

NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard



Albert Murray is eighty-nine years old. *THE MAGIC KEYS* (Pantheon, \$24) is the fourth volume in his “Scooter” series of autobiographical novels. But the hero is still in his twenties and we haven’t yet reached World War II. Murray clearly isn’t interested in the anguished trajectories of traditional fiction, the shameful secrets of confessional memoir, the vehement dithyrambs of the pamphleteer, nor in settling scores or finding God. In its lyrical passage from down-home Alabama to the great cities and the Mother Goose realm of “Phil-

tyred blacks to help white journalists and lawyers discover scruple.) Scooter was *chosen*. He was chosen outside Mobile, Alabama, before he entered the third grade; a teacher, Lexine Metcalf, identified him as one of the Talented Tenth, the precious few who must make up for a silent many: “Who if not you, my splendid young man?” Being chosen meant fairy godmothers, demanding mentors, and scholarship money. Looking back at

his Gulf Coast boyhood from a Tuskegee College spyglass tree, Scooter sees that he brought with him not only dog fennel, crepe myrtle, crawfish, and mattress moss but a density of nurturing cultures—Choctaw, Creole, and Cajun; buccaneers and runaway slaves; buffalo soldiers, Pullman porters, and barbershop pols. At Tuskegee, before venturing north, he is introduced to Egypt, Rome, Chaucer, and Proust; Thorstein Veblen and Roger Fry; Snake, his polymathic roommate, Hortense Hightower, the blues lady singer who gives him a bass fiddle, and Giles Cunningham, who gives him a gun; plus Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Ma Rainey, and Jelly Roll Morton.

“Metronome time is mathematics, Schoolboy,” a musician tells Scooter. “Pulse is *soul*.” To this wisdom add what another character says about magic keys—“some sharp, some flat, some natural; some solid gold, some sterling silver”—and you’d think our Don Quixote had everything he needed to riff on the afterbeat. Except that being chosen doesn’t mean you know what to make of yourself. On the road in *The Seven League Boots* with Bossman’s blues band, Scooter in *The Magic Keys* finally arrives in New York, already married to Eunice, enrolled at NYU, and hooked up with the dapper novelist Taft Edison (Ralph Ellison) and the hyper artist Roland Beasley (Romare Bearden). But he is still looking for himself. So he will abandon this rich Manhattan material—the creation myth of the postwar black intelligentsia—to return to Tuskegee, teach literature, and ghost the autobiography of the bluesman

Royal Highness (Count Basie). Three remarkable things about this extraordinary project: First, Scooter accepts the burden of his being special and therefore obliged to give something back to his people.

Second, everybody in the novel—teachers, musicians, friends, neighbors, shopkeepers—believes in his destiny, helps him along, wishes him well,



makes room and allowances. Third, nobody in the novel is white.

Mary Wollstonecraft had it a lot harder in the eighteenth century than Scooter did in the twentieth. She had to raise and sustain herself. Having abused Mary's mother into the grave, her father succumbed to sottish drink. An older brother reserved such family fortunes as there were for himself. Women, of course, were not allowed to go to college. And her sisters depended on her for everything. Whereas Mary, except for the single printer who paid her for her novels and the nonfiction books she wrote on child-rearing, public health, the French Revolution, and women's rights, had no one reliable on whom to depend—not the families who might or might not need a governess, nor the parents who hired and fired her as a teacher of their children, nor the men in her intimate life who could never be counted on to ante up for homely bourgeois comforts either because they were too busy smuggling, spying, or real-estate swindling (the American adventurer and faux frontiersman Gilbert Imlay, father of her first child) or too pure of mind and too proud to compromise with the marketplace (the radical philosopher William Godwin, father of her second child, whose birthing finished Mary off at age thirty-eight).

In her fierce and wonderful new biography, *VINDICATION: A LIFE OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT* (HarperCollins, \$29.95), Lyndall Gordon glides on silver oars over the deep waters of English lit, dipping here into letters, there into polemic, yonder a novel or a memoir. She seems to have moved into Mary's apartments, even to have put on her skin. But she is also reading her as a dazzling character on the brilliant page—complicated but not at all contradictory; self-educated (but who better was there to teach her till Godwin finally took the plunge?); rounded, and wry. It is Gordon's thesis that this founding mother of feminism—far from being a strident caricature, a disap-

pointed rationalist, a wanton sensualist, or a despondent basket case—was brave, tireless, resilient, authentic, original, an exploder of exhausted and/or clichéd literary genres, an eloquent proponent of a better world of nonviolent nurturing, and in many ways a model of the rich new female characters who would show up in Jane Austen, as well as in novels by Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James (about all of whom Gordon has also written biographies).

To be sure, Wollstonecraft once tried to drown herself. But on reading Gordon we are persuaded she had cause. Yes, she waited a long time to fall at last in love, and a lot of good it didn't do her. Yet you could say the same about the Jacobin terror she lived through in Paris, from which the likes of Wordsworth ran so fearfully away. Unescorted on the barricades, she tested her principles instead of trimming them. So what if she would die with many of her causes seemingly lost? She was right, Burke was wrong, and at least her daughter would survive Shelley to dream up *Frankenstein*.

Victor S. Navasky has likewise never trimmed a principle, although the same cannot be said about his budgets. In his long career as an editor, he has known almost every serious writer in America and has always tried to get away with paying them less than they deserved ("the high two figures!" his old friend Calvin Trillin famously remarked). This is because there will forever be another batch of grabby writers, but there is only one little magazine like *The Nation*, and Navasky is betrothed to its survival. He explains why in *A MATTER OF OPINION* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$26), his graceful mix of memoir and meditation on journals of opinion and the stubborn enthusiasts who end up running them. From his boyhood at Rudolph Steiner and the Little Red School House; to his undergraduate career at Swarthmore College; to Yale Law days and the satire magazine *Monocle*; to the *New*

York Times and books on the Hollywood witch-hunt and Robert Kennedy's Department of Justice; to his annunciation almost three decades ago as chief pooh-bah of a radical weekly that has lost money ever since the Civil War and his latter-day rustication at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism—Navasky knows everybody. He even knows me, and has done so ever since I panned *Monocle* in my college newspaper in the late fifties, after which, characteristically, he asked me to write for him. He does this, with a friendly smile behind the beard but teeth that never let go. Oddly enough for a man of honor in an era of opportunists who would run you down with the tricycles of their careers, Navasky is a sort of nonprofit power broker or dating service. He hears of jobs and puts people in them, and then he expects a reciprocal courtesy, as if socialism were still the horizon of the world.

