

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

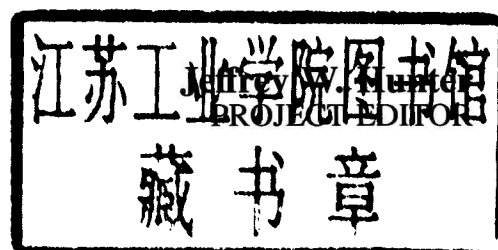
CLC

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Volume 241

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 241

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-0-7876-9565-1
ISBN-10: 0-7876-9565-3
ISSN 0091-3421

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language As-

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Guy Davenport

1927-2005

(Full name Guy Mattison Davenport Jr.) American short story writer, critic, essayist, translator, and poet.

The following entry presents criticism on Davenport's career through 2005. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 6, 14, and 38.

INTRODUCTION

An esteemed short story writer, artist, and scholar, Davenport is considered a veritable twentieth-century polymath. A practicing modernist in a postmodern literary world, Davenport employed methods usually associated with the visual art of collage, juxtaposing images of the past with the present to demonstrate the relevance of the archaic in modern times. Like his acknowledged predecessors Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams, Davenport created mythopoeic works that display immense erudition and a deep respect for classical antiquity, while casting an irreverent and critical eye on contemporary society.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Davenport was born in Anderson, South Carolina, to Guy Mattison Davenport, a railway shipping agent, and Marie Fant Davenport. He graduated from Duke University in 1948, and attended Merton College, Oxford, as a Rhodes scholar from 1948 to 1950, earning a degree in literature. After serving in the United States Army Airborne Corps from 1950 to 1951, Davenport taught at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1952 to 1955. In 1952 Davenport met and befriended poet Ezra Pound, whose cryptic, modernist verse provided the subject of Davenport's doctoral dissertation. He earned a Ph.D. at Harvard University in 1961, and took a position as an assistant professor at Haverford College in Pennsylvania from 1961 to 1963. Davenport subsequently taught at the University of Kentucky from 1963 until his retirement in 1991, precipitated by a MacArthur Fellowship. A volume of his poetry, *Flowers and Leaves*, was published in 1966, and his first collection of stories, *Tatlin!* appeared in 1974. Throughout his career, Davenport contributed reviews, essays, and stories to such prestigious periodicals as the *National*

Review, the *Hudson Review*, and the *New Criterion*. Two of his stories, "Robot" and "The Richard Nixon Freischütz Rag," received O. Henry Awards, and he garnered the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award for Fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1981. *Seven Greeks* (1995), one of Davenport's many treatments of ancient Greek culture, won the 1996 Harold Morton Landon Translation Award from the Academy of American Poets as well as the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. In 2001 Davenport was honored with the University of Kentucky Libraries Medallion for Intellectual Achievement. He died of cancer in Lexington, Kentucky.

MAJOR WORKS

Davenport's stories are a pastiche of historical references and personages, literary allusions, and critical discourse. His idiosyncratic narratives develop through recurring structural patterns, juxtapositions, and motifs, thereby mirroring the discovery and associative processes that dictate their composition. Davenport often referred to his writing style as "foraging," and his stories and essays have been aptly described as literary collages. His early story collections were originally published with the author's own illustrations, adding to the patchwork quality of his aesthetic. Such characteristics are evident throughout *Tatlin!* the author's first story collection. "The Aeroplanes at Brescia" recreates the famous 1909 Parisian air show that was attended by Franz Kafka (who wrote a newspaper article about the event), Giacomo Puccini, and Gabriele D'Annunzio, among others. In Davenport's story, the act of flight functions as both an allegorical escape from worldly concerns and a passageway to imaginative freedom. Another fanciful account of a historical event, "Robot" elaborates on the discovery of Paleolithic cave drawings in Lascaux, France. The book's longest story, "The Dawn in Erewhon," marks the beginning of Davenport's fictional meditation on the philosophy of nineteenth-century socialist Charles Fourier. The title also references Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, a satire of Victorian values that involves the discovery of a utopian society. Correspondingly, "The Dawn in Erewhon" takes place in a highly romanticized, utopian version of the Netherlands. The narrative revolves around the intellectual and erotic adventures of a fictional Dutch philosopher, Adriaan

