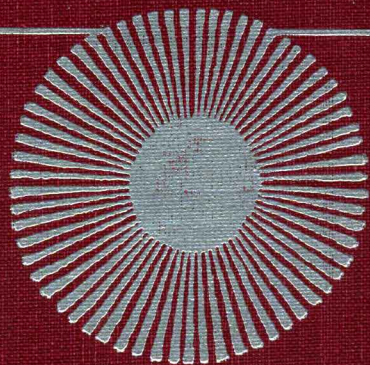

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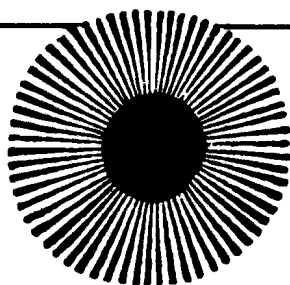
**TWENTIETH-
CENTURY
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Volume 4
H-M

HAROLD BLOOM

General Editor

The
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AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Volume 4

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HAROLD BLOOM

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Am</i> | AMERICA |
| <i>AM</i> | AMERICAN MERCURY |
| <i>AmSt</i> | AMERICAN STUDIES |
| <i>AnR</i> | ANTIOCH REVIEW |
| <i>APR</i> | AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW |
| <i>AS</i> | AMERICAN SCHOLAR |
| <i>At</i> | ATLANTIC |
| <i>BALF</i> | BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM |
| <i>Bkm</i> | BOOKMAN (NEW YORK) |
| <i>BIS</i> | BLACK SCHOLAR |
| <i>BIW</i> | BLACK WORLD |
| <i>BMR</i> | BLACK MOUNTAIN REVIEW |
| <i>CL</i> | CANADIAN LITERATURE |
| <i>CLAJ</i> | CLA JOURNAL |
| <i>Cmty</i> | COMMENTARY |
| <i>CoL</i> | CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE |
| <i>Com</i> | COMMONWEAL |
| <i>Ctrice</i> | COCKATRICE |
| <i>ETJ</i> | EDUCATIONAL THEATRE JOURNAL |
| <i>Expl</i> | THE EXPLICATOR |
| <i>GIT</i> | GREAT IDEAS TODAY |
| <i>GR</i> | GEORGIA REVIEW |
| <i>HB</i> | HARPER'S BAZAAR |
| <i>HC</i> | HOLLINS CRITIC |
| <i>HdR</i> | HUDSON REVIEW |
| <i>IR</i> | IOWA REVIEW |
| <i>JCan</i> | JOURNAL OF CANADIAN STUDIES |
| <i>KQ</i> | KANSAS QUARTERLY |
| <i>KR</i> | KENYON REVIEW |
| <i>LT</i> | LISTENER |
| <i>MFS</i> | MODERN FICTION STUDIES |

| | |
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>MPS</i> | MODERN POETRY STUDIES |
| <i>NALF</i> | NEGRO AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM |
| <i>ND</i> | NEGRO DIGEST |
| <i>NEQ</i> | NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY |
| <i>NL</i> | NEW LEADER |
| <i>NM</i> | NEW MASSES |
| <i>NR</i> | NEW REPUBLIC |
| <i>NS</i> | NEW STATESMAN |
| <i>NWR</i> | NORTHWEST REVIEW |
| <i>NY</i> | NEW YORKER |
| <i>NYRB</i> | NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS |
| <i>NYTBR</i> | NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW |
| <i>Opy</i> | OPPORTUNITY |
| <i>PR</i> | PARTISAN REVIEW |
| <i>PRev</i> | PARIS REVIEW |
| <i>QQ</i> | QUEEN'S QUARTERLY |
| <i>Rep</i> | REPORTER |
| <i>RIH</i> | RHODE ISLAND HISTORY |
| <i>Salm</i> | SALMAGUNDI |
| <i>SAQ</i> | SOUTH ATLANTIC QUARTERLY |
| <i>Scy</i> | SCRUTINY |
| <i>SEP</i> | SATURDAY EVENING POST |
| <i>Shen</i> | SHENANDOAH |
| <i>Spec</i> | SPECTATOR |
| <i>SR</i> | SATURDAY REVIEW |
| <i>SSF</i> | STUDIES IN SHORT FICTION |
| <i>SWR</i> | SOUTHWEST REVIEW |
| <i>TLS</i> | TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT |
| <i>VQR</i> | VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW |
| <i>WPBW</i> | WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD |
| <i>YR</i> | YALE REVIEW |

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CHESTER HIMES

1909–1984

Chester Boman Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, July 29, 1909. His parents, Joseph and Estelle Boman Himes, were both black teachers. The family lived in several cities in the south-central and midwestern United States, and settled in Ohio. Himes went to high school in Cleveland, and studied for a year at Ohio State University. At the age of nineteen he was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to twenty years in Ohio State Penitentiary. He served seven years' time. During his incarceration Himes wrote an account of a tragic fire which broke out in the prison and killed three hundred men. He began publishing prison stories in various magazines. On his release he joined a WPA writers' project, and went on to become a feature writer for the Cleveland *Daily News*. Himes was involved with the labor movement and the Communist party. He married Jean Johnson in 1937. During the Second World War Himes worked as a shipfitter and riveter in California. His experiences shaped his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945). Himes's early novels were explosive studies of the situation of the black man in a racist society. They enjoyed only moderate success in America, but in Europe Himes was lauded as a powerful voice of social criticism. He moved to Spain in 1954, and spent the rest of his life there and in Paris.

In Europe Himes wrote his famous Harlem thrillers, such as *For Love of Imabelle* (1957), *The Real Cool Killers* (1959), and *The Heat's On* (1966). He also published fiction and non-fiction in the protest vein of his early works—including *The Primitive* (1955), *Pinktoes* (1961), and his two volumes of autobiography, *The Quality of Hurt* (1972) and *My Life of Absurdity* (1976).

Himes was awarded the French Grand Prix de Littérature Policière. He died of Parkinson's disease in Moraira, Spain, on November 12, 1984.

Chester Himes had the immense advantage, for our purpose, of writing about Negroes from the inside, from their side of the fence. (. . .) The important thing (about *If He Hollers Let Him Go*) is that the character of Bob is sincerely and solidly drawn, and that his character, his state of moral being, is a function of his social situation. He is a black man without place in a world of hostile whites. They are hostile in the sense of denying him recognition or any of the means by which he might realize his nature. This book has not the power and sweep, the subtlety and depth, of *Native Son*. But in its lesser way it is an impressive performance. It will have done a great service to us all if it tends to promote a sympathetic understanding of the simple fact which lies at the heart of the Negro problem. This fact is the Negro's sense of being excluded from our community and thereby in effect deprived of the very bread of life.—JOSEPH WARREN BEACH, "The Dilemma of a Black Man in a White World," *NYTBR*, Dec. 2, 1945, p. 7

If He Hollers Let Him Go is the story of Bob Jones, a young Negro from Ohio who works as a leaderman in a West Coast shipyard during the war. Bob has a natural sense of dignity, which brings him into conflict with the Southern whites on the job, and with anti-Negro prejudice in general. To begin with merits, I liked particularly Mr. Himes's inclusion of sexual equality among the Negroes' demands for justice, and the use he makes of this theme in depicting the relationship between his hero and one of the workers, Madge, a Southern bitch, who teases him, taunts him and finally frames him on a charge of rape. It is regarded as a well established fact of sociology that sexual equality is last on the list of Negroes' demands and also least in importance to them. But the moral that Mr. Himes seems to draw is that a free man does not count his rights in order of importance, but feels himself entitled to enjoy them simultaneously, the great with the small. Which is correct as well as courageous. Accordingly, the scenes in which Madge and Bob are together are the best in the book; the author is on his surest ground, and his conviction gives free play to his insight. He also makes good use of various language patterns,

jive, bourgeois stuffiness and social workers' terminology, representing the social classes that come within his range.

