

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

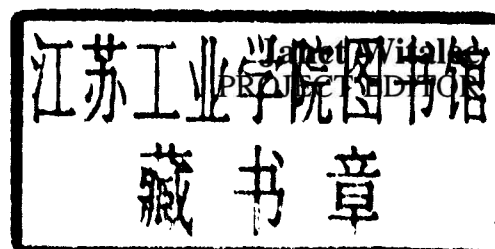
**CLC**

**176**

Volume 176

# 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. 176

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## 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 biographical 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*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- 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 Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, 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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# Mark Doty

## 1953-

(Full name Mark Alan Doty; has also written under the pseudonym M. R. Doty) American poet, memoirist, essayist, editor, and nonfiction writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Doty's career through 2002.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most renowned American poets to come of age during the late 1980s, Doty has earned distinction for his elegiac, colloquial verse and his emotionally resonant evocation of personal loss and sorrow, particularly as informed by the AIDS crisis and his experiences as a homosexual man. In collections such as *Turtle, Swan* (1987) and *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* (1991), Doty cultivated a conversational style, using elegantly rendered images to illuminate small epiphanies lurking within the natural world and everyday experience. After the death of Wally Roberts, Doty's companion of twelve years, the ever-present themes of mortality and loss in his work became more pronounced. His award-winning volumes *My Alexandria* (1993) and *Atlantis* (1995) are considered among the most compelling works to emerge from the AIDS epidemic. Doty has also authored two memoirs, *Heaven's Coast* (1996) and *Firebird* (1999), which have both won critical acclaim and a wide popular audience.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in Maryville, Tennessee, Doty grew up near various Army installations in the American South and West where his father, a civilian employee of the Army Corps of Engineers, was employed. In *Firebird*, Doty describes his estranged relationship with his father, a difficult and frightening figure, and his mother's descent into alcoholism. While in Tucson, Arizona, Doty was introduced by his high-school drama teacher to poet Richard Shelton, an important mentor who fostered Doty's literary passion. During his high school years, Doty struggled with his emerging homosexuality. At age eighteen, confused and apprehensive about his sexual orientation, Doty married poet Ruth Dawson soon after graduating from high school. He then enrolled at Drake University in Iowa, where he earned his bachelor's degree. Shortly after graduating, he and Ruth cowrote

and published several chapbooks of poetry. By the end of the decade, however, the marriage had fallen apart and the couple divorced in 1980. Doty subsequently moved to Manhattan to live and write as part of a larger gay community. He worked as an office temp, finished a master of fine arts degree at Goddard College, Vermont, in 1980, and met and fell in love with Wally Roberts, a department store window dresser. In 1987 Doty published his first book of verse, *Turtle, Swan*, to excellent reviews. Two years later, Roberts was diagnosed with AIDS, and Doty's concern for his lover's health was reflected in the darker poems of his second volume, *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*. In 1993 Doty published *My Alexandria*, which was selected for the National Poetry Series by Philip Levine and won the National Book Critic's Circle Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, and Britain's T. S. Eliot Prize, making Doty the first American to win the award. Roberts succumbed to a viral brain infection early in 1994, and his passing was commemorated in Doty's next volume of poems, *Atlantis*, which won the Lambda Literary Award, the Bingham Poetry Prize, and the Ambassador Book Award. Finding it difficult to write poetry after Roberts's death, Doty turned to prose in *Heaven's Coast*, a memoir of his life with Roberts, which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award. Throughout his career, Doty has taught creative writing and poetry at various schools, including Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, the University of Utah, University of Houston, Goddard College, and the Iowa Writer's Workshops.