van Hovendaal. Expanding upon Fourier's concept of Edenic harmony, Davenport imbued the tale with a graphic openness toward sexuality, often among children and adolescents. Yet such sexual exploits are presented as elaborate rituals of innocence, affection, and childlike joy. Since corrupting elements such as control and aggression have been forbidden in the story's highly structured society, "The Dawn in Erewhon" is a parable of regenerative innocence. The author continues his rumination on Fourier in his second volume of short stories, *Da Vinci's Bicycle* (1979). "Au tombeau de Charles Fourier," for example, juxtaposes Davenport's thoughts on Fourier with passages about such disparate topics as American expatriate author Gertrude Stein, the Wright brothers, wasps, and the Dogon tribe of West Africa. Elsewhere in the collection, "The Richard Nixon Freischütz Rag" documents the meeting between Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Richard Nixon during the president's visit to China in 1972. Davenport's third volume of short fiction, *Eclogues* (1981), reiterates his interest in ancient and modern Edenic narratives. The title of the collection comes from a literary form used by classical Greek and Roman poets such as Virgil and Theocritus; it is synonymous with the term *pastoral*, in which the idyllic, rustic lives of shepherds and farmers are depicted. Accordingly, the tales in this collection all include a shepherd-like figure. For instance, in "The Death of Picasso," the character van Hovendaal returns to guide a troubled youth and help him focus his energy on art.

Apples and Pears (1984) features "The Bowmen of Shu"—an assemblage of diary entries written by sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska while fighting in World War I—and "Fifty-Seven Views of Fujiyama," which presents contrasting narratives of a seventeenth-century Japanese poet's mountain journey and a modern couple's camping trip in New Hampshire. Most of the volume is devoted to the story "Apple and Pears," which finds van Hovendaal leading a Fourierist "horde" of eight youths toward a New Harmonious World. The theme of Fourierism recurs in *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon* (1987), which replaces the character of van Hovendaal with a Danish theological student and budding artist named Hugo Tvemunding. The stories in this collection are significant for introducing the concept of evil, in the form of drug abuse, into the utopian scenario. The lengthy "Wo es war, soll Ich werden" in *The Drummer of the Eleventh North Devonshire Fusiliers* (1990), concludes the Fourierist trilogy begun in *Apples and Pears* and continued in *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*. *A Table of Green Fields* (1993) features ten stories centered around historical figures and sexual innocence. Named after a painting by Henry Scott Tuke, "August Blue" imagines

