

everybody is born a bastard and that nobody should give himself airs about being better than the average run of folk." Elsewhere he muses on our innate tendency toward self-deception in matters of righteousness: "We'll all go to our graves as irrational as the day we were born, and the best we can do is watch out whenever our personal interest seems to coincide with celestial virtue." Of the essayist E. B. White, Mitchell reflects, "His work was civil and polite; he either had no gift of vitriol or else never felt any." The same could be said of Mitchell, a graceful and gracious observer of the human condition.

—Brian Gross

THE WORK OF POETRY.

By John Hollander. Columbia Univ. Press. 318 pp. \$29.95

In his postcard from Parnassus, *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes* (1992), the poet Donald Hall recounts a Harvard tribute to T. S. Eliot. Asked afterward if he had sat next to the guest of honor, a Junior Fellow told Hall: "I couldn't. John Hollander was sitting on both sides of him." In the 23 essays contained in *The Work of Poetry*, Hollander sits alongside, around, on, and over the great poets and their compositions.

Hollander's vigilant approach can be seen in the essay "Of Of: The Poetics of a Preposition," in which he writes that "the immense variety of ad hoc uses of *of* in idiomatic English helps destabilize its precise operation in certain phrases." Taking Hollander at his word, one can interpret "the work of poetry" as meaning not only the toil that informs composition but the work *belonging* to poetry, as if it were an autonomous enterprise. This second, self-reflective stance is borne by Hollander's insistence on poetry as a metaphor for reali-

ty, particularly in his essay "Dreaming Poetry." He discusses the infinite capacity of poets to editorialize on the work of past practitioners. "We cannot talk about our feelings," he contends, "without talking about talking about them, without pointing out the peculiar ways in which we must use language to tell the truth."

Hollander's several essays on poetic origin seem merely an extension of Harold Bloom's doctrine of misreadings, whereby a poet misconstrues the poem of a predecessor, then pens a rebuttal. Reflecting a critical stance common to the period in which these essays were written (1977–97), Hollander imports jargon from the uncertainty-principle school of literary theory, with ruinous consequences for his clarity. "Poetry is the soul of indirection," he writes. But indirection kills an essay. When Hollander performs a close reading on a specific text, the results are more fruitful, as in his fine essays on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Child's Garden of Verses*, the obscure American poet Trumbull Stickney, and the Victorian poets George Meredith and D. G. Rossetti.

"I've always been something of a moralist," Hollander acknowledges, and these essays convey several lessons and lamentations. One is that memorization, once an essential poetic discipline, has become a lost art. Another is that graduate writing workshops neglect rigorous analysis of the poetic form: "There is no useful conventional terminology for the description, taxonomy, and analysis of different modes of free verse." The reader is likely to profit from such concrete observations a good deal more than from Hollander's murky musings on indeterminacy. For the latter, consult a French linguist.

—Sunil Iyengar

Contemporary Affairs

THE LAST BARBARIANS: The Discovery of the Source of the Mekong in Tibet.

By Michel Peissel. Henry Holt. 320 pages. \$27.50

Michel Peissel would have been world famous in an earlier century, but he is an explorer at a time when, as he writes, "most people think explorers are old-fashioned or

completely obsolete." In *The Last Barbarians*, his 15th book, he makes a triumphant case for the explorer, weaving history, geology, and politics with candid revelations of the yearnings and ambitions that have carried him to some of the remotest places on the planet.

A fluent Tibetan-speaker with more than 37 trips to the Himalayas behind him,