise regarded as freaks and dismissed by his colleagues as hopeless. In *Awak-*

*enings* (1983) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), Sacks, not content with describing neurological illnesses, vividly evokes the personal experience of living within their effects. Sacks has described himself as a neuro-anthropologist but actually more resembles a physician making house calls at the far border of human experience.

Sacks calls his case studies or tales “paradoxical” because the patients he describes have succeeded not in spite but almost because of extraordinary dysfunctions. He describes an artist who, having lost his color vision in a car accident, now paints striking works in black and white through a heightened sense of their contrast. A surgeon with Tourette’s syndrome—characterized by oddly pitched vocal outbursts and arms flinging abruptly—manages, while operating, to control all manifestations of the disease. An autistic zoologist finds that autism permits her insight into animal behavior, but around human actions she is perplexed enough to feel like “an anthropologist on Mars.” Despite the neurological malfunctions that caused their conditions, Sacks writes, these people have adapted into “alternate states of being, other forms of life, no less human for being different.”

The “anthropologist on Mars,” though, more aptly applies to Sacks himself. Ever since Arthur Rimbaud attempted to “systematically disorder the senses,” literature has endeavored to resee the common world in new and strange ways. To this end, Franz Kafka often wrote in the guise of an animal—a mouse or gorilla or dog; Francis Ponge (and numerous other writers) invented fictitious countries where familiar practices and psychology were turned inside-out. Sacks outdoes such fictional contrivances, however, when he recreates the inner world of an idiot savant who sees ordinary objects as numbers or that of an alcoholic, suffering from a complete inability to remember, who lives in a hellish, endless present. In Oliver Sacks, science seems to have fulfilled literature’s old dream—to show that life is not only stranger than we imagine but even stranger than we *can* imagine.

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# POETRY

## BEN JONSON

*Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht*

**T**hat maker and breaker of literary reputations, T. S. Eliot, began an essay on Ben Jonson (1572–1637) this way: “The reputation of Jonson has been of the most deadly kind that can be compelled upon the memory of a great poet. To be universally accepted; to be damned by the praise that quenches all desire to read the book; to be afflicted by the imputation of the virtues which excite the least pleasure; and to be read only by historians and antiquaries—this is the most perfect conspiracy of approval. . . . No critic has made him seem pleasurable or even interesting.”

After an opening like that, surely we expect to lean back and see justice belatedly done. But that’s not quite what we get. Eliot, the restorer of life to John Donne, the literary assassin of Shelley, has nothing to say of Jonson as a poet but speaks of him only as a playwright (though he does pay complimentary attention to Jonson’s dramatic verse). And Eliot goes on to point out that Jonson has been unfavorably compared not only with Shakespeare but with Christopher Marlowe, John Webster, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher.

Eliot’s essay did little if anything to alter public indifference to Jonson, either as playwright or poet, and his failure simply confirmed the supposed soundness of that indifference. Jonson continued to be regarded by those who bothered to read him as a man of highly specialized sensibilities: learned, haughty, condescending, impersonal, classical, envious, and aloof. In brief, forbidding and unpleasant. “’Twas an ingenious remarque of my Lady Hoskins, that B. J. never writes of Love, or if he does, does it not naturally,” reports the 17th-century writer John Aubrey. What poet can hope to engage readers when handicapped by deficiencies in so central a poetic subject?

But Jonson deserves better of us. He is not as copious or versatile as Shakespeare, but at least one of his songs, “Queene and Huntresse,” is as lovely as any song of Shakespeare’s, and his musicianship (by which I mean his management of meter, rhyme, and stanza) is Shakespeare’s equal. His “Charme” (“The owle is abroad, the bat, and the toad”) could fit seamlessly into an incantation of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, while some of his epigrams are wonderfully funny.

Teaching Jonson’s poems to undergraduates over the years has shown me what it is in his work that keeps the general readership at bay. Students come to him knowing only “Drink to me only with thine eyes,” and have been chilled by the artificial ingenuity, the remote formality, of that song. Renaissance English diction and spelling make the poems seem alien, stilted exercises devoid of humanity, so that when Jonson is being funny, as in “The

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Dreame," they completely miss the whole tone and tenor of the poem.

Or scorne, or pittie on me take,  
I must a true Relation make,  
I am undone to night;  
Love in a subtile Dreame disguis'd,  
Hath both my heart and me surpriz'd,  
Whom never yet he durst attempt t'awake;  
Nor will he tell me for whose sake  
He did me the Delight,  
Or spite  
But leaves me to inquire,  
In all my wild desire,  
Of sleepe againe, who was his Aid,  
And sleepe so guiltie and afraid,  
As since he dares not come within my sight.