### MAJOR WORKS

Doty's acclaimed first volume of poetry, *Turtle, Swan*, embodies many of the hallmarks of his mature verse—the poems are long and narrative, written in free verse that is both accessible and lyrical. In the poem "Rocket," for instance, Doty uses the image of a rusting sandbox to conjure forth the mysteries of childhood as well as a sense of both sadness and wonder at the changes wrought by the passing of time. This sense of nostalgia and loss would continue to pervade Doty's work and become one of his major themes. In "A Replica of the Parthenon," Doty links the symmetry and ruins of the ancient world with his memory of childhood games, the death of his grandmother, and the paradox of verisimilitude. In *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, Doty continues to explore the thematic terrain



staked out in *Turtle, Swan*. The work is divided into three untitled sections: the first deals with issues of childhood, particularly relationships between children and parents, the second explores adult relationships, and the third examines the transitory nature of all human encounters. As in *Turtle, Swan*, the poems in *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* are largely autobiographical narratives marked by solid imagery and moments of epiphany. While Doty's homosexuality is central to the poems of *Turtle, Swan* and *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, his experiences as a gay man are presented as simply another part of the natural world, rather than a focal perspective in itself. In *My Alexandria*, however, Doty's gay experience came to the forefront, as the work was largely his response to the crisis years of the AIDS epidemic. A sense of loss pervades the volume, and death—in one form or another—is present in nearly every poem. However, poems such as "Becoming a Meadow," "Brilliance," and "Fog," in which Doty chronicles his and Roberts's fateful tests for HIV, Doty draws as much attention to the joys of life as the sadness of its parting. The title of the volume alludes to the home city of Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, whom Doty invokes explicitly in the poems "Chanteuse" and "Days of 1981." Doty continued to examine themes of mortality and transience in *Atlantis*. Many of the poems are set in Provincetown, Massachusetts—Doty and Roberts's adopted hometown—and the maritime setting provides much of the imagery Doty uses to evoke an elegiac sense of impermanence and loss, as in "At the Boatyard," "Fog Argument," and "Grosse Fuge." At the book's core is the six-poem title sequence in which Doty chronicles Roberts's illness and passing.

While Doty's critical reputation rests mainly on the strength of his poetry, his prose memoirs serve as an integral and equally important component of his oeuvre. In *Heaven's Coast*, Doty recalls his loving relationship with Roberts and his struggle to deal with the reality of Roberts's HIV-positive diagnosis and his devastating decline. The collage-like narrative, which incorporates dream journals, diary entries, poetry fragments, and excerpts from literature and letters from friends, mirrors the uncertainty and acute disorientation experienced by Doty during the ordeal. Doty's next volume of poetry, *Sweet Machine* (1998), marked the passing of his preoccupation with mortality and his reengagement with life and the living. Though a third of the book's five sections pays homage to those who have died, including poets Lynda Hull and James Merrill, the true focus of the book is found in poems such as "Mercy on Broadway" and "Metro North," which are set in a gritty, bustling urban milieu. Poems like "Favrite" explore the beauty and artistry of decorative textiles and objects d'art as a meditative point of departure. Though maintaining an eye for surface detail, the poems in *Sweet Machine* also display a resistance to overt ornamentation and fastidious metaphor, as addressed in

"Concerning Some Recent Criticism of His Work." One of the poems from *Sweet Machine*, "Murano," which discusses the glass artistry of the Italian island of Murano, was published as an individual work in 2000 with accompanying photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum. Doty's second memoir, *Firebird*, recounts his formative years from age six to sixteen, including his coming of age as a gay man. Besides offering a poignant and often darkly humorous recollection of his childhood and adolescence, the book is also a meditation on memory, particularly the way in which one is shaped by early events and how such memories can become sustainable narratives. Doty followed *Firebird* with another nonfiction work, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), which takes its name from a painting by seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Davidsz de Heem. A departure from his previous works, this extended seventy-page essay is part art history, part meditation on art and objects, and part memoir, all written in richly poetic prose style and covering a wide range of subjects. In *Source* (2001), Doty's sixth volume of poetry, he explores post-AIDS renewal and gay eroticism with his characteristically vivid, meditative, and graceful verse, set against the backdrops of Manhattan, Provincetown, Vermont, Key West, and Latin America. Doty has also published *Seeing Venice: Bellotto's Grand Canal* (2002), which pairs one of his essays with photographs of Venice, and edited *Open House: Writers Redefine Home* (2003), a collection of nineteen essays from different authors that examine the concept of "home" in America.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

