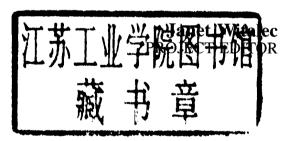
Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 188

Volume 188

Contemporary Literary Criticism

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









Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 188

Project Editor Janet Witalec

Editorial

Tom Burns, Jenny Cromie, Kathy D. Darrow, Jeffrey W. Hunter, Michael L. LaBlanc, Ellen McGeagh, Lemma Shomali

© 2004 Thomson Gale, a part of The Thomson Corporation. Thomson and Star Logo are trademarks and Gale is a registered trademark used herein under license.

For more information, contact Thomson Gale 27500 Drake Rd. Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535 Or you can visit our internet site at http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution, or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

Data Capture Francis Monroe, Gwen Tucker

Indexing Services
Laurie Andriot

Rights and Acquisitions Lori Hines, Bill Sampson, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information.

For permission to use material from the product, submit your request via the Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permisssions Department
Thomson Gale
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535
Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Imaging and Multimedia Lezlie Light, Michael Logusz, Denay Wilding

Composition and Electronic Capture Kathy Sauer

Manufacturing Rhonda Williams

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Thomson Gale neither guarantees the accuracy of the data contained herein nor assumes any responsibility for errors, omissions or discrepancies. Thomson Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN 0-7876-6761-7 ISSN 0091-3421

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

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. Singlework 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 Thomson Gale.

Indexes

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

A Cumulative Nationality Index lists all authors featured in CLC by nationality, followed by the number of the CLC volume in which their entry appears.

A Cumulative Topic Index lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Literature Criticism from* 1400 to 1800, Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism, Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, and the Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook, which was discontinued in 1998.

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

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

Citing Contemporary Literary Criticism

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

sociation (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a bibliography set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Morrison, Jago. "Narration and Unease in Ian McEwan's Later Fiction." Critique 42, no. 3 (spring 2001): 253-68. Reprinted in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 169, edited by Janet Witalec, 212-20. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 169, edited by Janet Witalec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale. 2003.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th ed. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1999); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Morrison, Jago. "Narration and Unease in Ian McEwan's Later Fiction." *Critique* 42.3 (spring 2001): 253-68. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 169. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 212-20.

Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy.* Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Janet Witalec. Vol. 169. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

Suggestions are Welcome

Readers who wish to suggest new features, topics, or authors to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions or comments are cordially invited to call, write, or fax the Project Editor:

Project Editor, Literary Criticism Series Thomson Gale 27500 Drake Road Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535 1-800-347-4253 (GALE) Fax: 248-699-8054

Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Mercy Library, Wayne State University Purdy/Kresge Library Complex, and the University of Michigan Libraries for making their resources available to us. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *CLC*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 188, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:

American Journal of Sociology, v. 97, May, 1992 for "Review of Looking Awry," by Edith Kurzweil. Copyright © 1992 by The University of Chicago. Reprinted by permission of the author.—American Scholar, v. 63, Summer, 1994. Copyright © 1994 by the author.—Artforum International, v. 31, March, 1993. Copyright © 1993, by Artforum International Magazine, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—Canadian Literature, n. 147, winter, 1995 for "Reading Awry" by Doug Aoki. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Chicago Review, v. 44, 1998. Copyright © 1998 by Chicago Review. Reproduced by permission.—Chicago Tribune Books, July 23, 1995 for "Mary Karr Recounts Her Tough East Texas Childhood" by Scott Donaldson. Copyright © 1995 Tribune Media Services, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Christian Century, v. 118, August 1, 2001. Reproduced by permission.—Christian Science Monitor, v. 92, October 12, 2000; v. 93, July 19, 2001. Copyright © 2000, 2001, The Christian Science Publishing Society. All rights reserved. Both reproduced by permission from The Christian Science Monitor.—Cinema Journal, v. 34, summer, 1995 for "Not Exactly a Knight': Arthurian Narrative and Recuperative Politics in the Indiana Jones Trilogy" by Susan Aronstein. Copyright © 1995 by Cinema Journal. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—College Literature, v. 27, spring, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by West Chester University. Reproduced by permission.—Commentary, v. 103, June, 1997 for "Doing Daddy Down" by Elizabeth Powers; v. 105, February, 1998 for "Amistad and the Abuse of History" by Gary Rosen; v. 106, October, 1998 for "Spielberg at War" by Christopher Caldwell. Copyright © 1997, 1998 by Commentary. All reproduced by permission of the publisher and the respective authors.—Commonweal, v. 111, June 15, 1984; v. 115, January 15, 1988; v. 119, January 31, 1992; v. 120, August 13, 1993; v. 125, September 11, 1998; v. 127, November 3, 2000; v. 128, August 17, 2001. Copyright © 1984, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1998, 2000, 2001 Commonweal Publishing Co., Inc. All reproduced by permission of Commonweal Foundation.—English Journal, v. 86, September, 1997 for "Growing up in America" by M. Joy Gorence. Copyright © 1997 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—Extrapolation, v. 32, fall, 1991. Copyright © 1991 by The Kent State University Press. Reproduced by permission.—Film Comment, v. 25, July-August, 1989 for "Keeping up with the Joneses" by Armond White; v. 28, May-June, 1992 for "The Panning of Steven Spielberg: Chapter One of a Critical Cliffhanger" by Henry Sheehan; v. 28, July-August, 1992 for "Spielberg II" by Henry Sheehan; v. 30, March, 1994 for "Toward a Theory of Spielberg History" by Armond White; v. 37, July-August, 2001 for "Movie of the Moment: A.I.: Artificial Intelligence," by Paul Arthur. Copyright © 1989, 1992, 1994, 2001 by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. All reproduced by permission of the respective authors./v. 38, July-August, 2002. Copyright © 2002, by the Film Society of Lincoln Center. Used by permission of the Film Society of Lincoln Center.—Film Quarterly, v. 47, fall, 1993 for "Review of Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)," by Paul Thomas; v. 53, fall, 1999 for "Saving Private Ryan" by Karen Jachne. Copyright © 1993, 1999 by the Regents of the University of California. Both reproduced by permission of the publisher and the respective authors.—Georgia Review, v. 52, winter, 1998; v. 55, spring, 2001. Copyright © 1998, 2001 by the University of Georgia. Both reproduced by permission.—Hudson Review, v. 51, winter, 1999. Copyright © 1999, by Hudson Review. Reproduced by permission.—Kirkus Reviews, v. 71, May 1, 2003. Copyright © 2003 by The Kirkus Service, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Kirkus Reviews and Kirkus Associates, L.P.—Lancet, v. 357, January 20, 2001. Copyright © 2001. Reproduced by permission of Elsevier Science Publisher.—Lingua Franca, v. 8, October, 1998, for "Enjoy Your Žižek" by Robert S. Boynton. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Literature and Theology, v. 16, for "Review of The Ticklish Subject," by Matthew Bullimore. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—Literature/Film Quarterly, v. 24, January, 1996; v. 29, October, 2001. Copyright © 1996, 2001 Salisbury State College. Both reproduced by permission.—London Review of Books, v. 15, July 8, 1993; v. 17, August 3, 1995; v. 20, October 19, 1995; v. 22, July 20, 2000. Copyright © 1993, 1995, 2000 by LRB Ltd. All appear here by permission of the London Review of Books.—Los Angeles Times Book Review, July 16, 1995; August 26, 2001. Copyright © 1995, 2001 by Los Angeles Times Book Review. Both reproduced by