a meeting between Tuke and famed British archaeologist and soldier T. E. Lawrence, and describes the burial site of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. These musings serve as a backdrop for the burgeoning sexual awareness of a group of adolescent boys, a motif that carries over into *The Cardiff Team* (1996), especially in the title story. Although these later collections are filled with explicit descriptions of carnal pleasure, they place equal emphasis on the need for emotional connection and the primacy of language. *Twelve Stories* (1997) brings together pieces from *Tatlin! Apples and Pears*, and *The Drummer of the Eleventh North Devonshire Fusiliers*, while *The Death of Picasso* (2003) randomly assembles stories and essays, most of which are from previous collections. The essays that comprise *The Geography of the Imagination* (1981), *Every Force Evolves a Form* (1987), *The Hunter Gracchus* (1996), and *Objects on a Table* (1998) range thematically from literature, art, and music, to philosophy, history, and personal reflection, often within a few pages. Some, like "Ernst Machs Max Ernst" from *The Geography of the Imagination*, offer insights into Davenport's writing process. *A Balthus Notebook* (1989) contains a series of reflections on the works of the titular Franco-Polish painter.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Scholars have consistently lauded the intellectual fecundity of Davenport's work, and have deemed his stories and essays structurally innovative genre hybrids that challenge notions of literary categorization. They have studied the highly allusive, fragmentary, and digressive nature of his oeuvre within the context of early-twentieth-century literary theory, and have viewed his use of formally arranged and uniformly structured blocks of text as a prosaic appropriation of Ezra Pound's ideogrammatic verse. Although many critics have interpreted this kind of stylistic experimentation as an outgrowth of modernism, others have characterized Davenport's aesthetic as "metamodernism." In defining this literary designation, commentator André Furlani explained, "The open-field compositions of the metamodernists are not simply indebted to the assemblages of writers like Pound, Marianne Moore, and [Jonathan] Williams but reconceptualize their methods and subject matter. . . . The metamoderns scorn the reactionary political radicalism and religious conservatism of various prominent modernists." Furthermore, reviewers have contended that the seemingly discordant array of techniques and references in Davenport's work in effect create an underlying sense of harmonious connection. Scholars have interpreted his Fourierist tales as purposefully simplified extensions of this harmonious ideal, though some

have found the author's fixation on underage sexuality unsettling and distancing. Despite the fact that Davenport never reached a wide audience during his lifetime, the enthusiastic appraisal of his work among critics underscores the lasting quality of his achievements.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Flowers and Leaves: Poema vel sonata; Carmina autumnii primaeque veris transformationum* (poetry) 1966
- Tatlin! Six Stories* (short stories) 1974
- Da Vinci's Bicycle: Ten Stories* (short stories) 1979
- Herakleitos & Diogenes* [translator] (philosophy) 1979
- Eclogues: Eight Stories* (short stories) 1981
- The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (essays) 1981
- Cities on Hills: A Study of I-XXX of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (criticism) 1983
- Apples and Pears, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1984
- Every Force Evolves a Form: Twenty Essays* (essays) 1987
- The Jules Verne Steam Balloon: Nine Stories* (short stories) 1987
- A Balthus Notebook* (criticism) 1989
- The Drummer of the Eleventh North Devonshire Fusiliers* (short stories) 1990
- A Table of Green Fields: Ten Stories* (short stories) 1993
- Seven Greeks* [translator] (philosophy and poetry) 1995
- The Cardiff Team: Ten Stories* (short stories) 1996
- The Hunter Gracchus, and Other Papers on Literature and Art* (essays) 1996
- Twelve Stories* (short stories) 1997
- Objects on a Table: Harmonious Disarray in Art and Literature* (essays) 1998
- The Death of Picasso: New & Selected Writing* (short stories and essays) 2003
- Guy Davenport and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (letters) 2007

CRITICISM

Harry Goldgar (essay date autumn 1987)

SOURCE: Goldgar, Harry. "Only Connect! Guy Davenport in the Modern World." *Hudson Review* 40, no. 3 (autumn 1987): 495-500.

[In the following essay, Goldgar surveys the essays on art, literature, and American culture in *Every Force Evolves a Form*.]

Thirty-five years ago, Allen Tate's Phi Beta Kappa address at the University of Minnesota, 1 May 1952, was published in these pages. It was called: "The Man of Letters in the Modern World." Tate considered the man of letters as a discriminating citizen of a "free society," with important responsibilities to the community. (There was more talk of the role of the writer in a "free society" in those days of the Cold War than there is now, and Tate read excerpts from his address later that month at a Congress for Cultural Freedom conclave in Paris.) He concluded, sweeping very broadly:

But the true province of the man of letters is nothing less (as it is nothing more) than culture itself. The state is the mere operation of society, but culture is the way society lives, the material medium through which men receive the one lost truth which must be perpetually recovered: the truth of what Jacques Maritain calls the "supra-temporal destiny" of man. It is the duty of the man of letters to supervise the culture of language, to which the rest of culture is subordinate, and to warn us when our language is ceasing to forward the ends proper to man. The end of social man is communion in time through love, which is beyond time.