A Matter of Opinion wants us to think about journalism instead of profit-making; about how to keep a weekly magazine afloat while it says unpopular things and its own employees are themselves so meanly paid that office politics get ideologized into matters of first principle; about fact-checking and lawsuits and offensive ads and bigfoot media conglomerates and governments that lie to us. As such it is full of strong philosophical medicine and nutritious anecdotes about I. F. Stone, Ralph Nader, E. L. Doctorow, Susan Sontag, Henry Kissinger, Jürgen Habermas, William F. Buckley Jr., and Norman Podhoretz, not to mention the Hiss case and the Rosenbergs. It is also full of jokes, because the Navasky who started *Monocle*, who first published Calvin Trillin and Nora Ephron, just can't help himself. But mostly, and this is the astonishment in our buzzy, greedy, craven time of agitprop cable, hate radio, white noise, blue meanies, and crybaby blogs, he is reminding us that the world is still unjust, and that there ought to be a whole lot more of us on the other side of the fence with Eugene V. Debs: "While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." ■



DAY-TRIPPER

The mundane raptures of Ian McEwan

By Jennifer Szalai

Discussed in this essay:

Saturday, by Ian McEwan. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005. 289 pages. \$26.



Ian McEwan is a writer for whom critical praise and commercial success seem to come with a polished ease. His ninth novel, *Atonement*, published in 2001, earned the favor of both reviewers and readers, who lauded McEwan's exquisite prose, the satisfying narrative, and the element of formal ambition revealed at the novel's end. Born in England in 1948, McEwan had already established himself there as the leading light of a generation that began scribbling in the 1970s, avoiding, as he did, the manic excesses of Martin Amis while navigating his way around the chilly waters of Julian Barnes. Even the mixed

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reviews that greeted *Amsterdam* (1998)—a rather lurid novel replete with treachery, cross-dressing, and mutual homicide—failed to deter the bestowal of a Booker Prize.

Saturday, which takes place on February 15, 2003, the day of the London protests against the Iraq war, has already been exalted in the British press as the culmination of McEwan's gifts: "wonderfully involving and affecting on every page," enthused one reviewer; "undoubtedly McEwan's best," burred (and, in effect, blurbed) another. The reverential unanimity prompted a columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* to muse, "Will anyone ever say anything bad about Ian McEwan's

novel" (though she herself managed to insert a perfunctory "For the record, I think *Saturday* is an exceptionally good book. . . . I was fascinated by its themes"). The smattering of British reviews that dared to put forth any misgivings modeled themselves on what my father, irritated by coy peer reviews in scientific journals, liked to call "the shit sandwich": effusive compliments at the beginning and at the end, with the qualms stuffed in between.

Reviewers seemed so enamored of McEwan's political timeliness (terrorism and the Iraq war loom large) that they effectively ignored the way in which the elements of *Saturday* hang together as a novel, suggesting that a generous trust was afforded him. But pious criticism that treats the author as

a brand, one whose celebrity is allowed to interfere with a close reading of the words on the page, is, in a sense, an affront to both author and novel, because the work isn't really being read. With *Saturday*, McEwan, whose talents are considerable, has written a profoundly flawed book that is marbled by moments of beauty—elegant episodes that interrupt a narrative shuffled along by a hyperrational protagonist and punctuated, somewhat inexplicably, by an overwrought ending.

McEwan's admirers, along with McEwan himself, have insisted on two distinct phases in his writing career—an oeuvre cleaved, after a decade of short, eerie fiction laced with darkness and menace, by a turn toward more intricate plots and an engagement with actual, historical events. The latter phase is generally promoted as the more "mature" work, whereas the early fiction—which includes two short-story collections, *First Love*, *Last Rites* (1975) and *In Between the Sheets* (1978); and two novels, *The Cement Garden* (1978) and *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981)—is dismissed as the grisly, despairing stuff of a young writer looking to startle (incest makes several appearances, as do murder and other iniquities). In a 2002 interview with *The Paris Review*, McEwan laments the "Ian McAbre' thing" that has dogged him ever since—"Sometimes I think I'll never quite escape my early reputation"—and explains his decision to write himself out of "formally simple and linear short fiction [that is] claustrophobic, desocialized, sexually strange, dark": "By the time I set out on a new novel in 1983, *The Child in Time*, I was thinking in terms of precise physical locations, and times—even time itself—and of social texture and a degree of formal ambition."

The Child in Time was certainly a departure, though McEwan's purge of his previous preoccupations was as radical as a scorched-earth policy: the novel gorges itself on events (a child-snatching, a car accident, a suicide, a meeting with the prime minister, a vigorous love-making session followed immediately by a weepy birthing session), dabbles in magical realism, and ties everything together in a mawkish

finale. His novels since then have ranged from the garish hyperbole of *Amsterdam* to the tender intelligence of *Black Dogs* and *Atonement*, but even his best work exhibits a compulsion toward narrative tidiness, a schematic story-telling that makes everything explicit. He creates worlds in which ambiguity is banished; he declares rather than insinuates, explains rather than reveals.

Saturday is another serving of clarity and scruple, eased along by the character of Henry Perowne, an eminently reasonable neurosurgeon who begins his day at 3:40 A.M. by looking out the window of his London town house and seeing what appears to be an airplane on fire. The forty-eight-year-old Henry recognizes that if he “were inclined to religious feeling, to supernatural explanations, he could play with the idea that he’s been summoned [by] an external intelligence which wants to show or tell him something of significance.” But with his impeccable logic, he surveys the scenario and concludes,

among so many millions there are bound to be people staring out of windows when normally they would be asleep. . . . That it should be him and not someone else is an arbitrary matter. A simple anthropic principle is involved. The primitive thinking of the supernaturally inclined amounts to what his psychiatric colleagues call a problem or an idea of reference. An excess of the subjective, the ordering of the world in line with your needs, an inability to contemplate your own unimportance. In Henry’s view such reasoning belongs on a spectrum at whose far end, rearing like an abandoned temple, lies psychosis.

Efficiently demystifying the situation for himself (and for the reader too), Henry embarks upon a day that is to include a much-anticipated game of squash, a visit to his mother in her nursing home, and a dinner party for his family.

It is also, however, the day of the antiwar protests, and traffic snarls prompt Henry into a fender bender with a BMW conveying three thugs, one of whom, Baxter, shows hints of the early signs of Huntington’s disease. Neurologist Henry is quick to compute the symptoms in his mind (“poor self-control, emotional lability, explosive temper, suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding

sites on striatal neurons”), even as Baxter and his crew are moving in to give the good doctor a beating. Henry manages to escape with only a blow to the chest and proceeds to his squash match, the supreme significance of which he deliberates in his mind beforehand: “winning his game will be an assertion of his privacy. He has a right now and then—everyone has it—not to be disturbed by world events, or even street events. . . . Freedom of thought. He’ll emancipate himself by beating [his American colleague, Jay] Strauss.”