permission.—National Review, v. 50, September 1, 1998. Copyright © 1998 by National Review, Inc., 215 Lexington Avenue. New York, NY 10016. Reproduced by permission.—New Leader, v. 77, February 14, 1994. Copyright © 1994 by the American Labor Conference on International Affairs, Inc. Reproduced by permission.—New Literary History, v. 29, winter, 1998; v. 32, winter, 2001. Copyright © The Johns Hopkins University Press. Both reproduced by permission.—New Republic, v. 194, January 27, 1986; v. 200, June 19, 1989; v. 210, January 24, 1994; v. 217, December 22, 1997; v. 227, July 22, 2002. Copyright © 1986, 1989, 1994, 1997, 2002 by The New Republic, Inc. All reproduced by permission of The New Republic.—New Statesman, v. 112, July 11, 1986; v. 10, January 10, 1997; v. 126, July 18, 1997; v. 127, September 11, 1998; v. 128, May 24, 1999; v. 130, June 25, 2001; v. 131, July 8, 2002; v. 131, September 9, 2002; v. 132, February 3, 2003. Copyright © 1986, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003 Statesman & Nation Publishing Co. Ltd & contributors. All reproduced by permission.—New Statesman and Society, v. 3, March 30, 1990; v. 5, April 10, 1992; v. 6, February 19, 1993; v. 6, July 16, 1993; v. 7, February 11, 1994; v. 7, February 18, 1994; v. 8, May 26, 1995; v. 8, October 20, 1995. Copyright © 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, by Statesman & Nation Publishing Company Ltd. All reproduced by permission.—New York Review of Books, v. 47, November 2, 2000; v. 48, August 9, 2001; v. 49, August 15, 2002. Copyright © 2000, 2001, 2002 Nyrev, Inc. All reproduced with permission from The New York Review of Books.—Observer, November 24, 2002. Copyright © Observer. Reproduced by permission of The Observer Limited, London.—Parnassus, v. 24, 2000 for "This Personal Maze Is Not the Prize" by Eric Murphy Selinger. Copyright © 2000 Poetry in Review Foundation, NY. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—*Poetry*, v. 173, February, 1999 for "Review of *Viper Rum*." by Leslie Ullman. Copyright © 1999 by the Modern Poetry Association. Reproduced by permission of the editor of Poetry and the author.—Publishers Weekly, v. 247, October 2, 2000; v. 248, July 23, 2001. Copyright © 2000, 2001 by Reed Publishing USA. Both reproduced from *Publishers Weekly*, published by the Bowker Magazine Group of Cahners Publishing Co., a division of Reed Publishing USA., by permission.—Quarterly Journal of Speech, v. 71, May, 1985 for "E.T. as Rhetorical Transcendence" by Janice Hocker Rushing. Copyright @ 1985 by the Speech Communication Association. Used by permission of Speech Communication Association and the author.—Review of Contemporary Fiction, v. 19, fall, 1999. Copyright © 1999. Reproduced by permission.—Science-Fiction Studies, v. 11, July, 1984. Copyright © 1984 by SFS Publications. Reproduced by permission.—Sight and Sound, v. 57, spring, 1988; v. 8, March, 1998; v. 11, September, 2001; v. 11, October, 2001; v. 13, February, 2003. Copyright © 1988, 1998, 2001, 2003 by the British Film Institute. All reproduced by permission.—Signs, v. 21, autumn, 1995. Copyright © 1995 by The University of Chicago. Reproduced by permission.—South Atlantic Quarterly, v. 97, spring, 1998. Copyright © 1998 by Duke University Press, Durham, NC. Used by permission.—Southern Humanities Review, v. 34, winter, 2000 for "Review of Viper Rum by Mary Karr," by Susan Churchill. Copyright © 2000 by Auburn University. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Southern Review, v. 33, winter, 1997 for "Mary Karr, Mary Karr, Mary Karr" by William Harmon. Copyright © 1997, by the author. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Spectator, v. 271, July 17, 1993; v. 275, November 4, 1995; v. 278, January 18, 1997; v. 279, July 19, 1997; v. 279, December 13, 1997; v. 282, May 29, 1999; v. 286, June 30, 2001; v. 287, September 29, 2001. Copyright © 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001 by The Spectator. All reproduced by permission of The Spectator.—Style, v. 34, spring, 2000 for "Psychoanalysis and Presuppositions" by Gustavo Guerra. Copyright © Style, 2000. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—Theoria, n. 98, December, 2001; n. 99, June, 2002; n. 101, June, 2003. All reproduced by permission.—Tikkun, v. 4, September-October, 1989. Copyright © 1989 Institute for Labor and Mental Health. Reproduced by permission of Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture & Society.— Times Literary Supplement, n. 4592, April 5, 1991; n. 4692, March 5, 1993; n. 4742, February 18, 1994; n. 4743, February 25, 1994; n. 4806, May 12, 1995; n. 4981, September 18, 1998; n. 5048, December 31, 1999; n. 5051, January 21, 2000; n. 5133, August 17, 2001; n. 5136, September 7, 2001. Copyright © The Times Supplements Limited 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001. All reproduced from The Times Literary Supplement by permission.—Women's Review of Books, v. 18, December, 2000 for "Hungry for More" by Alix Kates Shulman; v. 18, July, 2001 for "School of Wales" by Pamela Petro. Copyright © 2000, 2001, by Women's Review of Books. Both reproduced by permission of the respective authors.—World Literature Today, v. 76, spring, 2002. Copyright © 2002 by the University of Oklahoma Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL IN *CLC*, VOLUME 188, WAS REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:

