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Archaic (Post)Modernity: the Poetry of Ivan Zhdanov

The Inconvertible Sky by Ivan Zhdanov
translated by John High and Patrick Henry
(Talisman House, 1997)

Reviewed by Thomas Epstein

*So, history and conscience are one. And your
memory is not your own personal possession,
it returns to its primordial owner.*

—Ivan Zhdanov ("Arrested World")

BORN IN 1948 in a village near Barnaul, in the distant Altai region of Siberia, far from the center of Russian or any other civilization, Ivan Zhdanov would seem to be an unlikely candidate to become a central figure of his generation of Russian poets. And yet, as the century draws to a close, this is precisely what has occurred.

Like his person, Ivan Zhdanov's poetry is exceedingly complex: reaching backward into myth and archetype, and forward into fragmented thought, densely architectural imagery, and skepticism about the ability of language to coincide with being, Zhdanov has managed to create a poetic universe that bores into the earth as it ascends toward the heavens. Combining tradition with the avant-garde, the abstractly philosophical with the immediately personal, elegy with fierce irony, Zhdanov constantly crosses borders. Already, in the first poem included in the volume under review,¹ Zhdanov evokes, in four short lines, a world that is both mythical and embedded in our post-structuralist world:

I'm not the branch, only the prebranchness.
Nor a bird, simply the bird's name.
Not even a raven, though somewhere in the prewind
the horde of ravens is discussing my fate.

Thomas Epstein is the editor of alcco magazine. He is currently working on an anthology of contemporary Russian poetry in English to be published in 1999.

Apophatic in spirit, the poet defines himself in terms of what he is not: neither branch nor bird, “not even” raven. As for what he (or it, the self) is: “only” prebranchness and “simply” a name; bounded on one side by the invisible weight of everything that precedes existence, and on the other by the visible weightlessness of words, this bewildered “I” makes a fated journey toward an origin it cannot reach. The poet’s very tools—language, memory, self-expression—embody a profound paradox: they are both forms of estrangement and the only means of overcoming that estrangement. As Zhdanov writes in a memorable love poem:

The distance between you and me is you

but at the same time:

Distance binds us, this is the law
allowing jealousy’s existence, as it does your own truth and will.
Immortal while subjugated, yet not subjugated,
because I love, because I love, because I love.

Distance, and its concomitant, longing, are what drive human existence, creating jealousy, truth and will. This is a distance that permeates not only intersubjectivity but another essential expression of human being: memory, both personal and collective. In “The Mountain” Zhdanov describes his ‘search’ for an older brother whom he never met, dead in the trenches outside of World War II Leningrad:

Like a cow’s flank, the mountain above my village.
Memory has nothing against warming itself nearby.
From the mountain top, another childhood visible,
or rather, a pre-childhood, an idea between the lines.

But there was war then. Snake-meat venomously
shot out of the grass, ravaging the countryside,
multiplying itself like a number. One of my names buried
outside Leningrad, so that it might survive in me and sprout.

For the poet, the mountain above his village immediately suggests another reality, that of a cow’s flank, which itself suggests a third: the enormity and warmth of childhood memory. However, this metaphorical *joining* of disparate realities only underscores their *distance* from

each other: at its summit, which the poet can see but not reach, which he lives under but not *in*, he sees “another childhood” or “pre-childhood,” both personal and archetypal, historical and eternal. This “idea between the lines” contains both the unspoken and impersonal horrors of World War 11 (“like a number”) and the poet’s personal connection to them (“One of my names”), his dead brother. It is between these two unknowable poles that he will journey.

Language, although the primary locus of human memory and identity, is not the creation or possession of the individual: it is inherited or ‘buried’ in us. It transcends us even as we participate in it, struggling for meaning:

Hooked by your own speech, placed in a quarantine
that merges soaring and the rack,
you, as by a force of tide, extracting fish
out of the dead depths.

This speech into which we are born simultaneously isolates (‘placed in a quarantine’), joins the unjoinable (‘merges soaring and the rack’), determines thought (‘as by a force of tide’), and makes possible the retrieval of meaning (‘extracting fish out of the depths’). Such a multi-layered world of language can only be expressed in mythologems, hieroglyphic words that name both themselves and suggest other worlds, other levels of estrangement and being:

And so any sea echoes
all the seas that never existed –
concealing in each depth
a lament of all the unborn.

The claims of the dead thus overwhelm the living: their pregnant absence is the presence that creates the necessary but anguishing space between self and other, past and present, self and self, that makes life a quest for meaning outside of time, in repetition or resurrection:

Repetition, like resurrection, surmounts time. But repetition’s goal is the restoration of lost time, while resurrection always possesses unsquanderable time. Because repetition is jealousy, and resurrection, love.

This lover and seeker, moving towards thresholds and limits, or trying to annihilate them, finds him or herself on a stage (history) whose script is predetermined:

You—the stage and the actor in the vacant theater.
You'll pull down the curtain, playing out a form of life,
and the drunk anguish, sizzling like sodium,
will fly about the hall in utter blackness.

Speech, although the only way off this stage and into authenticity, is itself scripted, and its results can be as horrifying as they are dead and deadening:

Ragged gardens choked with fruit,
when speech stretches your larynx,
and a tin-can pogrom raises you in the play
to pillage and burn, flood the stage corners with light.

Trapped in time and space, the lyric voice is engaged in an “eternal monologue, like Sisyphus,” in which “you” are “a nightingale’s ricocheting whistle.” Imprisoned in becoming but seeking being, this “dreamer” turns to memory, eternity as repetition. But memory too is embedded in language: it is beyond the dreamer’s control, subject to change, ambiguity, motion.

the word is born of itself in the dark,
writhing your pungent prison into a tornado,
it reaches out for you, and you go to it.

In this encounter with language there is release and revelation of meaning, there is communication via a world of metaphors and symbols. However, the significance and direction of this encounter remain beyond the dreamer’s control. Always overdetermined, stretched and vanishing in what transcends it (whether God or nothingness), the self journeys through a bewildering forest of meanings for which it has no map. Reaching the word,

You crumble like the steppe gnawed away by heat,
and a crowd of horsemen rains down from the clouds,
and with freshness strike the extendible space,
and the wings of the banks embrace the ray.