While Doty's memoirs have been considered an important part of his body of work, his poetry has attracted the majority of his critical and popular acclaim. Since the publication of *Turtle, Swan*, Doty has established a reputation as an enormously talented young poet whose verse exhibits a maturity in advance of his age, a judgment that was further supported by *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, which has earned him favorable comparisons to Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill. Though some reviewers have found his early verse to be overly glib or shallow, *My Alexandria* has been widely praised as Doty's most emotionally engaged and technically mature work to date. Commentators have asserted that the redemptive, often exultant tone of *My Alexandria* offers a rare note of hope and optimism for AIDS sufferers and the gay community at large. *Atlantis* has also received a positive critical reaction, particularly due to Doty's ability to evoke nuanced descriptions of the natural world. However, several critics have contended that Doty is often too detached or preoccupied with surface details, complaining that his insights and metaphors are sometimes facile or formulaic. His supporters have countered that these characteristics are not faults, but

simply consequences of the style in which Doty has chosen to work. Furthermore, many commentators have argued that Doty's attention to exterior surfaces is a technique for inferring deeper interior meanings. Such reviewers have also asserted that if Doty's verse lacks either rigorous formal concerns or verbal pyrotechnics, it is because his verse is rooted in colloquial diction and a lyrical, direct style. Despite such debate, Doty has been frequently lauded for his use of language—both as a rhythmic and musical tool—and his striking ability to evoke luminous displays of loss, grief, and transcendence.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Turtle, Swan* (poetry) 1987  
*Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* (poetry) 1991  
*My Alexandria* (poetry) 1993  
*Atlantis* (poetry) 1995  
*Heaven's Coast* (memoir) 1996  
*Sweet Machine* (poetry) 1998  
*Firebird: A Memoir* (memoir) 1999  
*Murano: Glass from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (poem) 2000  
*Turtle, Swan & Bethlehem in Broad Daylight: Two Volumes of Poetry* (poetry) 2000  
*Source* (poetry) 2001  
*Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (memoir and nonfiction) 2001  
*Seeing Venice: Bellotto's Grand Canal* (essay) 2002  
*Open House: Writers Redefine Home* [editor and author of introduction] (essays) 2003

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## CRITICISM

### Steven Cramer (review date February 1988)

SOURCE: Cramer, Steven. Review of *Turtle, Swan*, by Mark Doty. *Boston Review* 13, no. 1 (February 1988): 28-9.

[In the following review, Cramer comments on the style and subject matter of *Turtle, Swan*, asserting that Doty's poetry is "quirky" yet refreshing.]

At a time when much American poetry seems paralyzed between two impoverishing forces—"new formalist" campaigns for the sequence of the metronome versus an equally reductive penchant for concocting puzzles keyed

to fashions in literary theory—it is enlivening to come across a poet willing to raise the stakes past gamesmanship. In *Turtle, Swan*, Mark Doty's first book, form is not merely a container but an embodiment of deep feeling and urgently articulated experience. And if his subjects are the familiar ones involving memory, loss, and the artist's necessarily quixotic project to redeem those losses, Doty's quirky, digressive mode of narration still manages to "make it new."

Doty's poems strive for a style approximating casual conversation, proceeding anecdotally, as if the poet were catching up with a friend he hadn't seen in years. "In Iowa, 1971, I wore my hair / in a ponytail nearly to my waist," begins one poem. Unashamedly autobiographical, resolutely naturalistic, the poems fix on names, places, and dates not only for literal fidelity but because these facts offer starting points for the poet to place himself in relation to his past, "which is too large / to apprehend at once."