Dunnigan, Sarah M. From "A. L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction: Articulate Grace," in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. Edited by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden. Edinburgh University Press, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by the contributors. Reproduced by permission.—Karr, Mary. From *Viper Rum*. New Directions, 1994. Copyright © 1994, by Mary Karr. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Lumsden, Alison. From "Scottish Women's Short Stories: Repositories of Life Swiftly Apprehended," in *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. Edited by Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden. Edinburgh University Press, 2000. Copyright © 2000 by the contributors. Reproduced by permission.—Mott, Donald R., and Cheryl McAllister Saunders. From *Steven Spielberg*. Twayne Publishers, 1986. Copyright © Twayne Publishers. Reproduced by permission of The Gale Group.

PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS APPEARING IN CLC, VOLUME 188, WERE RECEIVED FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

Karr, Mary, photograph. Copyright © Ralf-Finn Hestoft/Corbis Saba. Reproduced by permission.—Kennedy, A. L., photograph Copyright © Brian Tarr. Reproduced by permission of A. L. Kennedy.—Dreamworks executives and cofounders Steven Spielberg (left), Jeffrey Katzenberg (center), and David Geffen (right), at screening of *The Prince of Egypt*, Los Angeles, California, photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission.

Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board

The members of the Thomson Gale Literature Product Advisory Board—reference librarians from public and academic library systems—represent a cross-section of our customer base and offer a variety of informed perspectives on both the presentation and content of our literature products. Advisory board members assess and define such quality issues as the relevance, currency, and usefulness of the author coverage, critical content, and literary topics included in our series; evaluate the layout, presentation, and general quality of our printed volumes; provide feedback on the criteria used for selecting authors and topics covered in our series; provide suggestions for potential enhancements to our series; identify any gaps in our coverage of authors or literary topics, recommending authors or topics for inclusion; analyze the appropriateness of our content and presentation for various user audiences, such as high school students, undergraduates, graduate students, librarians, and educators; and offer feedback on any proposed changes/enhancements to our series. We wish to thank the following advisors for their advice throughout the year.

Barbara M. Bibel

Librarian
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Dr. Toby Burrows

Principal Librarian
The Scholars' Centre
University of Western Australia Library
Nedlands, Western Australia

Celia C. Daniel

Associate Librarian, Reference Howard University Washington, D.C.