O, just give me the cross! And I'll sigh in anguish.
stretching the bottom and causing the banks to heel.
I'll abandon force—and there, in an open field . . .
But someone's dreaming, and the dream outlasts me.

What remains is dream's shadow or mirror: the poem.

Not unlike his contemporary Yelena Shvarts², Ivan Zhdanov is a fiercely independent and self-taught poet who, although *au courant* of the latest trends in world poetry, has resisted identification with any single poetic 'school.' Called a metarealist or metametamorphicist by some,³ Zhdanov has particularly objected to the "postmodern" label; indeed, in one of his recurrent bouts of 'hooliganism,' he broke a plate over the head of a Moscow critic who called him a "classic of postmodernism" during a public forum.

For Zhdanov, poetry is not engaged in the play of signifiers but in the lyric quest for meaning amidst fragmentation and estrangement. Although he *has* called himself an "avant-gardist," he did so in a rather narrow sense, identifying the avant-garde cultural ethic with process and quest as opposed to the elegant presentation of received knowledge. More broadly, Zhdanov is part of a post-Symbolist current in contemporary Russian poetry that combines the visionary and archaic with the intellectual and critical.

Nevertheless, like many self-proclaimed postmoderns, Zhdanov is acutely aware of the three-pronged crisis of language, memory, and identity. Well acquainted with the 'prison house of language' and history, Zhdanov does not merely celebrate or ironize it (as do the Postmodernists) but seeks to use the bars of the postmodern prison against themselves, creating an authentically contemporary lyric voice from shards of language, experience, memory.

In their able translation, John High and Patrick Henry have managed to convey just how haunting and essential is Zhdanov's triumph; let the last word go to the poet:

The Doors Are Wide Open . . .

A sickle moon, drowned in a Sea of rainwater
grazes over the slain with its edges,
these nameless ones, never coming back —
do not know they've been forgotten.

Fires traipse through the forsaken villages,
cackle at night over the telephone wires.

The doors wide open, yet they should have been bolted,
they don't realize there's no one here to look after
the universe they've abandoned.
And the road they were led down
hangs there since, not touching the earth—
just the knee-deep dust of the moon.

Not jealousy between them and us, yet a ditch,
not the indistinct blanket of impetuous impotence,
but the forgetting's soporific speed.
Still a soul speaks once more from obscurity,
the aureole transforms into a sickle and flames,
and the lament of resurrection roams.

NOTES

1. Ivan Zhdanov, *The Inconvertible Sky*, translated by John High and Patrick Henry (Talisman House, 1997).
2. A selection of her remarkable verse, entitled *Paradise*, is available from Bloodaxe Books, translated by Michael Molnar.
3. On this subject, see Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future* (Amherst, 1995), in particular the first three chapters.

Constructing Beauty

By Paul Vangelisti

CONSIDER BEAUTY or the beautiful at a time when many institutional (institutionalized?) artists and critics in the U.S. have appeared committed to, or at least professionally occupied in its deconstruction.

One can't help wonder if a "loss of reference" (along with certain notions of authenticity or contemporaneity in art) doesn't stem from a rather restrictive sense of what is referential. Insisting on such a loss, aren't we, on the one hand, equating meaning with the personal and mundane, and on the other, with the technical and scientific? Doesn't a squeamishness toward something broadly characterized as meaning reduce the value of language and ultimately drive it toward some instinctive, even desperate univocality: a function of psychological need or technical utility, or some hapless combination of both? And thus, however euphemized by commercial and/or institutional forces playing on the manic appetites of class, race, gender and age, might we not be reinforcing the prejudice that reality is what is predictable, and the world only that which may be manipulated or made to serve?

If one finds the world (and the beautiful) to be polysemic, supposing different ways or conditions of reality which at times only the poem may reveal, then the suspension or (to twist Rimbaud slightly) the deregulation of meaning and reference is just a single, if necessary, step. One may risk losing an immediate sense of ordinary things—the kind of written experience often called "narrative" or "personal" or "psychological," and frequently oversimplified as being the most direct—so that one might redirect his or her experience of language towards more profound, if, at times, inconvenient forms of understanding.

Paul Vangelisti is the author of numerous books of poetry and is a noted translator from the Italian. Since 1993 he has been the editor of the journal Ribot.

The reality poems project for me is essentially ontological, recovering ways of experience as well as removing language from certain obligations to things and their common perception. To dwell on the beautiful we are, like Emily Dickinson, dwelling in possibility. Or, as the assassinated Algerian poet Jean Senac has more recently put it, "citizens of beauty." Dwelling in possibility we develop a stance, a mindful habitation: which dwelling, in turn, yields horizons that recede at our approach and so maintain a capacity for definition and song.

The possibilities of our experiences of the beautiful constitute a world. Experiencing the peculiar beauty of a poem offers something very much present, urgent and undeniable; though equally urgent and undeniable is the sense of that which is missing or potentially present. "A silver wire which reaches from the end of the beautiful as if elsewhere," muses Jack Spicer in his paradisaical "A Textbook of Poetry." As readers and poets, we may not only try to appreciate what is in the poem but try to reach the kind of world from which the poem, not necessarily the poet, emerges.

The poem and reader belong to and, in fact, inhabit worlds whose horizons may often merge. At the limits of each linguistic experience is some construction, some shelter in the superimposition of the boundaries of these differing worlds. This third world of the poem is fresh as a set of eyes or chunk of fruit or the two a.m. willies because the poet isn't necessarily compelled to express or refer to it. There may be, instead, a strict, if playful refusal of expression in the building of another feeling, another beauty out of the renunciation of the already known. "Let me sit and go blind in my dreaming / and be that dream in purpose and device," writes Amiri Baraka in perhaps his most notorious book, *Black Magic*.

