GLENN'S BOOK NOTES. Last updated 23 December 2010.

The subjects:

1: Kenneth Rexroth's Classics Revisited.
2: The Tale of Genji.
3: The poetry of Daniel Huws.
4: The novels of Jonis Agee.
5: Five (or twelve) great mysteries.
6: The literature of the Blasket Islands.
7: Zen: Shunryu Suzuki, Robert Aitken, R.H. Blyth.
8: The letters of Van Gogh, Keats, Helene Hanff, and the Shaw-Terry correspondence.
9: The journals of Pepys, Thoreau and Dorothy Wordsworth.
10: The great Buddhist poets.
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36: Rosemary Mahoney.
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77. Morison on the Intellectual Life of Colonial New England, and the Colonial poets.

#1: THE MOST IMPORTANT THING I WILL NOT BE TELLING YOU. "Classic" is a terrible epithet to slap on a book: it ends up on somebody's Lifetime Reading Program or one of those other canons people are always firing off. My own notes are going to be entirely random and subjective, but if you ARE looking for a guide to the best, a checklist of the biggies, I recommend CLASSICS REVISITED, by Kenneth Rexroth. Rexroth was a California poet—he organized the famous Six Gallery reading which launched the Beat movement—as well as a translator, essayist and reader of world-ranging voracity. This book gives essays on sixty classics ranging from Gilgamesh to Chekov, with suggestions

for the best translations of foreign-language works. Unlike most such attempts, it is lively, beautifully written and genuinely exciting. There is a second volume, MORE CLASSICS REVISITED, and both are in print from New Directions.
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#2: GLENN'S NOMINATION FOR THE GREATEST NOVEL EVER WRITTEN. This is pure cheek, because I haven't read all the novels ever written: but neither have you, so there. I personally vote for THE TALE OF GENJI, an eleventh-century novel from Japan; the author's name is Lady Murasaki or Murasaki Shikibu ("Shikibu" was a court title). GENJI is a long (1100 pages), almost bewilderingly beautiful panorama of the relationships of an illegitimate Heian aristocrat with his family, his friends, his superiors at court and, above all, his wives and lovers. Though there is recurring wit in the tomfoolery these characters get up to for love, no author in any language has a sense more profound than Murasaki of the ache of human longing. No one as well has a sense more searching and observant of how the act of a moment—in the most famous example, the jealous fit of a neglected mistress—can radiate out, sometimes even fatally, into the lives of literally dozens of characters, down to the following generation. By the ends of their lives, Genji and those closest to him are backlit by the results of hundreds of these acts, some no more than nuances, which then pass them by and shape the lives of their young—the Buddhist notion of karma made visible. One can hardly deal with GENJI but with superlatives: no novel has a greater number of tableaux and set-pieces, often set at night; no author has a more dramatic or pervasive sense of smell. It offers par excellence the end experience of great fiction, the feeling as of looking out from atop a mountain. Of the three complete English translations, I'm still devoted to the first, the one by Arthur Waley; it is, scandalously, out of print, but was reprinted for years by Modern Library and shouldn't be hard to find. That failing, the 2002 translation by Royall Tyler (Penguin Books) is excellent as well, with instructive notes and illustrations, and a handsomely produced paperback. Ivan Morris's book THE WORLD OF THE SHINING PRINCE (Penguin Books) is a readable guide to the Heian period of Japanese history, with special reference to Murasaki. MURASAKI SHIKIBU: Her Diary and Poetic Memoirs, translated by R. J. Bowring (Princeton, 1982) contains the remaining little of Murasaki's literary work, readably translated with copious notes.

(A bit of clarification: Arthur Waley's complete translation of THE TALE OF GENJI was originally published in six separate volumes. The common Doubleday paperback, reprinted recently by Dover, called THE TALE OF GENJI is only the first volume of the six. The Modern Library reprint mentioned above is complete. Royall Tyler's translation has also been issued in an abridged edition. Any complete version of GENJI is going to be a brick of a book: weigh your options.)

#3: GLENN'S NOMINATION FOR THE BEST BOOK OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T READ. OK, she got the Nobel, so that probably means you've read Wislawa Szymborska's VIEW WITH A GRAIN OF SAND, and you've discovered that this Polish poet's voice is as inimitable, each piece immediately recognizable as her own, as Emily Dickinson or Dr. Seuss (those comparisons are not chosen at random). You may even have followed the trail of

Claire Cavanagh's excellent translations and hit upon MYSTICISM FOR BEGINNERS, Adam Zagajewski's third collection of poems, and discovered that the wry and tragic voice of postwar Europe is speaking still. But I'm betting you haven't read THE QUARRY, by Daniel Huws, the Anglo-Welsh poet still completely unknown (as far as I can tell) in the U.S. He published one collection, NOTH, in 1972; THE QUARRY, published by Faber and Faber in 1999, is a selection from NOTH with new original work, one beautiful translation from the Welsh, and ending with "Al Poco Giorno," a rendition of Dante whose deliberate, pensive movement is worthy of Yeats at his best. I'm not sure if THE QUARRY is still in print, but I think you should go find out and knock down anybody who gets in your way.

#4: GLENN'S NOMINATION FOR THE BEST CONTEMPORARY NOVELIST YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T READ. There is just way too much fiction out there. Not just too much of it at the Barn: too much of it in existence. And the indiscriminate sludge-chute of American publishing obscures some really good authors, like Jonis Agee, whose novels SWEET EYES and STRANGE ANGELS, both set in the American Midwest, are not only passionate and clean-seeing books about farm community life, but manage to avoid being either one of those teacup-and-potpourri "village" novels English authors write in their sleep or one of those baths of magnolia surrealism and baroque hoo-hoo that creep up so frequently from the American south. Agee, Nebraskan by birth, never gives the feeling of axes grinding: she's not just moving, she's believable. And these are just her first two…..

#5: FIVE ABSOLUTELY TERRIFIC MYSTERY NOVELS YOU SHOULD READ, EVEN IF YOU DON'T LIKE MYSTERIES. I do actually like mysteries, but I'm not much of a one for those plotted-to-the-nines, can't-figure-out-whodunit, the-puzzle-is-all stories: Agatha Christie, as you might have guessed, bores me gormless. I prefer the ones that have some characterization, setting, and breathable air in them. With those provisos:

---A TASTE FOR DEATH is my favorite of P.D. James's ample and somber novels about Superintendent Adam Dalgliesh. It traces not just the satisfyingly worked-out solving of a double murder but the disruption of the lives the murders come to involve. There is a maturity of observation in James that sets her above her competitors; she also has a superb sense of setting, and A TASTE FOR DEATH is one the best stories of contemporary London I know of. (DEVICES AND DESIRES, set around a nuclear plant in Norfolk, is a near-second favorite.)

---In the stories about Inspector Wexford, Ruth Rendell tones down some of her fascination with abnormal psychology and centers the action in a believable English middle-class community, Kingsmarkham, which has given her later books great emotional force. In SIMISOLA, when the daughter of a black professional family goes missing, the indelicate cards of race and class get thrown in. Though Rendell quietly pulls off an extraordinary stunt—we don't know the meaning of the title until the next-to-last line of the book—what stays with you is the author's very moving handling of violence and loss.

---Following in this vein—contemporary mystery writers moving from their good but more conventional earlier works to books of much fuller characterizations and deeper, more somber tone—Reginald Hill has gone from the enjoyable earlier Dalziel and Pascoe mysteries to ON BEULAH HEIGHT, which has an intricate plot and good-size cast but which is given depth by the characters' rounded emotional and family lives, an eerie setting (a drowned village) and a sense of moral urgency in the threat of the return of a serial killer. Be warned that it's not cheerful—by the end of the book you know what it is to lose a child, and it ends with an emotionally wrenching dream sequence—but neither does it have the nastiness and psychosexual weirderies that have marred so much of Elizabeth George or Minette Walters. (If you want cheerful, backtrack to Hill's earlier and deliriously funny PICTURES OF PERFECTION.)

---From the golden age my recommendation goes to GAUDY NIGHT, which Dorothy Sayers thought the best of her novels. It's the third of the four books (after STRONG POISON and HAVE HIS CARCASE and before the amusing postscript BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON) of Lord Peter Wimsey's romantic pursuit of Harriet Vane, herself a mystery writer. Harriet takes center stage in this one, and what makes it a perfect tie-up—a blending of theme and plot no one's ever quite pulled off again—is that in order to solve the mystery she must also confront the obstacles to her romance with Wimsey. Even the setting becomes part of the plot: Oxford (with an attendant cast of female dons as eccentric as Oxford ever in real life produced) as the Cloud Cuckooland where passion and scholarship fight it out in heaven. It's a supreme comedy with a surprising emotional kick in the solution: Sayers must have hugged herself when she pulled this one off.

---Another supreme comedy, in fact one of the funniest books I've ever read, is THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON, the last novel by Edmund Crispin. Crispin wrote his mysteries about Gervase Fen, the Oxford don-detective, up through the fifties and then, after twenty-five years of silence, delivered this last lunatic stroke. There's a perfectly good mystery plot in there, of course, but there's also Old Gobbo, a tune-deaf cavalry major who's afraid of horses, the man from SWEB, Titty and Tatty Bale, the Botticelli, an unpredictable power station called The Pisser, a climactic chase worthy of Sennett and the far-flying scattershot of Fen's (and Crispin's) witty remarks. If you have a susceptibility to British humor at all, I guarantee this one. Crispin's BURIED FOR PLEASURE and THE LONG DIVORCE are also pretty spectacular.

Okay, that's twelve novels, not five, but really. No one expects the Spanish Inquisition.

#6: A WORLD YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW EXISTED. The Blasket Islands, a tiny grouping of only a few square miles off the west coast of the Dingle Peninsula, produced, between 1929 and 1953, two generations of memoirs that must be some sort of record for literary production per square foot. These include THE ISLANDMAN, by Tomas O'Crohan, the first and most famous of them, and his ISLAND CROSS TALK, a later book; AN OLD WOMAN'S REFLECTIONS and PEIG, by Peig Sayers; A PITY YOUTH DOES NOT LAST, by Peig's poet-son Micheal O'Guiheen; LETTERS FROM THE GREAT BLASKET, by Eibhlis Ni Shuilleabhain; and Robin Flower's affecting historical account, THE WESTERN ISLAND. Of all of them my favorite is Maurice O'Sullivan's TWENTY YEARS A-GROWING; O'Sullivan has the natural blood of storytelling in him, and the peculiar sweet intimacy of his language brings you further into

the bare, rapt life of the islands than you could hope. The book is still in print from Oxford, and one feels about it as E.M. Forster wrote in his preface: "Here is the egg of a sea-bird—lovely, perfect, and laid this very morning."

#7: ZEN. One of the books long recognized as one of the very best in English on Zen is ZEN MIND, BEGINNNER'S MIND, by Shunryu Suzuki, the Japanese Soto monk who ventured to America in the sixties and founded the Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara. The format of this blessed little book, a collection of brief talks, became widely used, but in none that I know of has the voice speaking from the profound center of meditative experience been caught with such humaneness, humor and simplicity. ZEN MIND stood for almost thirty years as Suzuki's sole book, and when two more books were recently mined from the mass of materials Suzuki left behind, I approached them gingerly, not wanting to be disappointed. I needn't have feared: both have Suzuki's voice inimitably in them and are more than worthy successors. BRANCHING STREAMS FLOW IN THE DARKNESS (University of California Press, 1999) is a commentary on the Sandokai, an eighth-century poem; NOT ALWAYS SO (Harper, 2002) is another collection of short talks. They have the airy, crisp clarity which is the special attribute of the great Japanese masters; they also have a luminosity which is Suzuki's own, and few teachers better repay rereading. For a charming and readable biography of Suzuki, see CROOKED CUCUMBER, by David Chadwick (Broadway Books). Chadwick has also edited ZEN IS RIGHT HERE (Shambhala, 2001), a little book of short anecdotes and teaching stories. This "Wisdom of…" format is usually a collection of platitudes, but even here Suzuki was incapable of being soppy or conventional. My favorite line: "Hell is not punishment, it's training."

There was a mercifully brief period when Buddhism was discussed in the West as a system of religious discipline with no real moral or ethical element. With the wide popularity of works by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, I don't imagine anyone persists in that error, but two particularly vivid and readable books on Zen ethics are THE MIND OF CLOVER (North Point Press) and THE PRACTICE OF PERFECTION (Counterpoint) by Robert Aitken. Aitken is an American who was exposed to Zen by meeting R.H. Blyth in the internee camps during the war, and who later founded the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii; in his hale elder years, he is still producing good work, and most of his books are still in print; see also www.robertaitken.net.

R. H. Blyth was the author of ZEN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AND ORIENTAL CLASSICS, an Englishman who moved to Japan and whose books on the haiku are still among the best on the topic. ZEN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE is a wild man's book, leaping about madly and certainly not orthodox in approach; but it's got great stuff in it that I can't imagine being written by an Easterner. Unfortunately, it isn't easy or cheap to get hold of; the original Hokuseido Press edition and the Dutton paperback are both long out of print. Another title some reprint house should get hold of. Robert Aitken in his first published book, A ZEN WAVE: Basho's Haiku and Zen (Weatherhill, 1978), showed himself very much Blyth's able student: the book is a collection of Dharma talks based on the work of the greatest master of the haiku form, which manage to leave the poetry intact. Gary Snyder called it "a superb book on Basho, real life and poetry all at once," and he was right.

#8: READING OTHER PEOPLE'S MAIL. Sitting down to a volume of somebody's letters has the inevitable whiff of duty and homework to it, but there can be pleasures, surprises, shocks even, and variety. The very best and most moving letters, to my taste, are those of Van Gogh and of John Keats. They are both, of course, the recorded tragedies of lives ended suddenly and young—but how different the paths!

In Van Gogh's letters, we see the wakefulness of the painter—the constant awareness of light and visual detail—more vividly evoked than we ever will anywhere else; we see the lifeline of communication provided by Van Gogh's beloved correspondent, his brother Theo; we see, most of all, the young Dutchman, who began his life with the hopes of becoming an evangelical minister, bearing the moral duties of being both an artist and a human among another humans until the duty can be borne no more. The selections of the letters edited by Mark Rothskill, reprinted now in England by Flamingo, and by Ronald de Leeuw in Penguin, are much preferable to Irving Stone's DEAR THEO, in which the letters have been run together to create an ersatz "autobiography". The complete three-volume edition of the letters has been recently reprinted by Bullfinch and is full of lovely illustrations.

The letters of John Keats, surely one of the most attractive personalities who ever wrote poetry, give the impression of a wonderful emotional fullness, with none of the swooning that puts contemporary readers off some of Keats's early verse. Part of the fullness is the illuminant side of a family shadow: Keats and his siblings were separated by the deaths of their parents, and so in Keats's letters to his siblings we are privy to family visits which had to take place on paper. The friends with whom he shared his poetic interests became a kind of family too; these letters, which witness one of the quickest literary developments on record—by his mid twenties Keats had written some of the inarguable masterpieces of English-language verse—have an eagerness, an ardor, that is Keats's own. Then illness struck, which frustrated as well his romance with Fannie Brawne, and he died at the age of 26, certain that his work would be forgotten. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" is the epitaph on his grave in Rome. These last letters of separation are among the most moving ever written. "I can scarcely bid you goodbye, even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow." There have been several good selections published—the edition from Oxford edited by Robert Gittings is probably the best—and a complete edition in two volumes from Harvard.

One of the few happy ironies of Keats having lived so short a life is that he never got to the age when he propaned his earlier manuscripts and got rid of his juvenilia. The result is that we have an extraordinarily full picture of one of the most rapid artistic developments in the history of poetry. And he is the subject of one of the great literary biographies: W. Jackson Bate's JOHN KEATS (Belknap Press, still in print), which gives Keats's story its full, affecting drama, accompanied by some of the most cogent criticism of Keats's poems yet done. For the now-standard text of the poems themselves, go to THE POEMS OF JOHN KEATS, edited by Jack Stillinger (Belknap Press). The long essay on Keats at the end of Harold Bloom's book THE VISIONARY COMPANY: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry (Cornell, 1961) is an excellent piece that places Keats in the poetic context of the time.

On a humbler but cheering level, there's 84 CHARING CROSS ROAD, by Helene Hanff. These letters between an aspiring playwright in New York who had a crush on British literature and the staff of a used-book shop in the post-war years of London's

bookseller's row, are a charming and comic high point in bibliophile/Anglophile literature. She wanted books; they supplied, and over the years the contrast between the formal courtesy of the London letters and the bright New York yawp of Hanff's responses mellows into one of the best-recorded of all book-loving friendships. In THE DUCHESS OF BLOOMSBURY STREET, Hanff finally makes it to England, and the breathless amused charm and inimitable vernacular continues. If you get hooked on Hanff, there's more: Q'S LEGACY (more on England) APPLE OF MY EYE, LETTER FROM NEW YORK and UNDERFOOT IN SHOW BUSINESS (on New York). Buy them; you'll reread them.

Of the great theatrical correspondences—there aren't as many as you might expect—my favorite are the letters exchanged between Ellen Terry and George Bernard Shaw. No one succeeded in disarming Shaw as Terry did: he obviously adored her, and the exchange of letters between them is entirely charming and amiable. You may not learn all that much about the technicalities of early modern theatre, but only rarely have two people so thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. There's a hint of real passion in the letters, to which Shaw replied: "Let those who may complain that it was all on paper remember that only on paper has humanity yet achieved glory, beauty, truth, knowledge, virtue and abiding love." Christopher St. John edited the standard selection, and it's still easy to find secondhand. Terry's own autobiography, THE STORY OF MY LIFE, is still in print and eminently worth reading.

#9: READING OTHER PEOPLE'S DIARIES / THE BEST BATHROOM BOOKS EVER. Not long ago a friend of mine asked me to find her a nice copy of the CANTERBURY TALES; not a very odd request, it seems, but it did mark an occasion. Many years before, in the midst of raising a family and holding down a job, she'd gotten a copy of the DIVINE COMEDY and left it on the tank of the toilet, to read during trips to the loo. And now, eighteen years later, she had finished reading Dante and was now going to start the trek to Canterbury. The woman is in her early seventies; I love to imagine her, hale, ninety and in exceptional digestive health, closing the book on the Parson's Tale and Chaucer's farewell to his readers.

--These are laudable adventures, but I am not myself much of a one for poetry in the bathroom: it takes too much concentration. But even the briefest sit-down is not too short for a paragraph or two of Samuel Pepys. His voluminous diary—or any selection thereof—is as good company as Charles Lamb or Sydney Smith ever dreamt of being. Every day is its own little self-contained drama—from eyeing a pretty woman at church to riding in state down the Thames. One could mine the diary endlessly—and people have—for history of the period: not only was Pepys a man of real importance in British naval history, but his eyewitness accounts of the restoration of Charles II and the Great Fire of London remain the most vivid. But of all the diarists Pepys had the greatest ability to be pleased with himself, and so is the best company. And of all the diarists and self-examiners Pepys is the one to whom the reader's presence goes most thoroughly unnoticed. To read Pepys is to peek in on him unawares, and it's part of the pleasure he especially gives. The various early editions of Pepys's Journal are all to some degree cut, edited, rewritten and expurgated; it was not until 1970, in the eleven-volume edition

transcribed, edited and annotated by Robert Latham and William Matthews that Pepys appeared in print without the pestering of Mr. Bowdler or Mrs. Grundy. There are many single-volume abridgements: EVERYBODY'S PEPYS has some charming illustrations by Ernest H. Shepard. The old Everyman's Library edition, in a single volume with an introduction by Richard Garrett, is the most portable version and can still be found cheaply. Richard Wheatley's 1893 edition—the fullest previous to Latham and Matthews—can be viewed in full at www.pepysdiary.com. Of the many biographies, the recent one by Claire Tomalin, SAMUEL PEPYS: The Unequalled Self (Knopf, 2002) is readable and exceptionally intelligent.

---Pepys's innocent self-regard is in contrast to Thoreau's journals. Thoreau wrote always to engage, to convince, to take you up in argument and win; there are beautiful, self-forgetting passages of natural description, but he was the essential contrarian, at his best when he was having at you. Like Gautama Siddhartha, he wanted to awaken people; his method was just more by way of a slap upside the head. This gave Thoreau his limits, but it also gave him his (sometimes unintentional) comedy and his electrical current. (Read his description of being visited by three itinerant preachers—June 17, 1853—and you will see, pinned on the page forever, the efforts of the human race to escape being slimed by grinning fatuity.) Any gentleman will prefer to say yes to saying no, Stevenson wrote regretfully of Thoreau's arguments; but no writer ever kept saying no for better reasons. The preacher incident is in Odell Shepard's selection, THE HEART OF THOREAU'S JOURNAL, published by Dover, but there are several good paperback selections available. For the best short appreciation of Thoreau, read E. B. White's essay "A Slight Sound at Evening" (in ESSAYS OF E. B. WHITE, McGraw Hill, 1977), which hits just the right note of amusement and affection.

---In the Journals Dorothy Wordsworth kept at Grasmere the questions we ask of so many diaries—why and for whom they were written—are answered simply: "To please William." Then without loud announcement, they transcend, page after page, their modest aim. Her journals, like Keats's letters, were the result of a separation-- but this time a separation ended. Dorothy and William had lived apart as young orphans, but a sum left William by a friend enabled them to live together in a frugal but complete independence. In this reunion, and in finding a home, Dorothy seems to have entered into all she wanted; her content at being able to walk with William and their friend Coleridge and to see the variety of the seasons is the source of the calm daylit radiance that suffuses even the simplest sentences of the Journal. She records ungrudgingly the hardships of a northern life—headaches and icy waters—and of course all earthly Edens come to an end: she suffered late in life from both physical and mental illness. But the two years of the Grasmere journals especially are the record of a Franciscan joy in the life daily around us. "Wordsworth's exquisite sister," Coleridge called her, and she earned the epithet.

There have been several good editions of the Grasmere and Alfoxden journals: the current paperback from Oxford is good. If you want to go whole hog for Dorothy, search out Ernest de Selincourt's two-volume complete edition (Macmillan, 1941)—not in print but not that hard to find. There's a good selection of her letters, edited by Alan G. Hill, from Oxford. The biography by Robert Gittings and Jo Manton (DOROTHY WORDSWORTH, Oxford) is out of print but available cheaply secondhand.

#10: EIGHT GREAT BUDDHIST POETS IN TRANSLATION. "Chinese Buddhism," Burton Watson has written, "produced no PEARL or PARADISE LOST, no Dante or Donne." In all the languages of traditional Buddhism there has been a quantity of versified teaching but few people who we would think of—or read voluntarily—as poets. There are exceptions, however, available in graceful translations.

---Han-shan is the Zen vagabond of T'ang China and endless story, the archetype of the wise madman, and his poetry comes encased in myth, as with Dickinson or Rimbaud, and, as with them, it's difficult not to read the verse biographically; nonetheless, it moves from an earthbound mood to something thoroughly moonstruck, both teasing and convincing. Han-shan has been singularly fortunate in translators: Arthur Waley, Gary Snyder, Burton Watson, Red Pine, J.P. Seaton. THE COLLECTED SONGS OF COLD MOUNTAIN, by Red Pine (Copper Canyon Press) is complete, very well translated, with texts and excellent notes. Burton Watson's edition, COLD MOUNTAIN: 101 Chinese Poems, originally from Columbia, also exists in Shambhala Pocket Classic: an edition that really will fit in your pocket, and no one is better company for the road than Han-shan.

---A sharp contrast is Izumi Shikibu, one of the greatest Heian Japanese poetesses, a court poetry haunted with a knowledge of the impermanence of all earthly pleasures. For her read THE INK DARK MOON: Love Poems by Ono No Komachi and Izumi Shikibu, translated by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani; the translations are superb. (Jane Hirshfield's book of essays NINE GATES: Entering the Mind of Poetry is also very much worth seeking out.)

---In the poetry of Saigyo, the sense of impermanence is less lacerating, more in tune with the melancholy of so much traditional Japanese verse; the sky, the moon, the trees, the hills have their companionable, sharply observed pleasures. Read MIRROR FOR THE MOON, New Directions, translated by William R. LaFleur. There is also an excellent selection of Saigyo in Sam Hamill's collection DUMB LUCK (Boa Editions, 2002).

---Muso Soseki, also known as Muso Kokushi, was a thirteenth-century Zen roshi, the first great designer of the Japanese rock garden, and a poet of startling immediacy and attractive spirit. His work mixes the paradoxical directness of Zen convention with a great expansiveness of feeling: the poems manage to be both wise and delightful. He too has been fortunate in his translator: W.S. Merwin, working with Soiku Shigematsu, has cast Muso's verse in Williams-inspired triadic stanzas, and it works beautifully. Read SUN AT MIDNIGHT: Poems and Sermons by Muso Soseki (North Point Press). For more of his prose, DREAM CONVERSATIONS: On Buddhism and Zen (as by Muso Kokushi) is published by Shambhala, translated by Thomas Cleary. Muso's poems are included in EAST WINDOW (Copper Canyon Press), a collection of W. S. Merwin's Asian translations, which is full of good things. A rather dry but informative essay on Muso is in Heinrich Dumoulin's (rather dry but informative) ZEN BUDDHISM: A HISTORY, VOLUME 2: JAPAN (Macmillan, 1990).

---By the fifteenth century, the Zen establishment of Japan had petrified sufficiently to bring on itself the iconoclasm and freshness of Ikkyu. Zen always had a knack for paradox, but Ikkyu's best poems were written in terms of a nomadic life, mockery of the religious establishment, and sexual love. (When he was invested as abbot of Daikoku-ji, he described himself as "mortified".) Stephen Berg's translation, CROW

WITH NO MOUTH (Copper Canyon Press), strives always for maximum starkness and compression; it's a daring, individual translation. John Stevens's edition, aptly titled WILD WAYS, is a fuller selection, very well translated, and is back in print from White Pine Press.

---Stevens has also translated, superbly, the poetry of Ryokan, the nineteenth-century Japanese monk-poet, in DEWDROPS ON A LOTUS LEAF, from Shambhala (both are nicely illustrated). "Like the little stream/Making its way/Through the mossy crevices/I too, quietly/ Turn clear and transparent." So true is this, so gentled is the emotion in Ryokan's poems, that he can make all but the sweetest-natured of western poets—Keats, say, or Francis Jammes—seem like ruffians. Like Jizo, the Buddhist protector of animals and children to whom he wrote many poems, Ryokan seems moonstruck, but in full daylight. ONE ROBE, ONE BOWL: The Zen Poetry of Ryokan (Weatherhill), also by Stevens, is a substantially different selection, also excellent. Burton Watson's versions, in THE ZEN MONK RYOKAN, are also lovely.

---Gensei was a seventeenth-century Japanese monk whose work combines Buddhism with the influences of Confucianism; he wrote mostly in Chinese, and his mood, meters and emotional temperature are very like his Chinese models. He is intimate, occasional and charming; an everyday poet in the best sense. GRASS HILL: Poems and Prose by the Japanese Monk Gensei, a first-rate translation by Burton Watson, is from Columbia University Press.