(. . .) *If He Hollers Let Him Go* is well sustained in action, but sacrifices too much to the melodramatic uses of violence. When Mr. Himes writes in his own person, abandoning the rhythms of jive or professionalism, he loses rhythm altogether; his style is a compact thing, known to the trade as "hard-hitting," acceptable because it is free of the major irritants of journalese, but lacking in real literary distinction. Moreover, his book fails as a work of serious reflection on the Negro problem through a basic irresoluteness. Bob is shown to have but two alternatives: to accept the values of his light-skinned fiancée, Alice the social worker, who wants him to study law, make the most of his limited opportunities as a Negro and climb as high as he can, socially and professionally; or to take the practically suicidal risk of his militancy, which will satisfy his sense of human dignity but leave him frustrated in every other respect. At one point in the novel Bob appears to have repudiated Alice and the compromises that she stands for (the characterization of Alice has been directed toward this end). But there is a sudden shift in the final section and instead Bob repudiates his militancy, his pride and violence and plans to marry Alice, which leaves the novel with no real conclusion; for the principle of his original rejection of Alice's world is not revoked by his coming to terms with that world. The dénouement, furthermore, in which Madge brings a charge of rape against him (the charge, patently false, is dropped when he agrees to enter the Army), does not really prove that Bob was wrong to compromise with the white world by way of his engagement to Alice, for the frame-up is not a consequence of his engagement, and the moral—that it is useless to expect justice from the whites—was obviously known to him when he decided to take a chance on bourgeois success. Compromise is shown to be a calculated risk rather than an enlightening error.—ISAAC ROSENFELD, "With the Best Intentions," *NR*, Dec. 31, 1945, pp. 909–10

A generation or so ago the new immigrant and his struggles to overcome obstacles and prejudice formed an important element in American writing. Today two top fiction best-sellers deal with racial problems, the one with anti-Semitism, the other with anti-Negroism.

Chester Himes's (*Lonely Crusade*) is a study of the American Negro, a brave and courageous probing into the Negro psyche. His diagnosis reveals a racial malady for which there is no immediate remedy. The cure, as he sees it, is centuries of equality and miscegenation. And in the beginning simple equality is not enough. Equality to the Negro means special privileges.

Mr. Himes's hero, Lee Gordon, is indeed a lonely crusader, seeking justice in a white ocean of prejudice and discrimination. A college graduate, a sensitive Negro of basic honesty and integrity, he comes up against the usual barriers. His college degree cannot get him a white-collar job, and since he refuses to take menial work, he and his devoted wife live in poverty, with the result that Lee Gordon's sense of manhood and fitness is gradually corroded, and his wife loses faith in him, though not her love for him. This tragedy Lee Gordon blames on the white man.

Lee Gordon's real troubles begin in the spring of 1943 when, at the age of thirty-one, he gets a job as union organizer of an aircraft plant in Los Angeles. The job is given to him not because he is a professional union organizer—he is not even a member of the union—but because the union needs a Negro organizer. And Lee Gordon takes the job because it is a white-collar job. The next fifty days are a nightmare. His honest efforts are thwarted at every turn, by the plant management and its deputy sheriffs and by the Communist Party, which tries to gain control of the new union. Lee Gordon refuses to sell out to either, and in the end is destroyed by both.

Mr. Himes's story, for all its hard realism and able writing, reads like a melodrama, with the Communist Party the real villain and the deputy sheriffs the actual murderers. His story also suffers from a form of elephantiasis. He tries to embrace too much and his themes cross and get mixed up, so that in the end Lee Gordon's tragedy could just as well have been that of a white man. This overzealousness led Mr. Himes into long generalizations and oversimplifications. The usual racial prejudices and discriminations against the Negro are merely catalogued, with the result that large segments of his book read not like a novel but like excerpts from extended social studies.

Mr. Himes has touched upon every phase of the Negro problem and has mercilessly vivisected the American Negro's personality. We have here clinical revelations of the Negro's homicidal mania, of his lust for white women, of his pathetic sense of inferiority, of his paradoxical anti-Semitism, of his arrogance and his incurable Uncle Tomism. At times it seems that Mr. Himes is trying to convince us that the whole Negro race in America, as a result of centuries of brutal oppression, is sick at soul.

Hatred reeks through his pages like yellow bile. The Negro hates the Jew and the Gentile and he hates his own Negroness; the Jew hates the Negro and the Gentile and his own Jewishness. The pure Marxist Rosenberg, who hates nobody except the capitalists, is expelled from the Communist Party because of his goodness.

The strict Party-line Communists will not like Mr. Himes's book and will no doubt denounce it. The Trotskyites will probably take it to their bosoms, as certainly will all those who believe in unions free of Communist control. As for the Negro problem, it occasionally finds momentary resolution in

oversexed white women mixing up Marxism with Negro macrogenitalism.—STOYAN CHRISTOWE, *At*, Oct. 1947, p. 138

Himes feels the trunk and roots of American society are so corrupted as to make normal growth and development impossible. His concern is not primarily with social protest, as has so often been alleged, for protest implies some hope of appropriate reform, and Himes, one suspects, regards the American scene as beyond redemption. His principal subject is the human consequences of a distorted and diseased civilization. His characters, on the other hand, prefer to interpret their warped and maddened psyches in terms of the society that has conditioned them. Being Negroes, they are more attuned to social abuse, and being middle-class and intellectual, they are all the more aware of their frustrations since their aspirations, though similar to those of the white bourgeoisie, are blocked by their color. "Successful" professional Negroes are more frequently more embittered than persons of lower socioeconomic strata, whose expectations are not nearly so great. And it is men like Himes who are often the bitterest enemies of their own social class for having compromised their values in submission to caste mores.

Somewhere James Baldwin has written that Chester Himes is the only Negro writer who has described male-female relationships in other than violent terms. This is not altogether accurate, since Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen probed along these lines in the 1920's, as have some latter-day novelists, notably Kristen Hunter and Paule Marshall. Nor is Himes's treatment of love without its elements of sadism and self-laceration. But it is undoubtedly true that Himes, in each of his major works, has focused much of his attention on lovers, and has attempted to track down the vagaries and nuances of their emotions. He has, in addition, an unabashed eye for the physical and sensual. It is true as well that he appears to be devoting more and more of his work to material hitherto regarded as taboo—interracial love. Perhaps Himes feels, like so many other Negro authors and intellectuals, that underlying the structure of American society is an unresolved residue of erotic guilt that manifests itself, among other ways, as "the Negro problem."—EDWARD MARGOLIES, "Race and Sex: The Novels of Chester Himes," *Native Sons*, 1968, p. 89

ROBERT BONE

From "The Contemporary Negro Novel"
The Negro Novel in America

1958, pp. 173-76

Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1946) is an impressive failure—with accent on the adjective. It takes the novel of pure race consciousness to its utmost limit, where it strangles to death in its own contradictions. The novel is Wrightian to the core, which is hardly surprising in view of the author's background and experience. Himes, like Wright, is a product of the Great Depression, of association with the Labor movement, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Communist party. A kind of Yerby in reverse, he began his writing career with popular fiction but veered sharply in the direction of protest. He has published short stories in *Esquire* and *Coronet*, as well as in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and as of 1952 was the author of three full-length novels of which the present work is the most important.