Thus, deconstructing the beautiful (or its referentiality) seems a curious oversimplification, a sort of sheep in sheep's clothing. It is precisely one of the blessings of renouncing reference that allows a reunion with nature and objects. Language as it is being made in poetry, on the way to becoming once again potential—some other thing—inhabits a dimension of reality itself in the making. Dwelling on the possibilities of beauty, one risks an adventure with an unfinished world. Unlike the institutional speech of corporations, government or aca-

deme, the words of a poem try to enjoy their objects without necessarily knowing or containing them, as George Oppen says, “glassed in dreams.” The radical meaning of poetry is in its redundancy, its contradiction, its defeat, its refusal to become transparent and instrumental, to mean anything but itself.

Notice one of Homer's truly minor characters, Elpenor: the first of Odysseus's crew to die, in a drunken, freak accident no less, during a moment of celebration. Elpenor, the sailor who begs his captain: “O my lord, remember me, I pray, do not abandon me, unwept, unburied....” You might recall that, unknown to Odysseus and his crew—they now having ventured into the land of the dead—Elpenor lies dead and forgotten in the world of the living. The poet is both Elpenor and Odysseus, sailor and captain, both begging and determined, you might even say ruthless to be resolved.

Pheasant Under Cellophane: A Capsule History of Literary Portraits in Recent Cinema

By Gilbert Alter-Gilbert

THE PAST decade has witnessed a spate of movies based on the lives and works of prominent literary figures. What's the fascination? No doubt it's filmdom's long-standing engrossment with myth and the myth-making process; a propensity for mythologizing everything from locker room lore to the sinking of the Titanic, for deifying everyone from Mr. Magoo to George Armstrong Custer, for jamming athletes, statesmen, singers, and scientists in the same indiscriminate pantheon with flying nuns, talking rabbits, and trademark characters such as Aunt Jemima, the Jolly Green Giant, and the Quaker Oats man. This democratic process makes no distinction between figures of pop culture and the most serious "high culture" icons.

Where recent literary-themed films are concerned, Hollywood's motto would seem to be "banality ascendant". But not all of these films are products of Hollywood. More than a few hail from France, Germany, Japan, Argentina, Italy, and England. Originating beyond U. S. borders doesn't ensure quality. The much-touted Merchant/Ivory films, for example, dramatizations of literary classics, thoroughly conveying the stultification of Victorian novels and claustrophobic British society, ultimately project all the appeal of an afternoon spent fasting in a convent for a flagellation cult. This is nothing new—take a look at an early talkie such as Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, and you'll ask yourself how either of them could ever have gained any sort of reputation at all.

But what's worse, the arrogant tampering with classics becomes, at

Gilbert Alter-Gilber is a critic and translator who continues to contribute to Artweek and other journals

times, so outrageous, that it calls up the need for legislation to prevent such aesthetic crimes. Works of Dante, Petronius, Twain, and Poe, Thackeray, Conrad, Orwell, Huxley, Eliot, Bronte, James, and Dickens all have been done, and done to death; the works of Steinbeck, Faulkner, Williams, Fitzgerald, Melville, Hawthorne, and de Maupassant, Verne, and Bierce, and Woolf, and Joyce, and Stevenson, and Dostoyevsky, too. Neither have the moderns, from Ray Bradbury through Margaret Atwood, from Edward Albee through Gunter Grass, been spared. And not all adaptations for the screen have been atrocious. What's odd is the current fashion among moviemakers to create full-length celluloid portraits of these famous authors themselves. Even television has gotten in on the act, doing biopics on Margaret Mitchell and L. Frank Baum. Recent years have also witnessed a swirl of films with tangential literary themes, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Satan's Brew*, about a would-be poet who emulates Stefan George; *The Last Time I Committed Suicide*, about Jack Kerouac's sidekick Neal Cassidy; Zalman King's adaptation of Anais Nin's *Delta of Venus*; Volker Schlöndorff's *Swann in Love*, in which Jeremy Irons plays a thinly-veiled Marcel Proust in a simple, if elegant, erotic escapade. Perhaps the standard for most of these concoctions was set in the 1960s by Roger Corman's Poe films, which were "loosely based", to say the least, on the life and works of the great gothicist. Almost everything that has come after those pictures has shown their influence. But whereas Corman only meant to entertain, others aspire to higher things, and that's where they go wrong...

Nevertheless, not all these films are bad. For every five dozen turkeys there's an occasional winner. Unfortunately, from the days of the silents through the present era, the driveling idiocy of Hollywood's cops-and-robbers cosmogony has consistently prevailed, and the losers have unfailingly been in the majority. As far back as the 1930s, the pattern was set. A representative product of the early talkie era, 1938's *If I Were King*, directed by Frank Lloyd, and starring Ronald Coleman as François Villon, who changes places with Louis XI, when he wins a bet, presents vagabond-rogue-murderer-thief Villon as a Robin Hood type merrily scampering about the slums of Paris serenading peasant girls in a perfect Tunbridge Wells accent while King Louis is a doddering nincompoop who complains to his ministers that he wishes he were more in touch with the people because he doesn't know who to

trust. For François Villon, a complex, mysterious genius, long before Jean Richepin, Francis Carco, and Charles Bukowski, the original gutter poet, to be reduced to a mincing flibbertigibbet foisting fistfuls of flowers upon barmaids while improvising sonnets in order to seduce them, is absurdly simplistic. So much for filmdom's notion of the man Swinburne called "our sad bad glad mad brother". But the supremely dopey *If I Were King* is counterbalanced by another film of the period, the excellent *The Life of Emile Zola*, directed by William Dieterle, in which Paul Muni, in a tour de force as Zola, valiantly defends the unjustly accused Captain Dreyfus, played by Joseph Schildkraut. This is a fine story, brilliantly acted and developed. By 1960, such respectable offerings as Oscar Wilde, with Robert Morley in the title role, had come along. In most instances, the films we will consider here date from the 1980s and 1990s. Many are constructed along the lines of Roger Corman's Poe extravaganzas—life-and-works melanges subservient to some genre formula such as murder mystery, adventure, or historical romance. To the four traditional classifications of Tinseltown's film types—swill, drivel, tripe, and crap—one would be tempted to add, after watching most of the films detailed here, bilge water, guano, codswallop, and common manure. By way of guiding the viewer through the miasmas of Bandini Mountain, the following aid is offered:

RATING CODE

A = ADVENTURE

CD = COSTUME DRAMA

DM = DOMESTIC MELODRAMA (SOAP OPERA)