At this point in the novel, we’ve already been privy to Henry’s musings on everything from the innovative marvel of his triple-bladed razor with its “cleverly arched and ridged jungle-green handle” to the impending war in Iraq—which Henry, having treated an Iraqi professor tortured by the Baathist regime and learning “the sickly details of genocides,” waveringly supports. He also ruminates upon terrorism and radical Islamists, noting how “the pursuit of utopia ends up licensing every form of excess, all ruthless means of its realization.” Utopian projects are of course pathetic to someone who derives such intense pleasure from life as it already is (life, that is to say, as it already is for a well-off neurosurgeon in his Fitzrovia town house). Even the hot-water kettle in his kitchen sparks another reverie and a contented sigh: “What simple accretions have brought the humble kettle to this peak of refinement: jug-shaped for efficiency, plastic for safety, wide spout for ease of filling, and clunky little platform to pick up the power. . . . The world should take note: not everything is getting worse.”

So Dr. Henry Perowne prefers the material world of things to the metaphysical one of belief. Because of McEwan’s skillful rendering of everything tangible in Henry’s day, this is something we probably would have been able to figure out for ourselves. Yet McEwan refuses to show us anything without telling us too: “A man who attempts to ease the miseries of failing minds by repairing brains is bound to respect the material world, its limits, and what it can sustain.” Henry is a perfectly transparent, intelligible character—transparent and intelligible to us and, apparently, to himself as well.

Henry’s mother, however, isn’t amenable to such comprehension; Lily Perowne suffers from vascular dementia, and Henry visits her after his portentous game of squash has ended. The scene with Henry and his mother is beautifully and affectingly described, an interlude of unsentimental tenderness and quiet despair in a novel that otherwise makes everything explicable. Tiny strokes are devouring Lily’s memories and, with them, her ability to make any sense of the world around her. Their conversation is both poignant and absurd, as Henry’s mother teeters between sense and nonsense, the miscellaneous clauses jangling against one another:

“And you know that this . . . you know, Aunty, what people put on their shoes to make them . . . you know?”

“Shoe polish?” He never understands why she calls him Aunty, or which of her many aunts are haunting her.

“No, no. They put it all over their shoes and rub it with a cloth. Well, anyway, it’s a bit like shoe polish. It’s that sort of thing. We had side plates and God knows what, all along the street. We had everything but the right thing because we were in the wrong place.”

Henry the neurosurgeon can parse his mother’s medical condition, and while he’s visiting Lily “the tragedy of her situation will be obscured behind the banality of detail, of managing the suffocating minutes, of inattentive listening.” But this tragedy of a once-vibrant woman’s withering connection to the world ultimately defies explanation; it lies outside the realm of satisfactory cause and effect. There’s little that Henry can do, other than visit his mother and accept her inevitable decline: “The hard part is . . . when the woman she once was haunts him as he stands by the front door and leans down to kiss her goodbye. That’s when he feels like he’s betraying her, leaving her behind in her shrunken life, sneaking away to the riches, the secret hoard of his own existence.”

When Henry does eventually leave the nursing home, he returns to his familiar world of assuredness. He attends an afternoon concert by his eighteen-year-old son, Theo, whose talents as a jazz musician provide Henry with a chance to have a bit of a boogie, even if the loosening up is confined to his

mind. Again, the experience is annotated for us, and the ineffable power of music isn't allowed just to be; it's intellectualized, overtly linked to the ideological utopias that Henry typically disdains:

There are these rare moments when musicians play together . . . when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself. Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone, for ever—mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' state, the ideal Islamic state. Only in music, and only on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalizingly conjured, before fading away with the last notes.

Henry, you see (and you see it because McEwan won't allow you not to see it), is venturing outside the


limits of his rational universe—the music touches him in a way that his ordinary, material concerns cannot. This divide between feeling and reason is something that McEwan has explored in previous novels, such as *Black Dogs* and *Enduring Love*, and it resurfaces in *Saturday* as a distinction that intrudes rather than insinuates itself upon almost every page in the book. Henry's twenty-three-year-old daughter, Daisy, is a poet who, like her brother, provides an obvious foil to Henry's excruciating rationality, though her efforts to rattle him haven't been so successful. She gives Henry novels to read, including *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, and—since he reads the novels as literal documents about adultery in nineteenth-century France and Russia—they leave him “unmoved.”


All of this is really a prelude to the grand opera of McEwan's ending, which rivals *Enduring Love* for whatever prize might be given for histrionic silliness with a home-invasion scene. That evening, as the

dinner party for the Perowne family is about to begin, our sensible hero finds himself in the most bewildering of situations: Baxter and his mate, the thugs from that morning's fender bender, barge into the town house, hold a knife against Henry's wife, and force Daisy to undress. Daisy trembles as she removes her clothing, and . . . “the weighted curve and compact swell of her belly and the tightness of her small breasts” reveal to everyone, including her previously oblivious parents, that she's pregnant.

Ruffled, Baxter sees the galley of Daisy's poetry collection on the sofa and commands her to read one of her poems. Unbeknownst to Baxter (and to the poetically ignorant Henry), she recites Matthew Arnold's “Dover Beach,” the beauty of which apparently moves Baxter to let Daisy alone and to entreat Henry for help in finding treatment for his Huntington's disease. (Henry, of course, will later expound upon the episode and its implications: “Some nineteenth-century poet . . . touched off in Baxter a yearning he could barely begin to

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define. That hunger is his claim on life, on a mental existence.") Some family teamwork ensues, and Baxter tumbles to the bottom of the stairs.

Lest anybody think I've given everything away, there's still another twist remaining, one comparable in tenor to the brouhaha that preceded it. Afterward, when *Saturday* ends, Henry Perowne is again in his bedroom, brooding over the state of the world and the meaning of life. But being as reasonable as he is, he doesn't so much brood as rehearse declarative statements, such as, "Beware the utopianists, zealous men certain of the path to the ideal social order. Here they are again, totalitarians in different form, still scattered and weak, but growing, and angry, and thirsty for another mass killing." He's also enough of a materialist to accept as his reality the sensual pleasures of existence, and the novel ultimately ends like a warm hug, with Henry slipping into bed beside his sleeping wife:

Sleep's no longer a concept; it's a material thing, an ancient means of transport, a softly moving belt, conveying him into Sunday. He fits himself around her, her silk pyjamas, her scent, her warmth, her beloved form, and draws closer to her. Blindly, he kisses her nape. There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this.

And so this eventful day-in-the-life is finally over.

February 15, 2003, June 16, 1904, June ____, 1923... Those grasping for traces of Leopold Bloom or Clarissa Dalloway in *Saturday* might as well trot out erudite references to the television thriller *24*: that the events take place in a single day does not, in this instance, make one thing fruitfully analogous to the other. McEwan's marvelous depictions of visual and sensory detail, a talent he shares with Virginia Woolf (and, in some respects, with James Joyce too), aren't accompanied by the formal inventions of *Ulysses* or by Mrs. Dalloway's deft movements between multiple points of view. If anything, the twists in plot, the uncanny coincidences, and the melodramatic melee at the end suggest a certain kinship between *Saturday* and the titillations of *24*, though

a comparison of Henry Perowne with counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer would be similarly pointless.