The novel is no mere catalogue of grievances, though these are amply provided, within the context of a wartime California shipyard. Racial oppression is a *donnée*; Himes is

interested in the personal adjustment of a sensitive Negro to the bitter fact of caste. For the most part, the conflict is successfully internalized, as the protagonist is forced to choose between revenge and moderation—a theme first treated in Negro fiction by Sutton Griggs and Charles Chesnutt. The alternatives are given concrete dramatic expression through the rebellious protagonist and his accommodationist fiancée.

As a psychological study of a man who is obsessed by race, the novel has power and authority. The protagonist lives on the verge of violence, one minute rebelling, the next conforming; one hating, the next loving; now despondent, now exhilarated by his girl or simply by driving his car—battered from emotional pillar to post by external pressures which he can't control. To render this inner agony, Himes has borrowed freely from the visceral style of Richard Wright: "I started drawing in my emotions, tying them, whittling them off, nailing them down. I was so tight inside, I was like wood. My breath wouldn't go any deeper than my throat and I didn't know whether I could talk at all. I had to get ready to die before I could get out of the house."

This characteristic hyperbole is perhaps appropriate, since the whole plan of the novel rests upon magnifying normal emotions to pathological intensity. It has the disadvantage, however, of all overstatement: the reader builds up a gradual immunity. Somewhat more successful is the dream device through which Himes gives us occasional glimpses of his protagonist's subconscious. Here—through a freely symbolic medium—his naked hatred of whites, his violent oscillation between energy and impotence, and his corrosive feelings of rejection, fear, and shame are vividly conveyed.

The problem with case-study fiction is to generalize successfully. Himes solves it by developing Bob Jones as a symbol of will-lessness. By thematic repetition of key phrases ("beyond my control," "I didn't have a chance"), he conveys the feeling of helpless frustration which ensues whenever one surrenders control of his destiny to others. It is a feeling which every slave, every convict, every conscripted soldier knows intimately. Bob Jones knows it in those areas of his life where he is deprived of will by the whites: "I don't have anything at all to say about what's happening to me. I'm just like some sort of machine being run by white people pushing buttons."

It is in these terms that the main tension of the novel is resolved. "To accept being black as a condition over which you have no control" seems in the eyes of the protagonist an ignominious surrender. For most of the novel he resists, but experience convinces him that personal defiance is suicidal: "I knew with the white folks sitting on my brain, controlling my every thought, action, and emotion, making life one crisis after another, day and night, asleep and awake, conscious and unconscious, I couldn't make it. I knew that unless I found my niche and crawled into it, unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn't live in America." The crowning irony is that Jones' decision to conform is—disallowed. He makes his truce, but the white world will not respect it: he is framed on a rape charge and nearly sent to jail for thirty years. By a quirk of fate he is set "free," providing he is willing to "volunteer" for the Army. As a result, he loses both his girl and his dream of manhood.

In its denouement the novel reveals a fatal structural flaw. Here is a black nationalist, hypersensitive, neurotic, unable to mobilize his energies for anything but the race war, driven by his obsession to the brink of murder. The whole novel moves inexorably toward the opposing view that some kind of accommodation is the price of sanity. The protagonist chooses;

he is born again; but suddenly we are confronted with a chain of events whose logic seems to justify his former view of reality.

Earlier in the novel, Himes has argued convincingly that in every human being there is an inner world which lies within his power to control. Is it now his thesis that in all crucial matters concerning a Negro's fate, the will of society is decisive? If so, we feel put upon, for we have been following Jones' inner conflict as if it mattered. Suddenly it is revealed as meaningless—no matter what Jones decides, society will dispose of his future. Such a thesis requires that the tensions of the novel be resolved on a sociological plane; the very basis of a psychological novel is destroyed.

At bottom the trouble is ideological: neither revenge nor accommodation is acceptable to Himes, and as a result, the novel flounders to an inconclusive finish. Earl Conrad writes of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*: "the book is at war with itself, as is Jones, as is Himes, as is the American Negro." The novel suffers ultimately from a one-to-one correlation between form and content: in portraying a divided personality, Himes has written a divided novel. But formless and chaotic is precisely what art cannot afford to be.

EDWARD MARGOLIES

From "Race and Sex: The Novels of Chester Himes"

Native Sons

1968, pp. 97-99

The title of the novel, *The Primitive* (1955), of course refers to the role Jesse plays in his affair with Kriss. From the world's viewpoint Jesse lives up to this image by murdering Kriss. But the irony lies in the fact that, far from being primitive, Jesse kills because he is overcivilized. His sensibilities have been stretched to the breaking point, and it is precisely because he feels his individual humanity is never recognized that he finds his existence unbearable. In killing Kriss, Jesse strikes back at the primitivism of "civilized" whites who deny him his dignity. His "primitive" act of violence thus makes him civilized in their eyes. When he realizes he has murdered Kriss, he muses sardonically to himself that he can now join the human race.

Himes's point is basically that anything that dehumanizes is primitive, and the racial attitudes of American society are symptoms of a dehumanized culture. The India Institute, where Kriss works, is a case in point. Kriss's colleagues are passionless and petty, and although the Institute is presumably dedicated to humanitarian ends, none of the employees appears to find his work meaningful. The dehumanized lives of all Americans, from the exploited poor to the characterless sophisticates of Kriss's circle, torment Jesse in drunken dreams. Perhaps most symbolic of all is the prophetic monkey forecasting the news. It is as if this nonhuman, precivilized creature really expresses the nature of American life.

It is in the area of sexual relationships that the theme of the novel makes its greatest impact. Kriss and Jesse perceive one another in primitive images—not as individuals but as projections of their own inchoate impulses, desires, and terrors. For Kriss, Jesse is at once a symbol of sexual power, a whipping boy for all her self-loathing and frustration, and an instrument to taunt the sensibilities of white men who have rejected her in the past. But Kriss, by a strange twist of logic, tends subconsciously to blame Negroes for the failure of her marriage. In taking a Negro lover, she can also direct her anger toward Negro men generally. For her, an act of love is as much an act of hostility as anything else. Jesse, in turn, is motivated by certain primitive and dangerous elements in his nature.

When he first sees Kriss he feels himself utterly defeated; in a way he is already spiritually dead. Prior to their meeting he says he *needs a white woman*. Without acknowledging it to himself, Jesse is seeking out his physical destruction, but just as significantly he is seeking out the cause of his destruction. For him Kriss represents the white world that has crushed him, and, unconsciously, Jesse decides to kill her. Kriss knows of Jesse's intentions; she watches him sadistically as he writhes in his sleep, muttering to himself, "Kill you!" Yet she does not flee, for she seeks her own death. It would be her final act of vengeance on all the men who have drained her.

It is difficult to do justice to this novel. Parts are extremely well-written and Himes's cast of characters is authentically conceived. Jesse is especially interesting. His self-pity—of which he has plenty—is seldom irritating, and this is a remarkable feat for any author. Himes laces Jesse's gloom with a kind of dry wit, a sad intellectual humor that saves him from sentimentality.

