

Preface

For many years I tried to blush over the fact that, besides poems, I wrote prose—not just fiction, but critical prose as well. Excuses were ready, though, should anyone ask me to justify the practice. For example, I didn't earn much as a poet and part-time teacher of writing. I couldn't afford to buy all the new books I wanted to read, and reviewers are supplied with a copy of the book discussed, which could be sold to the Strand bookstore if it didn't prove worth keeping. Certainly I pondered the argument that writing prose hinders a poet's ability to trawl the depths and discover the sea-creatures needed for a true poem. It seemed like bunk to me. Also, there was Pound's famous, "Poetry should be at least as well written as prose," and his theory that poetry in the twentieth century should try to annex some of the energies of the sister verbal art.

In any case, my early efforts to produce literature were, actually, in the genre of fiction, which meant that I liked the muscular swing of prose. I had, moreover, done graduate work in French, fulfilling all the requirements for a doctorate except writing the dissertation, a process that gave me the training needed to read analytically and to evaluate a text. When the emphasis shifted to poetry-writing, I found as a first mentor the distinguished professor and critic David Kalstone, whose essays (collected in *Five Temperaments* and *Becoming a Poet*) I read with avidity and a sense of complicity. In those years I never missed an issue of the *New York Review of Books* and the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*. Eventually, I was to read the collected criticism of central twentieth-century poets, including T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Richard Wilbur, plus the few literary

essays of Elizabeth Bishop's I was able to unearth in library archives.

In time, after bringing out numbers of reviews and essays people told me they liked, I began to feel more confident. It was possible to imagine that advocacy of writers I admired made a difference and that pieces showing how bad some writers were would have a salutary effect on the current literary scene. On the other hand, I came to see that many readers who enjoyed the critical essays had never bothered to read any poems published under my name. Poets have often lamented the fact that, in an "Age of Criticism," critics are much more often read than the poets they discuss. How many of the latter can lay claim to an audience as large as Harold Bloom's or Helen Vendler's?

Being a critic, though, doesn't solve every problem. In 1989 I brought out (with Viking Penguin) a volume of critical essays under the title *The Metamorphoses of Metaphor*. Though this book received praising notices, I even so encountered a persistent bias against the publication of a collection of disparate essays instead of a unitary argument supporting one theme. The underlying assumption seems to be that any literary argument worth making needs book-length amplification—hence the profusion of critical books containing an insight that *could* be dealt with adequately in a single essay. I recall many of these, widely reviewed when they appeared and now forgotten.

Meanwhile, other collections of essays, in particular those written by poets and published in the University of Michigan Press's Poets on Poetry series, are still sought out by general readers as well as scholars. I'm actually tempted to think that the relatively brief literary essay is the best mode for criticism in an era when we are all bombarded by information to the point that we have to be severe in our allotments of reading time. Though we can all find forty minutes to devote to reading an essay about some writer we love, who has the hours and days needed to slog through a 450-page position paper? The problem has been all the more acute in recent decades, when a scholar-theorist's importance was partly gauged by the impenetrability of his/her prose. I once had this startling response from a professional critic to whom I'd sent an essay: "This is very good, and you write with extraordinary clarity—probably too much clarity for

the piece to be taken seriously by professionals.” It’s in the nature of fashions to fade, though, and how many will be able to feign bereavement when smoke-screen unreadability exceeds its sell-by date?

Two of these essays are concerned with novelists, the rest with poets. The overall title *Atlas* isn’t meant to invoke the weight-lifting champion or even the mythological Greek figure (about whom Robert Graves, in *The Greek Myths*, remarked that he was, for his assistance in the war of the gods against Cronus, “awarded an exemplary punishment, being ordered to carry the sky on his shoulders”). What I mean to invoke instead is the homely collection of maps found in even most moderate-sized libraries. Admittedly, the etymology of the cartographical term goes back to the Greek Titan, crouched eternally on the Pillars of Hercules at the gateway to the Atlantic. But travel is a recurrent theme in these essays, and they also do some “mapping” of modern and contemporary English-language poetry and prose. From vantage points on both sides of the Atlantic, I’ve looked at several figures—Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Thom Gunn, Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Marilyn Hacker—who lived or continue to live at least part of their lives as expatriates. All of the subjects are twentieth-century figures, with the exception of Keats and Wordsworth, the study of whose lives and works might still be stimulating to contemporary poets, critics, or readers of poetry.

Because these essays were first published in magazines, books, and electronic journals, I owe a debt to the editors who first commissioned, and then worked with me to improve, them: Ben Sonnenberg (*Grand Street*), Don Bruckner (*New York Times Sunday Book Review*), Laban Hill (*American Letters & Commentary*), Paula Deitz and Fred Morgan (*Hudson Review*), Richard Howard (*Paris Review*), Nicholas Jenkins and Katherine Bucknell (*Auden Studies I*), John Leonard (*Nation*), Hilda Raz (*Prairie Schooner*), and Ernest Hilbert (*Contemporary Poetry Review*). I would also like to thank Professor Ernest J. Smith, who conducted the interview “An Interview with Alfred Corn.” Some of these essays were published more than a decade ago; obviously, I would write them differently if commissioned to do so now. Yet I’ve been assured that they are worth the candle and that at the very least they shed light on the essayist’s own identity and goals, in case anyone is

interested. Because the Michigan series has length restrictions, I did not collect every literary essay of mine written since 1987 (when *The Metamorphoses of Metaphor* came out), nor any art or music criticism produced during the last two decades, nor any travel pieces. I hope that the editors of the publications where those writings appeared will even so like this book well enough and allow for the possibility that a later collection might include the pieces we worked on together. As the famous comic character in *David Copperfield* says about his intentions concerning the irresistible Clara Peggotty: “Tell her Barkis is willin’!”

—Alfred Corn