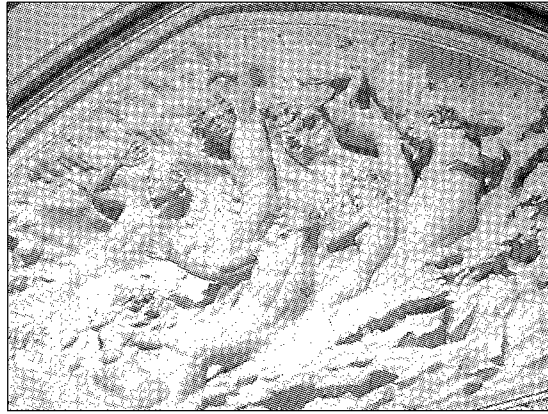# The Shame of the Critics

Tom Wolfe chronicles in the *Weekly Standard* (Oct. 2, 1995) the brilliant career and strange neglect of representational sculptor Frederick Hart. Hart's works include the popular *Three Soldiers* at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

[Hart] was discovered . . . by a stone carver from Italy, Roger Morigi. As Morigi's apprentice, Hart learned to conceive of form in stone from the carver's perspective, from the inside out.

By day Morigi and Hart carved stone for Washington National Cathedral, an enormous structure in the Middle English Gothic style. By night Hart began sculpting on his own, and by the age of 25 he was pulling human forms out of clay and stone with a breathtaking facility. In 1971 he learned that the cathedral would be looking for a sculptor to adorn the entire west facade. The theme was to be the Creation, with the pièce de résistance a two-story-high, 21-ft.-wide stone bas-relief above the main entrance. Morigi urged Hart to enter the competition. The young would-be sculptor spent three years conceiving and preparing a series of scale models. In 1974, at the age of 31, a complete unknown, a stone carver by trade, Hart won what would turn out to be the most monumental commission for religious sculpture in the United States in the 20th century. He spent 10 years creating the full-size models in clay and overseeing Morigi and his men as they carved Ex Nihilo, depicting mankind emerging from the swirling rush of chaos.

Hart was now at the same point in his career as Giotto when Giotto did his first great painting, the Virgin Mary trembling before the Archangel Gabriel, for the high altar of the Abbey of Florence in 1301. From that time on, Giotto's life was an uninterrupted ascension to wealth, the company and patronage of the rich and powerful, surpassing fame, and the universal admiration of his fellow artists. For Hart, the more earthly rewards came soon enough. . . . One thing was missing: the artistic atmosphere of 14th-century Florence, not to mention a Vasari or two to chronicle his success.

Just what this meant Hart found out in the very first week after the dedication of Ex Nihilo in 1982 (two years before the completion of the entire facade). In the press, even the local press, there was nothing, save a single rather slighting remark in passing in the Style section of the Washington Post. In the art press in the weeks and months and years that followed—nothing, not even so much as a one-paragraph review. Thirteen years at work on the most important American religious commission of the 20th century, and—nihil, a hollow silence. It was as if the west side of Washington National Cathedral, the seventh-largest cathedral in the world, were invisible.

Interactive Lit. 101

Someone reading Stuart Moulthrop's novel *Victory Garden* (1991) on a computer encounters a man named Harley and a waitress named Veronica flirting in a bar. If the

reader hits the "Enter" key, the story contin-
ues with Harley and a friend resuming their
conversation as Veronica leaves. But if the
reader instead selects certain words high-
lighted in the text—for instance, "another
table"—the story takes a different path, fol-
lowing Veronica as she goes to wait on
another customer. Or if the reader chooses
"Veronica," the narrative leads to a bedroom
scene between Veronica and Harley.

Victory Garden is a "hypertext novel," part
of a growing new genre called "interactive
literature." Kendall, who teaches interactive
poetry and fiction at the New School for
Social Research in New York, says that more
and more writers, including some estab-
lished ones such as Thomas M. Disch and
Robert Pinsky, have been trying their hands
at interactivity.

"The new electronic literature breaks the
bonds of linearity and stasis imposed by
paper," Kendall contends. "In digital form a
story can draw readers into its world by giv-
ing them a role in shaping it, letting them
choose which narrative thread to follow,
which new situation or character to explore.
Within a 'page' of poetry on screen, words of
lines can change continually as the reader
watches, making the text resonate with shift-
ing shades of meaning. Written work can
'improvise,' altering its own content every
time it's read. With its power to mix text,
graphics, sound, and video, the PC can
extend the ancient interdisciplinary tradi-
tions of writing."

Electronic publishing is currently a
booming field, Kendall notes, with hun-
dreds of novels, stories, and poems available
on CD-ROM. The vast majority of these
works originally appeared in print, but inter-
active literature is growing. Many locations
on the Internet's World Wide Web, he says,
now contain hypertext fiction and poetry.

The writer "who really opened up the
electronic frontier to serious writing,"
Kendall says, was Michael Joyce. His hyper-
text novel, *Afternoon, a Story* (1990),
"requires the reader to unravel interwoven
strands of narrative to make sense of the
story. The reader's efforts parallel the strug-
gle of the story's main character to learn
whether his son and estranged wife have
been killed in a car accident." The
Washington Post Book World called Joyce's
work "a noteworthy piece of recent
American fiction, genre considerations
aside."

Electronic literature has not yet been
widely accepted by the reading public,
Kendall concedes. But that may change, he
believes, when "an inexpensive paperback-
sized computer with a screen that matches
the readability of the printed page" arrives
on the scene. "Then," he predicts, "the elec-
tronic publishing boom will begin in
earnest."

Stephen Foster's High Art

"Sound and Sentimentality: Nostalgia in the Songs of Stephen Foster" by Susan Key, in *American Music* (Summer 1995), Sonneck Society for American Music, P.O. Box 476, Canton, Mass. 02021.

Stephen Foster's many immensely popu-
lar songs, from "Beautiful Dreamer" to "My
Old Kentucky Home," are rarely considered
much more than sentimental, albeit artfully
constructed, crowd-pleasers. In Foster's day,
however, argues Key, a graduate student in
musicology and ethnomusicology at the
University of Maryland, College Park, no
rigid barriers separated high and low cul-
ture, and Foster's ballads were much
esteemed in refined circles.

In the first half of the 19th century,
improvements in transportation and manu-
facturing stimulated the growth of a sheet·
music industry. By the Civil War, publisher
Oliver Ditson boasted thousands of popular
ballads, instrumentalized for voice and piano.

Inspired by the strongly egalitarian senti-
ments of the day, many American parlor
music composers "sought to provide music
for everyone," Key says. Their favorite
device was "the portrayal of bittersweet emo-
tions stimulated by the contemplation of
something lost." Most often, as in Foster's
"Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," an ide-
alized past was juxtaposed with an alien pre-
sent; but sometimes, as in "Old Folks at
Home," an idealized "far" and an alien
"near," or, as in "Beautiful Dreamer," an
idealized night and the "rude world" of the