

The End of the Eternal?

Writing in *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Fall 1996), George Steiner, a professor of comparative literature at Oxford University, detects “a slow, glacial shift in Western culture’s attitude toward death,” with profound consequences for the traditional conception of literature.

Literature, as we have known it, springs out of a wild and magnificent piece of arrogance, old as Pindar, Horace, and Ovid. Exegi aere perennius—what I have written will outlive time. Stronger than bronze, less breakable than marble, this poem. Pindar was the first man on record to say that his poem will be sung when the city which commissioned it has ceased to exist. Literature’s immense boast against death. Even the greatest poet, I dare venture, would be profoundly embarrassed to be quoted saying such a thing today.

Something enormous is happening, due in part to the barbarism of this century, perhaps due to DNA, perhaps due to fundamental changes in longevity, in cellular biology, in the conception of what it is to have children. We cannot phrase it with any confidence, but it will profoundly affect the great classical vainglory of literature—I am stronger than death! I can speak about death in poetry, drama, the novel, because I have overcome it; I am more or less permanent.

That is no longer available. A quite different order of imagining is beginning to arise, and it may be that when we look back on this time we will suddenly see that the very great artists, in the sense of changing our views—of what is art, what is human identity—are not the ones we usually name but rather exasperating, surrealist, jokers. Marcel Duchamp. If I call this pisoir a great work of art and sign it, who are you to disprove that? Or, even more so, the artist Jean Tinguely, who built immense structures which he then set on fire, saying: “I want this to be ephemeral. I want it to have happened only once.”

other as art and commerce are said to be.”

In an America that is mostly white, it is inevitable that the audience for serious plays

is mostly white, Gates points out. “Wilson writes serious plays. His audience is mostly white. What’s to apologize for?”

Selling the Arts

“Crisis in the Arts: The Marketing Response” by Joanne Scheff and Philip Kotler, in *California Management Review* (Fall 1996), Univ. of California, S549 Haas School of Business #1900, Berkeley, Calif. 94720-1900.

For nonprofit performing arts organizations, the bright lights have dimmed. Corporations, foundations, and government agencies have become more tight-fisted, and attendance at plays, concerts, and dance performances has stopped growing. Scheff and Kotler, who teach at Northwestern University’s Kellogg Graduate School of Management, have some advice for the managers of arts organizations: learn to market the “product” better.

Such skills weren’t needed in the golden era that began in the mid-1960s. Professional orchestras increased in number from 58 in 1965 to more than 1,000 recently; professional regional theater companies went from 12 to more than 400; dance companies, from

37 to 250, opera companies, from 27 to more than 110. Ticket sales (adjusted for inflation) jumped 50 percent between 1977 and 1987. By that year, Americans were spending more on tickets to concerts and other arts performances than on tickets to sports events. And foundations and corporations were contributing vast sums (\$500 million in 1990).

But that era is gone, Scheff and Kotler say. Audiences are no longer expanding, and in many cases are shrinking. Nearly half of all the regional theaters in the country are operating in the red. “Increasingly, funders—especially government agencies and foundations—are restricting their grants for specific purposes and less funding is available for general operating support. Corporate support is

becoming more commercial than philanthropic, and conditioned on arts organizations becoming leaner, more business-oriented, and able to meet the corporation's own marketing objectives."

To survive and thrive, Scheff and Kotler say, arts organizations need to build audiences by mounting "full-fledged campaigns that include direct mail, telemarketing, well-designed, high-quality brochures, advertising, and special offers designed to attract and retain patrons." Surveys indicate "that many more people are interested in attending the

performing arts than currently do so." It will take creative marketing to get them into the theater or concert hall. That may mean, for example, selling tickets in grocery stores or workplaces. The Columbus (Georgia) Symphony enjoyed a 35 percent increase in ticket sales after putting a humorous ad on local television showing that it was okay for concert-goers to dress down.

Many people in the arts have traditionally looked on marketing with disdain, but that attitude, the authors say, is a luxury that arts organizations can no longer afford.

The T. S. Eliot Debate

"A Flapping of Scolds" by Vince Passaro, in *Harper's Magazine* (Jan. 1997), 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012.

In *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995), Anthony Julius stirred controversy on both sides of the Atlantic by arguing that Eliot's well-known anti-Semitism blighted the poet's literary achievement. Nonsense! says Passaro, a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*.

Eliot (1888–1965) "unquestionably" was an anti-Semite, Passaro says, but Julius renders the great poet "utterly vile" on the basis of just "one full poem, five passages in Eliot's poetry (some of which were not published in his lifetime), and a few scattered prose remarks." It is not mere political correctness that leads Julius to jump from these transgressions to an indictment of Eliot's entire corpus, Passaro says. It is literature itself, with its insistence on "making something significant and even beautiful out of ugliness, dissonance, fever, hatred, anger, failure, and pain" that today's undereducated literary intellectuals find unacceptable. They nod perfunctorily toward Eliot's greatness but do not grasp the meaning of the word.

Eliot's accusers fail to see, Passaro writes, that his "constant effort [was] to take the stuff of the neurotic, damaged, modern personality, and the stuff of everyday irritation, anger,

fear, loathing, and contempt—the self, in all its horrors—and try to move it toward some divine plateau . . . where the burdens of personality fall away and the truth, painful and retributive though it may be, makes itself known." This "narrative movement toward God" can be traced back even to Eliot's early poetry, predating his 1927 conversion to Anglo-Catholicism.

Thus, in the case of "Gerontion" (1920), which contains some notoriously anti-Semitic lines ("And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner, / Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp."), Julius misses their secondary meanings and the very meaning of the poem itself, Passaro contends. "Gerontion" is about an old man waiting to die, and the house in which he lives "serves as the central metaphor of the poem: the house is his life and contains history itself. . . . The image of the Jew is unpleasant and disturbing, but that he is the owner of the metaphorical house containing history itself suggests something else about him. That he is squatting on the windowsill is scatological, but it also suggests an animal about to leap—Christ the tiger, who, later in the poem, 'devours' us." Though the common meaning of *estaminet* is "cafe" or



The transgressive poet.