David M. Durant

Reference Librarian Joyner Library East Carolina University Greenville, North Carolina

Nancy Guidry

Librarian Bakersfield Community College Bakersfield, California

Steven R. Harris

English Literature Librarian University of Tennessee Knoxville, Tennessee

Mary Jane Marden

Collection Development Librarian St. Petersburg College Pinellas Park, Florida

Heather Martin

Arts & Humanities Librarian University of Alabama at Birmingham, Sterne Library Birmingham, Alabama

Susan Mikula

Director Indiana Free Library Indiana, Pennsylvania

Thomas Nixon

Humanities Reference Librarian University of North Carolina, Davis Library Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Mark Schumacher

Jackson Library University of North Carolina Greensboro, North Carolina

Gwen Scott-Miller

Assistant Director Sno-Isle Regional Library System Marysville, Washington

Donald Welsh

Head, Reference Services College of William and Mary, Swem Library Williamsburg, Virginia

Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xv

Mary Karr 1955- American poet, memoirist, and essayist	1
A. L. Kennedy 1965	. 68
Steven Spielberg 1947 American director, novelist, and screenwriter	105
Slavoj Žižek 1949	258

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 349

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 447

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 459

CLC-188 Title Index 473

Mary Karr 1955-

(Born Mary Marlene Karr) American poet, memoirist, and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Karr's career through 2001.

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of her memoir The Liars' Club: A Memoir in 1995, Karr, already a respected poet, became a critically acclaimed, best-selling author. The Liars' Club remained on the New York Times best-seller list for over a year and won Karr the 1996 PEN Martha Albrand Award for first nonfiction. The Liars' Club, which takes place in a small industrial East Texas town during the mid-1960s when Karr was eight years old, conveys a strong sense of place and effectively evokes the powerful emotional climate of a family circle characterized by alcoholism, mental illness, and strong passions. Critics applauded Karr's use of narrative voice, inflected with the colloquial speech of East Texas and the unique perspective of a precocious young girl. The Liars' Club inspired a spate of memoirs written in the confessional mode. Cherry: A Memoir (2000), Karr's sequel to The Liars' Club, portrays Karr's adolescent years of intellectual and sexual awakening. While Karr is best known for her memoirs, her body of publications includes three volumes of poetry—Abacus (1987), The Devil's Tour (1993), and Viper Rum (1998). Karr has won the Pushcart prize for both her poetry and essays.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Karr was born January 16, 1955, in Groves, a small town in East Texas located in the Port Arthur region, known for its oil refineries and chemical plants. Although she has given the town in her memoirs a fictional name, her writing clearly evokes the social and cultural milieu of this region. Karr's father worked in an oil refinery while her mother was an amateur artist and business owner. Karr's sister, two years her elder, is a key figure in her memoirs. Karr developed an early interest in literature; she told a *Publishers Weekly* interviewer that, at the age of eleven, she wrote in a notebook that her ambition was "to write poetry and autobiography." Upon graduation from high school, she traveled with a group of friends to Los Angeles, where



she immersed herself in the lifestyle of the California hippie and surfer counter-cultures. Later that year, she enrolled in Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, but left school after two years to travel. Her political involvement in the anti-apartheid movement led her to meet African American poet Ethridge Knight who became an important influence on the development of her poetry. Karr eventually entered graduate school to study creative writing, and earned an M.F.A. from Goddard College in 1979. Among her mentors at Goddard was Tobias Wolff, whose memoir This Boy's Life served as a major influence on Karr's own writing. She also studied with noted poets Robert Bly and Robert Hass. Her first publication was a poem that appeared in Mother Jones magazine. Karr moved to Boston in 1980, where she held various jobs in the computer and telecommunications industries while continuing to write and publish poetry. In 1983 she married poet Michael Milburn, with whom she had a son, but the couple divorced in 1991. Karr has worked as an assistant professor at several colleges and universities, including Tufts

University, Emerson College, Harvard University, and Sarah Lawrence College. She teaches in the department of English at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York.

MAJOR WORKS

The Liars' Club and Cherry are set in the fictional town of Leechfield, Texas, based on Karr's home town. The events of The Liars' Club take place during the years 1961 to 1963, when Karr was seven and eight years old, recounting the traumatic events she experienced during that period in the context of her dysfunctional family life. The novel's title refers to the local American Legion pool room and bar, as well as the back room of a bait shop, where Karr's father and other local men socialized in their free time. Karr asserts that her father was the best storyteller, a skill Karr effectively developed in her own right. Karr's mother, an alcoholic and mentally unstable woman whose artistic and intellectual interests were stifled by small-town life, once burned all of the family's possessions and called the local police station to report that she had killed her two daughters, a confession that turned out to be untrue. Against this chaotic emotional backdrop, Karr reports being raped by a neighborhood boy at the age of seven and sexually assaulted by an adult male babysitter at the age of eight. The Liars' Club explores themes of truth, lies, memory, confession, and storytelling, a set of terms that overlap and merge as her memoir develops. The trope of the "liars' club" thus comes to encompass everyone who has ever told a story or recalled a personal memory, based on the idea that personal perspective belies the possibility of ever conveying objective truth. Cherry, the sequel to The Liars' Club, follows Karr's adolescent years. Cherry has been referred to as a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story, in which Karr develops a sense of individuality distinct from her family. While some of the most powerful scenes in Cherry are concerned with Karr's sexual awakening, it is also a memoir of her intellectual awakening and development as a budding writer. The first half of Cherry is narrated by Karr in the firstperson voice; the second half of the novel, however, switches to a second-person narrative address, thus suggesting that her own personal experiences as a teenager in the late 1960s and early 1970s were characteristic of an entire generation of adolescent girls.