So far as I know, Guy Davenport has never anywhere defined the man of letters or his duties or position: instead he has spent his life taking culture as his "true province" and, more especially, "supervising the culture of language." He is, more than anyone else I can think of, "the man of letters in the modern world," in Tate's universal sense and also in the somewhat narrower European sense, in which, for instance, "homme (or femme) de lettres" is a common "occupation" to be printed after one's name in the Bottin, Paris's equivalent of the Yellow Pages. Poet, art critic and literary critic, translator, essayist, fiction writer, illustrator of his own books, inventor of a genre (his "documentary" story that is simultaneously fact and fiction and that has spawned a platoon of epigones), Guy Davenport "practices" as our archetypal man of letters in the generation after Allen Tate.

His new collection of twenty essays—half the number of the 1981 collection, *The Geography of the Imagination*—takes its title, *Every Force Evolves a Form*,² from a Shaker motto. It means "that form is the best response to the forces calling it into being," or that "A work of art is a form that articulates forces, making them intelligible." In a study of Joyce's symbolism, he remarks that Joyce's principle is "the imaginative bonding of images in an harmonic pattern," and continues, "This is the method of all art, and one artist differs from another in the quality of invention with which he bonds one image to another."

It seems to me that this is precisely Davenport's own artistic principle: "bonding," or connecting, astonishingly disparate or various images or, it may be, curi-

ous facts, in the “harmonic pattern” of the essay. It is what makes the critical essays, even the relatively brief reviews, works of art. It is also, of course, the trait for which he is most noted and which his imitators cannot replicate because, though they may be good writers, they don’t *know* what he knows, cannot associate or “bond” as he dazzlingly can. Writing about Montaigne’s journal of his travels, for instance, he gets to talking about Montaigne’s necessary preoccupation with his kidney stones, which “locate[s] his journal in a time when the body was still part of personality. Later, it would disappear. Dickens’ characters, for instance, have no kidney stones because they have no kidneys. From Smollett to *Ulysses*, there is not a kidney in English literature.” A few pages later, situating Montaigne in a time of renaissance, transformation and regeneration, he is reminded of Plutarch, of Montaigne’s conversation about Plutarch with other scholars and gentlemen one day in the Vatican library, and develops the “uncanny resemblance between the mayor of Chaeronia in the first century and the mayor of Bordeaux in the sixteenth.” All this is pure Davenport, connecting.

He has read, of course, absolutely everything: in one essay he introduces us to the mimes of Herondas, a Greek writer of about the third century B.C., of whom thirteen satiric playlets (seven intact, six fragmentary) turned up on a papyrus scroll unearthed by tomb robbers in Egypt in 1890, and offers us his own translation of one into American; in another he produces an entertaining analysis of O. Henry’s *Cabbages and Kings* and its curious relation to Conrad’s *Nostromo*—which, he finds, O. Henry was actually rewriting—“indeed, translating”—so that when the two are brought together we have “a lesson in literary genetics.” But his unqualified admiration is reserved for the two great modern masters, Joyce and Pound, and especially Joyce, whose layers of associations and connections, whose twists and turns of image and symbol, we would naturally expect him to admire (for his study of these has clearly influenced his own style) and to be expert in explicating. There are moments when Davenport, in talking about Joyce and the “interpenetration of figure and ground,” might almost be talking about his own stories, infinitely less strenuous than the *Wake* but in their fashion equally allusive: “It is as if Joyce recognized an elective affinity among images, however metaphysically witty, and hoped they would bond together in a kind of poetic chemistry. Whether the reader is missing something by not finding these recondite allusions is like asking if one can fully appreciate Chartres while being ignorant of its engineering, its history, and the iconography of all its sculpture.”