By quoting Saul Bellow's majestic *Herzog* (1964) in the epigraph to *Saturday*, McEwan invites a comparison that is much more illuminating, if only for the resonance that McEwan so laboriously tries, and fails, to create. The passage from Bellow's novel takes place as Moses Herzog, neurotic and perpetually unsettled, waits for his lover to finish her ablutions in the bathroom while he grapples with "his wild internal disorder." He's "quivering... because he let the entire world press upon him." The passage, which makes up *Saturday*'s epigraph, is such a remarkable coupling of lyricism and insight that it's worth quoting in full:

For instance? Well, for instance, what it means to be a man. In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass. Transformed by science. Under organized power. Subject to tremendous controls. In a condition caused by mechanization. After the late failure of radical hopes. In a society that was no community and devalued the person. Owing to the multiplied power of numbers which made the self negligible. Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home. Which permitted savagery and barbarism in its own great cities. At the same time, the pressure of human millions who have discovered what concerted efforts and thoughts can do. As megatons of water shape organisms on the ocean floor. As tides polish stones. As winds hollow cliffs. The beautiful supermachinery opening a new life for innumerable mankind. Would you deny them the right to exist? Would you ask them to labor and go hungry while you enjoyed delicious old-fashioned Values? You—you yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot. There, Herzog, thought Herzog, since you ask for the instance, is the way it runs.

The cadence of this passage, which progresses from the brusque fragments at the beginning ("In a city. In a century. In transition. In a mass.") and moves through the more tangled, tortured descriptions in the middle ("Which spent military billions against foreign enemies but would not pay for order at home") only to resolve itself with grim resignation at the end, is

extraordinary for the grace it has and the devastation it conveys. In an interview early this year, McEwan referred to the passage as "one of the most beautiful in contemporary literature," and explained how *Herzog* had inspired him to think of *Saturday* "as an excuse to write tiny essays to digress and feel completely free... I thought: A man, in a city, in an age of mechanization. What would that be like?"

Well, that depends: If you write a novel wherein a man trembles before reason, wherein this man constantly confronts the inhuman forces that threaten to overwhelm him, then what it would "be like" is the brilliant fury of Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. If, however, you write a novel wherein a man is entirely rational, wherein this man doesn't so much confront "the age of mechanization" as welcome it with moony tributes to its technological wonders, then what remains is the tepid elegance of *Saturday*. Henry Perowne resembles that other contented doctor, Charles Bovary, except that Flaubert chose, thankfully, to focus his novel on Emma; the blandly satisfied Charles is only a counterpoint to the darker, more conflicted story of his inconsolable wife. Henry may be temporarily rattled by the incidents with Baxter, but, aside from his mother's hopeless situation, there's little tension between him and the anodyne life with which he's so at ease.

With such a blanched figure at the center of the novel, most of the drama in *Saturday* comes not from character but from the insertion of extravagant events. Although McEwan has said, in interviews, that Henry's ambivalence toward the war in Iraq was intended as a "Hamlet-like doubt," there's nothing visceral or existential about Henry's measured misgivings. Liberal skepticism isn't comparable to the anguish of the Dark Prince. Henry's thoughts on the war are, ultimately, only that: passing thoughts about something remote enough from his everyday concerns as to be fodder for his analysis, not dilemmas that bear down upon him in any meaningful way and with which he, as a character, must actually contend.

For all of McEwan's talk of his impulse "to digress and feel completely free," the most "free" of these digres-

sions present themselves as rhapsodic paeans to consumer goods, such as the one Henry gives as he's luxuriating in bed, listening to his wife getting dressed:

... he hears the solid clunk of her wardrobe door opening, the vast built-in wardrobe, one of a pair, with automatic lights and intricate interior of lacquered veneer and deep, scented recesses; later still, as she crosses and re-crosses the bedroom in her bare feet, the silky whisper of her petticoat, surely the black one with the raised tulip pattern he bought in Milan; then the business-like tap of her boot heels on the bathroom's marble floor as she goes about her final preparations in front of the mirror, applying perfume, brushing out her hair. . . .

The prose is lovely (as are, clearly, the petticoat and the wardrobe), but Henry's blithe, bourgeois sentiments, the decency of which go unchallenged throughout *Saturday*, hardly provide the heft necessary to carry a novel—or, at least, the kind of grand novel of ideas that *Saturday* declares itself to be. Instead, the book reads like several short stories cobbled together. Each story on

its own is cleverly conceived and nicely written; it's the thinness of the stuff connecting them—Henry and his arid, all-knowing reason; the notion, which sounds more profound than it actually is, that life can change in an instant—that makes *Saturday*, sadly, a shriveled sum of its many fine parts.

Indeed, McEwan's formidable talents as a short-story writer are everywhere evident in his early work, which has been unfairly spurned by those who seem to believe that almost any novel, as long as it's ambitious and big and political, is preferable to an exquisite tale that's much smaller in scope. Although a few of the stories in *First Love*, *Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets* rely too heavily on gimmicks and out-ré scenarios, McEwan's writing in these books hugs closely to the dark worlds he describes: there's no attempt to resolve the narrative at the end or to analyze it. His first novel, *The Cement Garden*, is barely 150 pages long, and McEwan compels us to inhabit the mind of a fifteen-year-old boy who, with his three siblings, entombs their beloved mother's corpse in cement and hides the sar-

cophagus in the basement. Aside from the formal precision of its prose, what's so remarkable about the novel is that it resists being overwhelmed by what must sound here, summarized in a sentence, like a grotesque conceit. The boy is given a believable voice, one that isn't as scrupulously logical and self-aware as Henry's, one that isn't slotted into a schematic series of events. The boy is cruel yet confused, vulnerable and human.

But such a character—despairing and apolitical—probably holds little fascination for sensibilities grown accustomed to the onslaught of content-driven, political *romans á clef* that promise plot delights and conclusive pronouncements on the state of the world. A careful and intelligent writer, McEwan has elsewhere betrayed a shrewd awareness of these prevailing tastes. At the end of *Atonement*, he has his protagonist, Briony, reveal how she has changed the unpleasant facts of the story she has been telling because her readers will prefer the resolution of a happy ending to anything unsettlingly bleak, for "what sense of

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hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from that account?" She goes on to note that as a novelist, "with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God. . . . There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms."