Arguably the greatest of the poets discussed here, Wang Wei is invariably cited as one of the half-dozen masters of the T'ang Dynasty, itself the great period in Chinese verse. He was a devout Buddhist, but this is expressed in his work in the purest poetic terms, brought out through dramatic situation and emotional stance, with little of the technical vocabulary of Buddhism intruding. He has been called a perfect artist, and he is certainly one of the masters of the poetic quietude that is the dominant mood of his work. The simplest vocabulary, the tightest perfection of form: these can impose almost insuperable problems for the translator, and though there are several good translations of Wang Wei I don't know of a great one. The most generous selection of his work is in LAUGHING LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS: Poems of Wang Wei, translated by Tony Barnstone, Willis Barnstone and Xu Haixin (University Press of New England, 1991). This gives you not just the flavor of his work but the shape of his life and career; the introduction and notes are good, the translations are graceful and without any mannerisms. A very instructive work, not just on Wang Wei and Chinese poetry but on the issues of translation, is NINETEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT WANG WEI, by Eliot Weinberger and Octavio Paz (Moyer Bell, 1987). A single four-line poem—"Deer Park," from the Wang River Sequence—is given in text and transliteration and a variety of English translations, with comment on each; an opportunity for a kind of literary triangulation.

"Don't tell me how difficult the Way. / The bird's path, winding far, is right / before you.. Waters of the Dokei Gorge, / You return to the stream, I to the mountain." (Hofuki Seikatsu) For the poetry of Zen, ZEN POEMS, selected by Peter Harris (Knopf, 1999) is a lovely pocket-sized anthology; the verse and translation are good throughout, though the flavor is often more generally Buddhist than precisely Zen. For an anthology more specific to the Zen tradition (satori poems, death poems, etc.) go to Lucien Stryk's ZEN POEMS OF CHINA AND JAPAN: THE CRANE'S BILL (Anchor Books, 1973). The subtitle is taken from Dogen's poem: "The world? Moonlit/

Drops shaken/ From the crane's bill." ZEN HARVEST: Japanese Folk Zen Sayings, translated by Soiku Shigematsu (North Point, 1988) is a translation of the Zenrin Segosu, an anthology of haiku, dodoitsu and waka compiled for use by Japanese Zen students: it's also one of the most interesting anthologies of Japanese verse available.

#11: THE MEDIEVAL LYRIC. For all the extraordinary pleasures of medieval art and architecture, medieval literature—the chansons de geste, scholastic philosophy, the early historical prose, the early Arthurian and chivalric romances, the allegorical tales—has often struck me as a long, mucky row to hoe. (Some of the translations haven't helped—I remember James Agee's crack about reading "Aucassin and Nicolette" "translated into Middle High Marshmallow.") But the lyric poetry of the period can have a summery sweetness unique to the time, which varies remarkably and interestingly from country to country. Alas, I know of no satisfactory anthology of the troubadour poets of France—there have been several, all suffering from club-footed renditions. The closest you get to the troubadours in English is still in the versions of Ezra Pound, available in his TRANSLATIONS (New Directions). Likewise there is no good English anthology of the northern medieval French verse—a separate tradition. Fortunately there are excellent versions by Galway Kinnell of the greatest late medieval French poet, Francois Villon, still in print from the University Press of New England. AN ANTHOLOGY OF MEDIEVAL LYRICS, edited by Angel Flores (Modern Library, 1962) has a selection of Northern French verse as well as a good selection of Italian and Iberian lyrics; the translations vary in age and quality.

--- MEDIEVAL IRISH LYRICS, by James Carney (Dolmen) and Gerard Murphy's EARLY IRISH LYRICS (Oxford, unfortunately not easy to find) are verse and prose versions, respectively. The Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney has done a splendid translation of SWEENEY ASTRAY, a fantastic Irish medieval work, and there's a beautiful essay on the Irish medieval lyric in his collection PREOCCUPATIONS. Frank O'Connor, the short story writer and historian of Irish lit, includes medieval poetry among his versions in THE LITTLE MONASTERIES, KINGS, LORDS AND COMMONS and other collections. (For the Irish works see the website of Kenny's Bookshop in Galway, an excellent source helpfully staffed and an education in itself.) MIDDLE ENGLISH LYRICS, edited by Maxwell Luria and Richard Hoffman (Norton, 1974) is an excellent anthology for general readers.

---The great books on the topic are by Helen Waddell, whose collections MEDIEVAL LATIN LYRICS and MORE LATIN LYRICS follow the verses from the Appendix Vergiliana and Petronius all the way out of period to an elegy for his brother by John Milton; and her study, THE WANDERING SCHOLARS, is one of the most charming literary studies ever written. She of all the scholars and translators captures the inspiriting mix of cloister and tavern, faith and riot, hope and heartbreak, that is the special mark of the Latin lyric. She has taken the work of one time and language and created three minor English classics of her own.

---C.S. Lewis's THE DISCARDED IMAGE: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature (Cambridge, 1964) is about what Lewis calls the Medieval Model: the particular shape of the medieval mind, its intellectual background and assumptions,

the world view of a period in some ways more foreign to us than the Classical world. It's sympathetic, absorbing, informative and handsomely written—a fine preparation for the plunge into reading the period's literature. "I have made no serious effort to hide the fact that the old Model delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors," Lewis writes, and his delight is right on the page.

#12: WAR. Most anti-war poems and novels are dreadful: the message usurps the author's attention and the details become conventional. Two books by Paul Fussell, THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY and WARTIME: UNDERSTANDING AND BEHAVIOR IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR, seem to me to give far more convincing body and harrowing detail to the assertion that war is insanity. In the first he explores not just the history and literature of the Great War but how it affected our ideas of life, governance and justice; in the second he continues this exploration, this time into World War II, with attention to the differences in the times, the reporting of them, and the public's reaction. The detail, perhaps especially to those of us who have not done military service, is always telling and absorbing; the choice of eyewitness records makes the books believable but also haunting. The last chapters of WARTIME, "The Real War Will Never Get Into the Books"—a plaint echoed from Whitman—is as moving a recounting of the mutilation of war, both physical and psychic, as I have ever read. Both are in print from Oxford, and you should read them.

A worthy pendant to these works is Fussell's smaller book, THE BOYS' CRUSADE: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe 1944-1945. He centers, effectively, on the youth of the infantry soldiers, and how it affected their experience of the war and how it was conducted. It's part of the Modern Library Chronicles series, published in 2003. Among Fussell's other work is UNIFORMS: Why We Are What We Wear (Houghton Mifflin, 2002), which casts an amused eye on the topic of mandatory dress—with some memorable and mordant remarks on the peacock instincts of General Patton, the ill-received attempts of Elmo Zumwalt to dress up the Navy and the Ruritanian disaster of President Nixon's White House Guard.

For a remarkable series of novels about World War One, read Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy: REGENERATION, THE EYE IN THE DOOR, and THE GHOST ROAD (Plume Books).

Still considering? Chris Hedges's book WHAT EVERY PERSON SHOULD KNOW ABOUT WAR (Free Press, 2003) begins with a quote from Chaucer: "There is full many a man that crieth, 'Werre! Werre!' that woot full little what werre amounteth." Hedges's book is 150 pages of questions and answers that tell you, with a kind of deadly blandness and heaping of detail, what werre amounteth, ranging from what burn injuries feel like to the news that statistically you'll be twice as likely to beat your wife after being in a war, to the simple answer to the question as to whether Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can be cured: no. If you're a minority in the services, well, I'll leave it to your imagination, but Hedges won't. The one bit of good news I noticed was that the reports of hostile reactions to Vietnam veterans returning home were apparently somewhat exaggerated. Other than that it's a lot of bad news, which I for one would like to see distributed to a lot of school

libraries. Once the truth gets out, it's awfully hard to retrieve, although God knows people keep trying.

#13: FOUR SPLENDID CITY BIOGRAPHIES. Note the term. Histories of cities I think of as including charts, population statistics, chapters on forms of government and mention of important bankers. City biographies is a term I use for books of more anecdotal history, accounts of interesting people, all the best buildings: a book you'd read for pleasure. John Russell has written two of the best: PARIS and LONDON, both published by Abrams, both beauteously illustrated. Finding that he could write so exactly and evocatively about two cities so different in their appeal reminded me of my amazement at discovering that Bernstein could conduct both Beethoven and Mahler equally well, which would seem to me to require two different autonomic nervous systems. For further pleasures of urbanity, read Adam Gopnik's splendid PARIS TO THE MOON, an account of living in Paris for five years after the birth of his first child, and LETTERS FROM LONDON, by Julian Barnes, a splendid collection of essays written for the NEW YORKER. High intelligence is only rarely this much fun. Alastair Horne's SEVEN AGES OF PARIS (Vintage, 2002) is a full, absorbingly written history that makes even its most familiar scenes vivid and is a sobering reminder of how much tragedy, violence and political bitterness the city has survived.   Of the various observers of Paris, none are more fun to read than the immortal Janet Flanner, who, as "Genet," wrote the Letters from Paris for the New Yorker after the second world war until 1971. She caught whatever was going on, from fashion to politics to literature, and brought the tang of her own personality to every page. Read the two volumes of PARIS JOURNAL, edited by William Shawn and published by Harcourt Brace.

---For one of the funkiest, most endlessly interesting cities of Europe, read Robert Hughes's BARCELONA, a book every bit the equal of Hughes's art criticism; Hughes skates absorbingly and clearly through the city's complex social/linguistic/religious history, and ends with a great account of Barcelona's presiding spirit, Antoni Gaudi. (Hughes's NOTHING IF NOT CRITICAL, by the way, is the most fun you'll ever have reading art criticism.)

---In Jan Morris's OXFORD, the dreaming spires turn out not to be dreamy at all, but positively swarming: with great projects, lovely architecture, a fractious history, and a very full catalogue of that unique lifeform, the Oxford eccentric-- than whom no one is more eccentric or amusing. (Morris also edited the highly entertaining anthology OXFORD BOOK OF OXFORD.) For more on that Oxford life form, read THE DONS, by Noel Annan (University of Chicago), an interesting and readable study.   In all these books is the common high spirit of urbanity—the pleasure in the crowd of human foible and accomplishment. If you can read these books and not want to be in the cities they describe, you HAVE tired of life.

And if you have indeed tired of life, London and Paris will entertain you even then. There are innumerable guidebooks to the cities' attractions (my favorites are the Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness Guides, handsome, informative and portable) but none are more amusingly specialized than PERMANENT PARISIANS and PERMANENT LONDONERS, by Judi Culbertson and Tom Randall (Chelsea Green), illustrated guides to the cemeteries of the two great capitals. You're either a cemetery buff—a woman I

knew in Cambridge had a photo album entirely of Parisian tombstones—or you're not; I am one, and will go a considerable distance for a good graveyard. (A Tourist Board worker in Salisbury, helping me hunt up George Herbert, phoned a local verger and said, "I've got a gent here looking for the church with the dead poet in it." The respondent knew exactly what—and where—she meant.) In the bookshop at Westminster Abbey on my first visit I was amused to find a book called WHO'S BURIED WHERE IN ENGLAND, and I knew I was not alone. Culbertson and Randall are amused as well. The London volume concentrates more on the known and noble; the Parisian volume takes the prize for baroque weirdness, with pelicans, mummies, a Victorian four-poster bed and an emasculated sphinx figuring among the funerary sculpture. Two of the more unbelievable stories—about the graves of Allen Kardec and of the philandering Victor Noir—I can attest by eyewitness experience to be true. Nightlife? Expensive restaurants? Boat trips? Who needs those when you've got graveyards?

---Postscript to Barcelona and Antoni Gaudi. Perhaps no other city is as dominated by a single architect as Barcelona is by the work of Gaudi. The flowing line of modernismo; his family heritage in metalworking; the delight in lowly and discarded materials that he shares with that other trickster of Spanish art, Picasso; his deeply felt, even obsessive Catholicism; all these combined with Gaudi's technical ingenuity and sense of natural form to produce the magical oddity and charm of his buildings. Iron strips become a dragon; balconies become masks, rooftop chimneys an army of helmeted centurions; spires bloom into cypress trees. The iridescent surfaces, the sinuous lines—Gaudi's buildings are all motion and becoming, as if the right angle had yet to be discovered. Gaudi was, as his biographer says, "revered and reviled"; Orwell thought the Sagrada Familia hideous and its spires reminded him of hock bottles. But Gaudi has taken his place, and his polychrome facades, so suited to the light of Barcelona, are entrancing and alive. For his life, see GAUDI: A BIOGRAPHY by Gijs van Hensbergen (Harper Perennial, 2001). For his work, the best book I've seen is GAUDI: COMPLETE BUILDINGS by Rainer Zerbst (Taschen, 2005), although I'm fond of the compact little album GAUDI: An Introduction to his Architecture (Barcelona, Triangle, 2001), full of terrific photos and some breathtakingly bad translation English. PARK GUELL, by Conrad Kent and Dennis Prindle (Princeton Architectural Press, 1993) is skint on pictures but conveys admirably how the Park evolved from the artistic and social currents of the day as well as from Gaudi's technicolor imagination. BARCELONA: A CITY AND ITS ARCHITECTURE: An Essay by Josep Maria Montaner (Taschen, 1997) is a perceptive and beautifully illustrated book which shows that Gaudi was not alone in his imagination or his stylistic choices.

#14: QUIETLY THINKING THINGS OVER AT CHRISTMAS. The holiday of Christmas entered American emotional life so thoroughly that it still, even for many people for whom its religious origins are lost or disdained, has a tremendous psychic pull: a time when our dreams of charity and kindness come to us again, powerful and poignant. It can still seem a right time for ritual and remembrance, and many people have their traditional favorites from the vast mine of art, music, literature and tradition associated with the time of year.

--- My own favorite of all Christmas stories is the "Dulce Domum" chapter of THE

WIND IN THE WILLOWS, by Kenneth Grahame: heartbreak and cheer stand so closely knit in it that it can be no coincidence that Mole's rediscovery of his abandoned home and of "the special value of some anchorage in one's existence" takes place at Christmastide (it also has a splendid carol in it).

---THE TAILOR OF GLOUCESTER remained Beatrix Potter's favorite of all her books and with its mice, cats, humans and views of snow-laid Gloucester, it has some of her most luminous and enchanting watercolors.

---A one-of-a-kind little book, recently republished by Wesleyan, is Rockwell Kent's A NORTHERN CHRISTMAS, the Christmas journal entries excerpted from his book WILDERNESS and done as a separate book. It's as simple as can be imagined—Kent and his son were staying with a friend in Alaska while he was separated from his wife and trying to gain a foothold as a working artist—but here too a sense of loss and hope conjoined come across to seem the true emotion of the season, like a great land come into distant view.

---Set on Christmas Eve but unlike any other Christmas story, "Vanka" is one of the simplest, most moving of all Anton Chekov's short stories—a few short pages that achieve an extraordinary pathos. It's the first story in THE PORTABLE CHEKOV (Knopf).

---And for observation and nailing the familiar, read Carol Bly's essay "Thinking Things Over Quietly at Christmas," in her collection LETTERS FROM THE COUNTRY, for a great sense of the numinous under our noses—or down the street from the VFW. For a wily and surprising account of how Christmas came to be what it is, read Stephen Nissenbaum's THE BATTLE FOR CHRISTMAS: A Cultural History of America's Most Cherished Holiday (Vintage).

And when the cleanup is all done and the guests are gone and you've sighed with relief that it's done for another year, read the great post-Christmas short story, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," the wryest and most whimsical of the Sherlock Holmes tales. It's in THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES and of course in THE COLLECTED S.H. (Doubleday).

#15: ENTERING THE STREAM: BUDDHISM FOR ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS.
Every once in a while a friend, knowing of my interest in Buddhism, will ask me what the best introductory book is on the topic, and I have to admit I've never had a confident answer. Buddhism is a tremendously heterogeneous tradition—so much so that Thanissaro Bhikku has just written a book called BUDDHIST RELIGIONS. Buddhism has evolved not only in a variety of purely intellectual and philosophic directions but taken on the colorings of a number of host countries and their cultures and languages. The Buddhist Canon itself, written in Pali and Sanskrit, is enormous—many thousands of pages—and just, say, the Tibetan commentarial tradition alone is another entire library. Some books are written from the viewpoint of historical scholarship and some of practice, and there is every combination imaginable of modern Western explication and original texts now in print. So if I list a few books it's with the hope of being helpful but none of being definitive. For further information, THE ETERNAL LEGACY: An Introduction to the Canonical Literature of Buddhism, by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications, 2006) is a useful guide and reference.

---FOUNDATIONS OF BUDDHISM, by Rupert Gethin (Oxford, 1998) and THE STORY OF BUDDHISM, by Donald Lopez (Harper) are both readable narratives intended for first-timers. Edward Conze's SHORT HISTORY OF BUDDHISM (Allen Unwin) is also good. THE BUDDHA AND HIS TEACHINGS, edited by Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Kohn (Shambhala, 1983, originally titled ENTERING THE STREAM, a traditional phrase for beginning practice) is a good mix of texts with some of the best contemporary teachers, with a short version of Kohn's lovely biography of the Buddha. Also in pocket edition from Shambhala is TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA, well-selected bits and the right size to be a vade-mecum. Dwight Goddard's A BUDDHIST BIBLE suffers slightly from old-fashioned translations but has a lot of important texts in one place, and is back in print from Beacon Press. Both THE BUDDHIST TRADITION In India, China and Japan, edited by William Theodore de Bary (Vintage, 1969) and WORLD OF THE BUDDHA: An Introduction to Buddhist Literature, edited by Lucien Stryk (Grove, 1968) are good general anthologies, though lacking in any material on the Tibetan tradition.

---Two of the shortest canonical texts are, I think, particularly essential: the Metta Sutta and the Heart Sutra. They are both contained in the Shambhala anthologies. THE HEART SUTRA: The Womb of Buddhas, translation and commentary by Red Pine, is a vivid and helpful annotation and study—the very model of what these things should be. THE HEART OF THE UNIVERSE: Exploring the Heart Sutra, by Mu Soeng (Wisdom Publications, 2010) is also very good.

---Kathleen McDonald's HOW TO MEDITATE: A PRACTICAL GUIDE (Wisdom Publications, 1984) is just that, a direct and non-academic approach to the various methods of Buddhist meditiation.

---Walpola Rahula's WHAT THE BUDDHA TAUGHT is an oft-reprinted classic—a collection of texts, mainly Theravadan (the school mostly associated with southeastern Asia); it's heavily peppered with Pali terms, but it's good. IN THE BUDDHA'S WORDS: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications) is an excellent anthology of Theravadan texts, selected from the vast jungle of the Nikayas, the original Pali sutta collections, and arranged thematically. The most famous and central Pali text, the DHAMMAPADA, has been translated dozens of times—I like Thomas Byrom's version, in a pocket edition from Shambhala.

----Many of the anthologies are entirely from the Pali Theravadan texts: A TREASURY OF MAHAYANA SUTRAS, edited by Garma C.C. Chang (Pennsylvania State U. Press, 1983) is a selection from the compendious Maharatnakuta Sutra and an excellent and varied anthology of Mahayana works. MAHAYANA BUDDHISM: The Doctrinal Foundations, by Paul Williams (London, Routledge, 1989) is a tad academic in style but is clear, intelligent and readable—a good general groundplan of the topic.

---THE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA, another oft-reprinted anthology from Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai/Buddhism Promoting Foundation, is an excellent collection of texts for practice, with a Shin Buddhist leaning to it. For an introduction to Shin—a predominantly Japanese tradition—read D.T. Suzuki's BUDDHA OF INFINTE LIGHT, reprinted by Shambhala. HONEN THE BUDDHIST SAINT, by Joseph A. Fitzgerald (World Wisdom, 2006) and THE ESSENTIAL SHINRAN, by Alfred Bloom (World Wisdom, 2007) will introduce you to two major Shin figures. The last chapters of D.T. Suzuki's MYSTICISM, CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST (Harper, 1957; recently reprinted by

Forgotten Books), about the Shin saint Saichi, are also particularly worth reading. Taitetsu Unno's RIVER OF FIRE, RIVER OF WATER: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism (Doubleday, 1998) is also very good.

---For the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition THE WORLD OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM, by the Dalai Lama, is a clear and admirable introduction. Of the Dalai Lama's books on more specific topics, my favorites are HEALING ANGER (Snow Lion, 1999—send for their newsletter or check out their website), ILLUMINATING THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT (see www.lamayeshe.com) and HOW TO PRACTICE (Pocket Books, 2002). ESSENTIAL TIBETAN BUDDHISM (Castle Books, 1997) has an instructive selection of Tibetan texts; the forty-five page introduction by Robert Thurman gives a clear, excellent and persuasive reading of the place of the Tibetan tradition. Weighing in at 500 pages, John Powers' INTRODUCTION TO TIBETAN BUDDHISM (Snow Lion, revised edition 2007) is perhaps the deep end of the pool, but it's a superb book, readable and impartial and scholarly—really an essential work.

And then there's Zen, "a transmission outside the scriptures," which seems to occupy its own distinct corner. Alan Watts's 1957 THE WAY OF ZEN is still pretty good, and Robert Aitken's TAKING THE PATH OF ZEN (North Point Press, 1982) is excellent and accessible. D.T. Suzuki's MANUAL OF ZEN BUDDHISM is a fine collection of texts. Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki's little classic ZEN FLESH, ZEN BONES has been piquing people's interest for almost fifty years and through many editions—it's still bloom-fresh, charming and unique. ZEN KEYS, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Anchor Books, 1974) is a good first book to read and a good introduction to Nhat Hanh's work. The "bares bones Zen" texts of the school's originating patriarch have been gathered and superbly well translated: THE ZEN TEACHING OF BODHIDHARMA, a bilingual edition translated with an introduction by Red Pine (North Point, 1987).

I don't want to leave the topic without recommending BODHISATTVA OF COMPASSION: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin, a moving and personal book by John Blofeld (Shambhala, 1977) about Avalokitesvara, or Kuan Yin, the intercessor figure of the Buddhist pantheon. Go read all of these if you're interested in Buddhism at all.

#16: NOT ONLY NOVELISTS. Speaking as one who has always found Orwell's fiction a bit of a slog, few books have come as a bigger delight and surprise than A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS, a selection of Orwell still happily in print. I think Orwell as an essayist is the writer he never was as a novelist. Brevity, humor, clarity, observation, an astounding eye for hypocrisy and illogic—he has all those and, like Lawrence and Camus, gives us the feeling of an artist who cares for nothing more than the truth—the wild evasive sprawl of truth, not just the part that fits his expectations or is to his advantage. There are pieces in Orwell—the lines on sainthood versus humanity in his Gandhi essay, down to a bit on overeating at Christmas—that have the head-clearing, defining light we sometimes get from great novels. And, like Lawrence and Camus, he spares himself so little we forgive him his faults. The COLLECTION OF ESSAYS is a skim off the top—you may well want to go on to THE COLLECTED ESSAYS, JOURNALISM AND LETTERS OF GEORGE ORWELL, published in four volumes.

Many pleasures await you. If you need convincing, Christopher Hitchens's WHY ORWELL MATTERS is an intelligent and persuasive reading of….well, why Orwell matters.

In translation from the French, the sketches and essays of Albert Camus do not have the vernacular current of Orwell's work, nor quite the range of topic and tone. But there is an enlivening moral clarity in common that counts above all else, and a fine seriousness. Even the bravura stretches—the rhetorical last pages of "Create Dangerously," say—are not written merely for flourish or effect. RESISTANCE, REBELLION AND DEATH, edited and translated by Justin O'Brien (Modern Library, 1960) represents Camus's choice from three volumes of essays, mostly political, that he felt worthy of translation into English. LYRICAL AND CRITICAL ESSAYS, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy (Vintage, 1968) contains, among other things, the blessed and sensual volumes of Camus's Algerian writings: THE WRONG SIDE AND THE RIGHT SIDE, NUPTIALS, and SUMMER, and the beautiful 1958 preface, which seems to me a nutshell of everything I love in Camus, and prize even above the plays and novels. For the French texts, admirably annotated, see the old Pleiade edition of the ESSAIS (Gallimard).

Fiction, of course, has become the end-all of many literary reputations. When you've read (preferably in order) the five best known novels of Thomas Hardy (FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD, THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE, THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE, TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES, and JUDE THE OBSCURE) and caught up with an under-recognized sixth near-masterwork (THE WOODLANDERS) I will suggest to you that Hardy is also the most under-read English-language poet of the twentieth century. Technically, Hardy rests in that ill-defined transition from the end of the Victorian period to just before the onslaughts and revelations of modernism: he is the last sweeping virtuoso of metrical forms, with an astounding stanzaic variety. He also stands in some ways as a critic of the obscurities of the modernists who followed him: few poets ever mined their autobiographies for poems that were as fully realized dramatically, with no need of explication or annotation. If you like his poems at all, get the Collected: the proportion of first-rate work is remarkably high.

#17: THE BEST SERIES OF CHILDREN'S NOVELS YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T READ. "There is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats." Everyone who's ever read THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS remembers Ratty's sentence, probably even people who've never been in a boat. "Is it so nice as all that?" his friend Mole asks. In twelve splendid stories, starting with SWALLOWS AND AMAZONS in 1930 and ending in 1947 with GREAT NORTHERN?, Arthur Ransome demonstrates to even the laziest landlocked poor devil that yes, it really is as nice as all that. These books are great literary holidays—children's stories in which Ransome's first-hand experience of the outdoors gives the conventions poetry and conviction. He has a master's sense of the double vision of childhood—reality and fantasy being barely a sentence apart—but also a master's ease at integrating the hammer-and-nail details of boating—and camping, birding, spelunking, ice-sledding, you name it—into completely absorbing stories (there's not a dud in the lot). Twice he lets fancy loose on a couple of pirate stories and one late book, THE PICTS AND THE

MARTYRS, is a farce comedy that ties up neat as a pin. I suppose for some adults there's nostalgia in the time and setting—the English Lake District and Norfolk Broads of the early 1930s, before highways and uglification had completely spattered the countryside—but Ransome doesn't write nostalgically, and no children's novelist hits his effects as delicately, as uninsistently, as he does.

Ransome's own odd, primitive drawings are the perfect accompaniment, and they've been restored both to David Godine's handsome American paperback editions and Jonathan Cape's fine sturdy British hardcovers. The Arthur Ransome Society also has an amusing and informative website, www.arthur-ransome.org. Another good site is www.allthingsransome.net. COOTS IN THE NORTH, the opening chapter of a thirteenth novel Ransome was unable to finish, was published in 1988 by Cape with some uncollected short stories—it isn't easy to find but it's worth having. Recently reprinted is Christina Hardyment's ARTHUR RANSOME & CAPTAIN FLINT'S TRUNK (Frances Lincoln, 2007), a readable account of the writing and locales of the series. Hugh Brogan's biography THE LIFE OF ARTHUR RANSOME (Jonathan Cape, 1984) is well-written and interesting, though I will admit to skimming the chapters of Ransome's involvement in the Russian Revolution, a topic in which I seem to be genetically incapable of taking an interest.