No more worrying about what's right and what's wrong. Just what's expedient. You're human now. Went in the back door of the Alchemy Company of America a primitive, filled with things called principles, integrity, honor, conscience, faith, love, hope, charity and such, and came out the front door a human being, completely purged. End of a primitive; beginning of a human. Good title for a book but won't sell in America with the word *human* in it. Americans sensitive about that word. Don't want to know they're human. Don't blame them, though. Poses the only problem they've never been able to solve with all their gadgets—the human problem. But they'll know damn well you're human. Be in all the newspapers: *Black man kills white woman*. Not only natural, plausible, logical, inevitable, psychiatrically compulsive and sociologically conclusive behavior of a human being, but mathematically accurate and politically correct as well. Black man has got to have some means of joining the human race. Old Shakespeare knew. Suppose he'd had Othello kiss the bitch and make up. Would have dehumanized him.

This is Himes's most pessimistic work. He has lost faith in the human capacity to reason its way out of its dilemmas. Jesse and Kriss, two intelligent human beings, are as muddled and distressed about their own identities as the worst racists. But here lies the trouble. Himes has, in a curious way, written two books—one about Jesse and Kriss, and one about racist America—and the two do not quite mesh, because Jesse and Kriss are too atypical and too idiosyncratic. Himes's ideas require a novel with a wider scope than one shabby Harlem tenement, one Gramercy Park apartment, and a few decadent intellectuals. Whether or not he will succeed in writing such a novel remains to be seen.

EDWARD MARGOLIES

"America's Dark Pessimism"

Saturday Review, March 22, 1969, pp. 59, 64–65

For some years the expatriate Negro novelist Chester Himes has been writing thrillers about a couple of black Harlem police detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, who plow their way through the layers of sin, venality and official corruption in their community in order to get their man—and often enough their woman. Ostensibly these books

are potboilers. Himes seems to have written them off the top of his head—their construction is loose, their narrative swift with occasional strands of plot not quite in place as the story ends, and there is always plenty of gore, as well as sex to the lively accompaniment of much bawdy satirical humor. Himes's crime fiction sells rather well in France, where presumably it whets and sates an appetite for erotica-exotica (violent and passionate jungle-black Harlemites); perhaps it also narcotizes French readers about their own race problems. Although from time to time an occasional piece will appear in a French journal declaring that Himes has plumbed the savage-sick essence of America, learned allusions have not yet harmed Himes's reputation with his mass French readership—and they have scarcely been expressed (in print) over here.

Himes's very minor American reputation rests on an elongated interracial sex novel, *Pinktoes* (1965), and five "major" works, the first of which was published nearly a quarter of a century ago. Two worth exhuming are *Cast the First Stone* (1952), a prison novel dealing in part with the strange, tender love relationship of two convicts (white), and *The Primitive* (1955), a taut, spare, intense work narrating the love-hate affair in New York of a soured black intellectual and his sophisticated and alienated white mistress. Himes's other three novels, though not without interest, remain for the time being, at least, better off interred.

His thrillers are something else again. It is not simply that they say something about the core of racism that underlies the rottenness of American institutions. Other detective stories have implied the disintegration of society—their cynical, lonely, battle-scarred private eyes relentlessly pursuing truth through a morass of decay and betrayal. And occasionally the best of these tales transcend genre; one thinks immediately of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whose themes express a kind of terrifying deracinated isolation. The point about Himes is that he does not transcend genre; indeed he seemingly insists on maintaining a kind of pop-campy dime-detective format—despite the ever widening chaos each of his books describes. It is as if Himes in the course of writing potboilers inadvertently discovered that not only had he freed himself from the "art" of the novel (he need no longer be serious about being serious; he could now allow his imagination far freer play), but that the kind of detective fiction he chose to write—implying, as it does, the comic, the violent, and above all the absurd—exactly suited his vision. In a peculiar fashion, for Himes the genre is the message.

Blind Man with a Pistol is the ninth of his crime stories, and in certain ways it follows the pattern of the others. The reader is introduced chapter by chapter to Himes's usual gallery of low life—in this instance, petty thieves, pimps, prostitutes, pederasts, lesbians, con men, quacks, vice lords, hopheads, narcotics peddlers, white teeny boppers, Black Power charlatans, Black Jesus charlatans, and others, each doing his hustling, each from time to time engaging racist cops and Himes's tough, cynical and embittered black detective heroes. As in his other works, all members of Himes's demimonde are linked in one way or another to some rather picturesque crimes, but it would be fruitless to rehearse the plot of this novel, partially because so many fragments are unresolved, partially because the very issue of the book is their irresolution. In their investigation Coffin Ed and Grave Digger are ultimately frustrated by police superiors, who are obviously bowing to political pressures in order to protect the lucrative Harlem rackets. To attempt to discover justice in an unjust racist system is therefore an absurdity—just as the system itself is absurd and

chaotic. The novel's conclusion is, therefore, altogether appropriate.

Himes is especially good at producing images of chaos. Indeed there is something of the feeling of a Brueghel canvas in all the anarchic, bustling activities of his swarms of participants. Somewhere near the middle of the novel he describes the convergence from different directions of three parades on 135th Street and Seventh Avenue. It is Nat Turner Day, and each of the groupings represents opposing ideologies: Brotherly Love, Black Power, and Black Jesus. The first, a mob of white and black marchers mindlessly gripping hands, is led by a simple-minded black youth and his dumpy middle-aged Swedish mistress, while the latter two parades are headed by unprincipled black phoneyes.

At a critical juncture all the marchers fling themselves madly on one another whereupon the confusion is compounded by an invasion of police. Himes conveys the scene in broad comic strokes, but below the surface lies utter revulsion at the simplistic slogans and cure-alls that aggravate the sicknesses of the black community. For, as Himes shows, the violence of blacks is more frequently directed at one another than at whites, and the exploitation of the ghetto by the white peripheral city is mirrored in minuscule by false black leaders and black racketeers and businessmen who gull the poor and ignorant of their own community.

All of which suggests Himes's rather ambivalent feelings about Harlem and its residents. These are most obviously revealed in his heroes who, if they do not always speak for their author, do manage to communicate by their actions certain curious attitudes. For all their expressed compassion for slum dwellers, their idealism in pursuing wrong-doers, their cynicism and bitterness about a system that renders their efforts futile, when Grave Digger and Coffin Ed do go into action, they somehow always employ excessive force on persons (generally black) whom they suspect. How much of their sadism is related to understandable anger, how much to the popular view that black cops are harder on their own than white cops, how much to the hallowed American convention

that hard-boiled dicks must beat up people, and how much to Himes's own possible pent-up fury at black people, the reader can only guess.

But something in the very tone and imagery of the book raises the same questions. On the one hand Himes's Harlemites are terribly sophisticated. They recognize in their sad comic way that life is a jungle and that in order to survive anything goes. They recognize as well that they must pretend otherwise, and their ingenuity in balancing themselves between appearance and reality wins grudging admiration from the two detectives and their author. Here, for example, is an exchange at a diner between a black counterwoman and a white pederast who wants to procure a "sissie."

I know what you want.
How you know that?
Just lookin at you.
Cause I'm white?
Tain't that. I got the eye.
You think I'm looking for a girl.
Chops is your dish.
Not pork.
Naw.
Not overdone.
Naw. Just right.