DMT = DECADENT MELODRAMA

ET = EROTIC THRILLER

HF = HORROR FANTASY

HR = HISTORICAL ROMANCE

HT = HAGIOGRAPHIC TRIBUTE

MM = MURDER MYSTERY

PADI = PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS DEDICATED INDIVIDUALIST

PAGS = PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A GOOD SPORT

PAOF = PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD FOOL

PAYN = PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG NYMPHOMANIAC

PAYS = PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG SATYR

PB = PSYCHO-BIOGRAPHY

PF = POETIC FANTASY

PM = POLITICAL MELODRAMA

RB = RUM BUM: social realism by way of analysis of central character who is usually a dipsomaniac given to frequenting the alsatias of large, modern metropolises

RC = ROMANTIC COMEDY

SF = SCIENCE FICTION

[Often these flicks are mish-mash amalgams of more than one formula or approach, a hodge-podge of any combination of the above, e.g.: MM ET PM = MURDER MYSTERY, EROTIC THRILLER, POLITICAL MELODRAMA.]

La Nuit de Varennes (1982). CD HR PM. Directed by Ettore Scola. Marcello Mastroianni and Jean-Louis Barrault as the libertines Casanova and Restif de la Bretonne along with Harvey Keitel as Thomas Paine, in a drawing-room yak-fest; the drawing room here being a carriage roving the French countryside on the eve of the Revolution.

Beaumarchais the Scoundrel (1997). CD HR PM. Directed by Edouard Molinaro. Screenplay by Molinaro and Jean-Claude Brisville; inspired by an unpublished work by Sacha Guitry. Fabrice Luchini plays 18th century French dramatist and wit Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, in a cycle of imprisonment, ruffled petticoat chasing, and espionage carried out on behalf of Louis xv.

Time After Time (1979). SF RC. Directed by Nicholas Meyer. Malcolm McDowell as H.G. Wells scampering about contemporary San Francisco in search of David Warner's Jack the Ripper. With the help of secretary Mary Steenburgen he accomplishes his mission and returns to turn-of-the-century England by means of—you guessed it—his time machine.

Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle (1994). DM PB. Directed by Alan Rudolph. Starring Jennifer Jason Leigh as Dorothy Parker drinking her way through several decades, geographic regions, and love affairs. Members of the Algonquin Round Table are so desperate to be witty, they come off as terminal depressives. A huge yawn.

The Man Who Would Be King (1975). A. Directed by John Huston; starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine. This is standard adventure fare based on the yarn by Rudyard Kipling; in a cameo of the author in his prime, as played by Christopher Plummer, he is presented as an

affable and dignified foreign correspondent.

The Dark Side of the Heart (1992). PF DTM PAYS ET. Directed by Eliseo Subiela; based on the writings of Argentine avant-gardist Oliverio Girondo; starring Dario Grandinetti as the poet Oliverio and Sandra Ballesteros as his inamorata. Fantasy quest about a poet seeking a woman who can fly.

Il Postino (1994). RC. Directed by Michael Radford. Massimo Troisi is the postman, Phillipe Noiret is the exiled Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; Maria Grazia Cucinotta is the love interest Beatrice. Everybody's uncle Neruda helps ditzy postman woo and win local tavernkeeper. Far from the cuddly, teddy-bear kind of character portrayed in the film, Neruda was a monstrous Stalinist who condemned non-communist compatriots. Admittedly a wonderful poet, though. Five screenwriters based the script for this dud on the novel "Burning Patience" by Antonio Skarmeta.

The Mystery of Rampo (1994). MM HF DTM ET. Directed by Kazuyoshi Okuyama. Screenplay by Kazuyoshi Okuyama and Yuhei Enoki. Starring Naoto Takenaka as Edogawa Rampo, Masahiro Motoki as Detective Akechi, Michiko Hada as the luscious femme fatale Shizuko, and Mikijiro Hira as the morbid Marquis Ogawara. Formulated like the Roger Corman Poe extravaganzas of the 1960s, but very exotic, elegant, deliciously decadent. Lush costumes and sets, with meticulous, beautifully-rendered details, including the matte of a clifftop castle, and wonderful props such as bunraku puppets, Noh masks, and a vintage music box.

The Disappearance of Garcia Lorca (1997). MM PM. Directed by Marcos Zurinaga; Written by Marcos Zurinaga and Juan Antonio Ramos and Neil Cohen; starring Esai Morales as Ricardo Fernandez, Edward James Olmos as Lozano, Jeroen Krabbe as Col. Aguirre, and Andy Garcia as Lorca. Byzantine whodunit that heads in fifteen directions without ever arriving anywhere. Andy Garcia's recitation of Lorca's Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejia, one of the finest poems in the Spanish language, is so embarrassingly bad, so absolutely wretched, it makes you want to flee the theater and grab the nearest barf bag.

Tom and Viv (1995). DM PB. Directed by Brian Gilbert. Messy glop about T. S. Eliot, and his selfish, sadistic treatment of his flighty wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood, played by Miranda Richardson. So breathtakingly pointless it leaves the viewer limp, other than to note that T. S. lives up

to his initials. Includes a walk-on by Bertrand Russell, who should have known better than to waste the time.

I, the Worst of All (1997). HT. Directed by Maria Luisa Bemberg. 17th century Mexican freethinker poetess Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz is played worshipfully yet humbly by Assumpta Serna; deferentially tasteful and proper.

My Life and Times With Antonin Artaud (1993). DTM PB RB. Directed by Gerard Mordillat; Written by Gerard Mordillat and Jerome Prieur; starring Sami Frey as Antonin Artaud and Marc Barbe as aspiring poet Jacques Prevel. Prevel character runs around Paris scoring drugs for the semi-demented Artaud in hopes he will be adopted as a protege. Focuses on one sad aspect of Artaud's last years while largely ignoring the fiery brilliance which burned through his inner maelstrom and made this one of the most creative phases of his life.

Total Eclipse (1995). DTM PB PADI PAOF. Directed by Agnieszka Holland; Written by Christopher Hampton; starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Arthur Rimbaud and David Thewlis as Paul Verlaine. Snot-nosed prodigy and all-around prick Rimbaud runs around making miserable as many human beings as possible. On the other hand, perhaps the scene where Rimbaud stands on a banquet table and urinates on the work of a lesser poet is worth the price of admission.