Davenport is not shy about calling the explication of such difficult literatures—tracing the “genetics” of the often (but not necessarily) hermetic text—“decoding.” In his Washington and Lee University lectures of 1985, “**The Artist as Critic,**” “**The Scholar as Critic,**” and “**The Critic as Artist,**” which form the heart of this book and one of the most explicit statements available of his creed as a High Modernist, he makes clear that decoding is the critic’s honorable and main function. To discover that Yeats in the Crazy Jane poems was remembering, “half consciously let us say,” a poem of Meredith, and to work out the analogies, proving once again that “Spontaneous generation is as uncommon in art as in nature,” delights him, as he expects it to delight us. “The arts,” he explains, “are a way of internalizing experience, allowing us to look with wonder at a past that is not ours, but enough of ours so that all stories are, as Joyce says, always ‘the same anew.’ It is not therefore surprising that the best books are old books rewritten.”

Davenport, scholar-critic, narrates at some length his experience in “decoding” Charles Olson’s “The Kingfishers.” He went about this detective work “with the sense that I could not say that the poem is great until I understood it.” It is an attitude that is certainly familiar to those of us who may have done a stretch at a liberal arts college at any time during the last five or six decades—yet there is something troubling about all this joy in decoding, this delight in puzzles and riddles. What becomes of all the writers whose books are not like Rubik’s Cubes? How does all the “easy” literature fit in? Guy Davenport tells us that William Carlos Williams (whose code is easily broken) is a great writer; but the inference is always that the Pound of the *Cantos* or the Zukofsky of “A” or, of course, the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*—the eccentrics who demand that they be decoded to be read—are the true masters.

One may ask such questions, but Davenport will proceed with his enjoyment of the game. “Zukofsky’s critic, or scholar, has a very specialized task. So does Pound’s, and Joyce’s, and many another’s.” In these cases the critic is “practically a subcreator, or even collaborator.” Writing that must impress into service a cryptographer-critic, who can reveal its “collage of texts”: that is modernist writing, the kind of writing that Davenport studies, explicates, admires. He even “would go so far as to say that all modern writing is about some other text, and that this is so much the case that many writers are guardedly furtive about it, while knowing that their only hope of meaning is in our ultimately finding that other text.” One can scarcely stick one’s neck out farther than that.

* * *

Guy Davenport is a painter, draughtsman, and illustrator who speaks with the authority of an insider about art and artistic reputations. Just as when he writes about literary texts, the essays here on Henri Rousseau and Balthus insist upon close reading of the paintings. In **"What Are Those Monkeys Doing?"** he shows how reputable art historians and museum cataloguers have thoroughly misunderstood Rousseau's *Les joyeux farceurs* of 1906 because they simply have not looked closely enough at what is happening in the picture. He demonstrates how Rimbaud's "A la musique," the opening paragraphs of Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and Apollinaire's "Annie" are equivalent to scenes by Rousseau, and winds up with stanzas of his own inspired by Rousseau's *Portrait of Pierre Loti*: this is all good-humored and apparently digressive, but, like the more strictly iconographic remarks in the piece, it is making the point that "The elements of Rousseau's style send us off our familiar scholarly paths, and open up explorations."

Davenport's observations clarify once and for all Rousseau's famous "primitivism," a label which does not mean that Rousseau's "feeling for traditional iconography" was not as alert as Picasso's, but merely that "When Picasso changes styles, he knew exactly what he was doing. . . . Rousseau did not: this is wonderfully useful to our knowledge of how tradition combines innovation and rules from the past to invent new forms."

En route to this discovery, we have learned: That in certain pictures Max Ernst and Robert Delaunay are quoting, or appropriating, Rousseau. That Grove's Dictionary used to define Charles Ives as a primitive composer. That about the time Rousseau painted the *Football Players*, the Baron Coubertin, founder of the Olympics, was lecturing on the *bonheur* of physical exercise (and that the game in the painting is rugby). That "Rousseau is the first to paint an airplane, the Wright Flyer No. 2, exhibited at Le Mans, 1909." Connections! Another eminent man of letters, Donald Davidson, once told me, "It is a curse upon the modern world that we cannot think of one thing without thinking of everything else." That "curse" is the charm and the glory of a Guy Davenport essay.