But there are other occasions when Himes images his blacks in such minstrel-like caricature (At night, from the black squares of tenement windows, "crescent-shaped whites of eyes and quarter moons of yellow teeth bloomed like Halloween pumpkins."), such Amos 'n' Andy dialogue ("I helps the old and the sick," Doctor Mubuta jawed. "I rejuvenates the disrejuvenated.") that it sounds as if he were telling a "nigger joke." And perhaps he is, but it is not just on his blacks; the joke is on his whites as well—all caught up in the absurdity of racism, the meanness of violence that reduces their humanity to cartoon dimensions. Thus Himes, fifteen years away from America, apart from brief visits, has written an exceedingly American book, a book whose very Americanness constitutes its author's darkest pessimism.

DANIEL HOFFMAN

1923—

Daniel Gerard Hoffman was born in New York City on April 3, 1923. His parents, Daniel and Frances Beck Hoffman, had one other child, a girl. Hoffman grew up in Larchmont and New Rochelle, and attended local schools. He went to Columbia College in 1940, but his studies were interrupted by the war. Hoffman was a serviceman from 1943 to 1946, editing the Army Air Force *Technical Data Digest*. He received his B.A. from Columbia in 1947 and his Ph.D. in 1956 from the same institution.

Hoffman began writing poetry as an adolescent. He wrote throughout his period of study, and in 1954 his first book of verse, *An Armada of Thirty Whales*, was selected by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Later volumes of poetry include *A Little Geste and Other Poems* (1960), *Broken Laws* (1970), and *Brotherly Love* (1981).

Throughout his career Hoffman has deftly managed to balance his three concerns: poetry, criticism, and teaching. He is one of the rare scholar-poets who have abandoned neither creative nor analytical efforts. He has taught at Columbia, Swarthmore, and the University of Pennsylvania. Hoffman married Elizabeth McFarland in 1948. They have two children.

Works

POETRY

A poet today, particularly perhaps if he is an American like Mr. Hoffman, who sets out to take his themes from Nature is in a very different and much more difficult situation than a Romantic poet like, say, Wordsworth. By the end of the eighteenth century the Newtonian cosmology had destroyed the ancient beliefs in Nature as the abode of actual spirits good or bad, so that the continued use in poetry of Greek mythology had degenerated into genteel periphrasis. At the same time, life was still rural enough for men to feel instinctively that Nature was numinous. Wordsworth's achievement in poetry, parallel to that of Kant in philosophy, was to preserve the validity of this feeling by describing it, not in the traditional mythological terms, but in terms of the psychology of his time. But the poet today is faced not only with the question of contemporary expression but also with the task of recovering the feeling which he and the public have largely lost, that Nature is numinous. He has to make a much more conscious and deliberate effort. At this point I hear the Accuser adopt his "honest Iago" voice: "This is sentimental rubbish. You don't feel that Nature is holy and as a modern man you never can. Genuine art is the mirror of genuine feelings, and the only real feelings you have are of self-pity at your alienation. So be frank, be modern. Express your pity for your self in the rhythmless language really used by metropolitan man." The only way to counter this lie is to realize its half-truth, namely, that our conception of Nature cannot be that of some prescientific magician, nor our modes of poetic expression those of some agricultural community without a written literature.

Mr. Hoffman has not been led astray by the Accuser. While admitting the pains and tragedies of life, he can find joy in life and say so. Nor, on the other hand, does he try to pretend to a Wordsworthian intimacy with Nature. He knows that, for any member of our urban culture, such intimacy is not given but is a prize slowly and patiently to be won: we all start as outsiders. Sometimes, as in "*An Armada of Thirty Whales*," he uses natural objects as heraldic symbols, but more often starts with direct observation and description. Such an approach produces, I feel, more interesting results. There is always a danger of becoming whimsical in using some animal as a symbol when you have no personal experience of it as an animal.

A number of Mr. Hoffman's poems are concerned with the same kind of place, the frontier between earth and water, and with the creatures associated with it, and they are written in the same kind of meter, a loose couplet, stopped between the lines and sometimes employing internal rhymes in lieu of end rhymes; e.g.:

All shrinks in the rage of the sun
 save the courage of clams, and their faith:
 Sacrificing the water they breathe
 seems to urge the tall moon from her orbit;
 she tugs ocean, cubit by cubit
 over killdeer's kingdom
 and ends parched freedom.
 Moon, with sky-arching shell
 and bright snout nine thousand miles long
 and anemones in her kelp hair
 that gleam in the heaven around her,
 responds with the wave of their prayers
 or sucks the sea unawares.

("The Clams")

The skeptical caution of the last line seems to me right, but so does the analogy Mr. Hoffman perceives between the clams and human ritual. Indeed if such analogies are not valid, no art is possible. As Malcolm de Chazal has written: "Symbolism was born when Adam, wishing to tell Eve with a single gesture of the immensity of his love for her, pointed with his hand to the disk of the sun."—W. H. AUDEN, "Foreword" to *An Armada of Thirty Whales*, 1954

Too bad that a poet's audience cannot respond like a tenor's, for the only satisfactory comment on the second volume by Daniel Hoffman, *A Little Geste and Other Poems*, would be a roll of applause and a crackle of bravos. This is poetry, no doubt about that. It is learned, ingenious, and technically sophisticated, of course; but also—and by no means of course—it sings, it shocks, it stirs, it raises the old, infallible goose flesh on your arms.

There are some lapses, to be sure, among the "Other Poems" of the book: leftovers, odds and ends, and exercises in abstraction such as "Scholiast Iconoclast" [the title tells all], which might better have been left to the gnomists. Hoffman's business is with the other kind of gnomes, or at least with wizards, new-born gods, lightning ("a zaggedy white trombone of lightshot"), "a hoof-deep pool," "fingers, rippling on the lute like minnows," "wakeless water." He invokes

the instinctual wisdom of the hawk's wing,
 the dumb cow's long-tongued patience, the seals'
 handwebbed finesse in motion indivisible
 from the cold seas', joyous in their submitting
 to the tide's seasons and turn, leaving my heels'
 prints on the shore, visible or invisible.

He is a poet of the visible and palpable, a subtle rhymers, a minter of metaphors, and a praiser of instinct and blood-knowledge.

His title poem, or sequence, is a bold piece of myth-making which rescues Robin Hood from his shrunken state of "democratic thief" and restores him to a Dionysian, Druidic, Laurentian godhood. Every character of the old geste is charged with mythic power (Marian rises like Aphrodite from the fecund sea; Submagus Tuck chants a fire-hymn; Robin is metamorphosed into robin with bloodstained breast), and ancient alliterative and ballad forms are adapted with stunning success to the demands of a modern poetic idiom. That's a poem, as M. H. L. Gay would put it, that's a poem and a half.—JOSEPH SLATKIN, "Wizards and New-Born Gods," SR, Jan. 7, 1961, pp. 28–29

Perhaps the best thing that can be said for the American poetry of the past decade is that it is wildly catholic. The reader can choose between the most desiccated of academic verse; passionate political statement blossoming in the vernacular or in full-blown rhetoric; arcane adventures in self-expression; the undigested distress of the mournful emotions; one or two major voices; and a handful of poets whose wit and intelligence have served, instead of overridden, their poetry. Daniel Hoffman belongs to the last group. *The Center of Attention* is a very good collection of poems.

Hoffman brings to his poetry what he has learned from his prose books such as *Barbarous Knowledge* and *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. He demonstrates not only a considerable psychological insight and sense of drama, but more important, a sense of all the nuances of pace. Some of the poems, such as "The Center of Attention," "The Princess Cassimassima" or "Tolerance" are story-poems; but others, which are poems of intensified insight, like "Old Photo in an Old Life," or "Boar," also move in every syllable.