Karr's poetry, like her memoirs, has been described as confessional, due to the frank revelations of self-doubt and dysfunctional family that are a common subject of her work. The settings of her poems are primarily of the same working-class East Texas milieu that is treated more extensively in her memoirs, and a number of the characters and incidents related in her poetry are

revisited in her memoirs. Karr's erudite references to classic literature are worked into her poetry juxtaposed against personal experiences of a hardscrabble childhood in her blue-collar hometown. Her poetry is characterized by brevity, clarity, meticulous detail, and careful attention to metrical form. She has developed a personal style of using the three-line stanza in many of her poems. The poems of Abacus are introspective reflections on personal relationships, love, friendship, and self-questioning. The Devil's Tour grapples with broader struggles of human existence and consciousness, exploring themes of death, mortality, evolution, and existential angst, as well as parenting and family relationships. The recurring motif of skull imagery in Devil's Tour invokes the themes of mortality and introspection. The poems in Viper Rum include reflections on Karr's personal life, her relationship with her parents, her struggles with alcoholism, and an awakening to religious sentiment. Karr's polemical essay "Against Decoration," originally published in 1990, is included at the end of Viper Rum. In "Against Decoration," Karr launches a critique of the neo-formalist trend in contemporary poetry, which she faults for lacking in emotion and clarity. Karr argues that, "[t]o pay so little attention to the essentially human elements of a poem makes a monster of poetry's primary emotional self, its very reason for being, so that the art becomes exclusively decorative and at times grotesque." Commentators have noted that Karr's own poetry generally lives up to the aesthetic standards she espouses in "Against Decoration."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Karr has been lauded for her savvy storytelling, lyrical prose, vivid, sensual detail, emotional honesty, humor, and ability to capture the colloquial speech of smalltown East Texas in her memoirs. She has been noted for her frank yet nonjudgmental portrayal of her father and mother, which effectively expresses both the love and the pain associated with each parent. Many reviewers have commented that themes of sexual abuse and dysfunctional family are handled by Karr without the bitterness, self-pity, melodrama, or sentimentality that characterizes many confessional memoirs. Cyra McFadden has observed that Karr "is blessed with a sense of humor that allows her to see whatever happens to her, good, bad or terrible, as just one more example of chaos theory at work." The Liars' Club is undoubtedly Karr's most highly regarded work. Reviewers admired her use of narrative voice in The Liars' Club, which convincingly portrays the perspective of a young girl. M. Joy Gorence observed that Karr's narrative voice in The Liars' Club expresses "the innocence of a young child but with the understanding of an adult." The Liars' Club also earned admiration for being skillfully written, powerfully expressive, and entertaining to read. Cherry,

while generally liked, has been judged by a number of reviewers as flawed in its use of narrative voice. Such critics felt that the first-person voice in the first half of the story is effective, but the abrupt shift to second-person voice in latter half constitutes a serious flaw in the narrative. Karr's poetry, while not attracting a wide popular readership, is highly regarded by critics. Her use of language has been consistently praised, especially her formal meter capturing the rhythms of everyday speech, her evocative imagery, and her meticulous attention to detail. As with her memoirs, critics applauded Karr's ability to express strong emotions and describe poignant situations without lapsing into melodrama or sentimentality.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Abacus (poetry) 1987
The Devil's Tour (poetry) 1993
The Liars' Club: A Memoir (memoir) 1995
Viper Rum (poetry and essays) 1998
Cherry: A Memoir (memoir) 2000

CRITICISM

Mary Karr (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: Karr, Mary. "Against Decoration." In *Viper Rum*, pp. 49-72. New York, N.Y.: New Directions, 1998.

[In the following essay, which was originally published in Parnassus magazine in 1991, Karr expounds her opinions on modern poetic techniques and presents a critique of contemporary neo-formalist poetry, arguing that it lacks both emotion and clarity.]

1

Decoration abounds in contemporary poetry, much of it marching beneath the banner of neo-formalism. Actually a mix of strict form and free verse, the new formalist poems juggle rhyme, meter, and various syllabic and stanzaic strategies. In the last ten years, the movement has generated a rush of anthologies, such as Robert Richman's *The Direction of Poetry: Rhymed and Metered Verse Written in the English Language since 1975*. Richman, the poetry editor of the neo-conservative *New Criterion*, selects not only distinguished writers such as the late James Merrill. John Hollander, and

Anthony Hecht (all of whom, by the way, have served as chancellors for the Academy of American Poets), but also from the forty-something generation that includes Michael Blumenthal, Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Brad Leithauser, and Rosanna Warren. This book produced one outraged notice by poet-critic Ira Sadoff, who in an issue of *The American Poetry Review* called neoformalism "A Dangerous Nostalgia," linking it to the political conservatism of the eighties. Once a poetry movement can boast an anthology, a starting date, and a metaphorically machine-gunning detractor, it qualifies as a movement—even if it lacks a coherent manifesto.