Well, you can see what daunts those students, who are not enamored of allegorical figures. In this poem, both "Love" and "Sleep" are personified. Obscurely those students sense that some sort of plot is going on, but though "surpriz'd" and "guiltie and afraid" are intriguing, it's hard to care much about events involving ghostly personifications. But when it is pointed out to a class that this poem is about being awakened by what parents used to call "a nocturnal emission," and what boys referred to as "a wet dream," the whole poem suddenly falls into place. It becomes personal, even confessional in a good-humored and unpretentious way. Jonson becomes more human.

**A**nd yet his art is also always cunning. In his celebrated epitaph for the child actor Salathiel Pavy, the poem is set down upon the page so as visibly to alternate between long and short lines. The short lines are uniform in length, each closing with a feminine ending; but the long ones, closing as they do with masculine endings, are not uniform. Their metrical deviation, however, is not random or casual. They alternate between seven and eight syllables, the odd-numbered long lines containing seven syllables, the even-numbered ones, eight. The shorter of these long lines elide their opening syllables (the absent syllable is removed from the front, not the end, of the line), thereby providing a subtle and measured syncopation, all the while rhyming *a b a b* in quatrain form throughout. It might be argued that such syncopation reflects the asymmetrical imbalance belonging to the subject of a child who so successfully plays the roles of old men that the Fates themselves are deceived and summon him prematurely to his appointed end.

To be sure, Jonson writes much stately and occasional verse. But he can be engaging in many moods—in his wrath as well as his humor, and the two are closely linked. In general, he is far more various than is commonly recognized. No small part of this variety lies in the fact that his poems are by no means all spoken (or sung) *in propria persona*. Quite apart from his plays, he is a lively inventor of characters of both sexes.

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## From Epigrammes

VI  
*To Alchymists*

If all you boast of your great art be true;  
Sure, willing povertie lives most in you.

XIII  
*To Doctor Empirick*

When men a dangerous disease did scape,  
Of old, they gave a cock to Æsculape;  
Let me give two: that doubly am got free,  
From my diseases danger, and from thee.

CXX  
*Epitaph on S.P. [Salathiel Pavy] a child of  
Q. El. [Queen Elizabeth's] Chappel*

Weepe with me all you that read  
This little storie:  
And know, for whom a teare you shed,  
Death's selfe is sorry.  
'Twas a child, that so did thrive  
In grace, and feature,  
As Heaven and Nature seem'd to strive  
Which own'd the creature.  
Yeeres he numbred scarce thirteene  
When Fates turn'd cruell,  
Yet three fill'd Zodiackes had he beene  
The stages jewell;  
And did act (what now we mone)  
Old men so duely,  
As, sooth, the Parcae thought him one,  
He plai'd so truely.  
So, by error, to his fate  
They all consented;  
But viewing him since (alas, too late)  
They have repented.  
And have sought (to give new birth)  
In bathes to steepe him;  
But, being so much too good for earth,  
Heaven vowes to keepe him.

## From The Forrest

V  
*Song. To Celia*

Come my Celia, let us prove,  
While we may, the sports of love;  
Time will not be ours, for ever:  
He, at length, our good will sever.  
Spend not then his guifts in vaine.  
Sunnes, that set, may rise againe:  
But if once we loose this light,  
'Tis, with us, perpetuall night.  
Why should we deferre our joyes?  
Fame, and rumor are but toys.  
Cannot we delude the eyes  
Of a few poore houshold spyes?  
Or his easier eares beguile,  
So removed by our wile?  
'Tis no sinne, loves fruit to steale,  
But the sweet theft to reveale:  
To be taken, to be seene,  
These have crimes accounted beene.

## From The Under-Wood

II  
*A Celebration of Charis in  
Ten Lyrick Peeces*

### 1. HIS EXCUSE FOR LOVING

Let it not your wonder move,  
Lesse your laughter: that I love.  
Though I now write fiftie yeares,  
I have had, and have my Peeres;  
Poets, though devine are men:  
Some have lov'd as old agen.  
And it is not alwayes face,  
Clothes, or Fortune gives the grace;  
Or the feature, or the youth:  
But the Language, and the Truth,  
With the Ardor, and the Passion,  
Gives the Lover weight, and fashion.  
If you then will read the Storie,  
First, prepare you to be sorie,  
That you never knew till now,  
Either whom to love, or how:  
But be glad, as soone with me,  
When you know, that this is she,



---

Of whose Beautie it was sung,  
She shall make the old man young,  
Keepe the middle age at stay,  
And let nothing high decay,  
Till she be the reason why,  
All the world for love may die.

VII  
*A Nymphs Passion*

I love, and he loves me againe,  
Yet dare I not tell who;  
For if the Nymphs should know my Swaine,  
I feare they'd love him too;  
Yet if it be not knowne,  
The pleasure is as good as none,  
For that's a narrow joy is but our owne.

I'le tell, that if they be not glad,  
They yet may evnie me:  
But then if I grow jealous madde,  
And of them pittied be,  
It were a plague 'bove scorne,  
And yet it cannot be forborne,  
Unlesse my heart would as my thought be torne.