#18: TACKLING BLAKE. Reading Blake, you just wonder how he did it—see so clearly the shape of what was to come and form so deep and humane and prescient a response. Blake can be labyrinthine, yes, and maddening, but what draws you on through all the commentaries and studies and rereading is not just the power but the unity and integrity of his thought—how each work illumines what's gone before and prepares you for what's ahead. Blake can be one of the great intellectual and aesthetic adventures; no matter where you stop, you're further than you've ever gone before.

---Geoffrey Keynes's edition for the Nonesuch Press is complete, portable and attractive, but the definitive text is the Anchor Books edition, THE COMPLETE POETRY AND PROSE OF WILLIAM BLAKE, edited by David Erdman and with an immensely helpful commentary by Harold Bloom.

---The opening chapter in Bloom's book THE VISIONARY COMPANY is a good floor-plan of Blake's poetry and mythology, and his BLAKE'S APOCALYPSE is an excellent, detailed study—not, alas, easy to come by. The indispensable work of explication—one of the great works of literary criticism—is Northrop Frye's FEARFUL SYMMETRY: A Study of William Blake (Princeton).

---For Blake as a visual artist, there are several inexpensive decent books of reproductions. The best I've seen is the catalogue of the wonderful Tate/ Metropolitan Blake exhibit of 2001, edited by Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips, published by Abrams—out of print, but not yet too hard or too expensive to find. And, unbelievably, all of Blake's engraved work can now be had, in full color repro, in one volume, WILLIAM BLAKE: The Complete Illuminated Books, published in 2000 by Thames and Hudson and the Blake Trust, one of those times when the glories of modern color reproduction can make you feel as rich as a king. And the William Blake Archives is the best of the many Blake websites—texts, reproductions, critical works.

---If you get mired in the late works, there is always Blake's life story to fall back on, one of the most dedicated and inspiring literary lives. Peter Ackroyd's 1995 BLAKE is fluent, intelligent and immensely moving, and Alexander Gilchrist, one of Blake's earliest biographers, is also still very much worth reading. (The old Everyman reprint includes Blake's etchings for Virgil, which are wonderful.) Blake's life was such that it moved Kenneth Rexroth to write that "Blake, William Blake himself, is the viable myth, not Los or Enitharmon."

Because Blake was so little known in his day as a writer, his literary influence skipped almost two generations of Romantics and Victorians. But as an artist he had a circle of devotees and disciples, including the extraordinary Samuel Palmer. Palmer is a smaller figure than Blake whose vision was quieter, more crepuscular; indeed it's hard to think of an artist for whom evening and oncoming night had, melancholy perhaps, but so few terrors. And as he left the early visionary works behind and became a Victorian landscape painter, the touch of the surnatural never entirely left him: any painting of Palmer's, at long regard, is likely to develop a hint of the uncanny. Palmer was due for a revival, and in 2005 the British Museum and Metropolitan engineered a great retrospective exhibit; the catalogue, SAMUEL PALMER 1805-1881: VISION AND LANDSCAPE, by William Vaughan, Elizabeth E. Butler and Colin Harrison is splendid both in reproduction and text. If you want something less expensive, Colin Harrison's SAMUEL PALMER (Oxford, Ashmolean Handbooks, 1997) is smaller but a gem. Palmer, like Sesshu, is an artist about whom I'm evangelical—don't get me started.

#19: GREAT TRANSLATIONS. Keats's sonnet "On Looking into Chapman's Homer" is the great statement of a particular pleasure: discovering a translation that conveys the greatness of an ancient classic. For long years as a bookseller I've winced as some unsuspecting soul has approached a text in an arthritic translation that has long ago passed its sell-by date; and I still remember the shock, the extraordinary clarification of spirit, of reading Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the ILIAD and feeling that it had really happened, I had read the great work of the Western tradition. I was thinking of this experience recently, reading the Modern Library reissue of Donald Frame's translation of Montaigne and rejoicing at how completely that great humane soul had made it into English. Some writers, Racine, for instance, Horace, Wang Wei, still await great translations; no one has quite yet brought across the whiplash perfection of La Rochefoucauld, or the full music of Eoghan O'Rathaille. Only as recently as 2000 has Seamus Heaney's new version of BEOWULF convinced me it was a great poem rather than homework, and once in a very blue moon you actually get a translation which equals or betters its original— Brian Hooker's version of Rostand's CYRANO DE BERGERAC comes to mind.

We are living in an extraordinary period for the art of translation. I strolled into a Borders the other day and could lay my hands on a remarkable range of books, everything from Stephen MacKenna's translation of Plotinus to a new complete version of Huizinga's WANING OF THE MIDDLE AGES and new versions of everything from Chasidic masters to Pablo Neruda. What follows is just a jumble and a stray selection of reading that has stayed with me, but the classics are so often spoken of as unchanging

bedrocks that we forget that their guises in English weather differently and are often in need of revision. And when the renewal comes—when some fresh version carries the current across time and touches us with a living voice—it is ourselves, of course, not just the authors, who are translated.

---Of the Greek classics: Mary Barnard's versions of Sappho are still very much the best; Guy Davenport's version of Diogenes (in his SEVEN GREEKS) captures the exhilarating edge of classical literature's crankiest bastard. Robert Fagles's version of the ORESTEIA of Aeschylus is my favorite, and I remember with gratitude the impact of reading Edith Hamilton's translation of the TROJAN WOMEN during the dark time of the Vietnam protests.

---Of the Oriental classics: Kenneth Rexroth's translations of Tu Fu (in his 100 POEMS FROM THE CHINESE) are only a fraction of the great T'ang poet's work but are still as close as he's come in English. Rexroth's collections of Chinese and Japanese poetry have been introducting people to these topics for a generation now and are still among the best available. Of the other great Chinese poets, David Hinton's recent POEMS OF T'AO CH'IEN is an excellent book. R.H. Blyth's versions of the haiku poets are splendid, as are Sam Hamill's translations of Issa, in THE YEAR OF MY LIFE. Barbara Stoler Miller's LOVE SONG OF THE DARK LORD is a version of Jayadeva's GITAGOVINDA, and I also favor her version of the BHAGAVAD-GITA.

---Of the great early twentieth century group of Russian poets, one who has made it most happily into English is Marina Tsvetaeva. Elaine Feinstein's versions (in SELECTED POEMS, Penguin) capture Tsvetaeva's Yeatsian shock at the ferocity of her emotions.

---One of the great phantom figures of twentieth-century literature, the Irish-language novelist and poet Mairtin O'Cadhain, figures here ironically; like many nationalist artists, he opposed the translation of his works, and CRE NA CILLE (GRAVEYARD CLAY), his most famous novel and reputedly one of the great works of modern world lit, has never been done commercially into English. Fortunately for us, the temptation was too great for Eoghan O Tuairisc, who gathered a selection of O'Cadhain's best short stories and translated them into a remarkably natural and expressive English, in THE ROAD TO BRIGHTCITY (Poolbeg Press). The stories are masterful—read them and you'll believe O'Cadhain's huge reputation is no more than justice. BRIGHTCITY is, alas, out of print, but not yet difficult to come by.

#20: THE MYSTERIES OF TIBET. A friend once said she reads mysteries to go places. We may pick up Ellis Peters's Cadfael stories to go to fourteenth century Shropshire, as Stephen and Maud battled for the throne of England, or Tony Hillerman's Leaphorn and Chee mysteries to visit the Navajo reservations of contemporary New Mexico. The P.D. James mysteries are distinguished by her mastery of locale: an elderly-care clinic, a nuclear plant in Norfolk, publishing offices in Docklands London. Setting a series of long and elaborately plotted mysteries in contemporary Tibet surely runs the risk of trivializing the tragedies that are still happening there or getting all James Hilton and woozy and over-romanticising the culture. Eliot Pattison has done four novels in his series about Shan

Tao Yun, a Beijing policeman who, as the first novel begins, has stumbled on the Party line and been sent to a Tibetan labor camp.

The first, THE SKULL MANTRA, sets the scene and does not shy away from the gritty details. Pattison occasionally fails to make his Tibetan characters speak convincing English, but he's harrowingly spot-on with his Chinese party-member characters: Pattison sketches an entire culture rendered ingloriously mute by the terrors of Communist politics. My favorite book, WATER TOUCHING STONE, takes Shan out of the Gulag and into the border regions where Tibetans, Kazhaks and Uighurs live amidst the remains of their ethnic cultures. I think it's the best-shaped of his stories, and the resolution of the murders is perfect: a tragedy that becomes a thread of hope.

The third and fourth novels, BONE MOUNTAIN and BEAUTIFUL GHOSTS, do not entirely escape the aroma of James Hilton—the mysticism gets a little too close to the surface and they're too elaborately plotted—but there's some great stuff in them, a sense particularly of how Tibet is being turned into a simulacrum of itself. I think Pattison wants to bring us, of the tragedies of Tibet, what Stephen Crane wanted to bring across of the American Civil War in THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE: the faces, details and characters that don't make it into the history books. And using a displaced Han detective as the lead character really works: we see the damaged Tibetan culture through Shan's own deepening involvement. Some of the details are a little bit pat, but if Tibet fascinates you as it does me, give them a try. If they aren't perfect, they're still a contrast to something like ORACLE LAKE, by Paul Adam (Thomas Dunne, 2003), in which an interesting idea—the international jockeying after the death of the Dalai Lama—becomes grist for a very run-of-the-mill thriller.

For the history, you want to read IN EXILE FROM THE LAND OF THE SNOWS, by John Avedon, and Tsering Shakya's THE DRAGON IN THE LAND OF THE SNOWS, both very fully detailed and trustworthy. Also very much worth reading—"an image of Tibet as seen by one man," the elder brother of the Dalai Lama—is TIBET, by Thubten Jigme Norbu and Colin M. Turnbull. ART OF TIBET, by Robert E. Fisher (1997), in the invaluable Thames and Hudson World of Art series, is an inexpensive and copiously illustrated introduction to the topic. Of the many accounts of post-invasion Tibet, perhaps the most moving, vivid and readable is Patrick French's TIBET, TIBET: A Personal History of a Lost Land (Vintage Departures, 2003), which conveys more than any other book how the misery of Tibet happened, and continues to happen, one person at a time; it also encapsulates a lot of historical information. PRISONERS OF SHANGRI-LA: Tibetan Buddhism and the West, by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago, 1998) is a wily, earthbound and informative book on the distortive Western romanticisation of Tibetan culture. THE SEARCH FOR THE PANCHEN LAMA, by Isabel Hilton (Norton, 1999) is an informative and damning account of the Chinese government's abduction of a child incarnate lama—still a central and unresolved issue in Tibetan politics. All worth reading.

P.S.: There are now two more Shan Tao Yun novels, PRAYER OF THE DRAGON (Soho Crime, 2008) and THE LORD OF DEATH (Soho, 2009). PRAYER OF THE DRAGON shares the faults (overelaborated plot, the whiff of Shangri-lamaism) and the virtues (immersion in and feel for the Tibetan setting and culture) of the earlier entries, and Shan holds his own as a still-interesting protagonist. PRAYER OF THE DRAGON involves the intersection of two ethnic groups, and if you pick it up, don't read the cover

blurb, which blows the first fourth of the plot. Bad bad blurb writers. No momos. LORD OF DEATH, set around the base camp at Everest, streamlines both the storytelling (though Lord knows the plot is still mazy enough) and the romanticism a bit but captures subtly the shift in feeling after the 2008 Olympic protests—this Tibet is still a few steps further in its process of becoming, among other things, China's tourist cash cow. The plot revolves around the 1950s covert involvement of the U.S. in the Tibetan struggle for freedom and keeps twisting until the final chapter. For a historical study of the novel's background, read ORPHANS OF THE COLD WAR: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival, by John Kenneth Knaus (Public Affairs, 1999.)

#21: GHOSTS. Pauline Kael once wondered if maybe the idea of musicals wasn't more fun than most musicals you actually get to see. Ghost stories always sound like a great idea, but in most anthologies of the form for every bit of real hair-raising genius—every story by Sheridan LeFanu, say— you get a dozen moldy old Victorian attempts where the characters are undead but the prose is not.

My favorite master of the form is M.R. James, whose four slender volumes puts him on the shelf next to Doyle and Dumas and Stevenson. I group James in my mind with the great nineteenth-century popular fiction writers, but he published in the 'teens and twenties and that surely is the key to the mischievous, witty and nimble quality in his prose: we get to have the braces scared clean off our teeth, and we also get the kick of how much James enjoys doing it to us. The mainly Victorian settings—rural, churchy, faintly bookish—seem deliberately and amusingly conventionalized; James sets his unsuspecting characters in motion, and we settle into the purring, confident prose; then he gets us, with one beautifully-timed flipover from the urbane to the maleficent. Just as Carroll and Austen fulfilled their geniuses in their few works—we can hardly conceive of there being others, or more of them—so James's complete literary existence fits neatly and uncramped into his collected stories.

The only other book of James's that seems to turn up is ABBEYS (London, Great Western Railway, 1926), which is handsomely illustrated and certain proof that the antiquarianism he teases in his stories was with him a matter of knowledge more encyclopedic than mere enthusiasm.

#22: THE SLENDEREST FOUNDATIONS OF FAME. Voltaire, Balzac, Trollope, Hugo, Joyce Carol Oates: truly prolific writers can be a little daunting. I'd like to cast a vote of affection for a couple of writers who've withstood the test of time on the strength of one or two titles.

You could stuff all of Izaak Walton between the covers of a mid-size Victorian novel. His more famous work, THE COMPLEAT ANGLER, was first published in 1653 and went on to become one of the most oft-reprinted books in the English language. People who have not read it know of it, vaguely, as a manual of fly-fishing, but if ever a book eluded and transcended genre, the ANGLER does. A pastoral in dialogue, with poems and songs liberally mixed in with the instruction, it is an evocation of the seventeenth

century countryside, and a prose version of the "Character of a Happy Life" that was a sub-genre of Elizabethan poetry (and that came to late perfection in Henry Wotton's poem of that title). It ends with a sermon in praise of the thankful spirit that is one of the most beautiful passages of seventeenth century prose. The short biographies of John Donne, Wotton, Hooker, George Herbert and Robert Sanderson—known since as WALTON'S LIVES— are some of the landmark early works of British biography but are still read for the peaceable Anglican vision which they share with the ANGLER.

The ANGLER still exists in dozens of editions, old and new; the old Oxford World Classics hardcover is the perfect and portable incarnation, and the current paperback reprint has good notes. I believe the beautiful edition edited by Richard Le Galienne and finely illustrated by Edmund New has been reprinted. As far as I can tell no complete edition of WALTON'S LIVES is currently available, which is shameful; why hasn't Dover or Oxford done one? Someone in those houses should be hit six times with a switch and made to get to it. Still one of the best essays on Walton is the one by James Russell Lowell in his old collection LATEST LITERARY ESSAYS AND ADDRESSES— long out of print but something that still turns up secondhand. Henry Wotton's "Happy Life" poem is in Palgrave's GOLDEN TREASURY.

(P.S., February 2010: A recent check on Amazon shows that there are a couple of reprints of Walton's Lives from small houses. They aren't cheap, they aren't particularly attractive, and the Kessinger edition has a whopper of a typo right on the cover, but, well, they're there. I'd say hunt for a cheap secondhand copy.)

Flora Thompson is probably the most underrated writer of English prose I know of. Her autobiographical trilogy, LARK RISE TO CANDLEFORD, is another hard book to pin down to a genre. These lightly fictionalized recountings of her rural upbringing in Oxfordshire in the early 1900s are usually spoken of as the last literary records of the countryside of her day, and this was a large part of the book's purpose; but LARK RISE is that story plus Thompson's vivid sense of stillness, compassion and well-being. There's a fourth volume, STILL GLIDES THE STREAM; and in A COUNTRY CALENDAR AND OTHER WRITINGS, Margaret Lane has gathered some natural history essays, poems and last chapters of autobiography of Thompson's and written a fine introductory memoir. I believe all are in print.

#23: TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELISTS. If you want to see someone at play in the fields of the English language, Roddy Doyle will supply. When I first began visiting Dublin, I saw and heard James Joyce everywhere; lately I hear Roddy Doyle. His first three novels, THE COMMITMENTS, THE SNAPPER and THE VAN, are dialogue comedies about the North Dublin Rabbitte family that were clearly Doyle staking his claim—THE SNAPPER is one of the funniest books I've ever read. The next, PADDY CLARKE HA HA HA, about a boy surviving an unhappy family life, showed a new shading of comic powers and depth of feeling, and the fifth, THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS, is a tough, hopeful novel about a woman getting into and fighting her way out of an abusive marriage; his most recent, PAULA SPENCER, is a look-in on the heroine of WOMAN, later in her embattled going-on. In A STAR

CALLED HENRY, Doyle introduces his little Dublin hellion, Henry Smart, who provides us with a mordant take on the 1916 Rebellion that manages to be both irreverent and romantic; in its sequel, OH, PLAY THAT THING, Henry skips Ireland, hits New York and Chicago, and becomes Louis Armstrong's white boy. With these books, Doyle's in full flight: his command of milieu (the immigrant's New York), his historical sense (his sly observations on jazz music as it passed from Chicago to New York) and evocative skills (the scene in which Satchmo plays a trumpet elegy for his mother) are couched in prose that all but gets up and walks around by itself. There's going to be a third volume of Henry's adventures—I can't wait.

(For another fictional revision of 1916, read Jamie O'Neill's AT SWIM, TWO BOYS, in which the Rebellion is the backdrop for two Dublin boys who fall in love—one bookish shopkeeper's son, one working rough.)

Margaret Atwood's style has a close-facing quality about it—a way of assuming you're in on her daring, acerbic joke—that I know not everyone warms up to. But her work has shown an amazing variety, an almost intimidating intelligence, and she's always onto her topics before anyone else—no other novelist has her eye so intently on tiny shifts of the *geist.* From her first novel, SURFACING—a satire that turns into an astonishingly successful literary handling of the theme of emotional rebirth—to her most recent, the harrowing post-apocalyptic ORYX AND CRAKE and THE YEAR OF THE FLOOD, it's been impossible to guess what direction she'll go off in; she's the opposite of a genre novelist.

My favorites have been THE EDIBLE WOMAN, a comedy about a woman whose romantic life and digestive system run afoul of each other and which has a tone-perfect comic whopper of an ending; THE HANDMAID'S TALE, a futuristic novel in which fertile women are pressed into service as surrogate childbearers for a sterile ruling class—one of those rare books genuinely not like anything else—and THE ROBBER BRIDE, her po-faced black joke about a woman ("a full scale villainess," Atwood calls her) who runs elaborate, self-serving roughshod over three friends' lives, and their response. In all Atwood's best work the ideas are so interesting, the themes so striking, the surprise is that in the end we remember people, voices—Atwood's characters touch us and convince us as much as her invention delights us. And in THE BLIND ASSASSIN there's all Atwood's invention—an elaborate playground of tale-within- tale—but a new strength of feeling over romantic and human loss. There are also some terrific collections of stories—WILDERNESS TIPS is the best—and literary criticism and poetry—TRUE STORIES is my favorite. And her recent work THE PENELOPIAD, a female reimagining of the Odyssey, is mordant and funny—the best example of playing dirty pool with the classics I've read in ages.

#24: SOME CONTEMPORARY POETS. Even those of us who love poetry end up baffled by the sheer mass (and expense) of verse now being published. Where to begin? How to choose? Here at least are a few titles I've loved. I suspect I have fairly limited taste: I can go a long, long time without most surrealist poetry, concrete poetry, "language" poetry and must admit that every time someone is introduced as a

"performance poet" my eyes go to the nearest exit sign. Call me….classical. In any case….

---RIPRAP, & COLD MOUNTAIN POEMS, by Gary Snyder (Shoemaker). Snyder has had a long, brave, lively career as the bedrock voice of Beat/West Coast poetry: as a writer and thinker, it's possible to take him seriously when Ginsberg—for all his virtues—may make you snort or roll your eyes. The prose pieces in A PLACE IN SPACE and THE PRACTICE OF THE WILD are supremely worth reading—and his verse has retained its voice long after the conventions which first defined him have passed. RIPRAP, now forty years old, is a sharp, plain young man's book and helped introduce a whole tone and range of experience into American poetry: where the West Coast reaches for the Orient. The second section, COLD MOUNTAIN POEMS, is his translation of Han-shan, one of the wonderful cases of a foreign poet convincingly reincarnating in a modern poetic voice.

---MORTAL ACTS, MORTAL WORDS, by Galway Kinnell (Houghton Mifflin). "Mortal beauty, acts and words have put all their burden on my soul," says the epigraph from Petrarch, which captures exactly the particular gravity of Kinnell's work. He had burst into full voice with a book-length sequence, THE BOOK OF NIGHTMARES, and it was followed by MORTAL ACTS, in which the simplest lines seem bathed in emotion. Kinnell has gone on to other great work—WHEN ONE HAS LIVED A LONG TIME ALONE and IMPERFECT THIRST are terrific—but this remains one of my favorites.

---WHAT WORK IS, by Philip Levine (Knopf). Like Kinnell, Levine can use a short narrative poem that becomes sheer emotion, but emotion which has a tough, feisty air. This collection has all the particulars of factory, working-class life, and is a catalogue of how people survive it and wear its scars. Levine captures the meaning of going on and, in the title poem, what you know out of that experience that you can't get any other way. In the face of the monotonous academic style of so much American verse, Levine speaks with an authority no professorship can confer. Read THE SIMPLE TRUTH too.

---TELL ME AGAIN HOW THE WHITE HERON RISES AND FLIES ACROSS THE NACREOUS RIVER AT TWILIGHT TOWARD THE DISTANT ISLANDS, by Hayden Carruth (New Directions). The title— my favorite for any poetry book since Ted Hughes's WODWO or Maxine Kumin's OUR GROUND TIME HERE WILL BE SHORT—may not say it all, but it says a good deal. Carruth hits upon a wry exaggeration—a sort of blowup of folksy New England speak—to carry the humor and feeling of the verse, a rushing-river style full of surprising exactitude. It's truly a one-of-a-kind book, even in the midst of Carruth's long career.

---BELOW COLD MOUNTAIN, by Joseph Stroud (Copper Canyon Press). Perhaps all there is to remark on in so wonderful a book as BELOW COLD MOUNTAIN—its title an ironic reference to Han-shan—is its mixture of amplitude and restraint: amplitude in its fullness of emotion, its variety of subject and attack, and its ranging of the world from Los Angleles to Auvergne, to Madrid, to "the Wailing Wall of the Jerusalem within me"; restraint in its matured exactitude of craft, which refuses to overstate or pester us to respond. Few poets working today can match Stroud for clarity, compactness and proportion in setting up a dramatic situation; but these situations move, as Rexroth said of the Noh drama, not towards resolution but realized significance. Here is broad humanity, striking but unrestrained metaphor, and feeling, a great steady flow of feeling for the world and its creatures striving to survive.

---DISTRICT AND CIRCLE, by Seamus Heaney (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux). Heaney has written with a sure hand since the beginning—touch him where you may, you'll find good work, and I've had trouble selecting a favorite. In the Glanmore Sonnets, in FIELD WORK, he tackles that worn form with vivid off-rhymed success, and in THE HAW LANTERN there are startling visionary poems: "The Mud Field," "In the Republic of Conscience," and others. But the work in DISTRICT AND CIRCLE (his newest, 2006) is so good throughout that it seems like an amused nose-thumbing at the old tradition that no one does good work after getting the Nobel. No working poet has been more joyously earthbound and seabound than Heaney; his poems are full of wonderful mud-squelchy noises. And in DISTRICT AND CIRCLE there is a high richness in the movement and sound of the verse—Heaney has learned his craft and is writing with a master's late ease. His prose is also good, particularly THE REDRESS OF POETRY, his book of Oxford lectures. OPENED GROUND is a generous skim off the top of his earlier collections.

---SELECTED POEMS 1946-1968, by R.S. Thomas (Bloodaxe). Thomas is the premier late-twentieth-century Welsh poet, known in his own country as a nationalist, defender of the native language and culture, and Christian minister. This is an impressive lot of chains for any writer, but in Thomas there resided that buggy, unpredictable thing, a poet. Christianity is among the themes and stances of his work, but his is no hand-clapping, folk-guitar religion: it has the windbared fields reminiscent of Sorley MacLean, the great Scots Gaelic poet. The language is as plain as can be imagined; not the stark down-to-the-bone of, say, Guillevic or Anne Hebert, but completely face-on and unadorned. "Since someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious" (Larkin's words, from "Church Going"), Thomas's work has a real necessity to it. He is not well-known in the States, but these stark, curt narratives are worth seeking out. This is northern music and its most powerful and satisfying.
For Sorley MacLean, read SPRING TIDE AND NEAP TIDE (Canongate).

---LET EVENING COME: Selected Poems, by Jane Kenyon (Bloodaxe). Kenyon died of leukemia in 1995, and since then a kind of heroine's myth has been gathering around her memory. Kenyon without leukemia would be like Plath without suicide, but it's a curious myth, that cannot be attached to any cause, national, political or feminist; as with Keats, it was an unsought martyrdom. The danger of any such myth is that it distracts from the verse. Kenyon's poetry was domestic without being banal, religious without being cloying, New England without being folksy; it had a kind of illuminated everyday quality without eccentricity or hobbyhorses, and was intelligent and penetrating without the academic manner. "Woman, why are you weeping," written at the end of her life, is one of the most beautiful poems of religious loss I've ever read; however desolated the experience we feel gratitude for this kind of honesty, worthy of Keats's "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

---THE GREAT FIRES: Poems 1982-1992, by Jack Gilbert (Knopf). Gilbert is another poet of mythic presence—his name is always in the air among people writing poetry. Mythic in part because the two collections preceding THE GREAT FIRES are out of print and difficult and expensive to find; and in part because he seems to have lived well away from the literary scene of appearances, awards, academe and so forth. This solitude is the breath of the poems; they give the sense of a man marching with enormous courage and confidence into unfamiliar and dangerous country. His sense of invention, the moulding of rhythm to mood, is extraordinarily sure-handed; he has taken from the Modernists as

much as he needed and sung with his own voice. Written in the ten years after the death of his wife, the poems are marked by an imagination wild without excess and by a deep, blessing gravity. (His two earlier collections, VIEWS OF JEOPARDY and MONOLITHOS, are out of print and the prices being asked for them are simply vile, but Bloodaxe Books in England has produced a collection, TRANSGRESSIONS, which is a selection from these two titles.)

---PICTURES FROM BRUEGHEL and other poems, by William Carlos Williams (New Directions). It's cheating a bit to include Williams among the contemporaries—he died over forty years ago—but of all the books of modern and contemporary poetry Williams's last collection may be the one I would most hate to do without. In it Williams took all his fascination with the rhythms of American speech, the experimentation and Imagism of his youth and middle age and went past them into a classical, almost mysterious mastery of form and emotional equipoise. Affection, dismay, humor—and, in the long poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," Williams's most beautiful verses on marital love as the victim and vanquisher of death—all crystalline, all written as if in a state of grace. A lifetime of doctoring is behind these poems, and very, very few twentieth century poets were granted the time, luck and determination to achieve this late-Shakespearean wisdom—Yeats himself, combative to the end, stopped just short of it, I think. Plain as they are, pawkish and teasing as they can be, these poems are wine, and you neglect them to your loss.