The fault, of course, doesn't lie with form per se. The late Amy Clampitt rarely employed strict forms, yet her work is almost exclusively ornamental, particularly in her overuse of historical references, which seem to increase in their obscurity over the course of her books. Her Collected Poems came out this year to vague but unanimous praise. It's easier to know what Clampitt's read than what she's writing about (the notes for Westward consume four-and-a-half pages). Critics have called her obscure, polysyllabic diction a long-awaited return to high language, likening her to Hopkins, Keats, and Milton. But Clampitt's purple vocabulary sounds to me like a parody of the Victorian silk that Pound sought to unravel. This passage could be Swinburne on acid or Tennyson gone mad with his thesaurus. In it, the sun is rising or setting:

Seamless equipose of crossing: Nox primordial half-shape above the treadle, the loomed fabric of the sun god's ardor foreshortened, with a roar as if of earthly fire.

(from "Winchester: The Autumn Equinox")

Influential critics have cheered Clampitt's linguistic intricacy for its own sake. And the appreciation for ornament extends to others. In April 1990, *The New Republic* carried Helen Vendler's seminal review of Merrill's *The Inner Room* beneath the telling headline "In Praise of Perfume." There, she aligned Merrill with writers "interested in intricacy of form, and a teasing obliqueness of content." In Merrill's "Losing the Marbles," Vendler enjoys a kind of crossword puzzle challenge:

A poem-manuscript has been rained on, and some of its words obliterated. On its half unreadable "papyrus," the poem looks like one of Sappho's enigmatic fragments:

body, favorite gleaned, at the vital frenzy—

—and so on, for seven stanzas. The game is to deduce what the poem's lost cells may have been holding. . . . We become, with Merrill, scholars of the papyrus, hunters for lost words—and find ourselves (in a mockery of classical scholarly reconstructions) wholly mistaken.

There's something scary about Vendler's enthusiasm for the poem as scholastic game, particularly when her efforts leave her "wholly mistaken." I always thought that poetry's primary purpose was to stir emotion, and that one's delight in dense idiom or syntax or allusion served a secondary one. I don't mind, for instance, working hard to read *Paradise Lost*, because I return to Milton for the terror and hubris Satan embodies. If, as Vendler suggests, the sport of decoding a poem is its central pleasure, then one would no more reread such a poem than one would bother reworking an acrostic already solved. Indeed, such a poem would become disposable after one reading, the "game" played.

Yet the affection for decorative poetry extends beyond Vendler to other powerful critics, poets, and publishers: Vendler begat Clampitt and others; Harold Bloom begat John Ashbery and the poetics of coy adorableness, which in turn begat Language Poetry; Merrill begat a string of ornament-spouting progeny through his service at Yale University Press and the Academy, as well as through his general pull with New York publishers (his blurbissimo on book jackets was famous); Alice Quinn, poetry editor for The New Yorker, begat the flowery, emotionally dim poems that one typically reads in that magazine; ad nauseam.

The argument against decoration, however, runs as far back as literary criticism itself. Aristotle called metaphors of all kinds the mere "seasoning of the meat," and believed that clarity resided instead in "everyday words." Cicero and Horace basically elaborated this dichotomy between seasoning and substance. Ancient rhetoricians admonished writers to avoidamong other things—excessive use of tropes. These elaborate figures of speech could, it was argued, overdecorate a work and reduce its power to convey feeling. In fact, the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics tells us that the poet and orator in the early Christian era had to justify the use of a limited number of tropes by demonstrating the extremity of his or her own feeling. In other words, unless the orator could convey the depth and sincerity of his or her own experience, the use of tropes fell into the realm of mere decoration. That's how I often feel about much of today's popular work: The poet concentrates so fixedly on the poem's minute needlework that he or she fails to notice—like a blind man with the elephant in the old fable—that the work involves only one square inch of a tapestry draped across an enormous beast, and that the beast is moving.

I define two sins popular in much of today's poetry—particularly the neo-formalist stuff—which signify decoration and can starve a poem of value:

1. Absence of emotion. What should I as a reader feel? This grows from but is not equivalent to what the speaker/author feels. Questioning a poem's central emotion steers me beyond the poem's ostensible subject and surface lovelinesses to its ultimate effect. Purely decorative poetry leaves me cold.

2. Lack of clarity. The forms of obscurity in decorative poetry are many and insidious: references that serve no clear purpose, for instance, or ornate diction that seeks to elevate a mundane experience rather than clarify a remarkable one. Lack of clarity actually alienates a reader and prevents any emotional engagement with the poem.

Again, I do not decry decorative elements in a poem per se. One can with perfect legitimacy use a reference or create an elaborately metaphoric or linguistic surface in a poem. But when those elements become final ends, rather than acting as a conduit for a range of feelings, poetry ceases to perform its primary function: to move the reader. To pay so little attention to the essentially human elements of a poem makes a monster of poetry's primary emotional self, its very reason for being, so that the art becomes exclusively decorative and at times grotesque. Like cats in jewelry or babies in makeup, the ornaments detract from rather than illuminate their subjects.