Reading the entire Hoffman poetic oeuvre, one is aware of

three major strands that knit into a strong texture: myth, history and the immediate experience, personal and colloquial. It's a rich fusion; one thinks immediately of other poets wedded more or less faithfully to one of the three. Hoffman's polygamy works well. He never writes without that sense of the dead which was so precious to Auden; he has as thorough a response to myth as Muir himself, and he can write of a personal shock or rage with total directness. What he once wrote of Robert Graves is true of his own work. Both combine "a Dionysian compulsion to belief with an Apollonian clarity of presentation."

And see, there kneels the executioner
Wiping his scimitar upon a torso's ripped
Sash. At ease, the victors smoke. A gash
Of throats darkens the river. 1900, The Boxer
Rebellion. Everyone there is dead now.
What was it those unbodied mouths were saying?
Something of relevance to this morning.

"The Boar" talks about a hunt, a cornered boar whose
clumsy bulk
Dances on murderous hooves in sudden lunges
And the scimitar tusks drip red.

But the scene connects with a wider and darker energy: the
dogs'

ardor
Is chilled by an ancient ardor that stays the blood.
If the hunters with trumpets and guns dare stop
within range
Of those hooves and tusks they will know the single
purpose
Of which the boar is steward.

Hoffman's boar is cousin to Roethke's pike and killer-birds on the wing. In *The White Goddess*, "The boar is the beast of death and the 'fall' of the year begins in the month of the boar."

But then in "Vows," perhaps the book's most impressive poem, Hoffman steps straight from his other persona into a direct and extremely moving poem of personal emotion. It could easily belong to that most embarrassing of all genres, the o-would-I-were-other lament; but by energy and control it frees itself into a dignified discreteness.

In an early book, *An Armada of Whales*, there is a poem in which the poet's child stares across a rough sea, uncertain as to the terms that will create what she sees.

the world without description
is vast and wild as death
the word the tongue has spoken
creates the world and truth.

Scrupulously attentive, Hoffman continues to name: qualities, situations, legacies; he conquers resistant nameless territory foot by foot. He has decided that for his purpose, his prosody will be highly flexible, its ear versed in, but not subservient to rules. The techniques are as varied as the poems, but there is a great deal of tough skill which at its happiest has the ease of an acrobat's control, the smooth sum of a dozen hidden efforts.

When he wishes to be grim, Hoffman commands a bland toughness, more effective than any number of head-on blasts. Delivered in the dead-pan tone of a practical recipe, "Rats" says more of the desperation of greed than a dozen social treatises.

Some of the poems in the book's last section are less successful as individual poems, being occasionally not much more than skillful and sensitive description, though never purely of surfaces; but by some curious element of balance they strengthen the book as a whole, altering the intensity of the pressure and inviting us to admit pauses. And even in this

section, lulled, one comes upon "Runner," or "The Poem," and learns not to relax expectancy.—JOSEPHINE JACOBSEN, "A Rich Fusion," NR, April 6, 1974, p. 30

A national epic is hardly a topic for serious consideration nowadays in literary and academic circles. The Bicentennial came and went without a major poet even attempting something so ambitious. Daniel Hoffman's poem, *Brotherly Love*, has all the makings of an epic: the founding of a new land, a hero of stature, his odyssey and struggle toward self-fulfillment and identity, an invocation to the muse (in this case, Clio), and a divine purpose made manifest in changing events.

The poem celebrates the founding of Pennsylvania as an image of the origin of our country, from its first contacts with the Indians to the configurations of all its cultures in the nation as it is today. Pennsylvania could not have been a happier choice. Before William Penn landed in 1682, settlers were already there, waiting for an identity of their own. Even today, Pennsylvania "Dutch" refers not to natives of Holland but to the descendants of German and Swiss immigrants. A more typical melting pot could not be found.

Hoffman investigates these European roots in the war between the English and Dutch in which Admiral William Penn, the founder's father, played an important role. The poet shows how the son turned inward, how a consciousness of destiny unfolded through his religious experiences, how his suffering of injustices brought him to respect civil laws, and how his biblical sense of history led him to plan a heavenly city for earthly men. When Penn set foot in America he came armed with laws, contracts, plans and ideas; he began to carry them out with amazing alacrity and grace.

His famous pact with the Delaware Indians provides the material for the opening section of the poem which is in three parts: "Treating with Indians," "An Opening of Joy" and "The Structure of Reality." There are a total of 61 poems, documents, adaptations and three illustrations from paintings that act as key images for each of the three main divisions.

The central theme, "the motion of the Lord/upon the soul," can be seen in the Benjamin West re-creation of the treaty with the Indians, in the portrait of Penn as a young man and in Edward Hick's version of "The Peaceable Kingdom" which depicts the Christ Child extending a branch of peace while the treaty is signed in the distance. Poem 8 describes the union of the two peoples, white and red man, when "The destinations of two journeys meet." The moment is sacred for "Behind the clouds," an unseen witness participates: "Great Manito, the Lord, whose will is done." Both the biblical and Indian names of God sanction the event as a holy covenant between brothers.

The last part of the poem recounts the sad breakdown of trust between peoples, the ruin of the Delaware by murder, exile, poverty and disease. Yet they keep the memory of Penn untarnished—more than we can say of his followers—and the Indians increase in dignity with their absolute resignation to the Spirit. Through their example and Penn's integrity, the poet tells us we can still gain "in our life in time/an intimation of that Light" which "God causes to glow/in every soul."

Brotherly Love is a true epic waiting to be explored and absorbed. Like the landscape around us, it is a reminder that cities, fields and hills summon us to fresh discoveries of ourselves, of our coming hither and our going hence: "In the Lord's love for each person/is his revelation/Perpetual and unending,/And they shall come together in a city." Hoffman has no illusions about the "wrangling" city that Philadelphia has become, but he affirms "a spirit in this place" and sees "possibilities of grace" in the soil that first received the seeds of

evasions of literary triviality, to see in parody and literary satire many instances of what he calls "pure fiction cast as a send-up," and to deal in a convincing way (for the first time, for me) with the rhetoric and intention of Poe's essay on "The Raven," "The Philosophy of Composition," like Scripture, so diversely read and applied.

Hoffman is illuminating and convincing, too, on the subject of Poe's more palpable romantic fictions, and he is able not to condescend to the poems even when they are very bad because of sympathy with their predicament and a kind of generosity accompanying real skill in the analysis of their failure. His long, attentive reading of *Eureka* is also most unusual, and we must conclude from his presentation of it that Poe's essay in visionary cosmology belongs in its limited way to the same genre as those other modern compendia of mythologies, *Finnegans Wake*, *The White Goddess*, and *A Vision*. In general, this book seems most unusually responsive to the realm in Poe's art governed by his lack of what Keats called "negative capability."—JOHN HOLLANDER, *NYTBR*, Feb. 13, 1972, pp. 7, 18

(*Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*) is the most refreshing and original volume of literary study to appear for a long time. One may even hope that it will set a new style in literary criticism, particularly as it deals with American subjects—although there cannot be many critics around who combine Daniel Hoffman's discernment, controlled quirkiness, poetic eloquence, and sense of the intellectual value of laughter.

