

loved, where I have buried my heart.” For the poet, says Lounsbury, embracing Africa became “a way . . . to reflect on his feelings of alienation—aesthetic, personal, and political—from a Russian society in which he [did] not feel entirely at home.”

Had Pushkin ignored his African heritage, she writes, “it is quite likely that others would have done the same, since race—or, at least, blackness—was not a particular obsession of early-19th-century Russian society.” Pushkin himself chose the nickname *afrikanets* (“the African”). He also used the words *negr* and *arap* (which referred to all black Africans) in describing both his ancestor and himself, and he termed American slaves “my brothers *negry*.”

The Russian national poet “first entered American consciousness as a black man,” Lounsbury notes. In an 1847 essay in an abolitionist newspaper, American poet John Greenleaf Whittier pointed to Pushkin, she says, “as evidence of blacks’ intellectual abilities.” And Pushkin became an “enduring presence in black American culture.” In 1925, the Urban League’s official publication instituted a Pushkin Prize for outstanding black poets. In 1937, the 136th Street Library in Harlem marked the centenary of Pushkin’s death with an exhibit of works by



In America, said a Harlem newspaper in 1929, Pushkin would have been a victim of Jim Crow laws.

and about him. Today, the African American Museum in Cleveland has a permanent Pushkin exhibition, and magazines from *Ebony* to *Black Scholar* often run articles on his life and works.

Lost in the Funhouse

“Welcome to the Funhouse” by Jed Perl, in *The New Republic* (June 19, 2000), 1220 19th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Once it was a center for the collection, study, care, and exhibition of fine art—but not any more, protests Perl, art editor of the *New Republic*. Today, the modern art museum—as exemplified by London’s gigantic new Tate Modern—has become “a funhouse,” in which great painting and sculpture of the last 100 years take a back seat to moving images, electronic noise, “wrap-around drama,” and the museum building itself.

At Tate Modern, which opened in May in a vast transformed industrial building on the south bank of the Thames, Perl writes, “there are three enormous floors of exhibition space, containing some 80 galleries, but only enough classic modern work to fill three or four rooms.” To disguise the paucity, “the curators have

reached for themes that enable them to bulk up their classic holdings with humungous recent works, or else contextualized the random masterpiece until it seems less a work of art than an illustration in a history book.” Though chronology is “the backbone of the historical sense,” the galleries are not arranged chronologically, but according to dubious, ill-fitting categories, such as “Still Life/Real Life/Object.” The museum’s whole mentality, Perl complains, “seems far more keyed to movies or popular entertainment than to painting or sculpture of the past hundred years.”

Tate Modern (not to be confused with the old Tate, designed to showcase British art and now known as “Tate Britain”) is not Perl’s only “funhouse” museum. The Pompidou

Center in Paris, which opened in 1977, represented “the dawning postmodern moment,” and 20 years later, “the funhouse mentality produced its first great building, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao,” whose “amazing design succeeds precisely because [architect Frank] Gehry had the wit—and the guts—to take as his subject the annihilation of the museum as we know it.” People go to Guggenheim Bilbao to see the building, not the art, says Perl.

This trio of institutions may be viewed as offspring of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, the original “user-friendly” art museum, Perl notes. “There is very little in the way of multimedia exhibitions, attention-grabbing alternatives to painting and sculpture, or institutional self-promotion through high-end

architectural projects that the Museum of Modern Art has not done, and done decades ago.” But there is, he says, a basic difference: “Nowadays, it is not art but the culture’s fascination with art—and with the art business—that fuels the museums. The museum curator who was once interested in how artists were responding to the world around them has been replaced by a curator who is more interested in the environment than in the artist.”

In the “funhouse” museums, Perl says, paintings cannot compete with “the enveloping atmosphere, the overheated mood.” In supposedly “opening art up to new media,” Tate Modern and the others, he concludes, are “closing art off from the wellsprings of tradition that have nourished artists forever.”

Architecture’s Class Struggle

“Class Notes” by Michael Benedikt, in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Summer 2000), Harvard Univ., Graduate School of Design, 48 Quincy St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Architects believe that theirs is a *helping* profession, writes Benedikt, director of the Center for American Architecture and

Design at the University of Texas at Austin. And just what is the nature of the service they provide? Well, this is seldom expressed out

EXCERPT

The Lit Crit Job Bust

At long last there is widespread talk of a crisis in literary studies, and yet in a kind of displacement the hand-wringing is directed not to the real problem, but to one of its side effects—that there are almost no college teaching jobs available for new Ph.D.s. When supply dwarfs demand, the question arises, is the problem mainly one of demand, or of supply? Everyone talks only about supply—that is, too many people in graduate school—and nobody ever faces the dreaded possibility that the crisis is really one of reduced demand. Yet, it should be obvious that demand is the problem. If undergraduates were majoring in English at the rate of 30 years ago, their numbers would be about 60 percent greater than they actually are today. The supply of Ph.D.s would then be hopelessly inadequate to meet the demand for new professors of English. The real source of the crisis must therefore lie in the fact that undergraduates are not attracted to what college literature programs now offer them. The college literature establishment professes sympathy for its hapless graduate students, but is not prepared to do the one thing that might help them—and that is, to think again about the mix of identity politics and postmodern dogma that has made English and related departments intellectually uncompetitive.

—JOHN M. ELLIS, a professor emeritus of German literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in *Academic Questions* (Spring 2000)