ABSENCE OF EMOTION

We can marshal evidence for the emotional vacuity of ornamental verse with the example of Merrill, who may well have been the first emperor of the new formalism. I contend that this emperor wore no clothes—or, to use a more accurate metaphor, that the ornamental robes existed, but the emperor himself was always missing—a surprising state of affairs, since Merrill was among the most revered and ubiquitous poets of his generation: He boasted two National Book Awards, the Bollingen, the Pulitzer, and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Merrill's chief talent is his mastery of elegant language. And in his earlier work, the complexity of language and metaphor applies to human dramas that are grounded enough in the world to move a reader. In "Charles on Fire," for example, we hear some privileged young men at dinner discussing the difference between "uncommon physical good looks," which are believed to "launch one," and "intellectual and spiritual values," without which "you are sunk." In this poem, Merrill gives us far more narrative data than he bothers with in his more recent books. Knowing certain physical and social facts, the reader can become sufficiently engaged in the poem to marvel at Merrill's sparing use of ornament. Here is the final two-thirds of the poem:

Long-suffering Charles, having cooked and served the meal.

Now brought out little tumblers finely etched He filled with amber liquid and then passed. "Say," said the same young man, "in Paris, France, They do it this way"—bounding to his feet And touching a lit match to our host's full glass. A blue flame, gentle, beautiful, came, went Above the surface. In a hush that fell We heard the vessel crack. The contents drained As who should step down from a crystal coach.

Steward of spirits, Charles's glistening hand All at once gloved itself in eeriness.

The moment passed. He made two quick sweeps and Was flesh again. "It couldn't matter less,"

He said, but with a shocked, unconscious glance Into the mirror. Finding nothing changed,

He filled a fresh glass and sank down among us.

Charles literally serves, and serves to contrast with his guests, who seem more foppish than he. In fact, Charles draws the poet's pretty diction by bringing out "little tumblers finely etched," a phrase that throws in lovely sideways relief the noise of "filled with amber liquid." This diction is juxtaposed with the poem's plain speech, something which—like narrative clarity—Merrill rarely employs in later work. At the instant the liquor catches fire, Merrill's staccato suspends us for an instant. Here's a wonderful example of a transforming moment that requires its adjectives and commas and one-syllable words to hold us at a key instant: "A blue flame, gentle, beautiful, came, went / Above the surface." And how convincing and surprising is the higher diction in the next lines when Charles, like Cinderella's footman "down from a crystal coach," briefly enters the realm of fire: "Steward of spirits, Charles's glistening hand / All at once gloved itself in eeriness." After this, the diction again irons out, becomes plain. "The moment passed. He made two quick sweeps and / Was flesh again. 'It couldn't matter less,' / He said. . . ." When Charles finds nothing changed about his outward appearance, he returns from the consuming to the mundane, from fire to flesh. In doing so, he literally sinks to the level of the others. Here the poet never embellishes a line with blowsy diction or froufrou unless it warrants such decor.

Parts of Merrill's later work show the old sparkle, but often the flourishes obscure the central subject, render it meaningless. Here, from *The Inner Room*, is "Serenade" in toto:

Here's your letter the old portable Pecked out so passionately as to crack The larynx. I too dream of "times We'll share." Across the river: MUTUAL LIFE.

Flush of a skyline. Owning up to past Decorum, present insatiety, Let corporate proceedings one by one Be abstracted to mauve onionskin,

Lit stories rippling upside down in thought Be stilled alike of drift and personnel, Then, only then, the lyric I-lessness At nightfall banked upon renew

Today's unfolder. Whose lips part. Heard now In his original setting—voice and reeds— As music for a god, your page Asks to be held so that the lamp shines through

And stars appear instead of periods.

Merrill never clarifies the central characters in this memory, or the relation between the you and I. A serenade suggests a night song played under the balcony of the beloved. And the poem hints at tremendous feeling—the letter so passionately typed that the periods have pounded holes in the paper. But never does the poet furnish the information required by the reader to understand and, thereby, feel moved. Instead, one small question after another niggles me. I don't know who serenades whom, so I don't know whether the letter writer's larvnx cracks or the reader-poet's larvnx cracks. If the former, typing does not touch the larynx; if the latter, there's a sick bathos to having one's voice crack while singing one's own poem. I don't know what "past decorum" and "present insatiety" mean, and I very much want to, because it sounds sexual. Unfortunately, the only excerpt from the letter is as meaningless a line as can be found on any Hallmark card, "I too dream of 'times / We'll share.'" The idea and tone suggest a foggy yearning, yet the source of that yearning remains blurred. Merrill's peculiar diction, however, seizes our attention: We guess at some business association with that official-sounding language; then we slip into gushlike "lyric I-lessness / At nightfall." The final stanza seems to allude to the famous musical duel between Apollo and Marsyas (the god won, and Marsyas was flayed and nailed to a tree for his arrogance), yet the reference seems dragged in (kicking and screaming, in my opinion) solely to demonstrate the writer's erudition. I never understand any clear link between Apollo and Marsyas and the two characters in the poem, or between the poet serenading and the letter writer's starstudded letter. We guess that a parallel exists, but how does it illuminate the poem's human situation?