He is if they can find him, faire,  
And fresh and fragrant too,  
As Summers sky, or purged Ayre,  
And lookes as Lillies doe,  
That are this morning blowne,  
Yet, yet I doubt he is not knowne,  
And feare much more, that more of him beshowne.

But he hath eyes so round, and bright,  
As make away my doubt,  
Where Love may all his Torches light,  
Though hate had put them out;  
But then t'increase my feares,  
What Nymph so e're his voyce but heares  
Will be my Rivall, though she have but eares.

I'le tell no more and yet I love,  
And he loves me; yet no  
One un-becoming thought doth move  
From either heart, I know;  
But so exempt from blame,  
As it would be to each a fame:  
If Love, or feare, would let me tell his name.

XXIII  
*An Ode. To himselfe*

Where do'st thou carelesse Lie  
Buried in ease and sloth?  
Knowledge, that sleepes, doth die;  
And this Securitie,  
It is the common Moath,  
That eats on wits, and Arts, and oft destroyes  
them both.

Are all th'Aonian springs  
Dri'd up? lyes Thespia wast?  
Doth Clarius Harp want strings,  
That not a Nymph now sings!  
Or droop they as disgrac't,  
To see their Seats and Bowers by chattring  
Pies defac't?

If hence thy silence be,  
As 'tis too just a cause;  
Let this thought quicken thee,  
Minds that are great and free,  
Should not on fortune pause,  
'Tis crowne enough to vertue still, her owne  
applause.

What though the greedie Frie  
Be taken with false Baytes  
Of worded Balladrie,  
And thinke it Poesie?  
They die with their conceits,  
And only pitious scorne, upon their folly  
waites.

Then take in hand thy Lyre,  
Strike in thy proper straine,  
With Japhets lyne, aspire  
Sols Chariot for new fire,  
To give the world againe:  
Who aided him, will thee, the issue of Joves  
braine.

And since our Daintie age  
Cannot endure reproofe,  
Make not thy selfe a Page,  
To that strumpet the Stage,  
But sing high and aloofe,  
Safe from the wolves black jaw, and the dull  
Asses hoofe.

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LXXI  
*To the Right Honourable, the Lord High  
Treasurer of England. An Epistle  
Mendicant. 1631*

MY LORD:

Poore wretched states, prest by extremities,  
Are faine to seeke for succours, and supplies  
Of Princes aides, or good mens Charities.

Disease, the Enemy, and his Engineeres,  
Wants, with the rest of his conceal'd compeeres,  
Have cast a trench about mee, now five yeares.

And made those strong approaches, by False  
braies,  
Reducts, Halfe-moones, Horne-workes, and such  
close wayes,  
The Muse not peepes out, one of hundred dayes;

But lyes block'd up, and straightned, narrow'd in,  
Fix'd to the bed, and boords, unlike to win  
Health, or scarce breath, as she had never bin.

Unlesse some saving-Honour of the Crowne,  
Dare thinke it, to relieve, no lesse renowne,  
A Bed-rid Wit, then a besieged Towne.

### Miscellaneous

IV  
*Hymn to Diana  
from Cynthia's Revells*

Queene, and Huntresse, chaste, and faire,  
Now the Sunne is laid to sleepe,  
Seated, in thy silver chaire,  
State in wonted manner keepe:  
Hesperus intreats thy light,  
Goddesse, excellently bright.

Earth, let not thy envious shade  
Dare it selfe to interpose;  
Cynthia's shining orbe was made  
Heaven to cleere, when day did close:  
Blesse us then with wished sight,  
Goddesse, excellently bright.

Lay thy bow of pearle apart,  
And thy cristall-shining quiver;  
Give unto the flying hart  
Space to breathe, how short soever:  
Thou that mak'st a day of night,  
Goddesse, excellently bright.

XXXII  
*Song*

from *The Gypsies Metamorphos'd*

The faery beame upon you,  
The starres to glister on you:  
A Moone of light,  
In the noone of night,  
Till the Fire-drake hath o're gon you.

The wheele of fortune guide you,  
The Boy with the bow beside you  
Runne aye in the way,  
Till the bird of day,  
And the luckier lot betide you.

XVII  
*Charme*

from *The Masque of Queenes*

The owle is abroad, the bat, and the toad,  
And so is the cat-a-mountayne,  
The ant, and the mole sit both in a hole,  
And frog peepes out o'the fountayne;  
The dogs, they doe bay, and the timbrels play,  
The spindle is now a turning;  
The moone it is red, and the starres are fled,  
But all the skie is a burning:  
The ditch is made, and our nayles the spade,  
With pictures full, of waxe, and of wooll;  
Their livers I sticke, with needles quicke;  
There lacks but the bloud, to make up the floud.  
Quickly, Dame, then, bring your part in,  
Spurre, spurre, upon little Martin,  
Merrily, merrily, make him saile,  
A worme in his mouth, and a thorne in's taile,  
Fire above, and fire below,  
With a whip i'your hand, to make him goe.