McEwan knows this, and he seems to have taken the novelist's godlike powers of invention to heart; the universes he presides over are meticulously orchestrated, mapped-out af-

fairs. There is something admirable about the exacting discipline, but there is a sense of freedom that's missing, too. And it is this lack of freedom that keeps Henry Perowne and his "tiny essays" from soaring toward the immoderate and the sublime, whether by way of Herzog or Hamlet. We, however, have the freedom to recognize when a novelist-as-God is trying to force us to believe in flattering parallels where none exist. n

the artfully designed hall around him:

The New Art has many branches. In each of these there is a clearly discernible evolution from models. In none is there any trace of that abnormality or incoherence which the casual critic is fond of making the subject of tirades against the new order. It is my aim to sketch briefly the parallel developments of the New Art in the fields of painting and sculpture, music, and literature.

Anyone who takes Art seriously, who understands the development of technique in the last half century, accepts Cézanne and Matisse as he accepts Manet and Monet. But this brings us to the point where contemporary criticism becomes, for the most part, rampant abuse, and where prejudice utters its storm of condemnation.

Cummings had come to issue a corrective to an audience ignorant of any error. The prejudicial storm against which Cummings warned wasn't even a diffuse cloud on his listeners' broadest horizons; the artists to whom his commencement would give shelter were not even on Harvard's curriculum. But Cummings wasn't speaking to the mortarboards, not really. He was speaking to posterity—about Cubism via Brancusi and Duchamp ("By using an edge in place of a curve a unique tactual value is obtained"); about the music of Schönberg, Stravinsky, and Erik Satie ("Twenty-five years ago he was writing what is now considered modern music"); and above all about literature, of which he promised to "discuss only the most extreme cases." Thus he read aloud a poem by Amy Lowell that he introduced, approvingly, as "abnormal." Its opening lines ("Why do the lilies goggle their tongues at me/When I pluck them") made his audience brim with laughter. Harvard's sitting president, in fact, "turned to brick": Amy Lowell was, after all, his sister. Cummings barely paused, continued on with readings from the now forgotten poet Donald Evans (whose promising career was cut short, six years later, by his suicide), and arrived at last at the work of Gertrude Stein, whose art he described as "the logic of literary sound-painting carried to its extreme." Upon hearing Cummings read from *Tender Buttons* ("Please pale

MAKE IT NEWISH

E. E. Cummings, plagiarism, and the perils of originality

By Wyatt Mason

Discussed in this essay:

E. E. Cummings: a biography, by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno. Sourcebooks, Inc., 2004. 608 pages. \$29.95.

Harvard University's Sanders Theatre is one of America's most congenial halls; beneath its seventy-foot ceiling, the room brims with rich red wood and has the womby intimacy of a space designed to harness the human voice. Rows of benches rise on two levels in a U-shaped arc, hugging the low stage on both sides, a design that recalls structures dating back to the earliest days of Western civilization. And there, on a late June morning in 1915, 1,124 soon-to-be-graduates in mortarboards and gowns were enjoying that year's commencement exercises, about to witness a kind of history unfold. After a Latin oration inaugurated the day, and after the class valedictorian did his part, a slender young man with an upright bearing stepped to the front of the low wooden stage. In what is recalled as a high

Wyatt Mason is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. His translation of *A Season in Hell and Illuminations*, by Rimbaud, will be published this summer.



voice, this blond, boyish graduating senior—Edward Estlin Cummings, aged twenty—read an address that proved as ill-suited to the tastes of the audience before him as it was ideal to

hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beefsteak with regular feel faces . . .”), the audience no longer brimmed but, rather, roared; as Cummings would later write, Stein “brought down the house.” Not, of course, that he was surprised by this turn: he was counting on it. Cummings brought his carefully orchestrated remarks to a close by addressing the future of art in his time, a future in which he was determined to play a leading role:

The great men of the future will undoubtedly profit by the experimentation of the present period . . . [for] the New Art, discredited though it be by fakirs and fanatics, will appear in its essential spirit to the unprejudiced critic as a courageous and genuine exploration of untrodden ways.

Cummings’s own “exploration of untrodden ways” would make him famous as a Modernist poet. Even people who pay little attention to poetry, when confronted with a poem that looks like this—

one
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—will correctly assume that its scattering of lowercase letters, cleaving of parentheses, and cuisinarting of syntax, were produced by Cummings. That we would need to be neither quiz-show freaks nor candidates for a Ph.D. in literature to make this guess tells us a great deal about the nature of Cummings’s fame: he forged a style so individual that it still precedes him—as it was engineered to do. We know he

wanted to blaze a new trail because, in 1920, after his father read one of Edward Estlin’s early poems—

(Do you think?)the
 i do,world
 is probably made
 of roses & hello:

(of solongs and,ashes)

—the elder Cummings wrote his son a letter (“Hellos and Roses with their parenthetical shadow of so longs & ashes is a masterly touch”), to which E.E. offered a telling reply: “it is a supreme pleasure to have done something FIRST—and ‘roses & hello’ also the comma after ‘and’ (‘and,ashes’) are Firsts. . . . commas and small i’s, in which minutiae my Firstness thrives.”

Cummings’s notion of “Firstness” was not simply a gratuitous maneuver on his part. His artistic generation came of age as the Industrial Revolution crested the rising century, and the changes it precipitated only gathered speed. Newness was not so much being pushed as it was pushing—a vortex of new technologies that was hurling populations and people into greater proximity: the photograph, which flooded the world and our eyes with images (often ugly ones) of ourselves; the gramophone, which took the concert out of the hall and into homes; the telephone, which allowed us to make impromptu visits (or unwelcome interruptions) to distant lives; the automobile, which connected cities (and begat the sprawl of suburbia); and the airplane, which brought goods from far away (and dropped bombs from high above). As William Butler Yeats wrote in 1916, these new kinds of nearness presented artists with both opportunities and hazards: “All imaginative art keeps at a distance and this distance once chosen must be firmly held against a pushing world.” What the world was pushing, more than ever before in its history, was a riotously unmediated flow of images and sounds and information. More information, though, proved to be no guarantee of greater knowledge: the illuminating lure of access often brought only the glut of noise. And so, in this suddenly noisy, “pushing

world,” imaginative artists shoved back with an answer of their own: “MAKE IT NEW.”

The phrase was Ezra Pound’s, and its meaning is often misunderstood: Pound wasn’t advising innovation for its own sake, that we should will ourselves to invent the artistic equivalent of an airplane. Rather, the “it” of his “MAKE IT NEW” was the art of the deep past—a scholarly knowledge of which, Pound believed, was essential to the endurance of artistic enterprise. Not novelty but discipline was required to make choices about how artists should create, choices informed by how others had created. Armed with such comprehension in a world rendered increasingly incomprehensible, the artist was to impose order, in the form of form, on his works. This, of course, was not new: art is always the imposition of pattern onto a void. The “new” part was that, in a growingly formless world, the artist had to trumpet form. What had previously been the hidden skeleton of a work of art was now to be worn on the outside—a trellis on which a reader, unmoored by new waves of noise, could gain a hold and, with the effort required to save oneself from drowning in ignorance, climb to higher ground. Making it new was shorthand for the civilizing activity that modernity was putting in jeopardy: the hunting and gathering of the sources of art and, therefore, of ourselves.