In embroidering his relaxed, matter-of-fact narratives, Doty sacrifices some of the more recognizable pleasures poetry can offer. A reader insisting on line-by-line compression of syntax, nuance of diction, the elaborate surface play of vowels and consonants, or the satisfaction of metrical recurrence will likely be disappointed by Doty's colloquial idiom and leisurely distribution of sentences across lines and stanzas. But over the larger arc of his extended narratives, Doty deploys parallels of incident and gesture, details that recur and modulate, and a keen sense of fictive structure to lend his poems an unmistakable shapeliness.

In the title poem, for instance, a swan's "white architecture" and a turtle's shell ultimately transform into the "muscular wings" and the "mottled autumnal colors" of a lover's chest and eyes. In another poem, the cleaning solvents from Doty's night job at a laundry become emblems of the abrasive marriage he returns to each dawn and the growing disaffection that will, "seep into everything like a dye."

Or consider "A Replica of the Parthenon," in which his *Golden Treasury of Archeology*, a childhood Christmas gift, leads Doty to the "summer twilights, blue as Egyptian porcelain," when he and a neighbor girl, imitating funeral rites, "took turns dying." Taking his cue from these "replicas"—both, significantly, involving loss—he recalls his own grandmother's funeral, the paper boats he sailed across the bureau in her empty room, and finally the replica of the Parthenon he'd seen in a city park—"strange in its completeness" to a boy used to ruins pictured in his *Treasury*. Out of these reflections and refractions, Doty distills his final assertion that "this was in Nashville, in 1957," turning the poem itself into a replica. Like the terse, factual "legend" under an infinitely more mysterious photo-

graph, this last *location* reminds us that no encapsulation of the past is sufficient; always “there are buried cities, / one beneath the other.”

Given his obsession with replicas, it's not surprising that Doty's imagination gravitates more toward the artificial than the natural. Aside from picture books and Greek ruins, his poems focus on amusement parks, fireworks, Shaker furniture, films, and paintings. For Doty, these *made* things represent the specifically human longings to arrest change, to freeze the process of time into discrete, graspable, and—however vicariously—relivable moments. “Permanence lay in things,” he says in “**Horses**,” “etched palmettoes cut finger deep / in a round mirror, a chest of drawers / infinite with handkerchiefs and nightgowns / to bury my hands in cool sliding.”

Yet Doty knows that these freeze frames of time can never wholly satisfy. “**Nancy Outside in July**,” perhaps the book's most sustained meditation on the “apparent perfection” of the artificial, begins with a wry illustration of how any frame, by definition, idealizes. Walking with his lover through an exhibition of Jim Dine prints depicting the artist's wife, Doty superimposes their own images of intimacy over these portraits of a marriage:

Talking in the gallery,  
You and I both want to work. You'd draw me, also  
in variation; I'd draft a sequence, “Nancy” replaced  
by your name: “Wally Outside in July” followed by  
Dine's subtitles: “Among Flowers of the Holy Land.”

Yet art's promise of the ideal made permanent is a seductive illusion. “It doesn't work,” Doty says later in the poem, “much as we'd like to believe that false magic.” In the penultimate stanza, the lovers leave the gallery for a hall of mirrors:

in the lobby  
of the Lenox Hotel, the mirrored walls offer  
the most familiar image of reflected endlessness.  
In the distance of the glass's smaller reaches,  
I don't know which of us is which, or care.

As the sequence of idealized portraits gives way to a prism of shifting identities, the poem concludes by spelling out “nothing / if not your name,” poignantly settling for one of art's more fragile consolations. In a world in which love is easily lost—where, as the book's title poem grimly reports, we read “every week of some man's lover showing / the first symptoms, the night sweat”—perhaps the best art can offer is a momentary inscription of the name of someone loved.