The essay on Balthus, another "primitive," or at least another autodidact, is an equally original kind of art criticism: a meditation on Balthus's children and adolescents, on childhood and adolescence as states of being, and on adult attitudes toward these creatures, in literature and in the culture at large—with reference especially to one painting, *The Street*. "The child in Alain-Fournier, Proust, Colette, Cocteau—" and, the inference is, in Balthus—"inhabits a realm imaginatively animated with a genius very like that of the art-

ist. Children live in their minds." Thus the adolescents in the street scene (there are also adult figures, but they are less interesting) resemble those in the room-scapes "who take poses that are erotically suggestive, ambiguous, tentative of symbolism. There's the same vagueness of purposelessness in Cocteau and Proust: the love scenes between Marcel and Albertine are all purest Balthus." We are invited to look at the painting through the spectacles of the man of letters, the cultural historian, the psychologist—and the artist.

There is much else in these essays that I have scarcely space left to touch on. There is a vivid appreciation of Lévi-Strauss, who, in interpreting the primitive, becomes "the best and most diligent interpreter of our time." There is an essay that for the first time anywhere recognizes the wide spectrum of influences on E. E. Cummings (not the wisest but the "wittiest of American poets"), from the Greek lyric to Krazy Kat, from Mallarmé to Joel Chandler Harris. We become acquainted with the Reverend Sydney Smith, who is responsible for fifty-two entries in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* ("twenty-eight more than Mark Twain"), the first resident clergyman his parish had had for 150 years: "When, in his first sermon, Smith struck a cushion for emphasis, the dust that flew out obscured his view of the congregation." There is a discussion of Beckett's replay *Company* that reveals that "In a sense *Company* is Beckett's reply to Deirdre Bair's biography" (in the writing of which he neither helped Bair nor stood in her way). There is an approving essay on Nabokov's lectures on *Don Quixote*. (But is it really "a crude old book full of peculiarly Spanish cruelty?")

Toward the end, there is a fascinating group of essays on American themes. **"In That Awful Civil War"** offers a fresh view of the old myths about slavery and Grant's drinking ("His idea of war was that you killed the enemy. When you had killed all of the enemy, the war would be over"). **"More Genteel than God"** is an amusing study of Noah Webster and his prudish dictionary. **"The Peales and Their Museum"** walks us through the history of this eccentric and wonderful Philadelphia family. The title essay, **"Every Force Evolves a Form,"** turns out now, late in the book, to be a classroom lecture, "reconstructed from notes on a scrap of paper," that starts with Poe's raven and ends with a survey, making all the connections we have come to expect—Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, Olson's kingfisher, Hopkins's windhover—of "birds taken to be *daimons*." **"Imaginary Americas"** discusses the peculiar notions of these States that abide in the minds of English residents like D. H. Lawrence and W. H. Auden.

But the one of the American group that lingers longest is a fierce little powerhouse of an essay on what we

are doing to the environment: “**Making It Uglier to the Airport**”:

Poland survived the Second World War better than my hometown in South Carolina. Main Street has rotted into a wasteland. Gracious old homes came down to make way for used-car lots, tacky little finance companies, and drive-in hamburger pavilions. The seven ancient oaks that stood around the house where Thomas Wolfe's sister lived fell to the power saw, and the house itself, deporched, hoked up with neon and Coca-Cola signs, was islanded in a desolation of tar paving and converted into an eatery called, with that genius of the destroyer for taunting, The Seven Oaks. Some two miles of magnolia shade became a glare of festooned light bulbs, and all the used-car dealers are named Shug and Bubber, a semiology I am not equipped to explore. . . .

