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 reality, 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,

Peissel discovered in his reading that the source of the Mekong River had never been established. (The French explorer Dutreuil de Rhins, leader of an 1894 expedition up the Mekong, was shot to death by Tibetan tribesmen in a dispute over stolen horses before reaching the source.) Mindful that success would bring little glory or money, and that an intransigent Chinese bureaucracy would make securing travel permits anything but easy, he was spurred on by his respect both for the Mekong (Asia's third-longest river, originating in Tibet, crossing China, India, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand, and ending at a delta in Vietnam) and for Tibet's ecological primacy as the river-head of Asia, the source of the Yellow, Yangtze, Salween, Mekong, Bramaputra, Irawaddy, and Ganges rivers.

The author is painfully witty in describing the hell of innumerable days in a Land Rover, referring to himself as "strictly what you might call a foot and horse man" who is trapped with a driver, two companions, and a humorless and unenthusiastic Chinese guide. At an outpost, they barter for porters and horses. Then, after a 15-day journey, they reach the object of their quest, the headwaters of the great Mekong—which prove to be not a stupendous glacier, like the source of the Ganges, but a mere trickle from a patch of red soil. "We had discovered the source of the Mekong, an act as banal as it proved to be magical. There was little or nothing to see. The true importance of our discovery was all in the mind, for we had reached one of those rare sacred places where myth and reality meet."

Crossing the vast Tibetan highlands back toward civilization, where he confronts the ugly reality of the Chinese military occupation (in place since 1950), Peissel ruminates on whether technology has divided man from nature and robbed us of willpower, curiosity, and wonder. His mission has become an exploration of the conflict between the civilized and the nomadic: "There is nothing organized society fears more than the intrusion of smart, carefree, gutsy, horseback-riding 'barbarians'." Once more Peissel has proved that even in the age of the satellite and the Internet, there are yet many things about our planet that remain unknown.

—*Maura Moynihan*

CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War.
By Tony Horwitz. Pantheon.
399 pages. $27

What strange historical passions could induce a gainfully employed and coherent-sounding young waiter to spend his weekends and much of his income pursuing a "hardcore" experience of the Civil War, a quest that involves sleeping in battlefield ditches, eating authentically wormy period grub, and studying old photos to perfect his imitation of a bloated Confederate corpse? Play-acting aside, what still-vivid historical memories provoked a black teenager to shoot and kill Michael Westerman, a white father of newborn twins in Guthrie, Kentucky, whose pickup truck displayed the Confederate flag?

The "unfinished Civil War" described by journalist Tony Horwitz runs the gamut from hobbyist fervor to deadly violence, across a vast middle stretch of more familiar manifestations of historical awareness—books, movies, tourist reconstructions, associations of Confederate veterans' sons and daughters, debates over the teaching of history and the symbols of the Confederacy. Horwitz, a long-time *Wall Street Journal* foreign correspondent and author of two previous books, returned from nine years abroad to find his country plunged into the rediscovery of a war that had fascinated him as a child. Having missed such watershed events as the Ken Burns documentary, the movies *Glory* and *Gettysburg*, and the fight over whether to build a Disney theme park near Manassas battlefield in Virginia, he hit the road, seeking to find out what stokes this continuing hunger to revisit a war that ended 133 years ago.

Horwitz's book offers a lively map of the "continuing war's" various campaigns, but their meaning remains elusive. He finds, not surprisingly, that for many adherents the Civil War obsession spills beyond the standard motives of the amateur historian—regional pride, genealogy, escapism—into wider, still-raging issues of civil rights and race. Some of the people he talks to are clearly in full flight from modernity: the Klan members, the sweet lady in North Carolina who tells Horwitz she has enrolled her cat in the first chapter of Cats of the Confederacy. Others, it is clear, are simply