Hunting and gathering sources was precisely what Cummings did at Harvard. Yes, he read Longfellow and Keats, Dante and Shakespeare; took survey courses in allegory and the American novel. All of these courses contributed to his understanding of the literary landscape, but none *made* him. Majoring in classics, though—that is where Cummings forged individuality through imitation. He read Roman literature in Latin—histories by Terence and Livy, poems by Catullus, odes by Horace (some of which he translated into beautiful English)—but spent more time reading Greek literature in Greek—Euripides, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Sophocles: the canon. He owned volumes of

he wrote prickly epigrams when his peers were crafting epics (“what does little Ernest croon/in his death at afternoon?”). And for such work, Cummings became wildly popular, was read and recited and celebrated.

But Cummings, like Modernism itself, hasn’t aged very well. Not his work, which remains enduringly filled with vigor, intelligence, and beauty; rather, his reputation. In different forms this has befallen many of his Modernist peers, and for each a different “reason” has been given. Joyce is now increasingly called a phony, one not worth the trouble the unpacking of his allusions demands. Pound, too, is dismissed as an incomprehensible fraud—not because he is, but because he made it so hard for us to figure out what he was doing. And Cummings? His discrediting at the hands of what he preemptively called, in his commencement address, the critical “fakirs and fanatics” has been for the most unkind reason of all: not for the blight of aiming too high but for the shame of his stooping too low—for triviality.

In a 1931 essay called “Notes on E. E. Cummings’ Language,” that name in poetry, R. P. Blackmur, struck out at the young poet’s growing reputation, bruising his verses with an epithet that, in high critical corners, has never faded—“babytalk”:

In a sense anyone can understand Mr. Cummings. . . . Nothing else is needed but a little natural sympathy and a certain aptness for the resumption of a childish sensibility. But no poetry is so pretentious. . . . Sometimes words pile themselves up blindly, each defeating the purport of the others. No feeling is ever defined. No emotion betrays a structure. . . . Such an art . . . is a substitute for something that never was—like a tin soldier, or Peter Pan.

That one major critic might misread Cummings is understandable. That most of the popular critics of poetry of the twentieth century have done so is telling of the very trouble that Pound’s imperative to newness was meant to address. For what does it mean if Helen Vendler, typically a generous reader of poetry, in a damning 1980 essay in *The New York Review of Books* did little more than rekindle Blackmur’s fifty-year-old arguments, which she called

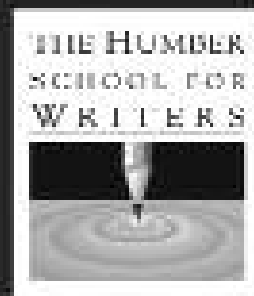
“superlatively unanswerable”? What does it mean that she gave Cummings no quarter, objecting to how she believed he “permanently rejected mind, intellectual patience, learning, meditative persistence, and profundity of soul, producing in his turn platitudes.” What does it mean that she dropped Cummings’s work whole into the critical basin, closed the lid, and flushed:

is there anything here to interest another mind? is it foolish? is it sentimental? is it repellent? is it stupid? what is wrong with a man who writes this? . . . What makes a grown man resort to empty “babytalk” as Blackmur calls it, in the name of experiment; what restricted Cummings’s mind to the banal and the sentimental[?]

What such a blithe dismissal of Cummings’s work means is this: Modernism failed. The artistic shelter it designed to bridge the storm of unmediated information wasn’t structurally sound. Modernism hadn’t merely hoped to produce writing that would be read in the world; it promised to produce writing so good that it might fundamentally, and lastingly, change the way we look at the world—or, at the very least, compel a wise critic such as Helen Vendler to engage with one of its texts instead of spurning it as if it were simply more noise. If nothing else, that failure—a collapse of Modernism’s agenda and, with it, Cummings’s reputation—would make for a fascinating story.

This is not the story Cummings’s early biographers thought to tell. The first of these was by Charles Norman. Published in 1958 while Cummings was still very much alive, *The Magic-Maker* is a tale of success—one of biography’s more devotional examples. “They only who live with a man,” said Samuel Johnson, “can write his life with any genuine exactness and discrimination; and few people who have lived with a man know what to remark about him.” Norman, who knew Cummings for thirty years, fits snugly Johnson’s bill. Consider this description of Cummings strolling Greenwich Village:

A weathered hat rides high on a head seeking to soar from squared shoulders loosely draped in an old jacket, from the left pocket of which protrudes the

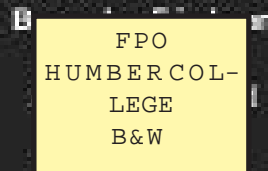


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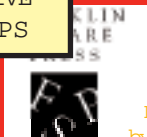
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top of a black notebook. The face under the hat takes daylight as though it and the light and air are friends. . . . The nose is strong, the mouth full and sensual, the chin arrogant. The ears are large and seemingly tense with listening; they belong to a born eavesdropper of human speech or a dissolving sliver of birdsong. . . . He has beautiful hands.

The story in *The Magic-Maker* is, as the paragraph above suggests, largely an affectionate profile. Norman is adept at sketching the facts of Cummings's life, establishing a chronology that is rich in warm reminiscences and fuzzy anecdotes, but these are only some of the facts, not the sum of them. Although Norman claimed that he was allowed "to examine the accumulations of family and literary documents, which Cummings placed at my disposal," Cummings himself suggested otherwise. In a letter to his daughter at the time the book was published, the poet told her that Norman's "access was negligible (indeed microscopic)." And as with the research, so with the writing: Cummings insisted on vetting the manuscript of *The Magic-Maker*, from which, as he claimed in various letters to friends, he cut extensively and parts of which he rewrote.

A second Cummings biography, Richard S. Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror* (1980), couldn't have been more different from its predecessor in form, content, and intent. Taking his first chapter's epigraph from Boswell—"... for I profess to write, not his panegyric, which must be all praise, but his Life"—Kennedy was the first biographer allowed to draw upon the Cummings archive at Harvard's Houghton Library. And he fought for that privilege, finding that the Cummingses had made access almost as difficult for him as they had for Norman: "I went through seven years of delay and struggle with [Cummings's widow] Marion Morehouse, her lawyer, and the executrix of her will, before I could begin the research."

And what research! Cummings's principal papers, housed at Harvard, fill 282 boxes and occupy 105 linear feet of space—literally millions of pages of material. If I say "principal papers," it is because, beyond these holdings in Cambridge, there are significant collections of Cummingsana in Texas and

New York, not to mention other archives around the country whose collections house relics to which any serious chronicler would surely make pilgrimage. Devoted to Cummings's many talented friends—among them John Dos Passos (in Virginia), Marianne Moore (in Philadelphia), John Peale Bishop (Princeton), William Carlos Williams (Buffalo), and Ezra Pound (New Haven)—all contain letters received from, or material relating to, Cummings, all of which Kennedy consulted. Add to this raw research Kennedy's scores of interviews, conducted over the sixteen years he worked on *Dreams in the Mirror*: the biographer spoke to all of Cummings's then-living intimates, most notably the poet's daughter, his sister, his first love, and dozens of his friends. Kennedy even engaged "the one hundred and fifty-six members of the Harvard Class of 1915 who answered my inquiry about Cummings and his professors."