#25: RIMBAUD. Where did this revolutionary genius come from? Nineteenth-century France, you might say, a country of such passion for the arts and such rigidity in their practice that in 1830, at the premiere of "Hernani," Parisian audiences rioted when Hugo varied the placement of the caesura in the alexandrine line. Or specifically Charleville, the bourgeois-to-the-bone northwestern city Rimbaud spent his life trying to escape and which now, ironically, has his bones. But no fact or agenda—cultural, historical, biographical, sexual—can encapsulate or explain Rimbaud. His work is most often read biographically: the brilliant and intractable child, the roadside bodies of the Franco-Prussian War, the barrack-room sodomy of the Commune, the scandalous affair with Verlaine, the vertiginous and self-hypnotizing attempts to become a seer. Having revolutionized poetry—and with Rimbaud, that word is not hyperbolic but merely accurate—he abandoned writing and disappeared into parts of Africa where Europeans had hardly been seen, and was dead of cancer at thirty-seven. His manuscripts were discovered and published shortly after his death, like the unexploded mines people still dig up in the Ardennes. From the supple and inventive early verse—"Ophelie," "Le Dormeur du Val," "Au Cabaret Vert," "Ma Boheme"—it's hardly a year to "Voyelles," "Le Bateau Ivre," "L'Eternite," "O Saisons O Chateaux," where Rimbaud goes into areas of vision and incantation not touched before in European verse, and two years, maybe three, to the hallucinatory dramas of the ILLUMINATIONS, in which the dramatic and syntactic elements are broken down and recombined—the first mesmeric style of the surreal. In "Un Saison en Enfer"—"A Season in Hell"—not just the biographical elements but the possibilities of literary French seem to be broken down, barbarized and remade, to end with one of the most moving passages in French, shorn of the old elegance and clarity but with a new, convincing voice of anguish, honesty and

hope: "Il me sera loisible de posseder la verite dans une ame et un corps." "It will be allowed me to possess the truth in one soul and one body."

There are several new translations of Rimbaud, but the best complete one in English is still Wallace Fowlie's, from the University of Chicago Press; it includes a good selection of Rimbaud's letters. Louise Varese's versions of "The Drunken Boat," "A Season in Hell," and the "Illuminations" are good as well (New Directions). The definitive text in French is in the Bibliotheque de la Pleiade (Gallimard), edited by Antoine Adam. Enid Starkie's biography (New Directions), despite some sentimentalities, is probably still the best in English, superior to Graham Robb's more recent attempt. Jean-Jacques Lefrere's ARTHUR RIMBAUD (Paris, Fayard, 2001) is an exhaustively detailed biography, if a bit spotty in critical analysis. PASSION RIMBAUD: L'Album d'une Vie (Editions Textuel, 1998) is a spectacular visual collection. Charleville, about which Rimbaud said little except in vituperation, now honors its embarrassingly famous renegade son with a very fine museum full of his effects, above the millstream near which Rimbaud spent his childhood. Several websites now have the entirety of Rimbaud's poetry online, some with translations.

#26: GEORGE HERBERT. "Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart / Could have recovered greennesse." In 1998, after a visit to Charleville, Rimbaud's birthplace in northeastern France, I went to Bemerton, near Salisbury in England, where George Herbert lived and preached the last three years of his life. Rimbaud hated Charleville and was repelled by its Sunday-dinner respectability; he wanted only to escape it, and the day I spent there, wandering alone, left me troubled and saddened. In contrast entirely, the modest church of Saint Andrew's in Lower Bemerton seemed a perfect and moving mirror of Herbert's work and character; seeing the altar beneath which Herbert is buried, I was moved to tears of gratitude. Christianity permeated the great English poetry of the seventeenth century and no one succeeded above Herbert in letting it be the whole and everyday life of his work. From Donne he inherited the intellectually and syntactically knotted style that Johnson mockingly dubbed "Metaphysical," and Donne is perhaps a poet of greater moments, of greater range and intensity. But Herbert goes with us on our way: his poems are more trimmed and homely than Donne's, Traherne's, or the Catholic Crashaw's, more vividly ordinary than Vaughan's. With the pastorate at Bemerton, Herbert abandoned connection and courtly ambition; the choice delivered him, and shaped and reflected his best gifts. He can be startlingly modern in diction, as when he calls prayer "Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood, / The land of spices; something understood." But the informing modesty, the love and gratitude over elemental things, can seem both special to his time and a rarity in any day.

One of the best entries in the recently resuscitated Everyman's Library from Knopf is Anne Pasternak Slater's edition of THE COMPLETE ENGLISH WORKS of Herbert: it includes the verse, prose works, letters, an entertaining collection of "Outlandish Proverbs," and Walton's biography; the introduction is good and the notes are excellent and helpful. For a lovely and keenly-felt appreciation, read "George Herbert and the River Valley Route," the sixth chapter of Ronald Blythe's DIVINE LANDSCAPES (Harcourt Brace, 1986).

#27: WHEN THE LIONS WROTE HISTORY. It's not always remembered that African-Americans, in addition to inventing and dominating several forms of American music, contributed a distinct genre to American literature: the nineteenth century slave narrative. (Its twentieth century successor, the Holocaust narrative, is of course mostly European.) Of their nature, most of the "perhaps several hundred" such narratives (Arna Bontemps' estimate) survive only as bibliographical raritites or historical documents rather than literature, though a number of them in their day escaped Abolitionist circles and became popular reading.

To read Douglass for the first time in full adulthood is to be struck by lightning. Here is not only a great moral document and an historical testimony of the first importance but one of the great works of the nineteenth century plain style. Douglass's NARRATIVE surpasses all the others of its type in dramatic movement and conciseness; he exceeds also in sheer penetration. In every episode he goes to the core of the matter: he has no thought for frills, and so each chapter strikes us with maximum impact. And surely here, as is always said, the style is the man. From this distance in time we could surely forgive in a slave any low cunning and deceit; Douglass's style, even when writing of the time before his escape, shows a countenance of amazing directness and integrity. His slavery seems to have been merely physical, and never to have formed his soul. (He worried in his later works, for instance, of people's reaction to his having accepted English Abolitionist money to have purchased his final right to freedom, so he could walk the streets of Rochester without fear of being kidnapped and returned to slavery.) His friend Wendell Phillips once quoted from the fable that the lions felt they should be better represented "when the lions wrote history." Perhaps of all nineteenth century American writers, Douglass's style is the most leonine. His later books, MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM and LIFE AND TIMES, overlap and repeat much from the NARRATIVE, and the writing becomes more prolix, but there is also more detail and a lively panorama of nineteenth century America. There are also unexpected encounters (we move from Daniel O'Connell and Gladstone to, of all people, Hans Christian Andersen) and lovely moments (a reverie over seeing a violin played by Paganini). All three titles exist in various editions and are published as one volume in the Library of America series.

#28: I WENT ON MY WAY REJOICING: TWO NOVELS BY MURIEL SPARK. Spark, God knows, is a born writer, and even her duds and misfires have a guaranteed sophistication and dark comic sheen; but many times I've been disappointed by the insistently brittle quality, the willed comedy that lacks all gaiety, the eyebrow arched over any kind of emotion. But two of her works seem to me to get right above that to be not just comic but genuinely funny and even—good heavens—endearing without a smudge of sentiment. In LOITERING WITH INTENT (1981) she plays with the old hairballs of art versus life, fiction versus truth, even the novel versus autobiography, but she really does play: there's a light, conjuring hand throughout. Its real theme—its emotional source—is

the delight in maturity, in coming into one's strength. It's a remarkably unsentimental stance, but entirely without bitterness. She conveys the joy of writing, of getting a grip on the world around you and using it as an artist, and teases it. It's about the choice between using art to embrace and explore life or to imprison it, and it expresses, as well as I've ever seen in a novel, the self-confident thrum of early adulthood.

A few years later (1988) she wrote A FAR CRY FROM KENSINGTON, an even more splendidly formed book with a similar if more serene feel. Both are about recollection, about encountering evil and coming away whole, and about escaping old sorrows—finding out that even they don't last forever. It's a perfectly contained story, with a feel of looking back with unfooled affection; Spark puts the book together with a delighting sleek precision. There's emotion in it—there are two deaths, both of which we're allowed to feel—but because Spark is so long and fastidiously practiced in her art the deaths complete the comedy rather than disturb it. Both novels give the pleasure of watching a sly old master relax into humanity and keep her wits about her. It doesn't get much better.

#29: A CUPPED HANDFUL OF SONG. Most poetry anthologies are programmatic—examples of the work of a group, a time, a style, a theme— and sometimes the editors are more interested in the program than in the poetry. The earlier great anthologies—Palgrave's GOLDEN TREASURY, Quiller-Couch's original edition of THE OXFORD BOOK OF ENGLISH VERSE, or Pompidou's ANTHOLOGIE DE LA POESIE FRANCAISE—have stayed alive and influential, still setting standards, because the editors loved the poems for themselves, and selected above all for excellence. One of the most instructive things any reader curious to understand and experience great poetry can do is to read some war-horse anthology, Oscar Williams's IMMORTAL POEMS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, Robert Penn Warren and Albert Erskine's SIX CENTURIES OF GREAT POETRY, or, more recently, Harold Bloom's BEST POEMS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, from start to finish, to hear the evolution of our poetic language as its rhythms sway and change, become languourous or staccato. Three of the most enjoyable recent anthologies have been edited purely as collections of poems the editors loved: no program, no axes grinding, just the poems selected and set out purely for their own sakes, to perform that undefinable act that poetry does. These are THE RATTLE BAG, edited by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes (Faber, 1985); STAYING ALIVE: Real Poems for Unreal Times, edited by Neal Astley, the great editor of Bloodaxe Books (American edition from Miramax/Hyperion, 2003) and REAL COOL, edited by Niall MacMonagle (Marino Books, 1994). I recommend them all, and there's very little overlap between them.

#30: PRAISING KAEL. If you're ever in the mood for conversational combat, go into a roomful of movie buffs and mention Pauline Kael. Half of the room will go into raptures; half will make great noises of disgust. Kael was for many years the film critic for the NEW YORKER; she bloomed, first and particularly, during the late sixties and early seventies, when American cinema was in a brief glory period of inventiveness and

pointed relevance, and American receptivity to foreign film was at a new high. She'd already been an influence, programming San Francisco art cinemas, lauding the French New Wave films, and getting fired from McCALL'S for her review of what she called "The Sound of Money". As time goes on we'll be able to sort out Kael's blunders and biases and put her work in perspective; I want to get at her as an example of American vernacular writing. One of the blessed streams of American prose, from Thoreau and Twain on, has been a kind of irreverent truth-telling, and which surfaced early in American movie reviewing with James Agee. A phrase I often use is "By conservative estimate, the god-damnedest thing ever seen" (I used it once of the Albert Memorial). That's Agee, and that streak of verbal barbed-wire is the reason he's still so much more fun to read than Otis Ferguson or Andre Bazin. Note the word: fun. Kael shamelessly associated movies with fun, with playing hooky, with a good time out. "It must be art, because it sure as hell isn't entertainment." She loved the irreverent American comedies—she did a book-length essay on "Citizen Kane"—but her raucous attitude could be pressed into greater service: her review of Abel Gance's "Napoleon" is still the best thing done on that film because she captures the movie's overwhelming silliness as well as its greatness. I'm not talking that inhumane sophistication that so often poisons the NEW YORKER—I'm talking getting in there and having at it. And no critic since Kael can match her range of familiarity with the other arts— opera especially, her favorite point of comparison. Her peculiar effectiveness was in loving movies as an escape from the enforced appreciation of the academically respectable older arts. "At the movies you're left gloriously alone. You can say it stinks and nobody cares." That mischievous-schoolkid freedom may not hold true any longer, but it survives in Kael's essays. Start with FOR KEEPS (Plume, 1996), her own selection—from there you may want to go on to the individual collections, even if they're studded with reviews of movies long forgotten.

As for Agee, his essays and reviews were collected in the first volume of AGEE ON FILM (the second volume, his screenplays, is less interesting). Another favorite quote, his review of "I Walk Alone": "The picture deserves, like four out five other movies, to walk alone, tinkle a little bell, and cry 'Unclean, unclean.'" It's still in print from Perigee books, as it bloody well should be. The 2005 Agee volume FILM WRITING AND SELECTED JOURNALISM in the Library of America contains everything from the Perigee edition plus some uncollected pieces. Have fun.

#31: FIRST-RATE MINDS. "The test of a first-rate intelligence," F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in "The Crack-Up," "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time." Medieval Spain might not be the place we would think to look for such a quality, but in her book THE ORNAMENT OF THE WORLD: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain (Little, Brown, 2002) Maria Rosa Menocal gives us, convincingly, what she calls "a brief history of a first-rate place". She shows us how the political fracture of the Middle East let Islamic culture cross northern Africa to its eminence in Spain, until Cordoba at the first millennium could call itself the great city of the Islamic world; and to conjure vividly the traffic between Islamic, Jewish and Christian cultures in architecture, the sciences, poetry, the reclamation

of classical learning, philosophy, all the way to gardening and governing. It's an utterly charming book—one of the most attractive books on medieval culture since Helen Waddell's WANDERING SCHOLARS.

In THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions, Karen Armstrong deals with what Karl Jaspers termed the Axial Age: the period from roughly 700 to 200 B.C. when the Eastern and Mediterranean traditions shifted their emphasis from the efficacy of magic and ritual to a vision more interior, more ethical and more humane. She approaches this vast topic chronologically, taking each of the major religious figures from Zoroaster to the author of the BHAGAVAD GITA (the Old Testament scribes and prophets are not grouped but scattered individually throughout), giving each the vivid and formative shape of his time, and giving the ideas of each a passionate, respectful voicing. What could have been a reductive and thudding Reader's Digest Guide to Your World's Religions is transformed by depth of scholarship, graceful prose and an impressive breadth of sympathy—the best kind of historical writing for the intelligent and curious lay reader. Likewise her 184-page ISLAM: A Short History (Modern Library, 2000) is a splendid, informative walkthrough, a perfect first book to read on the topic, and corrective of the idiocies and misperceptions common in these fearful, overheated times.

Both Armstrong's books end with chapters entitled "The Way Forward." Menocal's book, true to its topic, ends with an evocation of the current times of violence and, in contrast, a moving account of the saving of the Sarajevo Haggadah, a work of the civilization she extols. What grouped these books in my mind was their obvious shared hope that their topics might, against all odds, through fascination and delight, soften our sectarian rigidities, and the first-rate minds they evoke keep us safer from the brutish spirit abroad. Let's hope.

P.S.: A more obvious connective tissue between Menocal's work and Armstrong's is the latter's 1998 book HOLY WAR: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World (Anchor Books). For all its being twenty years old—the 1991 reissue preface notes the outbreak of the first U.S.-Iraqi war—it's still an excellent and humane navigation of how the Crusades—the defining act of a then-new Christian European nationalism—has helped lead, with much Islamic and Jewish assistance, to the entangled tragedy of the Middle East today. Armstrong's approach and style turn out to be ideal for the topic: she's vivid without being sensational or sarcastic, detailed without letting the book become an overcautious mire. Considering that the history of the Middle East seems to have been one long horrible riff on Jean Renoir's epigram "In this world there is only one tragic thing—everybody has their reasons," Armstrong's combination of moral clarity and restraint is pretty near miraculous. She is pressing herself—and us—to go beyond the "two opposing ideas" to a triple vision, to see from Christian/Western, Jewish and Islamic viewpoints. It's a serious read and expresses no easy optimism, but the headlines will make a lot more sense after you've read it. And Geraldine Brooks's beautiful essay "The Book of Exodus" (published in the New Yorker, December 3, 2007) extends the story of the Sarajevo Haggadah and Dervis Korkut, who protected it from Nazi confiscation, into an almost incredible turn-by-turn roundelay of courage and rescue.

#32: CLASSIC CHINESE FICTION: A FINDING MAP FOR THE CONFUSED. I was at college during the early seventies, when Asian literature was first beginning to seep into the American curriculum; like many others, I put in my time puzzling out the oddities of Wade-Giles, the then-current system of transliterating Chinese. But in the eighties the academic world shifted to pinyin, a new system invented in a fit of mischief by a pair of crazed Romanians, leaving me with the expression of a man who'd spent a fortune on eight-track tapes. Peking became Beijing, the Tao Te Ching the Dao De Jing, or sometimes Daodejing; Tu Fu became Du Fu, Li Po Li Bo (or Li Pai, or Li Bai). My personal favorite was watching Tsao Hsueh Chin, the novelist, become Cao Xueqin. This doesn't even get into multiple names, as when T'ao Yuan-ming is the same poet as T'ao Ch'ien, or Su Shih, who is also Su T'ung-po. (I think that's right, but I'm sure they move the apostrophes when I'm sleeping.)

The problem is compounded when you attempt to read the five official biggies of Chinese fiction, because THEY CHANGE THE TITLES from version to version, as well as practicing violent and promiscuous abridgement. AND the versions may differ based on which original edition or manuscript they're translating from, always assuming they're translating from Chinese rather than cribbing from a French or German version. All of this makes any attempt to become familiar with the Chinese classics like dealing with a field of moving targets. If they weren't so good—so massive, so absorbing, so enveloping—I wouldn't tell you to bother, but they are, so you should. Alas, some of the good scholarly editions are nastily expensive; you might want to try your local college library. Several of these editions are being picked up in paperback by the Foreign Languages Press at reasonable prices. Check on the secondhand websites and you may run across them cheaply.

--THE ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS, attributed to Lo Kuan-chung, exists as a two volume translation from Charles E. Tuttle, 1959, a decent translation by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor. As THREE KINGDOMS, there is a drastic one-volume abridgement by Moss Roberts (Pantheon, 1976) and a full edition, also by Roberts, in one volume from University of California Press (Berkeley, 1991).

--CHIN P'ING MEI: The Adventurous History of Hsi Men and his Six Wives, first came into English in a two-volume anonymous translation from Putnam in 1940. Clement Egerton translated it again as THE GOLDEN LOTUS, published in four volumes by Routledge and Kegan Paul (London). As THE PLUM IN THE GOLDEN VASE, or CHIN P'ING MEI, there is a full scholarly, annotated translation now in progress from the translator David Todd Roy and the Princeton University Press; it's planned for five volumes, three of which are now in print.

--SHUI HU CHUAN was translated by Pearl S. Buck as ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS, published by John Day in 1937 and reprinted recently by Moyer Bell. L. H. Jackson translated it as THE WATER MARGIN; it was done in two volumes by the Commercial Press in Hong Kong in 1963 and reprinted in a single volume by Paragon in 1968. The fullest versions, I believe, are OUTLAWS OF THE MARSH (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981, two volumes, reprinted in four volumes in paperback by the Foreign Languages Press) in a lively and readable modern translation by Sidney Shapiro., and THE MARSHES OF MOUNT LIANG, published in five hardcover volumes by the Chinese University Press, translated by John and Alex Dent-Young.

--HSI YU CHI first hit English as MONKEY, a translation by the great Arthur Waley that itself became a kind of classic; it's a severe abridgement—maybe a fourth of the original—but succeeds as later versions do not in capturing the story's humor and charm. But the two later versions, both titled JOURNEY TO THE WEST, by W. F. Jenner for the Beijing Foreign Languages Press (available now in paper) and by Anthony C. Yu for the Indiana University Press, are very much worth reading. Each are four volumes, with the stuff Waley omitted. THE MONKEY AND THE MONK, published by Chicago, is an abridgement of Anthony Yu's translation.

HUNG LOU MENG, commonly called THE DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER by Tsao Hsueh Chin (or Cao Xueqin) is the official masterpiece of Chinese fiction—their WAR AND PEACE, their TALE OF GENJI—and I'm not inclined to argue. Emerging from this vast tale of a family's decline in fortunes, you feel you have been, as with all great fiction, in an utterly convincing world that has somehow altered your sense of the world you live in. The still common Anchor paperback, translated by Chi-Chen Wang, is a severe abridgement which downplays the novel's supernatural element. The Pantheon paperback, translated by Florence and Isabel McHugh from a German edition, is better, fuller, but still drastically shortened. A DREAM OF RED MANSIONS is a decent, full, illustrated translation from the Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1978, translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, with a hilariously nervous, all's-right-with-the-Revolution intro, a ripe little piece of Party-line prose. The best version by far is the five-volume Penguin edition translated by David Hawkes and John Minford, with author billing as Cao Xueqin and entitled THE STORY OF THE STONE ("also known as THE DREAM OF THE RED CHAMBER", the smaller print assures us). With this edition one could feel that the DREAM had arrived in its proper English form.

From here you can go on to the next rung of classics: Li Yu's erotic novel JOU PU TUAN (translated by Richard Martin for Grove Press, 1963, as JOU PU TUAN: The Prayer Mat of Flesh, and by Patrick Hanan, for Ballantine, 1990, as THE CARNAL PRAYER MAT) or Wu Ch'ing-tzu's THE SCHOLARS (translated by Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1937).

And leave us not forget STRANGE TALES FROM A CHINESE STUDIO, a seventeenth-century collection by Pu Songling. It's considered one of the great accomplishments of Chinese classical prose, but in English it reads like a mix of Maupassant, Rod Serling and the giddiest kind of tabloid silliness. They're like very good-natured predecessors of the horror genre—delicious creep-outs. John Minford's nimble translation (from Penguin Books) of 104 of these short short stories, accompanied by some splendid period illustrations, is terrific fun—like a bag of the best salt-and-vinegar potato chips you've ever had.

#33: A CORNER OF INDIA. The Hindu deity Krishna is known to most Westerners, if at all, as the divine counselor to Arjuna in the BHAGAVAD-GITA, the philosophical poem embedded in the sixth book of the Indian epic MAHABHARATA. But in the medieval Vaishnavic cult, Krishna took on a whole other guise, as the lover of the Gopi maiden Radha, in a body of erotic, ecstatic poems and songs quite unlike anything in Western literature. This is a tradition steeped in religious feeling that has never heard the

word Puritanism: the result is a kind of stereoscopic literary vision, in which both the erotic and the devotional intent are fully realised.

The early masterpiece of this style is the GITAGOVINDA, by the poet Jayadeva, composed probably around the twelfth century. It's a dramatic cycle of twenty-four songs about the passion, separation, reconciliation and uniting of Krishna and Radha. The variation of voice and meter, the formal invention, the mounting intensity of feeling are such that even in translation the reader submits to a kind of joyous hypnotism and comes away transformed. Incomparably the best version in English is LOVE SONG OF THE DARK LORD: JAYADEVA'S GITAGOVINDA, edited and translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (Columbia, 1975; hardcover edition includes Sanskrit text); Miller has found a flexible and convincing idiom for the translation, and her introduction tells you all you need to know about the poem's setting and composition.

Tradition connects Jayadeva with the eastern district of Birbhum; later, in the fourteenth century, it was birthplace to a second great poet of the Vaishnavic cult, Chandidas. The unresolved legends of Chandidas's life cluster around his passion for Rami, a woman not of his caste. Perhaps it was this passion that gave his songs of Krishna and Radha their terrific anguish—perhaps not—but Chandidas's little ballads have a rarely matched intensity—love as a kind of emotional scorched-earth policy. In LOVE SONGS OF CHANDIDAS: The Rebel Poet-Priest of Bengal (Grove, 1967), the modern Bengali poet Deben Bhattacharya has found, as Miller did for Jayadeva, an idiom for carrying Chandidas convincingly into English, and given us in his introduction what we need to understand him.

If these get you hooked, there's more. THE LOVES OF KRISHNA in Indian Painting and Poetry, by W.G. Archer (Grove Press) is a lucid and intelligent study of the topic. Barbara Stoler Miller did one of the very best English versions of the BHAGAVAD GITA (Bantam, 1986), as well as the poems of Bhartrihari and Bilhana and the plays of Kalidasa. For the narrative core of the MAHABHARATA, the translation by Chakravarthi V. Narasimhan for Columbia is a readable abridgement. An accessible wee gem of a book is IN PRAISE OF KRISHNA: Songs from the Bengali, translated by Edward C. Dimock Jr. and Denise Levertov—more of the Vaishnavic poems (Anchor Books, 1967). AT PLAY WITH KRISHNA: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan, by John Stratton Hawley (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1981) is delightful and scholarly book about a cycle of pilgrimage plays performed annually; it captures the particular charm of the Vaishnavic literature. Deben Bhattacharya has also translated the poems of Vidyapati (Grove Press, 1963) and the more modern SONGS OF THE BARDS OF BENGAL, from the working-class Bengali Baul troubadours. The poems of Shaivism, the cult devoted to Shiva, are gathered by A. K. Ramanujan in SPEAKING OF SIVA, an appealing and well-translated anthology (Penguin, 1973). For a taste of this aesthetic in its sculptural and architectural form, read EROTIC SPIRITUALITY: The Vision of Konarak, by Alan Watts with photographs by Eliot Elisofon (Collier, 1971).

We return to Birbhum, which in the nineteenth century saw the birth of the protean figure of modern Indian literature, Rabindranath Tagore: poet, playwright, songwriter, folklorist, educational reformer, Nobel laureate, visionary. In 1912, in his fifties and with a large body of Bengali-language poetry behind him, Tagore translated a book of his "austere devotional songs" into English: GITANJALI. It was a wild success and is still many readers' introduction to Tagore; but to some its Anglo-Indian English may resemble

the bad, solemn early twentieth-century slush that made "mystical verse" something people would leave the state to avoid. Happily, there is a new selection of Tagore's verse (SELECTED POEMS, Penguin, 1987) by William Radice, a Tagore you can recommend without apology or embarrassment: the translations are graceful, inventive and without exoticism; the introduction is cogent and thoughtful, the notes helpful and readable, altogether satisfying stuff, and a poet who alters your notion of twentieth-century poetry. TAGORE: AN ANTHOLOGY, edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson (St. Martin's, 1997) gives a good selection of Tagore's prose, verse and non-fiction. And if you're not constitutionally opposed to flowery, read GITANJALI—it's still around and its Edwardian beauty can still cast a spell.

#34: THE DREAM OF A DEFINITIVE TEXT. Poets write, editors edit, and we read the published result—it all sounds so simple. But behind this everyday event may lie vast tangles of alternative texts, editorial choices, lately discovered manuscripts of varying legibility, and the battles of scholars. Many questions never get settled: the latest edition of the one-volume Oxford Shakespeare, for instance, presents two full texts of KING LEAR, which differ considerably. And many poets wait a long, long time for anything resembling an authoritative text: the recognized edition of Blake, in Anchor Books, was published only in 1965, 138 years after Blake's death. Thomas Johnson's great edition of Emily Dickinson appeared in 1955 (Dickinson died in 1886) but many of the cheap and remainder-table reprints of Dickinson still follow the old texts, in which Dickinson's individuality of punctuation, metric and diction—in other words, a distinct chunk of her greatness—was smoothed over and edited to the conventions of the time.

