

decision.” Study participants tend to respond that people in such a universe should not be held responsible for their actions. But if they are asked whether someone in such a world could be held responsible for killing his own family, participants say yes. “Concrete cases of bad behavior lead people to attribute responsibility,” Nichols observes. This pattern seems to hold true across cultures.

The answer also changes when the scenario is less distant. If told that

many scientists believe that our own world is determined, people are much less forgiving of wrongdoing than they are when the world under consideration is determined but imaginary.

Finally, human responses vary depending on the kind of wrongdoing being discussed. Imagining a determined world, people are less likely to hold a tax evader to blame than they are someone who has committed a more emotionally charged act, such as rape.

The divided responses people give in experimental philosophy tests pretty accurately reflect a centuries-old division among traditional philosophers. Some thinkers have argued that even a determined universe is “compatible” with the concept of moral responsibility, others that it’s not. Nichols says that the new philosophy will shed light on the “psychological mechanisms” behind each approach, and ultimately on the old-as-dirt question itself.

## ARTS & LETTERS

# Beauty, the Ultimate Survivor

**THE SOURCE:** “The Attack on Beauty” by Robert Boyers, in *Salmagundi*, Spring 2011.

BEAUTY HAS NEVER HAD AN easy time, whether under scrutiny from suspicious Puritans or picky Renaissance critics, but the attack on beauty over the last century by modernist artists is the “most serious and sustained,” writes *Salmagundi* founding editor Robert Boyers. They “have dismissed all things relaxing, easy to take in and enjoy, and therefore inimical to the spirit of an art intended to be rigorous, difficult, unpopular. To be impressed by what passed for beauty was felt by many modernist writers and artists to be philistine.”

In past generations, quarrels with beauty have mostly been concerned with what beauty was or how it ought to be valued, but the attack of modernists differs in kind, question-

ing whether beauty is anything more than a personal preference shaped by a particular cultural outlook at a particular moment in time.

Yet while there may be something to these arguments, beauty won’t go away. It crops up in the least likely places, the same pieces of art meant to repudiate the very notion. Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 urinal (which he titled *Fountain*), an early example in a long line of such modernist works, may even seem “beautiful by virtue of its form or the pristinity of its gleaming surface,” Boyers says. Duchamp “could not [have imagined] how inventive artists would be in clinging to improbable versions of the beautiful.”

Artists “have often found it useful to deny or to disguise their predilection for the beautiful.” Wassily Kandinsky, for example, said he sought to “apply the methods of music” and to

capture “the spiritual” in his abstract canvases. What could that mean besides beauty? Such evasions are just descriptions of beauty in “more acceptably sophisticated terms.”

The attack on beauty has been of a piece with a larger cultural assault on anything elitist, Boyers observes. Beauty required discrimination. In its place, “interesting” came into vogue, a more inclusive standard. “The interesting seems to us more reliable if only because it entails a verdict that regards issues of value as naive or spurious,” Boyers remarks.

Such evasions point to a basic concern: our limited ability to pin down what we mean by beauty. To get at that question, Boyers suggests turning not to masterpieces but to a sort of beauty “more modest in scale and ambition”: the aphorism.

A beautiful aphorism is “its own reason for being”—it is eloquent, it exhibits what the critic Denis Donoghue calls “the dancing of speech,” it carries a thrill. (Boyers cites Austrian writer Karl Kraus’s “My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin” as an example.) “Interesting” works, such as Du-

champ's urinal, are "essentially polemical, persuasive. [They] have no reason for being other than the points they aim to make." But a thing of beauty is "its own reason for being," and thus "wants for nothing, and inspires in us nothing more than the desire for further instances of beauty, for the satisfaction we feel in the presence of objects or expressions that are completely themselves."

ARTS & LETTERS

## No RIP for Print

**THE SOURCES:** Introduction to volume 37, by the editors, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, Spring 2011, and "Five Myths About the 'Information Age'" by Robert Darnton, in *The Chronicle Review*, April 17, 2011.

THE EDITORS OF *McSWEENEY'S Quarterly Concern* have a one-word response to apocalyptic proclam-

ations that the printed word is dead: phooey! They declare we have arrived at a "Golden Age of Reading and Writing."

Over the last year, *McSweeney's* researchers delved into data from Nielsen's Bookscan, which monitors book sales to the general public. The results paint a surprisingly positive picture of the printed word's health.

In recent years, the United States touted record-setting numbers of published authors, publishers, and original book titles. Although there was a slight decline from the all-time high in 2009, book sales comfortably topped one billion volumes last year despite a lackluster economy and continuing mass unemployment. Robert Darnton, director of the Harvard University library, notes that this trend extends beyond America's

borders: China and Brazil are experiencing publishing booms as well. Worldwide, one million new titles will be released this year.

Libraries are similarly feeling the effects of the public's appetite for print. The *McSweeney's* editors write that circulation of library books has reached record levels, and library memberships have increased, with 68 percent of Americans currently holding library cards. Darnton adds that libraries remain vital, not just because they lend books but because they assist people in wading through the information wilderness. This is nothing new, he says. Libraries have always been more than "warehouses of books."

It's only a hoary myth that people in the past had a greater appreciation of the printed word, the *McSweeney's* editors snort. While in

### EXCERPT

## Barry Hannah (1942–2010)

*There was a puncturing quality to Barry's zingers, darts that pop the overblown balloon and send it, whining and deflated, on its pitiable trajectory. I saw this at Oxford restaurants, on panels at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and, most appreciated where most needed, in the English Department faculty meetings at the University of Mississippi, where we were colleagues. I remember several young hotshot critics were attempting to amp up the introductory class for new grad students.*

*"We need more investiture in critical theory which assumes apprenticeship more than it does doctrinal or methodological instruction," said one.*

*"Yes," agreed another, "but choosing texts and films"—(here a snort from Barry, who read books, watched movies) —"that are not comparatist but destabilize the traditional concept of literature as an isolatable aesthetic object."*

*"Agreed," added a third, "privileging the historicity of such discourses and the cultural phenomena they set out to investigate. Of course, this re-envisioned course deserves a new name."*

*The critics paused, thinking of a course designation worthy.*

*Barry broke the silence. "How about calling it, 'The Death of Joy as We Know It'?"*

*Whoosh. I miss having someone around who could do that.*

—**BETH ANN FENNELLY**, associate professor of English at the University of Mississippi, on Southern writer Barry Hannah, in *The Oxford American* (Issue 72)