Yet certain poems in *Turtle, Swan* seek to widen intimacy into community, again focusing on those peculiarly human artifacts and settings that express our need for *collective* continuity. In the book's summary poem, “**Independence Day**,” Doty explores most fully how the intimate and the collective, the personal and the historical, the created and the experienced can

briefly intersect. As he and his lover sit “blanket to blanket” with thousands waiting for fireworks to commence, he reflects that “the two of us can't help but feel part / of this immense party” in which “the collective future's decided, / I guess, by these crowds.”

The darker shadings to this celebration—hinted at in comparisons of the crowd to refugees and the “mock danger everyone seems to like”—eventually take over as the couple encounters a familiar street character whose interminable stories about himself and *his* lover they usually try to avoid. Tonight, however, “the story's different: / ‘You won't be seeing Andy anymore. I woke up / and found him dead two nights ago . . .’ Then / the story's all a tumble: how a swollen leg / led to a burst heart . . .” Yet out of this isolated loss, and the once-shared routines the survivor clings to in order to distance the reality of his deprivation, Doty constructs a memorable passage of imaginative empathy:

It's that evidence of habit that moves most—  
the way any of us would turn to touch  
a familiar arm, the way a familiar chair  
supports us when we expect it to  
and does not disappear. As fireworks do,  
those spider chrysanthemums  
of our collective independence . . .

It's no accident that an ambiguous referent in these lines allows the fireworks simultaneously to “support” and “disappear,” reminding us that loss and reclamation must co-exist in an unresolvably mysterious interdependence. If the fireworks bring us together for their “cheerful explosions,” we also assemble to witness their “bright fragments twirl and chatter down / as if even the stars spoke to each other as they fell.”

Finishing *Turtle, Swan* I was reminded of a passage from Proust, in which the narrator “Marcel” undergoes an involuntary memory that seems to bring his beloved grandmother back to life. Shocked at how little consolation this affords, he laments: “On feeling her for the first time alive, real, making my heart swell to breaking-point, on finding her at last, [I] learned that I had lost her for ever.” With an imaginative range and emotional force rarely found in a first book, Doty's poems inhabit this paradoxical world of memory, where what lies nearest at hand is precisely what we've lost.

#### Marianne Boruch (review date July-August 1988)

SOURCE: Boruch, Marianne. “Blessed Knock.” *American Poetry Review* 17, no. 4 (July-August 1988): 39-41.

[In the following excerpt, Boruch contends that Doty employs striking imagery and imagination in the poems in *Turtle, Swan*.]

It is exactly this crucial mix, this imagination, that makes Mark Doty's collection, *Turtle, Swan*, such a stunning arrival. “I am inventing as much as remember-

ing—" Doty writes in **"To Cavafy,"** a poem half about love, half a treatise on love, a real boy aboard the pond's raft—and a real companion with whom to discuss him—yet, ". . . desire, how sometimes only an image, / a surface compels us. . . ." Or in **"Gardenias,"** a poem springing forth solely from image, a photograph of the speaker's mother, 1939, before his birth, leaning "against a garden gate, her hands in the black dotted / pockets of her dress. . . ." From this, meditation unfolds the vivid scene, "its dense, florid heat, its lack of boundaries, / its insistent green," and into possibility, "some form / imagined, the outline of a 'son' like a vacancy / in some unpainted section a muralist / has saved for last. . . ." Working thus, Lowell told Seidel, "some little image, some detail you noticed—you're writing about a little country shop, . . . and your poem ends up with an existential account of your experience. But it's the shop that started it off. You didn't know why it meant a lot to you. . . . And that's marvelous" (72). It's like the broom, nearly luminous in Doty's **"Shaker Orchard,"** one "so perfect in its simplicity / as to become a pure channel," or the way knowledge enters our lives through gesture—children in the front yard who play their twilight games, lying down, going solemn, their hands crossed on their chests, and so take "turns at dying" (**"A Replica of the Parthenon"**).