No poet so much worth caring about is in a worse textual quandary than John Clare. Readers may likely first find his work wrapped around with biography: peasant birth, the enrapturing discovery of verse, first popular success, dwindling interest in his work, the tragedy of the rural enclosures, then the long blank undifferentiated years of madness in the High Beech asylum. But his poetry sorts itself away from his biography relatively quickly, and this may be due to the special character of his work. When we read the official succession of the Romantic Period poets—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats—we have landscapes, persons, whole worlds seen from distinctive and convincing viewpoints. In many of Clare's poems we see past him to particular places, particular people, particular animals—badger, martin, ragwort, Ralph Wormstall, Ann Foot, Lolham Brig, the Clock-a-clay, Emmondale Heath—all seen and evoked for their own sakes, not to be pressed into philosophy's service. Clare's "minute particulars" are convincing because they seem not to be trying to convince us of anything in particular—the depth of thought is there, but second to the greater magic of evocation. Behind the poems, always visible, is a love of place so consuming and helpless we really believe that Clare paid for it with his sanity. In his native fields, no poet was more absorbed and happy than Clare; removed from them, none more thoroughly confused and displaced.

The matter of Clare's texts was made noisily controversial when Professor Eric Robinson bought up the copyright of Clare's unpublished work in 1965, which was seen as a kind of preemptive strike against scholarly competition. Robinson's editions were done in the "textual primitivist" manner—as little emendation or correction as practically possible—which sometimes makes Clare look primitive indeed but which could also be

like “discovering the original of a great painting previously known only through engravings” (John Barrell). But other editors and plans for other editions ran into claims for copyright fees, slowdowns, and threats of suit. Happily, though, Clare scholar Simon Kovesi told me recently in an e-mail that the issue of late seems to be dormant, and that editions of Clare are being published in a variety of editorial styles. Jonathan Bate, who issued a very full and admirable biography (JOHN CLARE, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) in 2003 has also edited “I AM”: SELECTED POETRY OF JOHN CLARE (also Farrar, Strauss), a good example of editing Clare to bring him closer to the norms of punctuation and such while still respecting Clare’s individuality. Several selections of Robinson’s editions have been done—the current one in Penguin includes the heartbreaking prose fragment “Journey Out of Essex”—“but Mary was not there”—which should not be missed. Clare is slowly taking his place in the succession—battles or no, we are all the winners.

#35: TWO CONTEMPORARY NOVELS YOU’VE PROBABLY ALREADY READ (AND THREE YOU PROBABLY HAVEN’T) BUT I LIKED THEM SO I’M GOING TO WRITE ABOUT THEM ANYWAY.

---Very occasionally you run across a novel in which everything goes almost mysteriously right—the author finds a story, a terrain, a tone exactly suited to her gifts. In POSSESSION (Random House, 1990), with several volumes of fiction and criticism behind her, A. S. Byatt hit form—but what a form! It’s subtitled “A Romance,” which set you up for a heightening of emotion as well as a certain latitude about probability, but POSSESSION is one of those wonderful books that flies all over the place—mystery, historical novel, love story (doubled—cubed, actually), a whopping satire of academic life—and yet it remains serenely under command. The protagonists are each expert in nineteenth century poetry; a letter surfaces suggesting an unsuspected connection between their two favorite poets; and you’re off, the letter triggering a series of parallel pursuits, like the pirated cassette in “Diva”. The grandstanding is in Byatt’s invention not just of the two poets but of their poems and stories, each a clue to the plot; but the richness is in the bug-eyed energy with which Byatt’s characters hit you—poets, professors, pedants and all, ringing as many changes on that one-word title as you can imagine. It’s a brilliant book and a splendid read.

--- “For instance? Well, for instance, what it means to be a man.” The epigraph to Ian McEwan’s SATURDAY is a passage from Bellow’s HERZOG—a little overture that should be disastrously chesty but comes to seem merely just. SATURDAY (Doubleday, 2005) is about twenty-four hours in the life of Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, and I don’t want to give away too much more of the story—if possible SATURDAY is a book that deserves to be read cold, without prompting; I’d say skip even the jacket blurb. When it came out it was hailed and discussed as McEwan’s 9/11 novel, and it certainly is about the lowering insecurity of the contemporary world, but it’s also about how we respond—our intimate, personal choices. The comparison is with Camus’s THE PLAGUE. When I’ve told people SATURDAY is a novel fit for adults, I’ve meant in part the generosity of adulthood—the steady running current of intelligence. (Note, for instance, how McEwan refuses to make a hanging case out of a man not recognizing a quote from Matthew

Arnold.) Page by page, the evocation of the first part of the novel is so absorbing that, as with Roddy Doyle's A STAR CALLED HENRY, we feel almost a blip of dissatisfaction when the plot begins to come to the fore; but that's next to nothing. SATURDAY is near to seamless, and gets everything right that counts. McEwan earns, amazingly, that quote from HERZOG. "You yourself are a child of this mass and a brother to all the rest. Or else an ingrate, dilettante, idiot."

---Dai Sijie is a Chinese-born novelist who was "re-educated" during the Cultural Revolution, and who has lived in France since 1984. In BALZAC AND THE LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS (Random, 2001) two young men are sent to western China for re-education; the education that actually takes place, with the village folk, the daughter of the local tailor and a cadge of forbidden European novels is of course a woeful and touching satire of what the Party had in mind. What's wonderful is the easy, unembittered sense Dai shows of how life continues to happen over, around, despite and in sad disregard of all the slogans and programs of Communist China. It teems with loving references to the forbidden literature and plays out like "Jules and Jim" and "Pygmalion" reset in the rural provinces. The translation by Ina Rilke is well done, and Dai himself directed the excellent film version, released in 2002 with Xun Zhou as the Little Seamstress. In his second, MR. MUO'S TRAVELLING COUCH, the tone wobbles a bit but there are some staggering bits of comic invention; his third, PAR UNE NUIT OU LA LUNE NE S'EST PAS LEVEE, published by Gallimard in 2007 and not yet translated, is a bravura piece of work: a modern-day romance wound around a torn piece of silk inscribed with a Buddhist text. It's in full flight virtually from page one and snaps neatly, perfectly closed in its final paragraph. I'm assuming it'll get translated—keep your eyes peeled.

P.S.: PAR UNE NUIT has been published in translation as of August 2009, as ONCE ON A MOONLESS NIGHT, translated by Adriana Hunter and published by Knopf. Go to it.

----In Michael Downing's BREAKFAST WITH SCOT (Counterpoint, 1999), a Harvard Square gay couple keep a promise to a deceased friend, to take care of her eleven-year-old son in the case of her death; this cheering and sweet-tempered novel details the first four months of an unexpected and warily-approached guardianship. The emotional trigger in the book is that Scot, with his "peculiarly limp limbs and his gooney posture," is a screaming sissy, a boy whose belt has "shiny white imitation leather with pink dancing dogs and jazzy little musical notes." Scot is a walking embarrassment, not least to his guardians, who are cornered into facing a lot of fears and insecurities they'd thought safely buried—and not just their own. "Scot raises a lot of questions," one of his guardians says. Fortunately, what could have been an unhappy horror of a novel is instead a comedy of reconciliation and coming to terms, with just the right Austen-like shape and severity. In it, Cantabridgian sophistication comes to seem not just a verbal style but a dogged courage of toleration. It's a clean shot of a novel, with terrific dialogue; Downing is a generous man and hellaciously funny.

----Tobias Wolff has labeled OLD SCHOOL (Knopf, 2003) a novel, but it's plainly a continuation of his memoir THIS BOY'S LIFE, at least in some important particulars. In this case, the adolescent narrator has wangled his way into a posh boy's school, and proceeds to 1) attempt to become a writer, which includes the goal of winning the school's annual competition for an audience with a famous visiting author, and 2) erase, in

conversation and behavior, any sign of his less-than-posh bringing-up, including some socially inconvenient Jewish blood. These two worn-shoe-leather themes Wolff polishes to a lovely, funny luster, partly with the unabashed glee he shows in knocking the stuffing out of his younger self, but also with his humane understanding of the boy's need to fit in and his seduction by the glamor of the school's traditions. The visiting writers are Frost, Ayn Rand, and Hemingway; the mimicry in each case is pretty good, and no one has ever so neatly shown the the effect on an unprepared mind of reading Ayn Rand, which immediately turns his narrator into a smug little Nazi. It's a the book's high point, and a great comic payoff.

#36: ROSEMARY MAHONEY. "It seemed a delightful thing to be sitting in a kitchen at the dead center of a house with nothing buts bats and stars for a ceiling and a lizard shrieking and chattering behind the refrigerator." What with bloggers and journal keepers and personal websites and the viral welter of personalia, writers like Rosemary Mahoney are both an example and a caution. She does what the introspecting young dream of: writing, not novels or poems or short stories but non-fiction books based on her personal experiences. The trick is, she does it awfully, awfully well. THE EARLY ARRIVAL OF DREAMS: A Year in China (Fawcett) and WHOREDOM IN KIMMAGE: The World of Irish Women (Anchor) are accounts of residencies abroad; A LIKELY STORY: One Summer with Lillian Hellman (Anchor) is a reminiscence of when in late adolescence she worked as a housegirl for the devastatingly irascible playwright; her most recent, DOWN THE NILE: Alone in a Fisherman's Skiff (Little, Brown) is about an Egyptian voyage, with wonderful word-portraits and a comic, horrible, self-terrifying passage about crocodiles; perhaps my favorite, THE SINGULAR PILGRIM: Travels on Sacred Ground (Mariner), brings us to Walsingham, Lourdes, Santiago, Varanasi, the Holy Land and Lough Derg in Ireland. They are all terrifically readable and the least narcissistic, most sharply observed books you could imagine. They are full of people, to whom Mahoney reacts with intelligence, kindness, fury and respect. The writing is lively and vivid and when there is introspection we come to enjoy it, because of its honesty and depth, as much as we enjoy her snapshot-perfect eye for detail and her memory for things said. She captures how in the midst of observation the past can stick its insisting nose into the present; she is infinitely curious and adventurous; and when she says, in THE SINGULAR PILGRIM, "Humor seemed to me the height of wisdom," we believe her. She's done her reading and knows where she is, and then sees where the place will take her. PILGRIM addresses the problem of religious belief and in its personal, sidewise tack says as much, and as honestly, as anything I've read on the subject. There's been a huge boom of memoir and personal reportage in the last decades—in Mahoney's books we find out how well it can be done.

#37: TO CHORTLE IN YOUR JOY: THE GREAT EARLY BRITISH CHILDREN'S CLASSICS. Few books of any description are surrounded by the jungle of explication that has grown up around the Alice books of Lewis Carroll. There are several full-length biographies, annotated and critical editions of the stories, selections of Caroll's letters and

diaries, tours of Carroll's Oxford, and by now innumerable essays on every conceivable aspect of Carroll (or Charles Dodgson) as don, mathematician, photographer, church deacon, linguist, logician, weirdo and prophet; and of the Alice books as children's lit, dream lit, satire, Victoriana, Zen koan, psychoanalytic palimpsest and nonpareil. And for all of that, some of it very good, some useful, much dull and disappointing, the Alice books—properly, ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND and THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS AND WHAT ALICE FOUND THERE—retain not just their originality, their wit, and their power to amuse and bemuse, but their irreducible strangeness. No degree of familiarity—and over the years I've come to know them almost by heart—ever reduces the genuinely dreamlike comic irrationality; rather it becomes all the more potent and fascinating. In contrast with much twentieth-century Surrealism, with its violence, darkness and tiresome insistence on shocking the bourgeois, Carroll's strangeness was a natural self, released by the circumstance of telling stories to three little girls on a boat trip down the Isis. In the circus-mirror vision of that self, all polite Victorian culture—its Mandarin courtesy, compulsive moralizing, leaden-footed didactic verse, its coffinlike repression—was blown up, distorted and exploded with a combination of mathematical precision and bubble-busting glee. It will never happen—not precisely like this—ever again. No one has ever successfully imitated Carroll, and no one ever will. He happened only once, a kind of happy accident of nature, for which may we ever be thankful.

If you want to tackle the now-vast literature of Alice—or just want to be able to catch some of the jokes now obscured by time—the best and obvious starting point is THE ANNOTATED ALICE, by Martin Gardner. The recent definitive edition (Norton, 1999, hardcover) combines the original edition with MORE ANNOTATED ALICE and includes the text of both stories with the suppressed "Wasp in the Wig" chapter, the Tenniel illustrations, and an amusing plethora of notes, and it's a splendid piece of work. Gardner also did an annotated edition of "The Hunting of the Snark," (Penguin, 1974) in which he again proved himself Carroll's perfect and inspired accompanist—as when, with Gardner's assistance, the Billiard-Maker wanders out of the poem and into one of the Sherlock Holmes stories, "The Greek Interpreter"; it's a shame the whole thing isn't included in the ALICE. (If Carroll were French the Bibliotheque de la Pleiade would have him all sewn up in a single volume, including his serious mathematical works, a box of which so disconcerted Victoria when she asked to see "more of the works of Mr. Carroll." It wouldn't be fun, but it would be complete, and it would be annotated to the nines.) Robert Phillips edited a collection of critical essays, ASPECTS OF ALICE (Penguin, 1974), though the fun factor isn't all that high. One might've wished for something along the lines of Frederick Crews's great book THE POOH PERPLEX, in which "several Academicians of varying Critical Persuasions" approach the Bear of Little Brain, with splendid comic results. Morton N. Cohen's LEWIS CARROLL: A Biography (Knopf, 1995) is thorough, intelligent and copiously illustrated; Cohen also edited REFLECTIONS IN A LOOKING GLASS: A Centennial Celebration of Lewis Carroll, Photographer (Aperture, 1998), the best book I've seen on Carroll's photography.

The Alice books have hit a record for attracting (and defeating) illustrators—see THE ILLUSTRATORS OF ALICE, edited by Graham Ovenden (Academy Editions, 1972) for a generous sample. That part of our vision of Alice is still formed by Tenniel, the PUNCH political cartoonist whose own pictorial strangeness is made up in part of the

particular steel-engraved ugliness of much Victorian visual culture (I never read Alice as a child because my mother found Tenniel's pictures too ugly and disturbing to have in the house). This is similar to the work of Edward Lear, whose books, like Beatrix Potter's, are so closely tied to his pictures as virtually to defy reillustration. Lear's verse has a different emotional feel than Carroll's—a low tone of distrust ("they" and "them" in Lear's limericks famously never mean you any good) and rapturous loneliness (in the songs particularly) mixed with a wonderful sense of silliness and a delighting energy of wordplay. Lear is sweeter than Carroll, and simply funnier—the nonsense botanies, for instance, or "The Story of Four Children Who Went Round the World," in which sanity seems to be a home country left further and further behind. The standard Dover reprint, THE COMPLETE NONSENSE OF EDWARD LEAR or A LITTLE BOOK OF NONSENSE: THE BEST OF EDWARD LEAR (Barefoot Books, a pocket-size selection) are great books to go with you—a kind of portable dementia. There is a loving and exact assessment of Lear in Peter Levi's Oxford lecture, in THE ART OF POETRY (Yale, 1991). W. H. Auden wrote a splendid sonnet on Lear, in his COLLECTED POEMS (Vintage)—it takes one, as they say, to know one.

Of the three THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS is the one that lands just over the edge of the twentieth century—1908, and enjoying its centenary as I write. It is also the one that most thoroughly disarms criticism—a piebald classic, it's been called, with the puckish and affectionate comic chapters cheek by jowl with lyric stretches of Edwardian pantheism. But for all its being a thing of pieces, its temper of genial melancholy and its celebration of friendship, freedom and landscape makes it one of the most endearing and enjoyable books ever written. It is dangerously, as A. A. Milne pointed out, a book by which we may choose to judge our friends. It is the bedside book par excellence.

Carroll was a don, Lear a landscape artist, Grahame a Secretary of the Bank of England—none a writer by profession. But Grahame fell in with a literary set; he knew Henley, and did a sketch for the YELLOW BOOK, an innocent among the leering decadents. He published a book of Stevensonian essays, PAGAN PAPERS, and made his reputation with THE GOLDEN AGE and DREAM DAYS—humorous sketches on childhood, dry-eyed by Victorian standards but to modern tastes still thick with twee. Grahame, who I suspect would have been happier as a Victorian-style, gentleman's club bachelor, fell into a strange and claustrophobic marriage and had a son, Alastair. The unhappy and half-blind boy later committed suicide, but in this interlude of happiness Grahame found his audience, as Carroll found his with Dean Liddell's daughters, and began coining the bedtime stories of Ratty, Mole, Badger and Toad.

Toad is the book's skittering id—the producer of its high comedy and trigger of most of the action, and his gawping, ricocheting character took over A. A. Milne's version when Milne adapted the story for the stage. Badger is the bass voice, all maturity and good sense and the restorer of order. But the continuo of the book, like the ever-present murmur of the river they love, is the friendship of Ratty and Mole—a camraderie of complete innocence and selflessness. THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS is a surprisingly emotional book—many tears and cries of sorrow are in it—but it is also, finally, a celebration of friendship—the modest and quotidian courage that sets so much right.

As with Alice, THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS has attracted its share of illustrators. Two editions stand clearly above the others and brought out the artists' best—those of Arthur Rackham, who obviously found the book congenial, and Ernest H. Shepard, who

also illustrated the Pooh books and other stories of Grahame's. THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS is a splendid and special book no matter how you have it, but hold out for one of these. I know of only two biographies—an early one (1932) by Patrick Chalmers, not very good, and Peter Green's KENNETH GRAHAME: A BIOGRAPHY (1959), reissued in 1982 in a slightly abridged and illustrated edition: BEYOND THE WILD WOOD: The World of Kenneth Grahame (Facts on File). This is much the better of the two, and includes some sensible criticism of Grahame's work. But be prepared—it's a sad story, and ends in unrelieved gloom.

#38: THE NOISE OF WOOD AND WATER. Poets of the Romantic period seem almost all to have felt the urge to write an epic or long poem. The classic examples of Homer and Virgil and Lucretius were very live to them; Pope's Homer and Dryden's Latin translations had returned the classic authors' presence to English readers; Spenser and Milton towered over them. Blake as usual went his own way; Byron belatedly turned the form to comic use with "Don Juan". The idea of the long verse narrative grappled with the new popularity of the novel; the notion haunted Keats, whose real gift was lyric; even Clare wrote the book-length SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR. And so on, past Southey's unreadable epics to the present day. Wordsworth's PRELUDE in this context is something of an oddity—the great literary expression of the old joke that life is what happens when you're making other plans. Wordsworth had it in mind to write a vast poem, THE RECLUSE, Or Views on Man, Nature and Society, which was intended as his great omnivorous catch-all; "I know not of anything," he wrote, "which will not come within the scope of my poem." The formlessness of the idea eventually defeated him (thank God). THE PRELUDE was written as a warm-up: a look within, preparatory to a look around. Wordsworth, every bit as much as Whitman, contained multitudes, and the look within came to encompass the Derwent, the Lake District, Wordsworth's school days and time at Cambridge, the hopes and disasters of the French Revolution, and finally "the noise of wood and water"—the communion with nature, wherein the borders of the self are felled. Much has been made (with some justice) of Wordsworth's egotism and nature writing, but THE PRELUDE transcends all such easy criticism: it has dead moments, both Saxon and Latinate, but much of it is as wondrous and enlarging as any verse written in English. THE PRELUDE seems to me, more than any other poem, a place you can visit—enter it at any point and the tide of Wordsworth's voice will meet you, welcome you and carry you along.

The much-revised 1850 text was for years the standard reading version; but Ernest de Selincourt published and popularized the earlier 1805 text. Each version has its advantages, but the 1805 text is the one I return to: it's still in print, from Oxford. If you're feeling studious, Penguin did an edition with parallel texts.

#39: OVID REDIVIVUS. Scholars must hate it when poets nip in and grab the glory. There they work, in learned obscurity, and then Seamus Heaney's translation of BEOWULF becomes a best-seller. The scholars of classical Latin poetry are probably used to talking amongst themselves; Latin has fallen out of the curriculum, the older translations have petrified and Latin poetry has been stubbornly resistant to the aesthetics

of twentieth-century verse. So when Ted Hughes did his TALES FROM OVID (Farrar, Strauss, 1999)—twenty-four selections from the METAMORPHOSES, including a great, rumbling creation myth—it too became a bestseller, probably because of Hughes's rep, but also because for many readers it must have been the first experience of Latin poetry that had the thrill of an audible, living voice. (An elderly gentleman in Blackwell's in London, watching me cull through a pile of poetry books trying to figure out which I could afford, tapped the Hughes and said "You should buy this. This really is something special." He was right.) Another living voice is David Slavitt, a prolific and gifted translator. In his collection OVID'S POEMS OF EXILE (Johns Hopkins, 1990) these poems, written by Ovid near the end of his life in hopes of talking himself out of Romanian exile and back to civilized Rome, have a special poignance to them, because we know what he couldn't: that his poems would fail, and Ovid would die still exiled from his wife, his friends and his beloved city. Slavitt captures both the craft and the heartbreak. Ovid's banishment took place exactly two thousand years ago, in 8 AD: with the help of Hughes and Slavitt, he speaks still.

#40: A COUPLE OF STOPPARDS. And speaking of scholar-poets…. In the first minutes of Tom Stoppard's play THE INVENTION OF LOVE, Charon, the ferryman of the River Styx, has been sent to meet a scholar and a poet, and it takes him a minute to figure out that they are…one person. This unlikely and irascible combination turns out to be A.E. Housman, remembered as the poet of A SHROPSHIRE LAD but known in his day as an exacting scholar of classical texts. "Oh! I'm dead then," are his first words. "Good." Stoppard is the intellectual pinwheel of contemporary drama—he loves ideas, the history of ideas, science, math, political philosophy, you name it, and it all clambers into his plays. When he's bad you want to tell him to stop that and go home; when he links it successfully to character and emotion, you get the rare and thrilling pleasure of racing to keep up with his range of references and his cheek. With Housman at its center THE INVENTION OF LOVE is peopled with Wilde, Ruskin, Benjamin Jowett, the Aesthetic Movement, homosexuality, Greek classical culture, love, death and textual criticism. It's heady and rending stuff.

ARCADIA, which precedes the Housman play, also touches the empyrean: it's love, death and mathematics. Oh, and gardening. And a publish-or-perish search for a lost Byron manuscript. It's hard to think of a dramatic romance built on Fermat's Last Theorem, but Stoppard specializes in this kind of unlikeliness. (In a way it's the dramatic opposite of the film "A Beautiful Mind," which professed to be about John Nash and displayed not one second of interest in mathematics.) You could praise the play purely for its technical brio, slipping back and forth between 1809 and the present, or for its witty dialogue—nobody beats Stoppard these days at the winged, stinging epigram. But what raises ARCADIA up is that it's romantically and emotionally satisfying—Stoppard's intellectualism never betrays him into Puritan emotional stinginess. ARCADIA takes your breath away, and it's lovely.

Oh, for Housman—the Penguin edition COMPLETE POEMS AND SELECTED PROSE (1999) edited by Christopher Ricks gives you all of the poems and a selection of the baleful, witty letters. Housman is still the great poet of bitter romantic loss—classical balance, Saxon bluntness and the iron shards of death and disappointed love.

#41: MAXIMES, PENSEES, ESSAIS. If you have had your head in the cloudier regions of poetry, philosophy or metaphysic, nothing can bring you back to earth—a sharp tug on the leash of common sense and worldly wisdom—like a little time revisiting the French aphoristic tradition. It has sentences and sentiments with the gleam and point of beautifully fashioned daggers. The master of the form, even above Chamfort, is La Rochefoucauld, whose perfection of phrase is so matter of fact it's like the edgeless moment between when you fall and when you hit the floor. Few writers can have made so permanent a reputation out of so low an opinion of mankind: his Maxims are a catalogue of man's veniality, culpability, self-deception and *amour propre*—the untranslatably vivid French term for self-love, forever after to be associated with La Rochefoucauld's name. In La Rochefoucauld's world man persists in his folly but never becomes wise. Looking back after reading him, we may protest in our hearts; we may feel fiercely that there is something, even much, beyond his view; but sentence by sentence no author's fluency makes for so quelling a presence as La Rochefoucauld's. And he survives, unblinking, in even a mediocre translation. (Louis Kronenberger's 1959 translation, reprinted many times in Modern Library, is pretty good.) Proceed at your own risk.

The years of composition of La Rochefoucauld's Maxims and Pascal's Pensees overlapped, and only five years separates their appearances in print—1665-1670. But in reading the Pensees we sense the cynical and worldly-wise tradition grasping after the nutrients of seriousness, conviction and faith—all the areas La Rochefoucauld omitted and ignored. Pascal had brought a haughty brilliance in his youth to the experimental sciences, but at the age of 34 he was visited with a transforming mystical experience—the spiritual taking-fire he described in his Memorial, one of the most moving passages of French prose, which he wrote on a scrap of paper and carried with him the rest of his life. Out of that experience his earlier religious thought took form, and he set to writing his Pensees (literally, thoughts), which were intended to assemble themselves into an apology for and proof of the Christian faith. His attempt to reconcile faith and reason—a gap still nagging the French soul—gives the Pensees their peculiar shape and passion. One of Pascal's recent editors wrote "The Pensees are, finally, a kind of infernal machine, from which one escapes either vanquished or persuaded: one of the only examples, like Rousseau, of a literary trap." And yet, for those of us outside of Pascal's faith, it is still possible to read him with love and awe. The passion of his Memorial—"God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and teachers"—imbues the pages of the Pensees with an emotion that bypasses the logic of argument. One may not think in Pascal's terms or speak his philosophical language and still be moved to the marrow by his devotion and his sense of urgency. Pascal too survives in all but the most feeble translation. The heart has its reasons.

It's in that sense that Pascal, and La Rochefoucauld as well, hark back to Montaigne. "Reader, I am myself the matter of my book," he says; and characteristically adds, "There is no reason for you to spend your leisure on a subject so frivolous and vain." The Essais were created out of unpromising circumstances. The death of Etienne La Boetie, the one great friendship and affection of his life, drove him to retire, at the age of thirty-eight, from civil and political life to the library in his tower, to evade his grief and to write. His marriage, we sense, was unhappy, and only one of his six daughters survived infancy. As

he began to write the Essais, the St. Bartholomew massacre took place, and a mixture of religious and civil war became daily circumstance for the rest of Montaigne's creative life. The war dragged him back to public service, a succession of battles, unsafe voyages, sieges and treaties, and during a term as mayor of Bordeaux, the city was struck by plague. Montaigne himself already suffered from gall stones, a condition inoperable at the time, and he spent a year traveling through France, Switzerland and Italy in vain hopes of a cure. The image of Montaigne as a man serenely sequestered is denied by his biography, but it was out of this dream that he wrote the Essais. What is so wonderfully expressed in them is an intensely abiding curiosity about life, which Montaigne above all wanted time to consider. In sixteenth century France knowledge was in flux, emerging from the theocentrism of Medieval thought; the Renaissance was by definition a rebirth not just of classical learning but of man's interest in the world around him. It's why the Essais are such a marvelous jumble: pieces on liars, prayer, cannibals, moderation, the Parthian army, Heraclitus, solitude, sleep, donothingness, Caesar's war strategies, sumptuary laws, stinginess, fear, friendship, paternal love, imagination—to pick a few at random. In the Essais, this particular fact may be true, but this opposite fact may be equally true; Montaigne was, by Fitzgerald's definition, the first-rate mind par excellence. The considering tone, a kind of ruminative nobility, makes the Essais utterly uncoercive—an antithesis of the aphoristic tradition that followed them. I cannot imagine anyone reading Montaigne and afterward going out and doing anything uncivilized—a special recommendation, perhaps, in these belligerent days.