Carrington (1995). DM PADI PB. Written and Directed by Christopher Hampton; Concerns critic and biographer Lytton Strachey, darling of the Bloomsbury Group, and his unconventional relationship with his adoring admirer, the painter Dora Carrington, at their country home, Ham Spray. A painful, tedious exercise apparently springing from the profound supposition that persons of conflicting sexual orientation strange bedfellows do make. What a concept! Based on the book Lytton Strachey by Michael Holroyd, but renamed *Carrington*.

Gothic (1986). DTM HF CD. Directed by Ken Russell. Hypothesis about a night spent in an Italian lakeside villa by Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, his wife Mary, her sister Claire, and Dr. Polidori. As wild as the happenings in the villa may seem, Gabriel Byrne's depiction of Byron, Julian Sands' Shelley, and Natasha Richardson's Mary are probably quite accurate. Ken Russell has a thing for tormented writers—he has done film biographies of Rossetti, Swinburne, and Ruskin, among others.

Salome's Last Dance (1988). DTM PF CD. Directed by Ken Russell. Stratford Johns plays Oscar Wilde, who attends, in a brothel, a private

performance of his decadent-symbolist drama *Salome*. Thence evolves the usual interweaving of fact and fancy, life and work, of the notorious Irish poet. At story's end, he's carted off to jail. Glenda Jackson supports.

Becoming Colette (1992). PAYN DM PB. Directed by Danny Huston. Gorgeous Mathilda May touchingly portrays an embryonic Colette to Klaus Maria Brandauer's suitably infandous Willy, and Virginia Madsen's catty Polaire, the two persons most responsible for foiling and exploiting her early career. As exploitative as this budding-author-coming-of-age flick is, in itself, it's redeemed by an honest portrayal of spirit triumphing over heavy odds.

The Old Gringo (1989). PAOF HR. Directed by Luis Puenzo; based on the novel by Carlos Fuentes. Gregory Peck plays Ambrose Bierce as an aimless, used-up delusional bumbling about Mexico during the 1913 Revolution. Also stars Jane Fonda and Jimmy Smits. A complete brain vacuum.

Henry and June (1990). DM PADI PAYS PAYN. Directed by Phil Kaufman. Henry Miller and Anais Nin, in the guise of Fred Ward and the delectable Maria de Medeiros, have repeated, spontaneous sex in unlikely, uncomfortable locales. With Uma Thurman and Kevin Spacey thrown in, just for complication's sake.

Heartbeat (1980). DM. Written and directed by John Byrum; Supposedly chronicles the formative exploits of the young Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, et al. Stars Nick Nolte, John Heard, Sissy Spacek, and Ray Sharkey. If you waste more than two minutes on this utterly moronic abomination, you won't feel Beat; you'll feel beaten.

Naked Lunch (1992). HF. Directed by David Cronenberg. Wm. S. Burroughs is played appropriately creepily by Peter Weller, as an exterminator addicted to "bug powder" in a paranoid phantasmagoria of all the trademark Burroughs bugaboos. This hallucination set in Interzone also features Judy Davis, Ian Holm, Julian Sands, and Roy Scheider. Yes, Burroughs' wife gets shot.

Fairytale (1997). PF CD. Directed by Charles Sturridge; Screenplay by Ernie Contreras. Starring Florence Hoath, Elizabeth Earl, Paul McGann, Phoebe Nicholls, Peter O'Toole as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Harvey Keitel as Harry Houdini. Arthur Conan Doyle is impeccably, even physically convincingly, played by Peter O'Toole, which is quite a feat considering that O'Toole resembles Conan Doyle about as much as a

peacock resembles a grizzly bear. Conan Doyle is sympathetically delineated as a believer in fairies, after losing his son, as did Rudyard Kipling and Teddy Roosevelt, in the First World War. Highlights include a period production of Barrie's *Peter Pan*; and an incident at the Theosophical Society where a soldier recalls the Battle of Mons (immortalized by Arthur Machen's "Bowmen of Mons").

Kafka (1992). HF. Directed by Steven Soderbergh. Stars Jeremy Irons, Theresa Russell, Joel Grey, and Ian Holm. Like *Naked Lunch*, this hallucinatory life-and-works formulation traps the author inside his own nightmares. Petty clerk Franz tracks evil villains through trap doors leading from the local cemetery to a bizarre, Czech-expressionist rooftop laboratory, where nefarious experiments are outdone in nastiness only by his bureaucrat bosses back at the office.

Lady Caroline Lamb (1972). DM CD HR. Written and directed by Robert Bolt; starring Sarah Miles, Jon Finch, Laurence Olivier, and Ralph Richardson. Includes a sketch of Lord Byron (Richard Chamberlain) as a cad, a heel, and an egomaniac par excellence. Lady Caroline serves as his lapdog, victim of a sick infatuation which leads to her destruction.

Prick Up Your Ears (1987). PAYS DM. Directed by Stephen Frears. Spotlights relationship between gay playwright Joe Orton, played by Gary Oldman, and his jealous lover Kenneth Halliwell, played by Alfred Molina. Apart from gawking at the lubricious scenes in public urinals and Moroccan boy-tels, you'll come away from this one asking, "who cares?" Also stars Vanessa Redgrave, Julie Walters, and Wallace Shawn.

Tales of Ordinary Madness (1983). RB. Directed by Marco Ferreri. Starring Ben Gazzara as Charles Bukowski and Ornella Muti as the most beautiful woman on earth. The idea of Ornella Muti sleeping with the likes of Charles Bukowski is one of the most howlingly ludicrous ideas of the century - an idea of not ordinary, but extraordinary madness.

Barfly (1987). RB. Directed by Barbet Schroeder. In this one, Mickey Rourke's Bukowski and Faye Dunaway's pushover floosie tumble through a booze-soaked haze of an hour-and-a-half's duration. Preposterous! Unintentionally even funnier than its predecessor Bukowski flick, *Tales of Ordinary Madness*.

Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters (1985). PB DTM. Directed by Paul Schrader in four parts: "Beauty"; "Action"; "Art", and "A Harmony of

Pen and Sword”. Stars Ken Ogata as the walking contradiction Yukio Mishima. Creditable account of the principal preoccupations of this unique Japanese writer.

Julia (1977). PM. Directed by Fred Zinnemann; Written by Alvin Sargent. Syrupy silliness about the World War II exploits of Lillian Hellman, played by Jane Fonda, and Dashiell Hammett, played by Jason Robards, who cloak-and-dagger though danger-filled Europe, in order to save a politically-threatened friend. Also stars Maximilian Schell, Vanessa Redgrave, and Meryl Streep. Moral here is that writers can be morally superior social activists who’ll go to any lengths to rescue an endangered comrade. This is a deep one, folks.

Hamsun (1997). PM. Directed by Jan Troell; Screenplay by Per Olov Enquist. Droning to-do about the misguided Nazi affiliations of Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun, recipient of the 1920 Nobel Prize for literature. Max Von Sydow, in a fine performance, carries the title role. However, after snoring through this, you may think Hitler was right about Norway—at least the Nazis livened things up for awhile.

Shadowlands (1993). DM. Directed by Richard Attenborough; Written by William Nicholson. Improbable romance of British author C.S. Lewis, played by Anthony Hopkins, and American poetaster Joy Gresham, played by Debra Winger. Precious, hand-wringing pabulum about wonderful, caring, warm human beings. Bears a highly original message: everyone needs love. Especially the makers of this glue.

Dark Prince: Intimate Tales of Marquis de Sade (1997). DTM. Directed by Gwyneth Gibby; Produced by Roger Corman; Written by Craig J. Nevius. Unlike Peter Brooks’ 1966 *Marat/Sade*, in which Patrick Magee played a blood-curdling Marquis, this film is a tacky romp starring a campy Nick Mancuso as de Sade, in an over-the-top tale of love, cruelty, deceit, imprisonment, blackmail, and betrayal. Though aiming purely at amusement, this film actually leaks a certain amount of Sadean thought, and cogently, at that. Janet Gunn and John Rhys-Davies head the supporting cast.

Out of Africa (1985). A DM. Directed by Sydney Pollack; Written by Kurt Luedtke. Danish author Isak Dinesen (Baroness Karen Blixen) is portrayed by Meryl Streep, who affects a charming but dorkily implausible accent, while running a coffee plantation in Africa opposite Robert Redford, the dashing Great White Hunter, Dennis, who gives her a fountain pen. In the course of this veldt version of “Days of Our

Lives”, we learn that Blixen has contracted syphilis from her philandering husband, that native children can be taught to read, and that British colonial interests care nothing about the native children or their parents. Blixen’s character describes herself as a “mental traveler”, because she tells stories in an age before television. Much gab about the importance of self-sufficiency and independence which is intended to point up how liberated and forward-looking the characters are. At least the film ends before that period in Blixen’s life when she celebrated birthday parties in West Hollywood with Marilyn Monroe.

Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life (1998). PADI. Written and directed by Michael Paxton; Narrated by Sharon Gless. A documentary about skyscraper worship, what it’s like to live in a Richard Neutra house, and to be taken under the wing of Cecil B. DeMille (who called Rand “Caviar”). Thorough-going analysis details insights into Rand’s complex and compelling intellect, her objectivist philosophy, her exaltation of individualism, and rejection of altruism. It should be remembered, and is confirmed by this film that, though Rand’s books were successfully adapted for the screen, she was a better philosopher than novelist.

Cross Creek (1983). PAGES. Directed by Martin Ritt. This lulu purports to demonstrate how 1930s author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, played by Mary Steenburgen, derived the inspiration for her novels from her relationships with her quaint backwoods neighbors. Cutsie-poo hokum about the dubious doings of a bunch of hicks. Watching this movie makes playing checkers on a cracker barrel at a country store seem like a high-brow activity. Also stars Rip Torn.

With few exceptions, we are told precious little about the works, or even the lives of the writers profiled in these films. All too often they are uni-dimensional: they are social consciences for entire nations but hopeless boobs in their personal lives; they are fatuous, self-indulgent decadents who just happen to be artistically gifted; they are mad, obsessed geniuses whose monomania destroys everyone around them and ultimately, themselves...The juiciest, most salacious aspects of authors’ lives become the dominant note to which other dimensions – especially that of the art which makes these people celebrated in the first place—are bound in cowering submission. The angle is usually one of kiss-and-tell, gossip column sensationalism. What sort of hubris propels filmmakers to treat subjects about which they obviously

know so woefully little? Might it be the compulsion to draw on the lives and works of great artists in hopes that some of the sheen will rub off on the pseudo-art form of the cinema? But filmdom, with all its resources—huge bankrolls and expense accounts, the combined talents of hundreds, sometimes thousands of people, the finest equipment, designers, and technicians—cannot approximate the artistry of a sole dedicated artist. Tellingly, of all the films outlined above, the one which works best in conveying an idea of the personality of the artist and some idea of the nature of her work is the only documentary in the group, *Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*. The other films, the dramatizations, are fanciful confections usually built around a single, exaggerated aspect of the subject's personality. Often, the work of the costume or set designer or composer of the score overshadows other contributions to the project. The story lines, ironically, are often the most flawed part of these stories about writers. What sort of synopsis best summarizes these efforts? That the films and filmmakers in question do achieve a kind of art—the art of bathos.

Trauma Becoming Form

perhaps this is a rescue fantasy
by Heather Fuller (Edge Books, 1997)

Reviewed by William Marsh

IF THE purpose of poetry is to wage war against stasis, then poetry compels an intelligent strategy, or a strategic intelligence, as its defense. The language of Fuller's book stresses its strategies—at each turn of a line, a tactical maneuver, a well-executed move, each relieving (perhaps reliving) this stress in moments of torn, sometimes nearly shredded syntax. The locale for this engagement is the city; streets traveled are vectors or “radia” (subtitle of first section) along which the writer-contestant conducts her danger excursions—not dangerous, but pursuant to danger. “Knifepoint has held me” (“Mantras” 22) and holds everything—body, mind, community, history—in a state of arrest (arrested time, arrested movement). Perhaps fear is an appropriate response, also rage, humor, despair—wound tightly enough to inform strategy, intelligence, recognition. Perhaps these are the weapons of rescue.

