

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

Poetry became, as T. S. Eliot said in 1921, "more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect." It repelled those who felt poetry must tell them something about life in words that stuck in the mind. And the "burdens of realism," Clausen contends, left the modernists of the 1960s with little sense of confidence or purpose.

But the poets are not entirely to blame, Clausen adds. The mass media have made such a mockery of lyric verse that traditional symbols of love, nature, and freedom have given way to toothpaste, Geritol, and political rhetoric. In this maudlin climate, it is not surprising that Rod McKuen becomes, according to his publisher, "the most widely read poet of all time" and singers John Denver and Bob Dylan are regarded by undergraduates (and some teachers) as our most important poets.

Readers' desires for clarity and memorable language cannot be dismissed as escapism or bad taste, Clausen concludes. On the contrary, this preference may simply indicate a desire for poetry that transcends the ills of modern life. Poetry must "reflect the complexity of [the poet's] thinking," as William Carlos Williams said late in his life, but it "should be brought into the world where we live and not be so recon-dite, so removed from the people."

### *Veils and Vaudeville*

"Salomé Where She Danced" by Elizabeth Kendall, in *Ballet Review* (Winter 1977-78), P.O. Box 11305, Church Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10249.

Artistic dancing was slow to win acceptance from American audiences, thanks to generations of Puritan stodginess. When it finally caught on in the early 1900s, dance, as a dramatic language, provoked far more scandal than vaudeville chorus lines or "the naughty girls in tights and flounces" who danced ballet.

The breakthrough came, says free-lance writer Kendall, when the Metropolitan Opera mounted Richard Strauss's *Salomé* on Jan. 22, 1907. The sight of prima ballerina Bianca Froelich shedding seven veils and fondling the severed head of John the Baptist was too much for the Met's financial backers—J. P. Morgan, W. K. Vanderbilt, and August Belmont. They ordered *Salomé* withdrawn from the repertoire and thereby sparked intense debate in the press. Mlle. Froelich promptly transferred her *Salomé* to the vaudeville stage and Florenz Ziegfeld soon served up another version in the *Follies* of 1907.

Only the perseverance of Gertrude Hoffman, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis convinced U.S. audiences to accept the dance as painting and music in motion. When St. Denis returned in 1909 from triumphal performances of her ballet, *Radha*, in London and Berlin, she set out to combine *Salomé* with Far Eastern drama and "sparked imaginations already sensitized to a whole range of exotic phenomena." Duncan invented the dance movements, Kendall writes, and "St. Denis invented the costumes."

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St. Denis dazzled audiences in New York, Chicago, and Boston with her extravagant costumes and staging. But the key to her stardom was her personality. With a wink or a smirk, she won the confidence of her audiences and made them feel at ease with the "artistic" side of the dance.

The pioneers of modern dancing in America, great as they were, Kendall observes, unfortunately encouraged a crop of amateurs determined to display their own undisciplined talents, claiming that they were "sky-taught" and "nature-inspired." By 1913, she writes, "seriousness had come and gone from American dance, which now belonged to society ladies, little girls, and vaudeville funnymen." Modern dance did not really revive until the 1930s.

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**OTHER NATIONS**
*Surviving  
in Iceland*

"A Millenium of Misery: The Demography of the Icelanders" by Richard F. Tomasson, in *Population Studies* (Nov. 1977), Population Investigation Committee, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, Aldwych, London WC2A 2AE.

The 11 centuries of Iceland's known history provide the most consistently bleak record of death and suffering a European nation has ever known. Thanks to the Icelanders' passion for genealogy and their early development of popular literacy (in the 13th century), scholars have unparalleled written evidence of their capacity to endure what University of New Mexico sociologist Tomasson calls "the most extreme inhospitable environment in which a European people has been able to survive and maintain its culture."

Since the original 400 Norsemen and Celts arrived as settlers (mostly by way of Britain, Ireland, and the Hebrides) between 870 and 930 A.D., fewer than 2 million Icelanders have been born. Until the mid-19th century, due to disease and starvation, fewer than half of those born survived to adulthood.

Lying just below the Arctic Circle, Iceland has a maritime climate made temperate by the warm waters of the Gulf Stream. But the growing season is short (four to five months). Until the end of the last century, the size of the Icelandic population was largely determined by how well the summer grasses grew, so great was the dependence on fodder for sheep and other livestock. (Fishing was an unimportant source of food until the mid-19th century.)

Only remarkable fertility allowed the Icelandic people to survive intermittent calamities. The Black Death (bubonic plague) of 1402-04 killed 80,000 people, two-thirds of the population. In 1707, a smallpox