Poem as unknown, then; poem as journey. In **"Rocket"** we spring off one of the "totems" of childhood, looming years ago over the speaker's job at a day-care center, a "rusty metal rocket, a sandbox / with its promise of discovery and burial." Here, the small world revolved, and for the poet, the force of one radiant boy, John, and back of that, John's house, "the patterned brick / . . . pots of pink geraniums— / emblems entirely predictable. . . ." So the poem meanders. "I'm not sure," Doty writes, "if I wanted to steal / their child or be him, at the center / of an excellent house. . . ." But beyond that, the territory deepens, the real parents by phone call, the speaker's mother guided out of her "dimmed room" to talk to her son about those who talk to her, the dead, those "ghosts / still gathered. . . ." But the unbearable is blinked back. "John must be what, / now, eighteen?" the poet rushes to tell us. Does he remember the place, its gaudy rocket? And what is such recall? Does it "strike him now, as we say / things magnified in memory do, as smaller / than he remembered, less dangerous?" Repeatedly in this collection, one is touched by the depth of the imagery, the way it works above ground and below to make its fatal, heart-linked sense.

**David Baker (review date February 1992)**

SOURCE: Baker, David. "Smarts." *Poetry* 159, no. 5 (February 1992): 282-98.

[In the following excerpt, Baker faults Doty's poetic style in *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, claiming that

*Doty's voice lacks "dramatic significance" and laments the attempts to instruct readers at each poem's conclusion.]*

Poets these days want us to think they are smart, it strikes me as I read much of the poetry written in the last few years. If the decade of the Seventies favored the shorter lyric and the Eighties became a decade of narrative extension, then the Nineties are shaping up as an age of discourse, of poetry infused and sometimes laden with obvious smartness: the Poem Thinking. That's certainly a preferred rhetorical method, one of the most common stances, among poets currently. I think, therefore I instruct.

This should not be an altogether surprising development, given the circumstance of a dramatic number of poets these days. They teach. But perhaps the current instructive and discursive modes may be explained by considering other matters, too. Perhaps poets are articulating a desire to engage and educate their audience toward a further enjoyment. Perhaps poets feel overshadowed by the critical superstars of the day and so wish to appear *au courant* with the more hip talk of theory. Perhaps they feel critically abandoned and therefore charged with the task of explicating their own work. Perhaps, in widening the scope of poetry from the personal to the historical, political, scientific, or more broadly cultural, poets are struggling to find appropriate voices and forms to bear such heavy weight. Indeed, it's finally not a bad development. Poetry had better be able to think hard. But our best poets are careful also not to destroy the passions, humilities, and mysteries that make poetry—not merely to talk so smart that only a few other poets (or critics) will care or pretend to understand them. . . .

Like [Andrew] Hudgins, Mark Doty writes well-ordered poetry whose primary method is anecdotal, whose speaker is singular and personal, and whose vision is skeptical. But where Hudgins takes each of these current conventions into startling, sometimes brilliant directions, Doty seems satisfied with humdrum competence. His narrative drive turns frequently into lineated prose; his speaker often prefers detachment and judgment over involvement and sympathy; his view of things seems rather self-contained or meager.

Doty's *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight* follows Hudgins's interests in the experiences of adolescence and art. In **"A Box of Lillies,"** a professor/poet is "driving to work, late, / *Tannhauser* on the tape player— // the skittering violins spiraling down / in their mortal pull. . . ." Juxtaposed with the "grand theme" of Wagnerian opera is the speaker's appointment with a young student who "tells me he's fallen / in love, an old girlfriend / still lingering somewhere." To the speaker, the student's dilemma is overblown, even compared to the inflation of Wagner's grandiose style:

There's something bravura,  
something nineteen in even saying it,



and I can't decide whether  
to love or blame him. . . .