Such quantity is of course no guarantee of true quality. Kennedy, however, in his artful assembly of this boggling array of possibilities, emerged from this chaos of data with a coherent and nuanced narrative. *Dreams in the Mirror's* greatest success is in informing precisely why Cummings held so dearly to the imperative of being "FIRST!" Modernist imperatives prove to be only part of the picture, however vivid. The sentimental component of his story, the intermittences of the heart as it grows, are telling, or can be, depending on the teller. And Kennedy excels in that role, doing a sparkling job of giving us facts that, quite understandably, the Cummingses would have kept from Norman.

For although Cummings was very lucky to have had parents who supported and encouraged him; to have been given, by grace, enormous intelligence and energy and charm, all of which were developed at the finest schools; and to have been blessed with financial good fortune; he was also, despite it all, a psychological mess, a man who misbehaved in ways ruinous to himself and to others. According to Kennedy, Cummings's father, a Unitarian minister and Harvard professor, is the bad guy in the story—not out of willfulness, only by

the daunting nature of his example. Cummings was a sensitive child, and his sensitivity was constitutionally ideal to his vocation. But it also made him wildly aware, at an early age and eternally, of his father's unusual excellence, an awareness that became hyperactive to the point of neurotic self-defeatism. Late in life, when Cummings eulogized his father, he was still in thrall to his father's bottomless reserves of capacity, just as he must have been in boyhood:

6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & first-rate sailor . . . & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd stillpaddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of the pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer (the best I've ever seen) & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar . . . & a painter (both in oils & watercolors) & a better carpenter than any professional & an architect who designed his own houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use for professors . . . & later . . . a preacher [who] horribly shocked his pewholders by crying "the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roof-garden: it's inside you" . . . & my father's voice was so magnificent that he was called on to impersonate God speaking from Beacon Hill.

The spine of the story that Kennedy tells is of a little boy who never really grew up, who never felt he had grown out of his father's long shadow. If the elder Cummings's voice boomed like God's, the younger Cummings's own was hard for E.E. himself to hear during his youth—a problem that a poet unusually prideful about "Firstness" would seem to have cunningly resolved. And yet it is here that Kennedy's biography shows its chief limitation, a kind of inhibition in its capacity to reveal Cummings's true place as a poet, as opposed to merely the truth of his poetry. It is not that Kennedy's readings of particular poems fail; rather, it is his lack of interest in examining the larger puzzle of the century's artistic leavings, of which Cummings's poems were only a part, that makes this fuller portrait seem all the more clearly incomplete.

To tell Cummings's story completely, one would need to devote equal attention both to the sweeping panorama of art-making in the last century and to the more intimate canvas on which a boy's difficulties becoming an expressive man are detailed. It is reassuring, then, that from the outset this is the story that Cummings's latest biographer wishes us to hear. As Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno explains in his preface to *E. E. Cummings: a biography*, "One question that kept recurring . . . was why Cummings had seemingly fallen out of fashion":

Cummings was a popular poet, indeed far more popular in his time than Pound or Williams or Stevens. And popularity . . . is a curse, often equated with simplicity of expression or lack of rigor. . . . The fashion in American poetry from the 1940s onward has been to write a book-length poem or a poetic sequence. Pound's *Cantos*, Williams's *Paterson*, Olson's *Maximus*, Ashbery's *Flow Chart*, and Graham's *Swarm* . . . have won wide favor, and became models for subsequent and present generations. But Cummings never wrote a long poem, never felt the need to write, in Pound's words, "a poem, including history."

With such an even-handed start, we follow Sawyer-Lauçanno trustingly into an examination of the life that led to such choices. "My aim in this biography," he writes, "is to link the words he wrote with the life he led." Although this latest biographer did not have the benefit, as Norman had, of intimate time spent with the man, nor time spent, as Kennedy had, with scores of Cummings's friends, he had the advantage of exploring both of these very different approaches to writing Cummings's life, examples to which he could profitably refer when designing his own. Just as a poet seeking to pioneer a new art of verse would be injudicious to neglect his predecessors' efforts, so too would a biographer be ill-advised to neglect prior considerations of his subject. Each so different from the other, these earlier accountings' greatest gift to Sawyer-Lauçanno would seem to be a windfall of perspective. Sawyer-Lauçanno, for his part, acknowledges the contributions of his predecessors to his book, stating his reliance "on the two previous biographies of Cummings for information. The late Charles

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Norman's memoir . . . was helpful in a general way. Of greater substance and value was the late Richard S. Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror*."

Here's the problem, and it is one I am extremely loath to touch: Sawyer-Lauçanno does not sufficiently acknowledge his indebtedness to Kennedy's biography. Sawyer-Lauçanno tells us that his book is "largely the result of archival research," and there is no question, and every indication, that he charted countless hours reading in the archives, more than one cares to imagine. But if one examines Sawyer-Lauçanno's book alongside Kennedy's—comparing them line by line, section by section—one finds that Sawyer-Lauçanno's is largely the result of Kennedy's research, Kennedy's writing, and Kennedy's interpretations.

Initially, one notices the trivial echoes, the simple phrases that any two good writers might, over the course of a 500-page book, inadvertently repeat. Kennedy: "Her early background is sketchy"; Sawyer-Lauçanno: "Morehouse's early life is sketchy." Kennedy: "there is no record of her ever having been enrolled"; Sawyer-Lauçanno: "St. Anne's School had no records of her having ever been enrolled." Then, with enough of these phrases echoing in one's ear, longer ones begin to chime, too, as many pieces of information jostle against identical syntactical turns. Kennedy: "All these years since 1924, Cummings had continued to rent the studio, a room fourteen by twenty on the third floor at the rear of number 4. . . . Estlin spent the days and most of the evenings upstairs in the studio and he slept there as well." Sawyer-Lauçanno: "Since 1924, he had lived and worked in the same fourteen by twenty foot room on the third floor of 4 Patchin Place. . . . Most days, Cummings remained in his studio, however, and often slept there, as well." And then there are the more complex instances:

Kennedy:

She was introduced as his wife, she was (some years later) registered at a hospital as Mrs. E. E. Cummings, their stationery sometimes carried the imprint Mr. and Mrs. E. E. Cummings, and in Cummings' first will, written in his own hand, he left all his property to "my wife Marion (Morehouse) Cummings."