I can only conclude that Merrill didn't mind these obscurities of character and metaphor, which leave us to gape at the poem's gorgeous surface—the mixed diction, the clever double entendre of "MUTUAL LIFE." Indeed, this surface seems the poet's final goal. Merrill wants to dazzle us, perhaps, with his dexterity and his ability to crank out metaphors, yet he doesn't value the ostensible subject here enough to communicate narrative data about it. The subject barely merits his attention at all, acting only as a backdrop for glittery pushpins of language and metaphor.

My test for a poem's emotional clarity is this elementary exercise: Can you fill in a blank about a poem's subject with an emotional word? The Waste Land, for instance, is a poem about spiritual despair. It is also about lots of ideas, not least of which is a twentieth-century decay of faith which precipitates that despair. But it strives to create that despair in the reader. That's why I return to it, not to test my knowledge of Greek myth and the Upanishads (references to which I had to look up initially anyway), but to rediscover the gravity of certain ideas with the conviction that is only born of feeling.

In my view, emotion in a reader derives from reception of a clear rendering of primal human experiences: fear of death, desire, loss of love, celebration of being. To spark emotion, a poet must strive to attain what Aristotle called simple clarity. The world that the reader apprehends through his or her senses must be clearly painted, even if that world is wholly imaginary, as, say, in much of the work of Wallace Stevens.

In Merrill's later poems, intricate surface and form seem like mere amusements, rather than paths to or from human experience. Such decoration cuts a great gulf between form and meaning, with form favored over an attempt to communicate, word divorced from world, a kind of brittle cleverness supplanting emotion, wit elevated above clarity.

Contrast Merrill's poetry with that of Seamus Heaney, who works in form and still attends scrupulously to the human and sensory data that ultimately prompt emotion. Heaney proves, as do centuries of formal verse, that form and ornament do not in and of themselves diminish a poem's emotional possibilities. He never lets linguistic loveliness or metaphoric surface deter him from the primary task of inspiring feeling, nor does he seek to mystify facts by draping them in veil after veil of metaphor. The metaphoric and linguistic prettinesses balance somehow; they seem carefully chosen to move us. Heaney's sonnet sequence about his mother's death, in The Haw Lantern, elegantly and economically sends us all the sensory and social information we need to enter the poem's world. Here is the third sonnet from "Clearances":

When all the others were away at Mass I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.

They broke the silence, let fall one by one Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:

Cold comforts set between us, things to share Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.

And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes

From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
And some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives—
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Heaney begins the poem with gentle end rhymes, sometimes settling for mere consonance—Mass and potatoes, one and iron, share and water, bedside and head. He doesn't hit the reader on the skull with the form at first. Like Shakespeare, who endlessly varied his iambic pentameter, Heaney doesn't want the poem's noise to weight too heavily on the ear and risk obliterating the more colloquial noises, for the poem consists of natural speech: The priest "went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying."

But after the volta—that space between the big stanza and the small one that traditionally marks a turn in the sonnet—Heaney moves to the present reality, his mother's deathbed, where he remembers their intimacy over the chore of peeling potatoes. Here the meter strengthens, becomes more regular, more heavily stressed. In doing so, it gathers force. The image of the two heads bent toward each other as they peel potatoes, forever near yet forever apart, like saints in stained glass, is luminous. "Her breath in mine" is also touching: on first reading because of the physical closeness that the two almost choose to ignore by tending to their chore; on second reading because we realize that she shared her breath with him in utero, then lost that breath on her deathbed. Yes, the dipping knives are adjectivally "fluent," and thereby reminiscent of speech, but the resulting metaphor-fluent, expressive silence-neither distracts from nor conflicts with the human drama under study. Rather the metaphor enhances. The bucket of water subtly conjures both holy water and the life-giving fluid of the womb—the waters that cleanse us and slosh us forth into the world. The fluency of the knives echoes the way music—in this case potato peels weeping from a knife into water—"bring[s] us to our senses." By the remembered sound of the water, the poet recreates in us that rare intimacy. And Heaney has no trouble making a direct statement of feeling at poem's end. Whereas Merrill would cling to emotional obliquity, Heaney earns the right to the weighty yet musical directness of his last line: "Never closer the whole rest of our lives."

LACK OF CLARITY

All too many contemporary poems, particularly those in the burgeoning neo-formalist canon, shy away from passion. For example, the vast majority of *New Yorker* poems favor botanical subjects, and seldom travel any farther than the poet's flower bed. Or when poets pretend to more earnest topics, the formal elements—mere surface, the pattern in the lace, if you will—replace emotional, rhetorical, and sensory clarity. The forms of obscurity are many and insidious. I set forth the following list of those that bothered me when reading Richman's anthology:

- 1. Obscurity of character. Who is speaking to whom and why? What relation do the characters in the poem hold to each other? How should the reader perceive them? Even in poems that assume the intimate tone of direct speech, with the reader as eavesdropper, I seldom—in the work of Merrill or Leithauser, say—understand the relationship between the characters, or even their identities in the most prosaic sense. Are they male or female; friends, lovers, or relatives; intimates, strangers; etc.?
- 2. Foggy physical world. Where are we, and why does the poem occur here rather than elsewhere? Often physical reality remains so out of focus, with shifts in locale merely used for shifts in tone, that it's likely that the reader will be baffled. Again, I invoke Stevens's work to exemplify a wildly imagined series of overlapping places, yet each rendered precisely and appropriately.