Get a good copy of Montaigne—pay what you have to—as Montaigne will be a lifetime companion. In French, see if you can find the original printing of the Pleiade edition of the Essais, edited by Alred Thibaudet, which gives translations and sources of the Greek and Latin quotes in footnotes; the later Pleiade edition of the Oeuvres Completes includes the letters and the travel journals, but with backnotes, which is less convenient. There are innumerable paperback editions and selections; the Garnier Flammarion pocket book modernizes Montaigne's spelling; the Folio edition does not. In English, Everyman's Library has reprinted Donald Frame's translation of the Works—still by a distance the best in English—in an affordable editon.

#42: SO: THIS ZEN MASTER WALKS INTO A BAR…. Humor in Buddhism is usually chalked up to its contact in China with the Taoist writers, Chuang-tse especially, which led to Ch'an, or Zen; and perhaps Zen, like Hasidism, owes its humor in part to its being iconoclastic in origin—a revolt against over-elaboration and sterile scholasticism. The tradition culminates in Japan with Sengai (1750-1837) the extraordinary ink painter, calligrapher, poet and Zen master. Zen by that time had abandoned classical Chinese for the Japanese vernacular, and been influenced by Shinran and the Jodoshinshu school, wherein Buddhism jumped the monastery walls and settled among the Japanese folk. Sengai expressed the tradition in the wildest, splashiest, funniest corner of East Asian painting. His drawings, with the thick scrawl of his calligraphy, remind you of the loosest and boldest drawings of Rembrandt, when he sets aside the precision of the etchings and lets fly. Sengai similarly is a relief from the delicate perfection of so much Chinese and Japanese ink painting—he's all over the place. In his version of "The Laughers of Tiger Valley," a traditional story, the characters are in a paroxysm of hilarity; the wobbling

background and calligraphy only adds to the commotion. The two figures in "An Old Piece of Rope" have just been told the funniest joke they've ever heard. All his paintings are, in a line from one of his poems, a cup of Great Happiness Tea—Sengai may be the most cheerfully caffeinated painter in history. And in the quieter drawings he achieves the simplicity of spirit we love in Medieval illumination, mixed with the gentlest humanity of the Japanese tradition. This master nonpareil has had two splendid books done about him: SENGAI: The Zen of Ink and Paper, by D.T. Suzuki (Shambhala, 1999), the last of Suzuki's published works, and SENGAI: Master Zen Painter, by Shokin Furuta (Kodansha, 2000), with excellent texts and reproductions.

#43: COINCIDENCE OF OPPOSITES. A scant two years separate the publications of two of the major works of world poetry: Whitman's LEAVES OF GRASS (1855) and Baudelaire's LES FLEURS DU MAL (1857). Both are arguably the great works of their country's nineteenth-century poetry: both were expanded to become catch-alls of their authors' verse; both works were controversial and their authors attacked as dangers to public decency. There is even that odd, glancing similarity in the titles. And the books are, in all other respects, as opposite as possible for works created by two members of the same species.

Baudelaire worked as part of one of the most gifted poetic generations in the history of France, alongside Lamartine, Vigny, Nerval, Musset, Leconte de Lisle and, of course, Hugo, who was as prolific in verse as he was in prose. What Baudelaire brought to the music of French verse was an hypnotic quieting of the Alexandrine line, a softening of the caesura, the complete removal of the thump of declamation or doggerel. This quality of calm allows Baudelaire's level gaze to deal with (in the first line of the book) "stupidity, error, sin, stinginess"—the city of dreadful night with which he found himself surrounded in Paris. Baudelaire looks at the abyss of urban self-alienation with more directness and less hysteria that any other nineteenth-century author, and without false distance—he is, movingly, the least Olympian of poets. He was one of the first to do this and is still one of the greatest—he addresses, with pity and terror, the world still with us. Les Fleurs du Mal is usually translated as The Flowers of Evil, but the sense of "mal" has a reach beyond the narrower English "evil"—it includes sickness, unhappiness, misfortune, moral wrong—a miasma of meanings on which Baudelaire worked his transformations. In the last line of the book he sums up his alchemical feat: "Tu m'as donne ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or." "You gave me your filth and I made of it gold."

The sonority of Baudelaire's verse has made him a bane to translators, but they keep at it: there are many bilingual editions. The New Directions edition has a text in French and a selection of various translators. In French, the Classiques Garnier and Bibliotheque de la Pleiade editions are standards, and annotated to the teeth. There is now a huge critical literature on Baudelaire, much of it gaseous, but Enid Starkie's biography (BAUDELAIRE, New Directions, 1957) is still worth reading. Claude Pichoisand Jean Ziegler's bio (BAUDELAIRE, translated by Graham Robb, Vintage, 1989) is also good, and conveys the overwhelming seriousness so central to understanding its subject. Jacques Barzun's ESSAY ON FRENCH VERSE For Readers of English Poetry (New Directions, 1991) is a terrifically intelligent little book and an ideal introduction. For a

selection of Victor Hugo's verse—the teeny tip of a very large iceberg—go to SELECTED POEMS (Penguin, 2002) which has texts and graceful versions by Brooks Haxton.

Whitman on the other hand worked alone, like Dickinson, and they stand as the great nineteenth-century American poets—I would say the greatest bar none. Dickinson reworked the traditional eight-and-six hymn meter into one of the most immediately recognizable voices in poetry. Whitman, on the other hand, took the traditional meters, put them together in a small room, and threw in a hand grenade. His gab, his barbaric yawp—his long rhetorical line, Bronx vernacular, his enthusiastic carnality, his firm planting in the American soil, his egalitarian mix of high and low, animal and angel—all these are still capable of startling the unprepared. Read aloud, Whitman has a wingspan nobody can match—and that, to him, was America, as he himself was America. A presidential candidate said recently, "The American people are, I think, congenitally optimistic," and it is the defining difference between Whitman and Baudelaire. The Civil War was a dreadful strike to him, and he hated getting old—but there is nothing eupeptic, nothing staged, nothing Hallmark in Whitman's optimism; it is blood-bred and convincing throughout. Perhaps his survival as a poet who is read with pleasure, not just studied or annotated, is a signal of something still in the American bloodstream—in abeyance these last bad years, but living, and premature of elegy.

There are scores of cheap editions of Whitman, every shape and size. The Library of America has an excellent text and includes the prose. One of the best recent studies of his work is WALT WHITMAN'S AMERICA: A Cultural Biography, by David S. Reynolds (Vintage, 1995).

#44: EXCAVATING EMILY. "If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her," Emily Dickinson wrote once in a letter; "If she did not, the longest day would pass me by on the chase." It did escape her, of course, during her lifetime; and, as with Blake and Clare, a fairly long day did pass before we had her poems in anything but heavily distorted versions. The justly famous 1955 edition edited by Thomas H. Johnson is now standard: anyone who's peered even at reproductions of Dickinson's manuscripts can get a humbling sense of the choices made and the work involved. The myth of Emily—of the garden-tending, wounded seraph in white, who wrote those nice poems—has not yet been entirely scuttled but, as Richard B. Sewall points out (in THE LIFE OF EMILY DICKINSON, Harvard University Press, 1974), the myth probably tended to preserve interest in Dickinson in the years after her death; he's amusing and clear on how the myth had begun to billow up even during Dickinson's lifetime. Sewall's biography—a brick of a book, 753 pages but every one of them to the point—was a long step forward to dispelling the cloud. Its unusual structure—each chapter concentrating on one or two people in the very restricted Dickinson circle and working his way inward to Dickinson through them—works in a way it probably wouldn't for any other writer; and its voluminous detail works to pack in a world framing the elusive figure at its center. Sewall approaches Dickinson with an astoundingly consistent tact; the quotations at length from poems and letters allows Dickinson to speak for herself, and he reminds us how much cannot be definitely known. And Sewall writes exceptionally well—this is one of the best written literary biographies. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's EMILY DICKINSON (Knopf,

1986) comes only twelve years after Sewall's book but in terms of its style already seems to belong to the later half of an unhappy divide, the time after which a vast amount of academic writing ceases to be for the intelligent general reader and becomes a clogged sink of Latinate, overspecialized language. ("Critics with their horrible jargon," I hear Mr. Ryder muttering behind me.) This is less than fair to Wolff, who writes sympathetically and intelligently throughout; but the footfalls are a good bit too definite, and Emily refuses to come downstairs. There is a distant but infectant smell of psychology in places; and after a few too many sentences like "Her poetry is in the process of revising Transcendent implication," I want to tell this woman to get her fingers out of Emily's mouth. After her analysis of "The Props Assist the House," you want to take the poem back out behind the barn with the other dead horses. Time then to go back to the poems, to find them—again—breathing, baffling, incontestable and alive. Be careful—many of the paperback and remainder reprints are still often from tampered-with texts. There's a good pocket selection from Shambhala edited by Brenda Hillman, and Johnson's edition is available both in hard and softcover. In 1998 there was a new edition of the poems edited by R.W. Franklin; both Johnson's and Franklin's editions are reliable and to the casual reader I doubt if there's a great deal to choose between them. If you open at random and it looks like you're reading a telegram—that's Emily.

#45: THREE GEMS FROM SHAMBHALA: Shambhala was, I believe, one of the first American publishing houses established to specialize in books on Buddhism and Eastern thought. They're still going, varying large, scholarly projects with individual works and lighter, new-agey titles. They've also published a string of small literary gems, translations of Oriental works; here are three of them, all refutations of the idea that major equals big.

SONGS OF THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF BUDDHA, translated by Andrew Schelling and Anne Waldman (1996). These are beautiful, readable translations from the Theragatha and Therigatha, the short poems of the earliest Buddhist monks and nuns. Though part of the Pali Canon, the earliest collection of Buddhist scriptures, they do not have the tone of canonical religious texts, nor do they sound at all like poetry written in the West. They are short testaments of hard meditative effort, the utter turning away from physical pleasures, sex and food particularly, and a startling, unbridled joy at the chance they are taking to leap free of the flesh. The poems have no reticence or apology; they are pungent, emphatic statements, with the bundled energy of a runner making that last, burning lunge for the goal line. The nuns' poems—vivid records of escape from domestic horrors and prostitution into the unmistakable accents of freedom—must surely be pretty early in the recorded body of poetry by women, and present graphically the improvement of women's situation Buddhism offered over Hinduism. Schelling's and Waldman's translations are personal, intimate, with the breath of the living voice: an entire success. This is tough, challenging stuff: be prepared.

THE ART OF WRITING: Teachings of the Chinese Masters, translated by Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping (1996). From staring intensity to the urbane and thoughtful. These are two short texts and two collections of quotes, stories and aphorisms on writing, from the third to the twentieth century, subjects anyone who picks up a pen will recognize, from writer's block and burning the old stuff to Taoist effusions on riding the spirit of

inspiration. The earliest piece, the Wen Fu or Art of Writing, is one of the great texts, its influence ranging from the time of its composition to twentieth century poets like Snyder and Nemerov; it's a true poem about writing poems and a good deal more rewarding to read than, say, Boileau. Here too the translations are readable and fluid. Afterwards you might want to pick up Sam Hamill's book of essays A POET'S WORK, which includes some great, moving stuff on the influence of Eastern poetics on contemporary poetry.

FOUR HUTS: Asian Writings on the Simple Life, translated by Burton Watson (1994). Don't let that last phrase fool you. There's nothing of Marie Antoinette dressing-peasant here. These are short records—essences caught—of lives of real retirement from the world and often of a poverty we would call stark rather than simple. There are pieces by Po Chu-I, Yoshishige no Yasutane, Kamo no Chomei and Matsuo Basho, ranging from the ninth to the seventeenth century. The title of the last piece, "Record of the Hut of the Phantom Dwelling"—"And yet we all in the end live, do we not, in a phantom dwelling?"—captures the insistent Buddhist theme of impermanence. Kamo no Chomei's Hojoki, "Record of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut" is one of the touchstone pieces of Japanese literature, a survivor's record of the fires and famines that attacked Kyoto in the twelfth century, and his reclusion to a mountain hermitage. It's also one of those indelible, unforgettable pieces that marks anyone who reads it attentively. Watson captures the range of mood and styles—read them over a couple of quiet evenings and see if you ever forget them. One of the best essays in Sam Hamill's collection of essays mentioned above is the beautiful "Basho's Ghost," a short record of a long life dedicated to the perfecting of a poetic gift.

#46: IRELAND REPOSSESSED. The end point of the Elizabethan and Cromwellian clearances in Ireland was not just the subjection of its native people and the appropriation of its land and natural wealth; it was a nearly total erasure of its language and culture, its mythology, and its centuries-old systems of aristocracy, education and poetic patronage. But in the southwest of Ireland tatters of this culture stayed stubbornly alive, just long enough to be recorded by an emerging movement of folklorists, historians, nationalists and poets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1925 Daniel Corkery published THE HIDDEN IRELAND: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century (current edition, Gill and Macmillan), which helped restore the old culture to sight by telling the story of its demise, and conferred on the declassed scholar-poets a new mythic presence. Reading the book even now, the story has a lost-continent feel to it: a complete and functioning culture, lingering in the overlooked rural corners of a conquered land. And even in Corkery's bald and literal cribs, we recognize in these poems the heroic currents of sorrow, intimacy and rage unique to Irish verse.

The work of cultural recovery still goes on, and one of its milestones was the publication in 1981 of AN DUANAIRE 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed (Foras na Gaeilge), edited and translated by Sean O Tuama and Thomas Kinsella. This is a treasure-book of the poems and songs of the period, with its tragedy leavened by a wonderful variety of love songs, humorous pieces, epigrams, lullabies and prayers. The emphasis in the renderings is on fidelity, as it should be, but Kinsella is a poet throughout. One might in a fussy moment have wished for complete texts of "The Lament for Art O'Leary" and "The Midnight Court," two of the great long showpieces of Irish verse, but that's all the

complaining I'm going to do. Here are riches, newly uncovered. For a version of the unearthly beautiful "Ur-Chill an Chreagain," go to the eponymous first album by the folk group Relativity (Green Linnet). And for a terrific play on these themes, read Brian Friel's "Translations" (Faber)—one of the very best works of a contemporary master.

As the penal laws strangled the native culture and English became the enforced vernacular, there grew in Ireland, alongside the political frustrations, a real effort towards a national literature. Some of the poetry in English tried to carry over the tones and elaborate accentual meters of the Irish; there was much versified propaganda; a lot of it was simply doggerel. Everyone was awaiting a Great Irish Poet, and William Butler Yeats's arriving to fill the post has a massive irony about it. The assumptions lurked that the Great Poet would be an ironclad Gael, that he would write in Irish, that he would write works of nationalist sentiment and that he would, of course, be Catholic. Yeats was proudly, even haughtily Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, and spent great chunks of time in England. He never got the hang of Irish. He started up a national theatre and brought in British help. He wrote a nationalist play, "Cathleen ni Houlihan," that managed to piss off both the nationalists *and* the Catholic Church. After the 1890s Yeats's verse shows hardly any impress of Christianity of any kind, Protestant, Catholic, crackpot or otherwise. He dabbled in everything from Theosophy and Hinduism to automatic writing. And he was the irreducible contrarian in a country long practiced in every form of orneriness and invective. Just for our modern tastes, he was a male chauvinist with a streak of the fascist in him. And Ireland was stuck with him, as we are, because he was a great poet—some say the greatest poet of the twentieth century in any language. For all his classical shape and tough Jonsonian line, no one could beat Yeats at prying open the cavern of himself and letting forth the great torrent. Anger, politics, betrayal, love, age, violence, the unassailable finality and mystery of death—Yeats looked hard, hard at these and made poems of what he felt. Behind even Yeats's mockery is the "cold eye" of his final lines: he spoke of writing a poem "cold and passionate as the dawn," and he often did. And if you don't want cold and tough there's the lovely early lyric verse, as sweet as Keats, that sings and dances but never drips or embarrasses. He worked seriously and hard at verse all of his long life; no one wrote better, or more passionately, about aging. The plays, the stories, the visionary writings, the essays and introductions, the autobiographies—like Blake, Yeats is a poet to do as a block, to go all the way in and come back out. But he was a poet above all and, in our time, none better.

#47: THE LIBRARIAN OF DISAFFILIATION. Shortly after reading the piece on Kenneth Rexroth's poetry in Sam Hamill's book A POET'S WORK, a copy of Rexroth's books of essays THE ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY: Essays from the Other World (Herder, 1970) fell into my hands. The first thing I noticed in rereading it was the dated, distinctive tone of the counterculture of the American sixties: its politics, references and vocabulary. The second surprise was in recognizing what the tone consisted of: a direct, prescriptive, almost visionary sense of engagement. The gadarene progress of the last thirty years—the sense of the machinery of the dominant society settling heavily, immovably, permanently into place—has been such as to make the efflorescence of the counterculture, with its dream that it could derail and reroute the main track of society, seem as brief and distant as, say, the Etruscans. If Rexroth is discovered at all now it's usually as a translator of

Oriental poetry or in some vague way via his connection with the Beats. He said once he didn't want to be known as the Father of the Beats but didn't mind being thought of as their librarian, and in his prose works he showed himself master of a simply incredible intellectual range. I always joke that the sixties didn't reach Connecticut until the seventies, and reading Rexroth gave me my footing during the last days of the Vietnam protests and, in college, acquainted me with the receding noises of the counterculture. He also blew open my intellectual horizons and sent me haring after everyone from Lammenais to Philip Whalen to Sei Shonagon. The now-disprivileged young—with impoverished job prospects, ever-worsening education and off in what I call the Permanent Elsewhere of compulsory cell phones, text-messaging, commercial fantasy and science fiction, and the invasive ubiquity of the media and internet—have a much thicker layer of crap to fight through than those of us in our fifties ever did. Just as E.B. White felt that a copy of WALDEN should be given to every graduate with his or her sheepskin, copies of Rexroth's essays—BIRD IN THE BUSH, ASSAYS, THE ELASTIC RETORT, CLASSICS REVISITED, AMERICAN POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, COMMUNALISM, THE ALTERNATIVE SOCIETY, or the selected volume WINDOW ON THE WORLD—might be an equally appropriate handout, a supplement to the education they didn't get. Fortuantely, all can be found secondhand, mostly inexpensively. Get cracking.

#48: THE MEN OF PROPERTY. One of the peculiar corners of English fiction is what I call the property novel: about the eponymous estate or country house whose evocation, atomosphere and inheritance become central to the story. Jane Austen's MANSFIELD PARK is the earliest one I can think of—Austen, with her amused and caustic sense of what property can do for and to a person—but bless me if I can think of a major European novel of this type. (After I post this I imagine I'll receive mortifying reminders.) Three of this type of fiction are among the novels that have made lasting impressions on me, and typify their authors' different sensibilities.

After his venomously funny early novels, Evelyn Waugh's BRIDESHEAD REVISITED was seen as his bid at writing serious, ambitious fiction. It was, pointedly, his Catholic novel—a loaded topic which he treats with cunning and stellar indelicacy. (Of a pious young girl, her brother remarks, "She made a novena for her pig.") And the sting is certainly still there—the pages in which Anthony Blanche practices conversational vivisection on the Flyte family are some of the best vicious gossip in literature. But the tone and style were a departure, both in its sensuous detailing of luxury and in its voluptuously plaintive mood. The storyline and the prose—of a young middle class artist who gets entangled in the tragedies of an aristocratic Catholic family—were derided by some as snobbish and vulgar, and there's a good deal of truth in both charges. And BRIDESHEAD doesn't cohere—I'm never sure that the book ends up meaning what Waugh wanted it to mean. But there's a livid surcharge of emotion in the book—of the delight of privileged youth, which one can certainly still smell around Oxford, and of the embittering wounds of loss, as friendship, love and the hope of belonging go slowly, gangrenously wrong. And it has a great, surreal cast of characters. As for the theme of property, I cannot pick up BRIDESHEAD without remembering an autumnal walk onto

the grounds of Castle Howard in Yorkshire (the model for Brideshead), with its great gates like trumpet voluntaries, the noble dome of its crypt—and getting a harrowing whiff of how the prospect of owning such a property could throw a life out of its proper orbit.

---"One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister." These first words—of E. M. Forster's HOWARDS END—hit that right, quizzical note. The first chapters of the book—a misunderstanding over words uttered a bit too soon, actions taken a bit too quickly—are the story in miniature, in which the slightest of actions—intentions misread, situations misread, circumstances nudged to one's own advantage—multiply and solidify, with disgrace, emotional failure, a death, and a final topping irony all in their wake. Forster can be a prim granny at times, and he's inclined to tell you what the novel means, but he gives the remarkable moral complexities of the tale an almost easygoing clarity. HOWARDS END goes along on an entirely lower emotional temperature than BRIDESHEAD, so it's surprising when the characters, the relationships, their odd tangles do not evaporate after the book ends—that these polite creatures have a stubborn memorableness, and that the remembering may be so moving.

---Charles Dickens's BLEAK HOUSE—quite possibly the best of his novels, I think—figures in this company by ironic contrast, as Dickens was always the great poet of the unpropertied. And the controlling estate here is not the house of the title but the Chancery suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, tied up in court for decades, for the decision of which its victims wait and wait and wait, like Beckett's Lucky and Pozzo. No one but Dickens could have made so dramatic a book out of legal paralysis—as the case affects and stymies an ever-growing cast of characters, Dickens brings each of the characters to brilliant and unruly life. Being Dickens, of course, he misses sometimes: pathos slides into bathos, drama into melodrama, a joke gets its long scrawny neck wrung again and again; the major flaw of the book is Esther Summerson, a heroine so teary-eyed and runny-nosed that she hovers near the top of the list of those Dresden-virtued females who regularly disfigure Dickens's novels. But you don't go to Dickens for perfection; if you have to skim, skip or roll your eyes occasionally, so what. In BLEAK HOUSE you get not just the ghostly Chancery drama but Mrs. Jellyby, Harold Skimpole, my Lord and Lady Dedlock, Mr. Guppy, Messrs. Krook and Smallweed, the terrifying and detestable Tulkinghorn, Jo the Sweep, Mr. Vholes, Boythorn, the legal firm of Kenge and Carboys—a whole rumbling universe of Shakespearean vividness. Institutions in Dickens's novels are conspiratorial, self-serving blights on people's lives, and only personal loyalty and goodness can save the day. Some of the virtuous characters here survive—not all of them do—but true to the way of the property novel, BLEAK HOUSE traces many a ruination and even death; this great mid-career novel of Dickens is like a juicy vicious lawyer joke which takes on the nightmare grip of a moral horror story.

#49: ETERNITY UTTERS A DAY: ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL AND RABBI NACHMAN. "The highest goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information but to face sacred moments." "We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is a moment that lends significance to things." Abraham Joshua Heschel's THE SABBATH is a book which faces down our frantic and acquisitive society not with anger or condemnation but with wisdom, healing and solution. In its hundred pages' consideration and description of the Jewish tradition of the Holy Day,

Heschel achieves a Blakean passion, breaking past error and petrification to the life-giving essential, with a more-than-Blakean clarity. It is so moving a book that it's almost possible not to notice that it is also a very great work of literary art; its aphoristic style is balanced with a brevity and plainness, a blending of the high and the humane, that is entirely apt to its subject. This is a book you should buy and keep, as it is a book you should buy and give.

---This blending of the high and humane—the notion that the highest level of creation transcends but includes the lower—is richly present in two short works by Rabbi Nachman, one of the eighteenth-century Breslover Chasidim: RESTORE MY SOUL, translated by Avraham Greenbaum, and OUTPOURING OF THE SOUL, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (Breslover Research Institute). These two little books, excerpts collected from larger works, seem to me to spring from the very deepest wells of spirituality and to throw the doors of their inspiration open very wide indeed. The first is one of the most convincing statements, out of all I have read of the world's religious literature, of the completely inalienable quality of God's love: its text is "If I make my bed in hell, You are there." The second is on the accessibility of the emotion of prayer and the avoidance of despair: "The main lesson is, 'from the maw of the depths I cried out.'" In both is a depth of feeling utterly beyond any Puritanism or anti-emotionalism; there is no fibbing, no dodging, no bashfulness about the devouring pains of life, no bland and pastel uplift of the sort that poisons so much religious or inspirational writing. Here is one of the high figures of European spirituality, utterly accessible, utterly simple, two works that are great in themselves and a perfect introduction to Nachman's life work. A HASIDIC ANTHOLOGY, edited by Louis I. Newman (Schocken Books, 1963) is an endlessly entertaining anthology of bits from the Hasidic masters—the perfect book to dip into at leisure.

#50: SURE IS ONE PECULIAR WAY TO RUN A BALLGAME…. In the taking and leaving department, there's always been a good bit of Kenneth Patchen I could leave without regret; whether it's him or me, I don't know. But one area of his work which strikes me as an inarguable success—books in which everything goes right in ways you can't even begin to explain—are his three collections of picture-poems, HALLELUJAH ANYWAY (1960), BUT EVEN SO (1968) and the incomparable WONDERINGS (1971). Not only is the success of the form hard to describe—which, purely in the matter of welding word inseparably to image, may surpass his one obvious predecessor, William Blake—but I find it impossible to hit off the emotional tone (surreal whimsy? post-apocalyptic good cheer? visionary giggling?) without heading towards phrases suggestive of work I wouldn't read at gunpoint. I'll confess myself a beaten man and simply and happily report that New Directions has published the three books together as THE WALKING-AWAY WORLD (2008). The rest is up to you. Another omnibus, WE MEET, is Patchen's illustrated verse and prose but to my taste it's stuff that for some reason just doesn't work, just as THE WALKING-AWAY WORLD wonderfully and inexplicably does. Go to it.