From here Doty's speaker shifts to consider a friend who has embarked "on a kind of going / we don't know the least thing about." The journey seems to imply a terminal illness, but again the speaker reorients his description, this time to the misdirected gift of a box of lilies and his neighbor's subsequent desire to see the flowers blossom:

it's the beautiful event  
in the garden she waits for,

and their fragrance goes hurrying  
up; she's an interruption

en route to heaven.

Doty's desire to connect narrative threads is admirable. The blooming lilies suggest operatic trumpets, his student's dilemma parodies Wagnerian tragedy, and the whole scheme attempts to understand the friend's terrible loss. But Doty's treatment is just too easy; his drive to understand is dramatically undercut by facile philosophizing:

Maybe dying's like being given  
a box of what will be trumpets,

maybe it feels like a mistake,  
and you plant them with all

the requisite attention  
and wait for something. . . .

Matters are too either/or in Doty's work, too quickly explained, vaguely confronted. How indeed is dying like a box of "trumpets"? Why were his only two possible reactions to his student's story either "to love or blame him"? He reduces, forcing things into tidy polarities: "I don't know which I love better— // knowing the bulbs are there, this March . . . or the brief July spangle // smudging our faces / with that golden lipstick."

Doty's preferred method is to connect and juxtapose anecdotal episodes. He often demonstrates good instincts for such correlations; he doesn't want to be pure. But he also doesn't manage enough stylistic rigor to convert anecdote into poetry. Often I feel as if I'm reading lined prose:

The school bus rattled around more turns  
in the desert roads than I'd ever  
be able to trace again, the summer I worked  
in Head Start and the lead teacher  
arranged a field trip from the barrio  
to the Valley of the Moon.

The opening stanza of "The Garden of the Moon" is cleanly lined but typifies Doty's limited voice. I find

little resonance, little figurative intensity, little dramatic significance; instead the tone is flat-spirited, the voice of reportage and self-satisfaction.

My other hesitation with Doty's style concerns a related easiness. Doty possesses the admirable desire to turn instance into meaning; he wants to philosophize and thereby instruct. His method here is often to conclude a long narrative passage with a short general observation. In "The Death of Antinoüs," the opening thirteen-line sentence describes in moving, concrete language the agonies of the drowning hero and his eventual immortality as statuary, but Doty follows up his precise description with nearly meaningless generality: "What do we want in any body / but the world?" I have some strong opinions about that question, if he really wants to know; but he doesn't seem to. Rather, in the poem's final sentence, he again confuses abstract emptiness with epiphany: "Longing, of course, / becomes its own object, the way / that desire can make anything into a god." Doty's impulse is often good—to make serious meaning out of detail and episode—but he smudges and reduces so much that his arrived-at theses seem sentimental, artificial, wrong, or at least seriously debatable.

The overall problem in Doty's work—and I feel the same about much contemporary poetry in this fashionable mode—is its detachment from its own story. Doty doesn't seem possessed by his content but, rather, a distant and privileged observer and commentator on it. "All we have of our neighbor's lives / is noise, and the stories we can make of it," he asserts in "Against Paradise," though in the same poem he claims that he "couldn't love any world but this." It's just not sympathy, but disconnection, not "love" but a final, subtle unconcern, that he describes. Within the realm of art, Doty's speaker is hopeful, faithful; otherwise he's an uninvolved skeptic: "That's the lesson," he theorizes, "art is remembering, and turning away." If that's the lesson, it may also be the obvious damning problem.

#### Allen Hoey (review date winter 1993)

SOURCE: Hoey, Allen. Review of *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, by Mark Doty. *Southern Humanities Review* 27, no. 1 (winter 1993): 96-100.

[In the following excerpt, Hoey offers praise for Bethlehem in Broad Daylight, stating that Doty manages to create balance between straight narrative and the "stricture of lyric."]

For Mark Doty, in *Bethlehem in Broad Daylight*, his second full-length collection, desire even at its most carnal, as in a garden where "every alcove / [was] alive