The sly humor, the grin that shows through the anger, is characteristic of Guy Davenport too. It is a gift for mimicry and mockery and fun, an affair with the comic muse, that some of our other famous men of letters—our Longfellows, our Tates, our Edmund Wilsons—rarely or never displayed. It is one of Guy Davenport's several captivating modes of being literary in the modern world.

Notes

1. Allen Tate, “The Man of Letters in the Modern World,” *The Hudson Review*, Vol. V, No. 3, Autumn 1952.
2. *Every Force Evolves a Form*, by Guy Davenport. North Point Press.

Joseph C. Schöpp (essay date 1988)

SOURCE: Schöpp, Joseph C. “‘Perfect Landscape with Pastoral Figures’: Guy Davenport's Danish Eclogue à la Fourier.” In *Facing Texts: Encounters between Contemporary Writers and Critics*, edited by Heide Ziegler, pp. 128-39. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1988.

[In the following essay, Schöpp analyzes the fragmentary and allusive qualities of “The Jules Verne Steam Balloon,” citing passages from Davenport's earlier work that support the short story's aesthetic and thematic structure.]

Guy Davenport, though undoubtedly one of “the very few truly original, truly autonomous voices now audible in American letters,” is nevertheless a literary figure widely ignored by readers and critics alike.¹ “Neither militantly committed to the new nor assimilable to an ‘old guard,’”² the author of three remarkable collections of stories and an impressive

selection of forty literary essays³ “goes underadvertized”⁴ and is, apart from a few highly favorable reviews, almost entirely left out of the critical discussion. A professor of English at the University of Kentucky with a profound knowledge of classical languages and a genuine interest in archeology and ancient cultures, Davenport regards his writings—translations, poems, fictions, essays—chiefly as “extensions of the classroom,” as “objective, useful, instructive” lessons.⁵

Davenport, the lecturer, seems to have learned these lessons, as he intimates in an autobiographical essay with the telling title “**Finding**,” in the fields of his native South Carolina where he with his family used to hunt for Indian arrowheads on Sunday afternoons after an appallingly tedious morning in Sunday school. These field trips, he contends, taught him how to see; these outings trained his eyes and shaped his sensibility “with surer and finer hand than any classroom” (*GoI* [*The Geography of the Imagination*], p. 367). Here objects for their own sake began for him to matter and things lying practically “at one's doorstep” (*GoI*, p. 131) rather than in a far-off exotic distance gained importance. As he observed them with a keen and “astute eye,”⁶ they gradually disclosed surprisingly new patterns that were unlike any “things with nearby models” (*GoI*, p. 366). Like Henry David Thoreau, another Indian arrowhead collector, passionate naturalist, and true American “forager”—an expression Davenport uses time and again to characterize his own work as a writer—he learned to “forage” the allegedly familiar places of the neighborhood and to come up with new reports of what he had found. He taught himself to explore the ordinary world only to encounter the extraordinary. He searched “surfaces for all the details” (*GoI*, p. 367) and—mirabile dictu—discovered what lay hidden beneath them. The physical sight supplied him with unexpected imaginative insights.

Davenport began as a Pound scholar and, from the very beginning, seems to have appropriated, if not assimilated, Pound's rigorous aesthetic standards, his clarity of mind, heart, eye, and ear—qualities which, in his Harvard dissertation, he discusses as poetic key concepts.⁷ The master's aesthetic of “the natural object,” which for him was “always the adequate symbol,” his avoidance of any “superfluous word,” “which does not reveal something,” his lifelong insistence on the clear-cut “Image,”⁸ quite obviously reinforced Davenport's early field-trip lessons and his “connoisseur's sense of things for their own sake” (*GoI*, p. 367). On a predominantly postmodernist scene, characterized by labyrinthine ruminations and apocalyptic forebodings of an utterly impotent language, Davenport's advocacy of the powerful word