#51: SHAKESPEARE: HOW AND WHEN. Two of the recent (2004/5) books on Shakespeare are vividly detailed and joyful examples of our current attempts to see him not as a man "for all time" but as one demonstrably and instructively rooted in his day. Because our knowledge of Shakespeare has holes in it you could push a house through, much of both authors' work is speculative, but they are as cheerfully undogmatic and as richly knowledgeable of their period as you could hope for. In WILL IN THE WORLD: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare (Norton), Stephen Greenblatt shows us Shakespeare emerging out of the Elizabethan world of nursery rhymes, the fast-vanishing Catholic rituals and saint-days of his youth, the gaps between aristocrat and commoner waiting to be leapt, the word-rich air of the London theatres and the sparking proximity of political and religious change; but he gives us too a hint of how the gravity-bending enormity of Shakespeare's genius—gifts, I was going to say, but what can you speak of with Shakespeare but genius?—transcended and reshaped that world as well as being shaped by it. In A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE 1599 (Harper Collins) James Shapiro sharpens his focus on the intertwining of one's year's events—the invasion of Ireland in pursuit of Tyrone, the building of the Globe Theatre, the Bishop's Ban and a spate of book-burning, controversies over the Jacobean succession and the date of Easter, the rumors of Spanish invasion, and, behind it all, the rise and fall of Essex—and matches their influence to Shakespeare's theatrical output: HENRY V, JULIUS CAESAR, AS YOU LIKE IT, and the first version and revision of HAMLET (he is particularly good on this last). It is, in a sense, "When Shakespeare Became Shakespeare," as in when he stepped from being the leading poet and playwright of his day to being the man whose genius beggars explication, comparison or praise. Both books are several evenings' first-rate education and entertainment; either may be called, in Greenblatt's phrase, "A token of the special delight Shakespeare bestows on everything." Both books have bibliographical essays that can supply you with years of Bardographical reading. If you are hunting for the facts and nothing but, go to Stanley Schoenbaum's splendid WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: A DOCUMENTARY LIFE (Oxford, 1975). Of recent criticism, Harold Bloom's SHAKESPEARE: The Invention of the Human (Riverhead, 1998) is a play-by-play analysis; you might not agree with everything Bloom says, but his knowledge and love of Shakespeare is potent and pleasurable on every page. Of the plays in Shapiro's focus, HENRY V and HAMLET have both been given adventurous and impressive film versions by Kenneth Branagh, superbly cast and available on DVD.   One of the formative events in my own Bardolatry was seeing Helen Mirren play Rosalind in a BBC version of AS YOU LIKE IT in 1978; it too, praise be, is now to be found on disc. Soon to be issued on DVD is the BBC series "Playing Shakespeare," in which the great dramaturge John Barton coached a number of the best current English stage-actors through the paces of acting Shakespeare. The book PLAYING SHAKESPEARE: An Actor's Guide is the text of the programs and is good reading as well. The discs will not be cheap, but you'll be able to get them through Netflix. They're terrific.

And when you're ready for dessert with more tales of treading the boards, read Peter Hay's THEATRICAL ANECDOTES (Oxford, 1987), or perhaps Penelope Fitzgerald's AT FREDDIE'S (Mariner Books) her mordantly funny 1982 novel of a London school for child actors. Break a leg.

#52: TRAVELS/TRANSLATIONS: BILL PORTER/RED PINE. Of the contemporary translators of Asian literature, Bill Porter is noticeably the most geographically oriented. "Most people who translate don't have a clue to where things happen," he said once in an interview. "They don't really have an awareness of the landscape." Certainly it is Porter's decades-long residence in Taiwan and his wanderings in China that's given his work this warm particularity; Arthur Waley, in contrast, the great early hero of Oriental translation, never set foot in Asia. Birthplaces, cities and counties, geomantic placement, burial sites: his work is musical with the place-names of China. It seems to have brought his mind into easy consonance with the poems or Buddhist texts he has been drawn to translate, and to escape the pomposity and jargon so common in academic prose. His relation to the texts is personal; when he says of the Platform Sutra, "You can walk a million miles and never make a better friend," we believe him.

Porter's work is framed by two travel books, published under his own name: ROAD TO HEAVEN (Mercury House, 1993), about his forays into the Chungnan Mountains to seek out the surviving practicioners of China's tradition of religious hermitage, and ZEN BAGGAGE (Shoemaker and Heard, 2009), about his visits to the monasteries of the early masters of Ch'an/Zen, and about the resurgence of religious activity and interest in China. They are both terrific books, endlessly rereadable, and easy entryways into Porter's work.

His translations, published under the name of Red Pine, divvy up between poetry and Buddhist and Taoist texts. Of the former, there are GUIDE TO CAPTURING A PLUM BLOSSOM, by Sung Po-Jen (Mercury House, 1988), the world's first printed art book; THE ZEN WORKS OF STONEHOUSE, the poems, gathas and dharma talks of a fourteenth-century monk; an anthology of Buddhist monk-poets co-edited with Mike Connor, THE CLOUDS SHOULD KNOW ME BY NOW (Wisdom Publications), six poets and six translators; and POEMS OF THE MASTERS (Copper Canyon, 2003), a translation of the Chienchiashih, a thirteenth-century anthology that for many hundred years was a part of a Chinese child's education, a sort of Chinese version of Palgrave's Golden Treasury. My own favorite is THE COLLECTED SONGS OF COLD MOUNTAIN, a complete translation of the T'ang Dynasty hermit monk Han-shan. A whole legendary existence has grown up around Han-shan, and in the revised and expanded edition published by Copper Canyon Press in 2003, he has included the poems of Shih-te and Feng-kan, the other two denizens of the Han-shan mythos. In all of these the translations are graceful and expressive, and the accompanying paragraphs of comment and exegesis are little masterpieces of their kind—quick bright backgrounds for the poems to figure in.

On the scriptural side: THE ZEN TEACHINGS OF BODHIDHARMA (North Point, 1987) is a collection of the originating patriarch of Zen; LAOTZU'S TAOTECHING is a version of one of the main texts of Taoism—a "long poem in praise of something we cannot name, much less imagine"—and includes some wonderfully illuminating excerpts from over a dozen of the many classic commentaries on the text. To me the great centerpiece of Red Pine's work is a trilogy of Mahayana Buddhist texts, beautifully translated with extensive annotation and commentary both from Pine and from the long commentarial tradition of the past: THE DIAMOND SUTRA (Counterpoint, 2001), THE HEART SUTRA: The Womb of Buddhas (Shoemaker and Heard, 2004) and THE PLATFORM SUTRA: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng (Shoemaker and Heard, 2006). In

all of Pine's books there is the full equipment of scholarship—Chinese texts, glossaries, commentary, textual notes and, of course, maps—but with these three especially the combined heft of Pine's intelligence, literary skill and depth of insight and commitment to the text renders something extraordinary and precious. What he says of Hui-neng—that you will never make a better friend—we come to believe of all these books.

Addenda: ROAD TO HEAVEN was the inspiration for Edward A. Burger's charming and moving documentary "Amongst White Clouds," available on DVD (www.festivalmedia.org). For observant and up-to-date books on contemporary China from an economic, ecological and business point of view, read POSTCARDS FROM TOMORROW SQUARE: Reports from China, by James Fallows (Vintage, 2009) and WHAT DOES CHINA THINK? by Mark Leonard (Public Affairs/Perseus, 2008). Of the nearly innumerable other editions of Lao Tzu in English, the great one is still Arthur Waley's THE WAY AND ITS POWER: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought (Grove Press). The oldest known printed book is actually a ninth-century copy of the DIAMOND SUTRA held in the British Library—it can be seen in its entirety on the website, www.bl.uk. And it is worth mentioning that all of Pine's books are handsomely designed and printed—a pleasure to the eye as well as the spirit.

P.S. Porter's most recently published (June 2009) book is IN SUCH HARD TIMES: The Poetry of Wei Ying-wu (Copper Canyon). In it, Porter does what most translators dream of: he restores to sight an indisputably first-rank poet who has somehow fallen through the historic cracks. The combat zone in Wei Ying-wu's poetry is at once thoroughly Chinese and universal: the Confucian impulse to public service versus the Taoist/Buddhist impulse to introspection: the office versus the retreat, sociability versus solitude. Wei lived through one of the tumultuous events of Chinese history, the fall of Hsuan-tsang and the An Lu-shan Rebellion, and his life as a minor official was in a time of disorder and upheaval. The call to conscientious public service must have been overwhelming, but this was also a glory period in the long Chinese tradition of monastic reclusion, and the tension between the two is the great source of Wei's poetry. Wei's poems are to cousins and friends who are off in the distance of postings, promotions, exile or military service, or to the monks and priests he admired and befriended, out of sight in their mountain huts. These themes, so large a part of Chinese poetry, might threaten to seem conventional, and the simplicity and quietude of Wei's style allowed his work to drop out of favor. But Wei's poems are full of conviction and emotion, of moods superbly conveyed, and, in Porter's renderings, very live indeed. It's a beautiful and civilized book.

#53: WITH FRIENDS T'ENJOY OUR DAYES. Waiting for Spring to come, I've been rereading Robert Herrick, and this paragraph will be simply a garland laid to his praise. Practically of all English poets, he is one who needs least to be read with heavy preparation, to be made a study, or to be read for any reason but pleasure. There is in Herrick no development—or none you need to worry about. He has no system or philosophy, just the self-refreshing iambic lilt of the pure lyric. He wrote at a fortunate time—as a disciple of Jonson, when poetry was simplifying even the ornament of Elizabethan style, but before Prior and the hoards of Fleet Street flattened everything to

the drone of the heroic couplet. It was the final moment in which the Altheas and Perennas and Julias had the blood of life and emotion in them, before they became the city-dressed mummies of convention. He was the contemporary of, and long outlived Herbert; like Herbert, he took orders to a rural curacy. (Marchette Chute wrote a dual biography of them, TWO GENTLE MEN, published by Dutton in 1959.) His verse was old-fashioned in its day, and politically incorrect: he was an unrepentant Royalist. He groused about leaving London, but Devonshire gave his verse its purling brooks and blooming flowers, its Edenic air, maybe even Herrick's vivid sense of smell. His later religious verse, the Noble Numbers, is not to be mocked; but without Hesperides, his lyric collection, English poetry would have suffered a strange gap, a sense of a room in the mansion left unoccupied. Pick him up—any edition—and start reading. Have fun.

#54: TWO BUDDHIST TEACHERS. With the increase of interest in Tibetan Buddhism and the efforts of scholars and publishers, there are a number of classical Buddhist texts and teachers, barely heard of twenty years ago, who are now widely read, with translations and commentaries easily available. Two of the very great figures, Indian teachers whose works were widely influential in Tibet, are Shantideva, the eighth-century author of THE WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA, and Atisha (or Atisa), whose LAMP FOR THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT was written in the eleventh century. Both are verse texts, rich and accessible, certain to be rewarding reading to anyone interested in Buddhism. My favorite version of THE WAY OF THE BODHISATTVA, translated by Wulstan Fletcher of the Padmakara Translation Committee into a graceful blank verse, has been reedited with notes in a fine hardcover edition in the Shambhala Library (2008). The Dalai Lama, who has claimed the work as a special favorite, has done three volumes of commentary on it: A FLASH OF LIGHTNING IN THE DARK OF NIGHT (Shambhala, 1994), HEALING ANGER (Snow Lion, 1999) and PRACTICING WISDOM (Wisdom Publications, 2005). Just recently published is THE NECTAR OF MANJUSRI'S SPEECH (Shambhala, 2007), a text of Shantideva with a full commentary by Kunzang Pelden. For Atisha: THE COMPLETE WORKS OF ATISA, translated by Richard Sherburne (Delhi, Aditya Prakashan, 2000, with romanized Tibetan text) includes the LAMP, Atisha's own commentary, and twenty-five key texts. It's an oddly-arranged volume with some puzzling features, but the only Complete Works in English. The LAMP is a brief verse work, and the full text is included in two excellent commentaries: ILLUMINATING THE PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT by the Dalai Lama (from www. lamayeshe.com) and ATISHA'S LAMP FOR THE PATH TO ENLIGHTMENT, commentary by Geshe Sonam Rinchen (Snow Lion, 1997). Worth reading.

#55: OUT OF THE NARROW GATE. Karen Armstrong's well-earned reputation is based on her intelligent and popular books on the history of religion, but her first fame was as the author of THROUGH A NARROW GATE (St. Martin's, 1981), a moving memoir of a failed vocation to the convent life. It was an unusual book, an account of an

intense and corrosive experience that ended with a return flight (reluctantly) to secular life, that yet seemed, for all its critique of the emotional coldness and intellectual limitings of convent life, not to be sharpening an axe or paying off a grudge. It must have disappointed readers hoping to work off any lapsed-Catholic payback rage; its intelligence was too balanced, its emotion too intimate. Years later, she followed up with THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE: My Climb Out of Darkness (Random, 2004), a spiritual memoir not quite like any other I've read. Armstrong, it turns out, has as clear a sense of the limitings of the secular world as of convent life, and found herself not quite fitted to either. THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE is about her carving a space out for herself and finding her way not in the cloisters of convent or academic life but as a writer—and using her writer's intelligence to reconnect with her religious impulse, not as an adherent of any one sect but in the more tentative satisfactions of comparative religion. Her memoir is not finally about rediscovered certainty but about learning how to move with an easeful grace through a larger, less certain terrain; she left the convent and became, in her unassuming way, a citizen of the world. Somebody out there is always willing to peddle faith, certainty and rapture; Armstrong's candor, level-headedness and her reliance on the wingspread of intelligence gives these two memoirs satisfactions entirely their own.

#56: FAIZ AHMED FAIZ. There is a jeweled, ecstatic quality which seems to be the special property of Islamic and Sufi verse, familiar to some Western readers now by the recent wild popularity of Rumi; similarly, there is an entranced and erotic tone particular to certain Indian poets, as in the great Bengali figure Tagore. The poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz rests at a meeting point between the two, but at many other crossroads as well. He was born in 1911 in the Punjab, which was part of India at his birth and of Pakistan at his death in 1984. He was raised an orthodox Muslim but came to see himself as agnostic; he had a traditional grounding in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, knew these literatures intimately, and yet opened himself to the influences of English Romanticism and European surrealism; he wrote ghazals (the recurring poetic form of Urdu and its eighteenth-century master, Ghalib) and sonnets. He also, perhaps inevitably, felt the influence of Marxism, and he extended the reach of Urdu into the characteristic twentieth-century poetic form of political witness. He was shunned and imprisoned by repressive politicians and came to his official honors posthumously; but in the literary world and among the Pakistani people he seems to have been a beloved and revered figure. Reading his verse even in translation one finds a radiance and generosity, a quality of goodness, that makes his personal reputation believable; it certainly puts to shame, say, the crabbed right-wing politics of many of the Modernist poets. The selection done by V. G. Kiernan (POEMS BY FAIZ, New Delhi, Oxford India Paperbacks, reprinted 2000) is a particularly interesting book from the point of view of translation: there is an Urdu text and transliteration, but also a close literal version as well as one in verse; one can follow, in a sense, some of the distance Faiz covers to get to English, and the rhymed versions, with their late Romantic manner, are often quite good. There is also 100 POEMS BY FAIZ AHMED FAIZ, translated by Sarvat Rahman (New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 2002), not as good as Kiernan's versions but with poems not included there.

For Ghalib, the best collection I know of is GHAZALS OF GHALIB: Versions from the Urdu, edited by Aijaz Ahmad (Columbia University Press, 1971), seven poets'

renderings, including W.S. Merwin and Adrienne Rich. A recent title is LOVE SONNETS OF GHALIB, with translations and explications by Sarafaraz K. Niazi (New Delhi, Rupa and Co., 2002), in which the explications tend to smother the translations rather badly. The real oddity here is that the poems included….well, aren't sonnets, at least not in the traditional use of the term. But then they made the movie "Krakatoa East of Java," and nobody thought to tell them that Krakatoa is west of Java. Sometimes these things just slip by you…..

#57: JAROSLAV SEIFERT. It has been instructive to be rereading concurrently the essays of Orwell and the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Jaroslav Seifert. Orwell was one of the great warning voices against totalitarianism, but he was also a mordant and amused critic of the political attempts, from left and right, to evaluate and direct the efforts of artists, writers in particular. The politicians were wrong, always, without exception, and the lives of both Faiz and Seifert were demonstrations of the life of the artist in the twentieth century. Closely contemporary, geographically distant (Seifert was Czech), emotionally not so far apart, both were disowned and maltreated by the regimes they lived under, their poetry dismissed for just the qualities we prize in them: the intense lyricism of Faiz, the affection and wry humor of Seifert. (Seifert got off lighter than some: he was scorned and banned, his work circulated only in samizdat copies. Ivan Blatny, in contrast, was banned, fled for his life, was pronounced dead on the radio, went mad and lived for decades, John Clare-like, in an asylum in the English countryside.) Seifert remained a committed but also irreverent, accessible and charming poet: there is an almost dizzied lyric quality, a humaneness and a delight in life, that kept his work moving, attractive and joyful. But there are also times, as when Cherubino comes to Seifert in a dream and describes Prague laying at the feet of Mozart's unknown grave, when he can move you to tears. THE POETRY OF JAROSLAV SEIFERT (Catbird Press, 1998) is an expanded version of an earlier selection from Andre Deutsch; the translations by Ewald Overs are very good. For Ivan Blatny, see THE DRUG OF ART (Zephyr Press, 2006), a terrific book with selections ranging from Blatny's early, Apollinaire-like poems to the late, unique, multilingual experimental work.

#58: DIVORCED, BEHEADED, DIED, DIVORCED, BEHEADED, SURVIVED. If you are not a hidebound anti-monarchist—some people are, with, let it be said, very good reason—you will remember those opening six words as a mnemonic device used to summarize the fates of Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anna of Cleves, Katherine Howard and Catherine Parr, collectively biographized, memorialized, analyzed and dramatized as the six wives of Henry VIII. And you would need to be unnaturally proof against the attractions of historical gossip to resist that more-than-operatic tale of court intrigue, lust laced with politics, empires shaken and popes defied, with, at its center, the awesome spectacle of a king rendered grotesque by ambition, vanity and rancor (and did we mention lust?). There have been new treatments of the tale lately by David Starkey and Alison Weir, even Karen Lindsey's DIVORCED BEHEADED SURVIVED: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Wives of Henry VIII (Addison Wesley,

1995), as if the whole business were not a feminist fable on the hoof right from the beginning. But the best of all is still Antonia Fraser's 1994 book THE WIVES OF HENRY VIII (Vintage), which really does show the oft-touted novelist's eye for character and milieu, as well as a sophisticated and canny sense of the realities of Tudor history. And she writes a sharp, musical prose, with the political backgrounds and colorful personages as splendidly measured weights and counterweights. It's an absorbing book with a still-potent emotional voltage.

On to the Victorian period. One of the marvelous things about Phyllis Rose's PARALLEL LIVES: Five Victorian Marriages (Vintage, 1983) is that it so consistently refuses to settle for making a series of hanging cases out of its subjects, the marriages of John Ruskin, Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Charles Dickens and George Eliot. Given the choice of subjects, the book could have been mere feminist hectoring (however richly deserved) or a baroque catalogue of period horrors. But, in her own words, "It will not do just to say 'How bizarre.'" She delves unsentimentally but fairly into the particulars of each relationship, not "to move readers either to self-blame or the blame of others," but to examine the patriarchal slant of the institution of marriage and to consider marriage as "imaginative projections and arrangements of power." That makes the book sound not only thesis-bound but oppressive; it is in fact a genuine exploration, and as invigorating as intelligent and honest discussion tends to be. Rose gives you a great conversation as well as terrific storytelling. It's a book you want to put into people's hands and it's probably an ideal discussion-group title—if this one doesn't get 'em talking, they've died.

#59: APOLLINAIRE AND THE PARIS OF MODERNISM. Amidst the programs, schools, manifestoes, phantasms and staggering productivity of the years of international modernism, the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire retained, for all its love of elaborate wordplay, formal border-jumping and technical complexity, a kind of moonstruck spirit and tear-stained sense of loss that marks it as a work separate and special. At one point we may be dazzled by an aggrandized, star-grabbing distance of vision, and at the next find him sitting on the ground, telling sad stories of romantic grief. Of his two major collections, ALCOOLS (1913), once voted by French readers the single best collection of poetry in French, saw the moods and manners of Symbolism through to their emotional ends; it was followed by CALLIGRAMMES (1918), in which the voice of the Avant-Garde and the sights of the first World War broke open the formal surfaces and brought out a new energy and playfulness. Both these volumes have been given magisterial bilingual editions by Annie Hyde Greet, published by the University of California Press, in which the downright French level of annotation is both warranted and helpful. For background the best reading is still Roger Shattuck's classic THE BANQUET YEARS: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I (Vintage, revised 1968). Shattuck studies the works and lives of Alfred Jarry, Henri Rousseau, Erik Satie and Apollinaire and shows, still better than anyone, how the theatricality and excesses of the time were bound to its genuine, at times mortally serious artistic accomplishments. Shattuck also edited and translated for New Directions the SELECTED WRITINGS OF GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE (1971), which covers both his verse and prose.

APOLLINAIRE, POET AMONG THE PAINTERS, by Francis Steegmuller (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1963) is a good and sympathetic biography.

That's the serious side—though of course Apollinaire had more than a touch of the publicist and prankster in him. For gossip and tale-telling one of the most entertaining books I know of is James R. Mellow's CHARMED CIRCLE: Gertrude Stein and Company (Praeger, 1974). I will admit I don't rate Stein very highly as a writer—her particularly unreadable form of self-proclaimed "genius" has always provoked in me a massive attack of jemenfoutisme, to use the argot. But she's a hoot to read about, and for a literary all-star cast this book is endless fun, from Hemingway, Picasso, Apollinaire and Wilder on to almost innumerable walk-ons and cameos.

And this of course was the Paris of Shakespeare & Co., and of La Maison des Amis des Livres, the two great bookshops on the Rue de L'Odeon in the Sixth, the myth-land of Odeonia, of Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, two of the wonderful figures in the history of bookselling—and no ignoble standing in the history of French letters. "Her simplicity was that of an undivided mind and a whole heart," Richard McDougall wrote of Monnier; it was true of Beach as well. Read Sylvia Beach's SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY (Harcourt Brace, 1959) and THE VERY RICH HOURS OF ADRIENNE MONNIER, translated with commentary by Richard McDougall (Scribners, 1976); in French, I believe Monnier's RUE DE L'ODEON is still in print. It's part too of the world of Janet Flanner's PARIS JOURNALS, mentioned before. Andrea Weiss's PARIS WAS A WOMAN: Postcards from the Left Bank (Harper, 1995) has a good text and loads of pictures; SYLVIA BEACH AND THE LOST GENERATION, by Noel Riley Fitch (Norton, 1985) is also worth reading.

#60: C. S. Lewis's A GRIEF OBSERVED. The mere name of C. S. Lewis is a call, if not to combat, then to heavily entrenched opinion. Some people idolize him; some people scoff at him. I've enjoyed some of his critical writing—THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE is such a readable and inviting book on medieval literature that for a while you actually think you want to reread THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE. (You don't. Trust me.) And THE FOUR LOVES I remember enjoying. The Narnia books, alas, I read after reading Tolkien and found them thin and priggish, as I found some of the religious writing entirely too donnish. One book stands apart for me: A GRIEF OBSERVED (1961). Lewis, as all the world knows, was for many years the image of the happy bookbound Oxbridge bachelor, sharing digs with his brother Warren. Lewis married late, the American artist Joy Davidman Gresham, and married happily; and shortly thereafter, as he had his parents, lost his wife to cancer. ("I wonder who's next in the queue," he writes.) A GRIEF OBSERVED, originally published under a pseudonym, is startling to read not just for its honesty, which is moving, but for its remarkable intelligence and self-observation. Time and again, reading this terse little book (ninety pages of large type) one has to say, "That's it; he's nailed it." It's this quality—its sheer commanding interest—that makes it the great thing of its kind, because it suggests that it was Lewis's intelligence as much as his faith that saw him through the ordeal. He says at the end, "Didn't people dispute once whether the final vision of God was more an act of intelligence or of love? That is probably

another of the nonsense questions." Reading A GRIEF OBSERVED, Lewis convinces you that it probably is.

Connection footnote: Lewis's brother Warren is the W. H. Lewis who wrote THE SPLENDID CENTURY, one of the lastingly popular books on the court of Louis XIV, and still worth picking up.

#61: INTRODUCING TOM PAINE. With due deference to the Civil War buffs who come through the Barn—and they are legion—my own favorite period in American history is that of the colonies and the War of Independence. In terms of literature things were just getting under way—the eighteenth century poets were very weak tallow compared to the bonfires of Whitman and Dickinson—but the intellectual ferment was fascinating and far-reaching: a speeded-up version of continental drift. Among the debaters and pamphleteers, the most stirring and still readable is Tom Paine, the staymaker's son from Thetford, England. Any archaeological dig into the structures of American thought are still going to find Paine down there at the bases. For all of the eighteenth century measure of his prose, he can still rattle the rafters: hang around in the narthex some Sunday and read out sections of THE AGE OF REASON (I dare you) and prepare for the explosion. For a generation or so the usual introduction to Paine has been Howard Fast's CITIZEN PAINE, but it now looks pretty forties, and a couple of new books have entered the fray. 46 PAGES: Thomas Paine, Common Sense and the Turning Point to Independence, by Scott Liel (Running Press, 2003) follows the wildfire success of Paine's first pamphlet and its effect on popular thought. It's a perfectly good book, but earnest and a bit pedestrian: one could imagine it being excerpted for READER'S DIGEST. Closer to the mark, more neatly informative and infinitely more fun to read is Christopher Hitchens's THOMAS PAINE'S RIGHTS OF MAN: A Biography (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006). Hitchens is, of course, our semi-resident godless heathen, our nay-sayer, and current master of the slap shot; despite this, or because of it, he's in consonance with Paine right down to small matters of style, and is obviously stirred to the bones by what Paine says: this is, basically, WHY PAINE MATTERS. It is also a remarkably concise presentation not just of RIGHTS OF MAN but the full framework of Paine's thought and his life. Hitchens knows that any intelligent reaction to Paine involves knowing when certain works were written: in reference to Paine on the French Revolution, not just the year, but the month and sometimes the weeks. He captures too how alert Paine was to the national disgrace of slavery, and how free he was of the common vice of anti-Semitism. All in all, read this and be prepared to want to run right out and read or reread Paine. Fortunately, this is easy to do: Penguin still has paperbacks of all the major works, and they're collected in the Library of America volume, along with lesser-known pamphlets. It's there and waiting.

#62: ANTONIO MACHADO. "Soria is, probably, the most spiritual part of spiritual Castile, in its turn spirit of all Spain. There is nothing overpowering in it, nothing flashy or boisterous, everything there is simple, modest, plain…It always invites us to be what

we are, that only…Soria is an admirable school of humanism, of democracy, and of dignity." Our cliché of Spain is of its gore-coated history of hysteria and violence, so much so that we can hardly fit Machado into our idea of its landscape. What he wrote of Soria he might well have written of his verse, in which a late-afternoon pensiveness hovers over the emotion. Machado is one of my poet-heroes, like Keats or Ryokan: in few poets of any language has modesty and restraint coincided so exactly and mysteriously with so deep a field of feeling. After the death of his child-wife Leonor, Machado wrote to his beloved mentor Unamuno: "I felt adoration for her, but over and above love is pity. I would have preferred dying myself a thousand times to watching her die…I don't think there is anything extraordinary about this feeling." Humanism, democracy and dignity inform the rhythms of Machado's verse, the choice and simplicity of his symbols, his distrust of loud or final pronouncements. He is one of the most fraternal and affecting of poets, and his appeal has survived in every translation of him I've read. There is no Collected Poems yet in English (Translators from the Spanish! Great opportunity available!) but Willis Barnstone, Robert Bly and Alan Trueblood have all done good selections. JUAN DE MAIRENA (California, 1963) is a prose collection of essays and aphorisms by Machado's professorial alter-ego. Two splendid and inexpensive introductions to Machado's work are FIELDS OF CASTILE/CAMPOS DE CASTILLA (Dover, 2007), a bilingual complete edition of Machado's second book, and THERE IS NO ROAD, a choice of his meditative short poems, translated by Mary G. Berg and Dennis Maloney (White Pine Press, 2003). "Honey from flowering rosemary / honey from bare fields."