Long lines evoke the long-strides of a walker (“Do I look as if I need a taxi” 42). Syntax unstops where phrases (‘natural’ breath pauses or discrete grammatical units) knot or mesh into longer strands. In the opening lines of “Darkroom” (8):

I walk out of the house without my glasses but with
preparation for drama this condition against deflation

but also surprise and everyone a romance

William Marsh teaches writing and literature in San Diego and edits the PaperBrainPress chapbook series

at the angle from which the poet approaches her subject matter. Objects are exaggerated and visible at a distance—overwhelming and consuming if approached. For Fuller the cityscape is the artist’s object, and writing cuts the grooves and defines the outer casting of the object so that details (face, shape, body, proportion) reveal themselves. Noted references to film and filmmaking set the static of hard sculpture against the kinetic of hard movement. The city is also a landscape one traverses (by foot, by car, by bus) and perhaps tries to escape, “running right over / getaway wreckage” (“A Senator’s Breakfast” 29). One wonders, “can the entire body / make a fist” (31) and (if necessary) launch a whole body resistance.

Leaving, escape and rescue are prevalent concerns. From “Rush Hr NJ Ave” (37):

who finds a child on the street not who leaves I ask you
this much I ask you not who leaves who can say who finds

not how hungry but who leaves you now how to call the foster
into this that fragments at the core of trauma becoming form

Frequent engagements with “trauma”

a man photographing wounds to make the wounds believable (38)

redwheelbarrowtrauma (41)

a woman gouges out her eyes (46)

as well as the places and systems designed ostensibly to prevent or treat trauma—“Emergency Broadcast System” (26), “police in their prowling” (26), “Mercy Health Care” (26)—combine to form the landscape against which the “rescue fantasy” emerges as the consummate strategy of escape. But while for most the rescue itself, or even its “fantasy,” ultimately defers to the reality of imprisonment (to codes, economies, abusive individuals and groups), a countermobilising strategy can be to know the landscape with precision and clarity. “The Large Passion” (43) fuels this tactical, intelligent countermobility:

...repeat to me
the distinction between barbed and razor wire

and later:

...I need to open
this box of pedals
or fit my life into
a car so I might move it *I'm building*
a latter so I might disappear or not attract
the reckless dispossessed the unsurefooted" (44)

Clear recognition and precise knowing are to the thinker what surefootedness is to the city-dweller. Defense (rescue) against trauma—even against the agencies of trauma-prevention—requires intimidation, risk, perhaps betrayal. From “Mythology Girl” (47):

if I intimidate I carry a different stick or perhaps
the voice that speaks to strangers
betrays sharecropper merchant marine mythic
white house on the hill genealogy of hands
too burlesque for annealer tree mender seating
at the opera but not for repetitive motion
disorder or lost uniforms she forgets
herself when the streets are clear...

Not to mention the violence sometimes necessary against those who would do violence to you:

...take a can opener to
the white man in your head he lights bonfires in your yard
keeps you up for nights keep you up for nights
[from “2nd Person as Means of Having Visions” 52]

And writing.

Placards. Notices posted in a public place—posters. But also posting, and the second active sense of the word can't be overlooked in a poetry about things and movement. The writer “placards” her environment—getting the message out. This last section (and action) of the book collects ten poems visually squared on the page—eight of which—“Placards,” are boxed in solid dark lines at the center of the page, poster-like. “Placard #5”:

**Of course I love
your masculine hands
and ring of runes.
What I knew for life
now stands for courage.
I heard chopping in
the kitsch-en but you
were halfway down
the stairs and there
was nothing else but
firewood. Outside.
I cannot say I've lost
an eardrum. I cannot
say**

The first work of the section, three poems collected under the title “a mormon of complexity,” lend further visual appeal by overlaying duplicate poems or posters in such a way that the placarded text displaces itself, palimpsesting but leaving large uneraser, undisplaced portions visible in the margins outside the poster’s border. Given the local concerns of each poem—“the woman will not transfer though / this is her bus...”; “a girl with static beneath her coat and I / the visitor...”; and “the woman taxi driver does not go by / the meter...” —the several movements or mobilities (not sensibilities) coalesce in a series of very well-articulated pronouncements. We can read the placards as framed moments of resistance, whose language consistently threatens to dissolve or burst the frame. Effects of a fully-realized (not fantasized) resistance can be devastating, cosmic: “the sun is a prime candidate for burnout” (“Postcard Home Soon” 68).

* * *

The book ends with a prayer, but its language, as throughout the

book, contends with the debilitating effect that prayer-speak (also a street-speak) can have on one “reduced to a hostage / among hostages.” From “Prayer and Other Celestial Congestion” (69):

I consult the border
crosser incant over-
pass indictments BUSH = AIDS art is
gay CUNT prayer
is staredown
randomness not unpatterned
thought not complete writing
cut and rearranged

True Lies

Credence by Dennis Phillips (Sun & Moon Press, 1996)

Reviewed by Jacques Debrot

WITH UNUSUAL conciseness, Dennis Phillips's latest book *Credence*, repeatedly elicits from the most minimal units of meaning, a maximal significance. Yet, paradoxically, this very precision arises from a recurring concern with (and openness to) the contradictions of narrative. That is to say, Phillips's poetry, at the moments of its tightest contraction, tends (along another axis, to become implusive. The writing here is dissociative, finally, rather than associative. So that, from within the limits of a compressed, minimalist sensibility, the book is simultaneously pervaded by a complex dispersive structure—what Roland Barthes, alluding to the pluralization of meaning in the scriptible text, has called the “stereographic space of writing” (Barthes: 15).

Divided into three sections of crossing and double-crossing text, the subtly disintegrative statements which characterize the “main” section are similar to those which occur, as one element among others, in Phillips's earlier books such as *Arena* (Sun & Moon), and *20 Questions* (Jahbone Press).

The principal innovation of *Credence* lies in Phillips's annotation of these statements by two sets of endnotes each of which articulates distinctive tonalities (the first, analytically lyrical, the second, consisting of allusive, occluded fragments) that, for the most part, are suppressed in the main text.