Sawyer-Lauçanno:

He almost always introduced Marion as his wife; when she was hospitalized in the 1940s she was admitted as "Mrs. E. E. Cummings;" some of their personal stationery has a header "Mr. and Mrs. E. E. Cummings;" and a Cummings will, dated October 1948, leaves all his property to "my wife Marion (Morehouse) Cummings."

Written twenty-five years after Kennedy's version, Sawyer-Lauçanno's reads like what it seems to be: a rewriting of Kennedy's. Still, as Boswell reminds us: "A casual coincidence with other writers or an adoption of a sentiment or image which has been found in the writings of another, and afterwards appears in the mind as one's own, is not unfrequent."

There is, though, a deeper, more disturbing tendency—instances where Sawyer-Lauçanno reproduces, with too great a fidelity, the secondary sources used by Kennedy. Consider this moment when Sawyer-Lauçanno describes Cummings's visit with a doctor at Strong Memorial Hospital, Rochester:

Segal found that though Cummings was "thin" and "high-strung," he did not appear ill, though he did note that he had "bloating, lower abdominal discomfort, diarrhea." Cummings returned to Manhattan feeling relieved that he did not have cancer.

The assumption a reader would make is that Sawyer-Lauçanno is quoting Dr. Strong. When one seeks a footnote in Sawyer-Lauçanno, there is none. When one finds the account of the same trip in Kennedy, the context is quite different:

The clinical report from the hospital described Cummings as a "thin, high-strung, middle-aged man who does not appear to be ill," although he had "symptoms of bloating, lower abdominal discomfort, diarrhea, all since lectures at Harvard and re-inforced by anti-cancer propaganda." Dr. Segal soothed his worries, for he found no real medical problem.

Does Kennedy footnote his source for this information? Yes: "Strong Memorial Hospital record on Edward Cummings, Unit 39-65-51, Number 262 396 551. Report dated 5/10/55."

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borrowing—not only of research but of storytelling and language, of which the following is only his most egregious example. After quoting Cummings's daughter, Nancy ("Quoted in Kennedy"), we note that Kennedy's next paragraph begins:

On October 15, Cummings and Marion moved into a house at 6 Wyman Road in Cambridge, a little cul-de-sac far enough away from Harvard Yard to allow Cummings to feel secure from too much intrusion. . . .

And Sawyer-Lauçanno's begins:

On October 15, Cummings and Marion moved into a small house at 6 Wyman Road in Cambridge, far enough away from campus to afford them privacy.

And then on the next page in Kennedy, one finds:

After the first lecture William and Alice James had a little social gathering at which everyone was cheerily congratulatory. Marion, however, was annoyed because Alice James forgot to introduce her to the other guests.

And on the next page in Sawyer-Lauçanno, one reads:

. . . following his first lecture, William and Alice James had thrown a reception for Cummings. Since Cummings was the star and the center of attention, all of the focus was on him, so much so that Marion felt snubbed. Alice James, she said, had not even bothered to introduce her to the other guests.

And then turning the page once again, in Kennedy:

Esther Lanman organized a cocktail party for Cummings with as many of the old Cambridge crowd as she could locate. Amy Gozzaldi was there, her jet-black hair now grey. She and Estlin looked at each other and grinned self-consciously, feeling what the years had done to them. He raised his hand to his bald head.

And, finally, turning the page in Sawyer-Lauçanno:

Lanman even organized a cocktail party for Cummings, inviting every member of "the old gang" she could round up, including Cummings's first crush, Amy de Gozzaldi. Her hair, once jet black, was now gray, and Cummings,

now fifty-eight, had finally gone bald. They looked at each other self-consciously, then grinned.

If we seek a source in Sawyer-Lauçanno's notes for this anecdote, there is no note. Whereas, when we follow the note in Kennedy to a source, we find this: "Mrs. Richard Hall (Amy Gozzaldi) interview with RSK, March 1973." RSK—Kennedy—got the story directly from Gozzaldi, in an interview he conducted himself. This is research. And it is equally clear, given the remarkable parallels of language and information, that Sawyer-Lauçanno got the story—like so much of his book—from Kennedy. This is plagiarism.

After I made these discoveries, I telephoned Sawyer-Lauçanno. I presented him with my findings. We had a long talk. Eventually, I asked him what distinguished what he'd done from plagiarism. "Well," he said, "it's a good question":

It certainly wasn't consciously plagiarized. I didn't sit with the Kennedy as I was writing, and I'm actually rather shocked by what you've been telling me. . . . I think what distinguishes it from plagiarism is in my intention; in my conscience, I think there are a lot of differences. The fact that I can account for how this happened doesn't necessarily make it better, or make it even right.

Sawyer-Lauçanno acknowledged Kennedy's "tremendous amount of work" and expressed clear regret for the inadequacies of his own citations: "There's a tremendous amount of material in that book to document. And I obviously missed some places that should have been documented. . . . I'm not pleased to know that I did that. If I did it, I did it. It's hard for me to defend myself there. But I didn't do it consciously."*

And so if an author "unconsciously" plagiarized Kennedy's book, why

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* Subsequent to our conversation, attorneys for Sourcebooks faxed a letter to this magazine along with a statement by Sawyer-Lauçanno in which he asserts "that any un-attributed similarities are quite trivial and seem to arise from our use of the same source documents."

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REVIEWS

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should *Kirkus Reviews* and *Library Journal* know any better? They gave the biography "Starred Reviews." *Publishers Weekly* opined, "Sawyer-Lauçanno is so adept at weaving together the difficult elements of Cummings's life that it is the biographer's accomplishment, more than the poet's, that remains in the mind." *The Christian Science Monitor* went so far as to praise it as "the first major and comprehensive biography," apparently without noticing that Kennedy's biography—still in print (Kennedy passed away in 2002)—features a conspicuous blurb from its own review in *The Christian Science Monitor*. And so when Billy Collins, the former American poet laureate, gushes that Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography is "revealing, exhaustive, and surely definitive—a bold, upper case study of America's notorious lower-case poet"—what might all this glowing information tell us?

It tells us that we are drowning in information—unreliable information, shoddy information, wrong information. It tells us that, as a culture, literary or otherwise, we are letting our ignorance lead us. Ignorance is nothing more than an indifference to what is before us; we have only to pay attention—and we are paying attention in a way, but to pretty noise, the newer the better. Pound knew this, and Cummings knew this, and they tried to devise a means by which we might pay better attention to our world. The pictured caves of the Dordogne marked by prehistoric hands; the tattered verses once sung by a girl with a lyre; a tapestry that tells of a thousand-year-old battle upon which a certain comet may be seen, bright as any star: these delicate things are evidence, proofs that others like us looked at the world once. These are the sources of ourselves, our truest fossil record. The Modernists feared we were burying this record and, with that burial, losing what was best in us under waves of what was worst. They set out to help us remember. But, of course, Modernism failed. It never had a chance. n