The title invokes Poe's name seven times: partly, one supposes, because the word "bells" was repeated seven times in Poe's poem about them, and Poe was an iterative fellow; but partly to point to the numerous dimensions of Poe's achievement. Mr. Hoffman, often piling up clashing adjectives seven at a time, explores that achievement seriatim: the poems; the critical theory; the detective stories; the social and political commentary (who remembers that Poe wrote so many sketches in this area?); a goodly number of the tales; *Arthur Gordon Pym*; the philosophical prose poem *Eureka*; and climactically "The Fall of the House of Usher."

The book is at every turn uncommonly engrossing, with constant changes of tone and pace, and a number of rhetorical devices aimed at keeping the reader awake, and at getting into still another facet of Poe's writing. The style is essentially conversational, sometimes exclamatory, and it is salted with colloquialisms: Poe, Mr. Hoffman remembers from his youth, is a writer "who can frighten a boy out of his pajamas"; and after quoting Roderick Usher's screech to the narrator, as Madeline totters back from her tomb, "*Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door*," Mr. Hoffman instantly lowers the pitch by commenting: "Most readers think it odd that Usher, who is as crazy as a bedbug, should call Narrator a madman," and goes on to offer a sound explanation for that phenomenon.

There are lively little dialogues with the reader: "What! You seriously propose that . . . ? Well, yes I do." There are Joycean tricks with Poe's name: Edgarpoe, Edgar Élan Poet, Hoaxipoe (the author of the spoof stories), Idgar Poe. There are head-shaking apostrophes to Poe, and pauses while the author seems to mop his brow at some new Poeian extravagance and cries, "Whew!"

Above all there is the steady expression of Daniel Hoffman's lifelong personal involvement with the writings of E. A. Poe—from childhood through a year as Fulbright lecturer at Dijon where Professor Hoffman tried to persuade the French idolaters of Poe that their hero was an imperfect versifier, to recent years and a total reimmersion in the *oeuvre*.

In the course of all this, the analytic sobrieties of the New Criticism are no so much cast aside as absorbed, made excellent use of, and gone far beyond. Admirable, admirable.

These devices, approaches and postures are, I am convinced, entirely relevant and necessary to Mr. Hoffman's deeply serious purpose, which is to give an account of Poe that is faithful to the highly mixed experience of reading him. It is an account that wants to be faithful both to that larger part of Poe that in James Russell Lowell's words was genius and to the smaller part that was "sheer fudge." And it wants to disclose the genius that often shines agonizedly beneath the fudged surfaces of individual poems or tales: beneath the appalling rhymes, the inflated prose, the preposterous interior decors of the protagonists' apartments.

Poe, as Mr. Hoffman roundly views him, sought to express the inexpressible—certain basic hideosities of human impulse, and phenomena detached from time, earth, sanity and the body—and in this he was more successful in the tales than in the poems. Mr. Hoffman draws a little upon the psychoanalyzing Marie Bonaparte (yes, *Ligeia* is to a degree Poe's defecting mother Elizabeth Arnold), and a great deal more on Richard Wilbur, the most illuminating student of Poe before Mr. Hoffman himself; but if the latter's suggestions are not always wholly original, there is something arrestingly fresh about every major reading.—R. W. B. LEWIS, "Genius and Sheer Fudge," *AS*, Autumn 1972, pp. 680–82

JOHN ALEXANDER ALLEN

From "Another Country:
The Poetry of Daniel Hoffman"

Hollins Critic, October 1978, pp. 3–18

II

INasmuch as a sense of being exiled from another life has, from the beginning, been the keynote of Hoffman's poetry, this survey of his achievement can usefully begin by glancing at three of his early poems that have this theme in common. It will be readily apparent to the reader that the style and technique of these poems differs markedly from that of "A Visitation," which appeared in Hoffman's fourth collection. Other recent poems on the theme of exile will be the subject of comment in Section V and elsewhere. (. . .)

Like any well-schooled young poet, Hoffman began his career in print with poems that rather ingenuously cast about for objective correlatives of his inner feelings. *An Armada of Thirty Whales* contains a number of poems in which creatures—whales, seals, clams—serve as surrogates for the poet himself. The whales of the title poem have, in the unaccountable fashion of their species, grounded themselves on a Florida beach. That much is fact. But Hoffman challenges the reader's belief by saying that the whales, in their predicament, "declare / their element henceforth air." As the unfortunate mammals, "who won't swim and can't stand / lie mired in mud and in sand," the poet may well identify their putative desire for a new life with his own very real one. The trouble is that whales do not in fact possess such a desire, and it is no good telling us, however whimsically, that they do. Again, in "The Clams," the poet uses the title bivalves as a basis for presenting the reader with a series of even less plausible non-facts. Left high and drying in the sand of the Bay of Fundy at low tide, they are praised for the "desperate hope" they allegedly display by erecting "valved snouts" and squirting out quantities of their remaining supply of moisture. "All shrinks in the rage of the sun," the poet declares, "save the courage of clams, and their

faith." It is surely one of the less persuasive analogies for the unyielding spirit of the exiled poet.

"The Seals in Penobscot Bay" is a more successful poem than either of the foregoing. Here, the poet is perforce engaging in a trial run on a naval destroyer, and the seals are not endowed with any emotions or aspirations but are plausibly said simply not to hear the poet's shouted warning concerning the atom bomb. It is the poet who must live with the knowledge of this danger, while he not unnaturally envies the playful sea creatures their apparent immunity to fear and their freedom to "plunge, bubbling, into the brine, / and couple & laugh in the troughs . . ." Here, the only dubious touch is that word "laugh." Hoffman's emphasis on the joyful coupling of the seals is in keeping with a strong, and generally sanguine, though sometimes ambiguous, emphasis upon sexuality that has persisted in his work. His poems are seldom explicitly sexual (though see "In Cytherea" —*A Little Geste*), but a number of his best love poems—all of which are securely domestic—successfully use sexual fulfillment to figure forth the sense of perfect union that is one quality of the "other world" the poet seeks.

"The Seals" doubles the notion of the poet's exile by bringing in reference to Odysseus' "sweet agony" at the sirens' song as a contrast to what the naval captive must hear as the destroyer's guns "punched dark holes in the sky." Song—more often that of birds than of sirens—is regularly associated in Hoffman's poems with the world from which the poet is exiled. Hoffman is, in fact, ear-oriented. Music, for him, is thought, the "true ground / The ordained cadences" of which may be as apparently inconsequential as "vestigial / Bird's whistle" or "wailed / Snatch on boy's harmonica" ("The Sounds").

In a much more recent poem, "Ten Thousand Dreaming Seamen Proven Wrong" (*Broken Laws*), Hoffman's strong emotional response to the sirens' song appears delightfully in the form of ironic glee. This is one of the poet's rare truly funny poems. He is amused to the point of chuckling out loud by the report of "Researchers" that seamen, in spinning their traditional yarns, have not *lied* about seeing mermaids but have simply been honestly mistaken. What they actually saw, as Hoffman reports, trying to keep a straight face, was

the bearded manatee
That pouts and floats, fat lady-like, along
Southern lagoons; further, it pleased their fancy
To stum the snoutish snorts of that dugong
On memory's lyre.

He rounds the sonnet out by imagining contemporary sailors lining the rail to gaze ashore, where "girls as sleek as seals sun on the beach." With one such mermaid, "whose molten eyes beseech," he leaves the question, "can the seafarer / Turn from your proffered love, or not be lost?" Hoffman has a dependably fine scorn for the products of intellect (Researchers) unalloyed by passion and imagination. After all, he has been a sailor himself. When the wind is right, he is incapable of mistaking a mermaid for a dugong, or vice versa: and this alone, in my view, is sufficient reason for reading his work with respectful attention. (. . .)