Of course, the obvious analogy is to hypertext. By this I mean that

Jacques Debrot is a Ph.D. student at Harvard University. His poetry appears (or is forthcoming) in Rhizome, Chain, Aerial, and other magazines.

each passage in *Credence* can be accurately compared to an intersecting node, or link, from which every other passage in the book potentially converges. But another analogy—perhaps more useful, though similar — would be to a Derridean conception of text as constituted by discrete reading units for which there exists “the possibility of disengagement and citational graft.”

Indeed, in spite of the hierarchical organization generally entailed by the endnote format, the poem is in reality a complex web (*toile*) or network (*reseau*) with multiple entrances and exits engendering — like a postmodern version of *midrash*—“an infinity of new contexts” (Derrida 185).

Phillips, in fact, often appears to annotate the poem at precisely those moments where the reader’s desire to restructure a passage into larger contexts of meaning will be particularly acute. The incitement for this may be a cipher of theoretical abstraction: “Just because space exists,^{ll} // Although a discourse on physics would include the idea of attraction”; or simply an unfamiliar word: “The vines then telluric,^k / indisputably over with” (65), but instead of resolving the poem’s ambiguities, the endnotes pluralize them.

For instance, in the last example, the endnote “k,” in contrast to the expectations that would be fulfilled by a scholarly article, does not define the meaning of “telluric,” but, rather, poses an implicit riddle: “The vessel, the shadow of the vessel, the shadow alone” (87). Both disjunct and affirmative, the integration of these passages into a higher level of non-dialectical or causal meaning is restricted by the absence of a sufficiently controlling context and, to a somewhat lesser degree, by the poem’s minimalist punctuation and subtle discontinuities of syntax. These “raise” the surface of the work, drawing attention away from the dimension of narrative referentiality and the problematic hermeneutic of depths in order to emphasize the complexities of the poem’s linguistic construction.

This is not to suggest, however, that the text and its annotations have only—or most importantly—a contingent relationship. The book is actually more like some fantastically intricate Moebius strip whose associational threads—“fantasies of attachments and re-attachments” (II)—appear to twist back on themselves returning to a point that is unaccountably different from where they began: The rhythm of inquiries trying to sound a tone i.e. what did you mean by sound?

The rhythm of inquiries trying to sound a tone i.e. what did you mean by sound?

Banking on a characteristic turn of phrased^d rejecting a familiarity replaced with nothing.

But who could expect such momentum? Even the most altruistic fall victim to an atavic urge for safety.

How to compare discourse with intercourse.

How to compare discourse with intercourse. Here meanings and images shift and overlap almost from one word to the next. Such a radically experientialist aesthetic seems to propose, in part, a reinvention of attention as a capability that is at once focused and diffuse.

Indeed, the complex structure of the poem (impossible, obviously, to reproduce here) will itself generate “deviant” readings inasmuch as, while searching for the endnotes and returning again to the “correct place” in the main text, a certain amount of reading both behind and ahead of the reading path ostensibly authorized by the book’s format will occur. In this way, the context of an endnote – for example one of those cited earlier: “The vessel, the shadow of the vessel, the shadow alone” – is produced not only with reference to the passage it annotates, but by its proximity to the other endnotes which surround it, in this specific instance: “Every letter every correspondent sound every numerical equivalent every suggested image every actual image every idea” – but, even more radically, by *every letter, every correspondent sound, every suggested image*. In fact, Phillips’s ideal reader would not only alter the text by her “mistakes,” but would perhaps make several quite different readings of the book, each time attempting an alternative strategy.

The poem’s difference from itself, a difference which, in *Credence*, is elicited from within by the constantly shifting contexts of each “re-reading,” subverts the very idea of totalized meaning. According to Barthes, critical difference not is “not what designates the individuality of each text, what names, signs, finishes off each work with a flourish; on the contrary, it is a difference which does not stop and which is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which each text is the return” (Barthes: 3). Resembling a “chambre d’echos” *Credence* invites not just a hyper-, but an inter-

reading of materials (the “voice in other voices” (11)) re-assembled from such widely diverse sources as *A Modest Proposal*, Freud’s case study of “The Wolfman,” *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as well as several plays of Shakespeare, including *King Lear*:

Then you shall split the kingdom thrice. Messages will be left or analyzed.

A comparison is made without concern for others’ ages or aging a component of how they thought or, besides you, have you ever just jumped?

For the entire day the sourceless problem of having words which begin with p-r-o filling the brain. (14)

When they are recognized, the elements appropriated from *Lear* – far from harmonizing – clash with Phillips’s deliberately ironic tone. But this discontinuity is not merely stylistic. As is evident from the very form of the book, Phillips substitutes a spatial organization for a temporal one, just as, in the allusion to *Lear*, the temporal denotation of the word “thrice” (three times) will be superseded by its connotation of space (three parts). Here attention is focused most insistently, as it is throughout the poem, on the processes of representation. The element of intertextuality beautifully subtletizes this, in that the line – “For the entire day the sourceless problem of having words with p-r-o filling the brain” – raises questions, in its own way, about a certain kind of interpretive “blindness” which would involve looking for all the words that begin with the letters p-r-o on the page of *Credence* from which this passage was taken (namely: problem, prophets, pro-lapse). As Jean-Pierre Criqui says (in another context), “a mechanism of disillusion is central [to works like Phillips’s]: an obscure and irrepressible remainder makes seeing too much equivalent to seeing too little” (Criqui 113).

Specifically, Phillips’s disillusion appears to be with the monologic specificity of “true belief.” That the poem ends somewhat ironically with the word “*Credence*” (57) only underlines this disillusion. But because *credence* is merely the last word in the main text, it is also situated (literally and metaphorically) at the book’s center in the same way one box is nested inside another in a Chinese puzzle. Like the poem itself – “a series of figures complete then revised” (83) (though never entirely figured out) – *Credence* entails a continuous revisioning

of authorial voice and readerly responsiveness. It is, in fact, the small miracle of this book that Phillips writes and unwrites “truth” with such aesthetic and ethical persuasiveness.

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