IV

A substantial number of Hoffman's poems deal with the big questions of his trade: What is the poet's purpose in writing, and How does a poem succeed in communicating what he wishes to say? Poems on these subjects can be tedious—mere shop talk or a kind of narcissism. On the other hand, such poems are always justified when the poet is not just taking you through his workshop but is pointing out that his problem as poet is everyman's problem: that of staying alive imaginatively and establishing the possibility of meaningful communication

between the inner man (his emotions, his imaginative vision) and the world outside himself. Hoffman's poems about poetry are of this kind.

From various early poems by Hoffman, one gets the impression of an earnest, idealistic young man who tries to believe that the voice of the bard will collar passers-by and impose enlightenment upon them. In "A Black-Letter Broad-side" (L.G.), he tells his reader that

You, in tumultuous nets of voices
Borne by that unrelenting throng,
Cannot escape what blaze rejoices
Me, nor disavow my song.

This is surely a sentiment that invites dissent. But time passes, with its attrition. Hoffman is not about to give up his faith in the imagination, but he finds that the spawn of unreason and power require that faculty, "great with rage," to

Turn . . . and conceive
On days like dragons' teeth.

to

Retell, in the leaping of exultant breath,
In the blood that sighs,
What knowledge in the bone this side of death
Death makes us prize.

("Reading the Times," —*The City of Satisfactions*)

Hoffman's tone has again altered by the time that he faces "A New Notebook" in the last poem of *Broken Laws*. Here the emphasis is not on mantic authority nor on rage and imaginative frenzy but on redemptive vision and power analogous to that of love. He hopes to "incise" upon the empty pages "images / the soul has seized / out of confusion . . . ,"

redeemed from dark and changed
from accustomed sight
as though by love's altering

. . .
to what like love's
imperial behests
cannot be disbelieved.

The case has altered once again in *The Center of Attention*, where the emphasis falls on waiting time out, paying attention, having patience: "What awaits us we / Can know only / By our deliverance" ("East"). Finally, in the last poem of the same volume ("The Poem"), Hoffman conceives of his art as itself an exile seeking deliverance. It remains faithful in adversity, and, with luck, may just have strength to deliver its message to the well-disposed reader (I quote in full):

Arriving at last,
It has stumbled across the harsh
Stones, the black marshes.
True to itself, by what craft
And strength it has, it has come
As a sole survivor returns
From the steep pass.
Carved on memory's staff
The legend is nearly decipherable.
It has lived up to its vows
If it endures
The journey through the dark places
To bear witness,
Casting its message
In a sort of singing.

Other readers may react differently, but I find this ragged wreck of a poem, just making it home, simply irresistible. I vow to listen faithfully to its nearly decipherable message, to rejoice quite voluntarily in its sort of singing—even to celebrate its heroism, according to my lights, in word and deed. . . .

VIII

Every poet writes his own epitaph, not once but many times, and changes it, from time to time, as he himself—and with him, his art—changes with the years. If I were to choose such a poem from *The Center of Attention*, it would be “Shell,” which I will quote in full:

I would have left the me that was then
Clinging to a crack in the bark of the tree,
Stiffened in wind, the light translucent,
A brittle shell that had the shape of me;
And down the back a split through which had burst

A new creature, from mean appearance free,
Swaying now where the topmost boughs of the tree
sway
At the center of the sound that's at the center of the
day.

To be sure, there has never been anything mean about Daniel Hoffman or about the poems he has given us. But every good person and good poet should be allowed his divine discontent. May the angelic Hoffman step from his split shell the just image of all he could wish to be, and may the exile live forever in the country of his choice.

JOHN HOLLANDER

1929–

On October 28, 1929, John Hollander was born in New York City. His mother, Muriel Kornfeld Hollander, was a high school teacher. His father, Franklin Hollander, was a physiologist. Hollander attended Hunter Model School, The Bronx High School of Science, and Columbia College. He received his B.A. in 1950 and his M.A. two years later. He went to Indiana University the following year and married Anne Helen Loesser. Hollander's first poems were published around this time, in magazines.

He left Indiana to take a fellowship at Harvard before completing his dissertation. From 1954 to 1957 he devoted much of his time to writing. His first volume of poetry was published in 1958 by the Yale Younger Poets Series; it was entitled *A Crackling of Thorns*. Subsequent volumes of verse include *Types of Shape* (1969), *The Night Mirror* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1972), *Spectral Emanations* (1978), and *Blue Wine* (1979).

Hollander has taught on the English faculties of Connecticut College, Yale University, and Hunter College. At present he is the Director of Graduate Studies of the Department of English, Yale University. Hollander has two daughters by his first marriage, which ended in divorce. He now lives in Connecticut with his second wife, who is a sculptor.

General

J.D. McClatchy: First, what's drawn you to syllabics? They've not attracted many modern poets (I can think of Auden, Marianne Moore, Richard Howard), perhaps because, even more than conventional metrics, they violated modernism's sense of “the musical phrase.” Even Dr. Johnson seemed aware of this when he spoke of “such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear.”

John Hollander: I know. My own ear always used to demand something accentual sounding through whatever other kind of pattern there was, or wasn't. When we were undergraduates together at Columbia, Richard Howard was already writing in pure syllabics from time to time, but I never did. The difference between a strictly decasyllabic line (like “A Line with ten syllables you can't hear/Without using your fingers to count them”) and an accentual-syllabic pentameter with ten syllables (“One with five downbeats clearly sounding out”) was central for me. It was only in 1969–70, in some poems in *The Night Mirror*, that I fell into syllabics; it was for some dark, intense extended epigrams—“Power Failure,” “Another Firefly,” “As the Sparks Fly Upward”—that I used seven- and eight-syllabled lines, instead of accentual tetrameters. Syllabics have been more flexible for me than other kinds of line, and I can move in and out of whatever rhythm the “sentence sound,” as Frost called it, beats out. Speech sound, and the so-called “music” of variously drawn-out terminations, are still there. (. . .)

JDMcC: Let me look back now. Several of your earlier collections are centered by a long poem, and they've succeeded one another in complexity and ambition—from “Upon Aphorhp House” (1962) to *Visions from the Ramble* (1965), to “The Head of the Bed” (1972), and on to your spy poem *Reflections on Espionage* (1976). The grandest and most daunting of them, I think, has been “Spectral Emanations,” the glory of your *Selected Poems* (1978). Is it a culmination of a kind of poem you had been writing or the achievement of a kind of poem you'd wanted to write?

JH: That's interesting. Of course it's easy to say: both! But first of all, I should say that “Spectral Emanations” is more like *Visions from the Ramble* in having a plan or scheme—in having parts I knew from the very beginning I'd have to write—than it's like the spy poem or “Aphorhp House.”

“Upon Aphorhp House” I would treat now as a kind of verse essay, like my poem called “New York.” Although it was full of all the concerns I had for and in writing poetry at the moment, it was when I still had a different sense of the requirements of poetry from the one I do now. I asked, I think, less of it. I asked a good deal of myself. It was something very hard for me to do, and something I had to live with for a long time—rather than a poem I would live with while composing for perhaps a week but no more, and then continue with in the process of revision. But that long poem was like living with part of one's own life that one had lived before, not just coping with the consequences of an act. Living with a very long poem was a