#63: STRANGERS IN SOME VERY STRANGE LANDS. When it comes to the British boarding school, one would have thought that George Orwell's "Such, such were the joys" (the opening volley in his COLLECTION OF ESSAYS) was just about the last pin anybody had to put into THAT balloon. Exact, pungent and hilarious, it's an awe-inspiringly clean shot that takes down any Thomas Hughes or James Hilton sentimentality you might have been harboring, with his essay on "Boy's Weeklies" and their stereotyping of school life as a needle-sharp postscript to finish the job. But right from its startling first sentence, Paul Watkins's STAND BEFORE YOUR GOD: An American Schoolboy in England (Random House, 1994) proves itself a more-than-honorable title in this overpopulated field. Born of a Welsh family in Rhode Island, Watkins was sent to the Dragon prep school in Oxford and then to Eton, bringing with him a suitcase, a stuffed bear with a bell in its ear, and absolutely no idea of the Carrollian world he had been dropped into. This makes it merely an exaggerated version of the everyday, horrible comedy we all live through in childhood, and the first half of the book, at the Dragon school, is a masterpiece mixture of perfect recall and the peculiar rueful surrealism of its topic. As he goes on to Eton, the tone sobers and deepens—mistakes cut more deeply, the paths darken; we may miss the comedy, but for its honesty and confessing, it's a decent trade. By the time Watkins uses the title of the book for a zeroing-in—and I'm not going to quote that line either—he's brought you back into the tyranny of adolescence and illuminates it as only the best novelists and memoirists do. It's a terrific book, and much too little known.

On the other hand, we all know people who have become enamored of foreign cultures—we may well have done so ourselves. The affections are often idealistic—hunting in foreign cultures for virtues lacking in our own. In JAPANLAND: A Year in Search of Wa (Rodale), documentary-maker Karin Muller went looking to crack the mystery of Japan, going at it as if Japan were the Marabar Caves in Forster's PASSAGE TO INDIA. Normally we know where that story is going: many quandaries and frustrations, ending in reconciliation and clarity, including the moment when the young soldier realizes that the tough-talking DI has a heart of gold and is doing all that nasty stuff For His Good. But whereas India, I suspect, is chaos—a riot of nonsequential elements and colors, with no central line to its history—Japan, once characterized to me by a friend as "an entire country on the same drug," in Muller's book begins to seem like a straight line that simply goes on forever, without end—or entry point. With its hierarchy, sexism, house-pride, corporatism and endless lubrication of submission and alcohol, it also seems like a hypertrophied version of the American nineteen-fifties—the decade no one wants to revisit. And when, early in her visit, Muller meets her DI—not one of her sponsors or judo teachers, but the mother of her host-family, Yukiko—she raises a spirit bigger than the book can quell. No matter how Muller seeks to present things from Yukiko's point of view, she comes across as a monstrous blend of Mrs. Miniver and J.K. Rowling's Professor Umbridge—an emotional and social miser absolutely convinced of her own correctness, who haunts the book like a night-flying animal. Like Paul Watkins's book, Muller's JAPANLAND is fun to read because Muller is undeniably a writer—her language balloons wonderfully around the situations of being a stranger in a very, very strange land. But it also suggests that the distance between the crowded-island hierarchies of Japan and the messy pluralism of America are not easily, if ever, bridged. As a travel book for Japan, it's a bit like using "Boys Don't Cry" as a tourist come-on for a visit to Nebraska. Enjoy—but beware.

#64: LA BELLE CORDIERE. Louise Labe wrote her moving and intimate verses in Lyon in the sixteenth century, at a time when French poetry had glamors and glories very neatly parallel to those of English: the model and influence of Petrarch, a pure lyric impulse matched by adventurous intellect, a beautifully mastered formality livened by vernacular wit and speed. I love Labe—she's one of my favorite Renaissance poets—but I'm uncertain as to how far she's likely to make it into English. The sheer accomplishment of the verse, its mix of artistry and directness, its ease and achieved style, as with her masters, Ronsard and du Bellay, even lesser and lovely poets like Philippe Desportes, are likely to leave all but the most inspired translators with little but pale simulacra. In the only current complete English-language edition of Labe's work (COMPLETE POETRY AND PROSE, edited with prose translations by Deborah Lesko Baker and poetry translations by Annie Finch, Chicago, 2006) Baker's versions of the prose—the famous Dedicatory Epistle and "Debate of Folly and Love"—are readable enough; Finch's rhymed-couplet versions of the Elegies work better, because simpler, than with the more tangled challenges of the sonnets, which are, finally, the real core of Labe's work. Better to take these renderings as usable cribs or, if your French is up to it, stick to Francois Rigolot's wonderful (and inexpensive) edition, published by Garnier Flammarion in 1986. The critical introduction by Baker in the Chicago edition is

intelligent but, sweet Jesus hung on the cross with nails, the prose is awful: a style so abstract and Latinate as to make Samuel Johnson look like blunt Saxon muttering. And nowhere in this mess of jargon is there any urgent sense that Labe meant any of it, that she is remarkable, even among the riches of Renaissance verse, for a style marked by utter conviction.

Of course, I could be mistaken. In the most recent academic attention to Labe she has received the Homeric, indeed Shakespearean level of flattery: dismemberment. In LOUISE LABE, CREATURE DE PAPIER (Droz), Mireille Huchon has denied Labe the authorship of the book published under her name and parceled her work out to Maurice Sceve and other poets of his Lyonnais circle. Oh, the horror….

Online there is not only much discussion of "The Huchon Hypothesis" but a variety of texts and translations: infionline.net offers a good selection of both.

#65: VICTOR. One of the arresting stories of French history is of the abandoned boy discovered in 1797 in the forests of Aveyron, who had been living wild for some years, who was captured and brought to Paris and who for six years was the sole student of Dr. Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who attempted to bring the boy into the human community by teaching him the use of language. Victor de L'Aveyron, as he came to be known, arrived in Paris with many of the eagerly-discussed questions of the time billowing around him. What is the human in isolation? What is man in the savage state? What are the gains and losses of the civilizing process? Victor was a walking philosophical question—the answers to which, as his education progressed, kept rolling just out of reach. What can be captured in part is the human drama, the relation between Victor and Doctor Itard, as well as Itard's remarkably intuitive teaching skills; almost the best part of the tale is watching Itard create a pedagogy day by day, as the meanings of Victor's responses appear and shift. It's a story of wonderful particulars of the France of its day, and of historical importance to the history of education and medicine, but also of the human inheritance we all have title to. Itard's own reports are available in English (THE WILD BOY OF AVEYRON, translated by George and Muriel Humphrey, Meredith Publishing, 1962) and the French texts are included in Lucien Malson's LES ENFANTS SAUVAGES (Editions 10/18, 1964). Two excellent books are Harlan Lane's THE WILD BOY OF AVEYRON (Harvard, 1964) and Roger Shattuck's THE FORBIDDEN EXPERIMENT (Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1980). Lane's book is the more detailed and has an exhaustive bibliography; Shattuck is the more graceful storyteller. In the 1970 film "L'Enfant Sauvage," Francois Truffaut brought his own nuance and sensibility to the story: when, in Nestor Almendros's ravishing black-and-white photography, we see Victor dance in the moonlight, it's eerie and moving beyond words, and it hints at ecstacies a cultivated man like Itard knows not of. Maybe those mad old Romantics weren't all wrong.

#66: DISLODGING THE JEWEL. Few men of the twentieth century have been idolized (and simplified) more than Mohandas Gandhi and Winston Churchill. The greatest shock of reading Arthur Herman's recent GANDHI AND CHURCHILL: The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age (Bantam, 2008) is being reminded of the long trail of blunders, miscalculations, backfires and disasters both men left behind them,

which makes it all the more incredible how, after errors that would have deleted lesser men's careers, they repeatedly found their way back to the center of their country's political events. This dual biography is the story of India's departure from the British Empire, and Herman is sufficiently removed in time from his story that he is interested neither in canonizing his subjects nor in blackening their names; indeed we are forced to wonder what might have happened to India if men of lesser vision, more flexible than these "intransigent, obstinate, uncompromising principals" (Wavell's phrase) had been at the helm. And Herman does not skirt the multiple tragedies of India, of England, of his two protagonists: "Both men at the end of their lives got what they most wanted, but at the cost of what they most treasured." It's a brick of a book, but quite readable, and Herman's had to assimilate an enormous amount of information; scholars of the period may find errors here and there, but I found the basic shape of his story convincing. The book's subtitle may be kitsch, but after reading about these two gigantic wills hurled at each other by history, you may be willing to allow it.

The study of both Gandhi and Churchill has reached cottage-industry proportions, and a good-sized cottage at that. Of the many books by and about Gandhi, his own collection THE GANDHI SUTRAS: The Basic Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi (Devin-Adair, 1949) is a good entry-level text. THE PENGUIN GANDHI READER, edited by Rudrangshu Mukherjee (1993) is another good introduction. The literature by and of Churchill—enough to make it seem Lincoln has gone relatively unnoticed—is enormous, and I confess I know it not. To paraphrase a paraphrase, never has so much been written by so many about so few.

#67: A STRANGE SOUND IN THE PANTRY. There are two agreements on humorous writing, one that it doesn't age well, and two that it represents (or performs) a kind of escape from the grim insistences of reality. The dust seems to be settling on Benchley and Stephen Leacock and Mr. Dooley and many such, but James Thurber's recent inclusion in the Library of America series suggests him as a lonely possible exception to the first agreement. Reading through this new selection may also give us a chance to figure out exactly what kind of escape Thurber's writing represents. He caught his own sources precisely in "Preface to a Life": the "short boundaries" of "an existence of jumpiness and apprehension." "He can sleep while the commonwealth crumbles but a strange sound in the pantry will strike terror in his stomach." You laugh at Thurber, but not exactly as you do at Dickens or Twain, whose sense of cosmic malevolence can make you blanch. The aftershock with Thurber is lighter and less caustic. I know people who can't abide him, who find him city humor, New Yorker to the bone, and deracinated. I'll say I understand that—all those cocktail parties and arguing couples, all that smoke and alcohol; no one's drunks are creepier than Thurber's. But "city" in Thurber's thirties meant something a little different, something less dehumanized, and it gave spark and shape to his sentences: the nervousness gives rise to glorious commotion. And of course there are also the drawings: those turbulating, cyclonic women ("Catch me!"), those men motionless in what Thurber called "the inertia of the nonplussed," and the impassive chorus of Thurber's sad, silent bloodhounds. (MEN, WOMEN AND DOGS is the essential Thurber title.) Thurber pre-empted the selectors when he did THE THURBER CARNIVAL in 1945, which has been most readers' introduction to his work for years. But the Library of

America volume (WRITINGS AND DRAWINGS, 1996, cannily edited by Garrison Keillor) is a much broader selection, with later and uncollected pieces. My sole complaint (you know there had to be one) is the omission of "The Secret Life of James Thurber," in which Thurber compares his own autobiography to Salvador Dali's. "Let me be the first to admit that the naked truth about me is to the naked truth about Salvador Dali as an old ukulele is to a piano in a tree, and I mean a piano with breasts." Read on.

#68: ORSON SCOTT CARD. I'm not a huge one for science fiction or fantasy; as with any genre, the best approach is to have a few friends who read omnivorously and who are willing to do a little cherry picking. Some of it I've liked (Ursula LeGuin's LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS), some I've found grandiose but forgettable (Asimov's Foundation trilogy), some of the fantasy I've found charming (Patricia McKillip's FORGOTTEN BEASTS OF ELD, Diana Wynne-Jones's HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE) and a fair amount of it I've found flatly unreadable (Frank Herbert's DUNE). I've found some first-rate and intriguing ideas and themes, a lot of secondhand characterizations and uninspired execution, and a large supply of thoroughly wretched prose (Frank Herbert's DUNE). Tolkien, of course, looms behind almost all the commercial fantasy; with THE LORD OF THE RINGS, you have to keep a straight face through long swampy passages, a lot of Prince Valiant haircuts, some awful dialogue ("Ai! Ai!" wailed Legolas. "A Balrog! A Balrog is come!") and a really bizarre story-telling structure, but you get the awesome wingspread of Tolkien's imagination, his linguistic adventurousness and the true heroic seriousness that is Tolkien's bedrock. Mind you, even Tolkien suffers from the moral simplicity—his best wizard wears a white gown and rides a white horse—that reduces so much fantasy to genre status. If one more dweeb whose cinematic horizons consists of a seventy-fourth viewing of "Star Wars," says to me one more time, "Like all great literature, it's about good versus evil," I shall not be kind. "Hamlet" is about good versus evil? MADAME BOVARY? Go home. Leave me alone.

Orson Scott Card's novella "Ender's Game" appeared in 1977 in ANALOG MAGAZINE, and was expanded to novel size in 1985 and has placed itself pretty firmly on the science fiction must-read list. As the story opens, Earth has suffered a near-devastating attack from an alien life form—oversized insects called Formics or, less formally, Buggers. The Buggers have been momentarily repulsed but are known to be gearing up for attack number two. Alexander Wiggin, called Ender, is a kid beset with an abusive older brother, ineffectual parents, a suspect social status as a third child in a reproduction-controlled state, and an innate genius for military strategy that happens once in a millennium. He is drafted, at age eight, into a highly advanced military school, run at a space station by the sort of people who run advanced military schools. They speak in weighted badinage, they vivisect their students emotionally and spiritually, what they do is monstrous and dishonest, but they aren't monsters—they're men facing situations most of us will never face. Or are they? These equivocal puppet-masters—Ender sniffs them out and does battle with them as furiously and inventively as he will against the Formics—ends up being a new and disturbing twist on Lord Acton's dictum, and ENDER'S GAME is a long, dirty, harrowing look at the inherently Pyrrhic quality of military success. The masters keep Ender physically safe, but he is very nearly destroyed

anyway, and the coda to the book is Ender's desperate search for some way to nourish what's left of his soul. In contrast to the optimistic we-can-go-anywhere spark of some early pulp SF, ENDER'S GAME is part of the more mature, saddened SF that remembers that no matter where you go, even in space—there you are.

Trilogies, quartets, sequels, prequels are all stock in trade for genre work—milk it 'til it's dead—so if I'd been paying attention in 1999 when Card issued ENDER'S SHADOW, a "parallel novel" to ENDER'S GAME told from the point of view of Bean, one of Ender's co-students, I probably would've rolled my eyes. Milking aside, telling the story from another point of view—why bother? But Card brings it off—in changing the narrator, the essence of the story changes with it. Bean is a six-year-old, off-the-chart brilliant kid with an emotional chip missing and the cynical misery of a holocaust survivior. Starting from spiritual ground zero—a post-everything Rotterdam whose inhabitants are like an infestation—Bean sets on an almost opposite route from Ender, until, at the final battle, he thinks of the dying men and speaks the words of David's elegy for Absalom. Ender almost loses his soul; Bean has one conferred on him. And yet the mordant onlook of the earlier book is the same, running a chill finger down the spine. These are popular fiction, you bet, but if all pop fiction was this good even cynics like me would be still.

#69: THE TAIN. Among the tales and legends rediscovered by Irish scholars and folklorists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—along with the myths of the Tuatha De Danaan and the tales of the Fianna—is the Ulster Cycle, the tales of the Red Branch, of King Conchobor and the great warrior Cuchulain. All these—Finn Mac Cumaill, Oisin, Deirdre, Medb, Aoife—are the characters who came to populate the poems and plays of Yeats, the plays of Lady Gregory, and the last of John M. Synge's six plays, "Deirdre of the Sorrows"—not to mention a now enormous library of translations, paraphrases, retellings, adaptations, still more plays, graphic novels, you name it. But the centerpiece of the Ulster literature, the oldest vernacular epic of Europe, the Tain Bo Cuailnge—"The Cattle Raid of Cooley"—remained elusive, the retellings bowdlerized, the straight translations unreadable. A good deal of this was due to the appalling textual situation, with no complete recension existing, and the manuscripts suffering from gaps, inconsistencies, erasures, vastly varying narrative styles, whole chunks of plot and setting relegated to side texts, passages of cryptic and indecipherable verse—a literary bomb site. The Ulster poet Thomas Kinsella, working for a decade and a half, pieced the texts together, gathered the necessary background tales, and in 1969 published with the Dolmen Press THE TAIN. Of the translations and retellings, from Lady Gregory to Ciaran Carson's recent (2007) version, no one has better caught the barbarism, the abruptness, the adamantine shock of the tale. The heroes of the Ulster cycle live in a violent otherworld, with bloody curses, severed heads, cries that deafen all who hear them, and the gae bolga, a mysterious weapon of disembowelment: the rages of tribal warfare as everyday reality. The cattle raid itself erupts from a lovers' bragging match and comes to earth with a wrenching existential thud, the death of the Brown Bull of Cuailnge. But no summary will convey the blood-running dreamlike quality of the tale—the comings and goings of the gods of the MAHABHARATA and the other Indian epics are not stranger than these. Kinsella has opened a fascinating, convincing window onto a world like no other, along

with Louis Le Brocquy's splendid, entirely individual illustrations. The book, too, republished as an Oxford paperback, is a handsome piece of bookmaking. Of the dramatic versions, the five Cuchulain plays of W.B. Yeats—"At the Hawk's Well," "On Baile's Strand," "The Green Helmet," "The Only Jealousy of Emer" and "The Death of Cuchulain"—are among the very best of his plays, drawing on Ezra Pound's Noh translations; they are in the COLLECTED PLAYS (Macmillan). Synge's "Deirdre of the Sorrows" is in his COMPLETE PLAYS (Vintage). Lady Gregory's version of the Ulster stories, CUCHULAIN OF MUIRTHEMNE, is in print as well, from Colin Smythe.

#70: THE PALACE OF ART. It's Spring, the euro's having taken a dive suggests cheap air fares and this young (ahem) man's fancy turns to Paris. Guide books of course are not usually meant to be read end to end, but I've spent the last few evenings reading the Knopf guide to the Louvre (1995) and have once again been overawed, enchanted and set to dreaming. The Louvre has not only a glamor but a long history no other such institution can touch—so long, no one is entirely certain how the place got its name. Its foundations, now excavated and visible, dig back into the fourteenth century, expanding on its twelfth century original form; it was site and witness to coronations and festivals as well as massacres and revolution; it survived the shift from monarchy to republic; it has the focus and financial support of a centralized, art-supporting socialist government; it houses the largest collection of art in the world. Repeat, the largest, most dazzling collection of art in the world, and with its extension into the Richelieu wing in the 1980's it expanded its display space by almost a third. What the Knopf guide brings across is the dynamism of the place: it's always changing, experimenting, trying things out, enraging the locals and carrying on. The I. M. Pei glass pyramid, just for most recents, caused an even better-than-usual rack-up of hysteria and protests in 1989; but now, well, there it is, and it's hard to remember when it wasn't there. Those who think of art museums as institutionalized fust have no notion of the Louvre's presence in the city's mental life. And, flipping through the pages on the Louvre's collection, one's jaw drops all over again. The Knopf guide is high-nineties book design, with its cubist text arrangement and innumerable reproductions caroming off of each other. (On the cover the words "Knopf Guide" give the Mona Lisa a flirtatious set of eyelashes.) You come away from it with your eyes crossed and your head spinning, but that experience is not unlike a trip to the Louvre: if you can visit the Louvre and not be overwhelmed, you simply cannot BE overwhelmed. The Guide gives you all the tourist info you could need, details of that part of the city for further visiting, even what types of fauna and flora you'll see in the Tuileries park. Get that passport ready….

#71: JUST THE RIGHT SIZE AND WEIGHT. As late as the nineteen-eighties it was possible, if you were in Sawrey in the British Lake District, to run into people who remembered Beatrix Potter, who died in 1943. She was the daughter of a hermetically sealed London barrister's family—an artist in words and colors turning up from some genetic left field—who found in the Lakes the ideal setting for her work, and who purchased some acres of farmland out of the royalties from her early books. (As her bank

account increased, she spent it on further acreage, and the land went to the National Trust.) In the village she was remembered as quite the local character—tack-sharp about business, a thriving and competitive sheep-breeder, and capable of being a bit of a tartar. (It was in these years she dressed down Graham Greene for what she saw as an inappropriate essay on her work, and she was capable of a chilly invisibility to unwanted guests or letters.) She was referred to invariably as Mrs. Heelis; not a single person so much as mentioned Beatrix Potter, the world-famous creator of the Peter Rabbit books, and the reason for all this bookish tourism in town. The books of course have survived heartily on their own, all twenty-three of them still in print with much peripheral merchandise and still, the last I looked, printed on good paper and decently bound. They are masterpieces of design—"just the right size and weight for their little hands," one of Potter's friends wrote—but Leslie Lindner's HISTORY OF THE WRITINGS OF BEATRIX POTTER (Warne, 1971) details how much variation and experiment went into these now uniform little volumes. This is the irreplaceable book for all Potter fanatics and a wonderful thing of its kind, full of detail, information, unpublished stories and drawings and variant versions to show how much care and revision went into not only the pictures but those terse, simple sentences, as pared-down as Hemingway's. There is something richly pleasing about so much exactitude and precision being spent on such stories as The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies or (my personal favorite) The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck; Lindner's book is entirely charming, from Potter's own designs down to the old Kodachrome pictures of the Lakeland settings. Anybody who cares tuppence for Potter should have it and will enjoy it. If you want the Peter Rabbit series in a single volume there's THE COMPLETE TALES (Warne), splendidly printed and a manageable size. (Hold out if you can for the 2002 Hundredth Anniversary printing, which added in four early and charming works.) THE TALE OF BEATRIX POTTER, by Margaret Lane (Warne) is a good biography, as is Linda Lear's BEATRIX POTTER: A LIFE IN NATURE (St. Martin's).

#72: TINTIN, BOY REPORTER. Moving on to another author-illustrator, we come to a protagonist whose province is a good deal wider than Mr. McGregor's garden; I speak, of course, of Tintin, the globe-trotting boy reporter who stands with Goscinny and Uderzo's Asterix as one of the two great early heroes of the French bande dessinee. Tintin and his fox terrier companion Milou (Snowy to you Anglophones) were the creation of the Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi, who, reversing his initials, came up with the pseudonym Herge. Tintin, after a brief stutter of an existence as the Boy Scout Totor, appeared in propria persona in 1929 in his first adventure, Tintin au pays des Soviets (Tintin in the Lands of the Soviets), and kept on adventuring through twenty-three completed titles, one unfinished story, and over four decades, with a Balzacian expanding cast of recurring characters. Under the editorial hand of Father Walles, a conservative Catholic priest, a couple of Tintin's early adventures smelled so distinctly right-wing that Herge later disowned them and tried to prevent their being reprinted; they have surfaced again, cemented into the Tintin canon, and the second, Tintin au Congo (Tintin in the Congo) is currently being banned by the Congolese government, who are understandably underwhelmed with Herge's 1930s petit-maitre-blanc approach to race relations. And

when the German army occupied Brussels in 1940 Herge, in a combined moment of patriotism and Wodehousean naivete, stayed on and allowed Tintin to be published in what became a collaborationist newspaper. All this clouded Herge's reputation so deeply that for years I've avoided reading about him—I didn't want to know the worst. But having recently been given Michael Farr's TINTIN: THE COMPLETE COMPANION (San Francisco, Last Gasp, 2001) the worst, it turns out, is not so terrible: Herge seems to have been largely on the side of the kindly and good. Indeed, as Anthony Lane has pointed out in a canny and sensible New Yorker essay ("A Boy's World," May 28, 2007), Herge's artistic love of accuracy and realism shifted into a love of emotional accuracy and truth which pushed him past his earlier and narrower views. It's documenting those forms of accuracy which makes Michael Farr's book so splendidly amusing and absorbing. Herge kept an enormous archive of photographic reference material, so that cars, planes, boats, weapons—even furniture and clothing—largely sprang from verifiable models. He consulted specialists, scientists and historians, so a good deal that you might assume merely cartoonish or imagined is instead precise and grounded. And for the political background, Herge's stories turn out to have some fairly pointed satire in amidst the heroics and hair's-breadth escapes. Farr gets into all this with a digging-for-gold enthusiasm and a wonderfully thorough eye. An old man getting into his car (in The Broken Ear), we find out, is from a photo of Octave Mirbeau; details like the one-man shark-submarine (in Red Rackham's Treasure) or the costumes of the Jolly Follies (in Tintin and the Picaros) are closer to life than you could easily believe. Farr's best discovery, a photograph of two mustachioed, bowler-hatted, black-coated, umbrella-toting French policeman who are Thomson and Thompson to a T, just might make you whoop out loud with laughter. (It did me, at least.) The whole book is one delightful discovery after another—a deserved tribute to pleasures we might just have been taking all too lightly.

All the Tintin stories—from Tintin au pays des soviets to the unfinished Tintin et L'Alph-Art—are in print in various formats and combinations and almost innumerable languages. My preferred format is the French mini-album, a bit smaller than the standard editions, a little larger than novel-size. Just the right size and weight, I'd say.

#73: PILGRIMAGES: COMPOSTELA AND KAILASH. A Medieval Irish verse mocks the very idea of pilgrimage: if you do not carry a sense of the sacred within you, what makes you think you're going to find it in Rome? Very early on the pilgrimage was derided as glorified tourism—Chaucer's pilgrims spend most of their time telling each other rude stories, and the spiritual rent on the road to Canterbury is paid largely in lip service—and then, even as now, there was a cash cow tethered in every sacred field. But that's the world, which it is our business to ignore. Surely the appeal of the pilgrimage—to set aside the dusty grip of self, family and career and to feel the manna of going and being someplace the sacred happened, and might still be happening—is obvious and honorable enough. In the northwest corner of Spain in the ninth century, a star guided a peasant to discover the believed relics of St. James, the site of which became, after Rome, the most heavily visited of the medieval pilgrimage sites—St. James of the Field of the Star, or Santiago de Compostela. Eventually, three major routes from Tours, Vezelay and

Le Puy in France converged at Roncesvalles in Spain, the site of the climactic battle in the Song of Roland; a fourth route from Arles hooked up at Puente La Reina. The route crossed the north of Spain, through Burgos and Leon, into the Celtic region of Galicia and to Santiago, past tiny villages where residents still call out greetings and blessings to pilgrims on their way. The daily noontide mass at Compostela, censed by a famous, enormous and dangerously mobile silver botafumeiro, are in a church dedicated to Santiago Matamoros, St. James the Moor-Killer, the spiritual figure of the Reconquista; but the atmosphere there and on the trail has no odor of the church militant. Rather it seems the culmination of the sharp air of the Cantabrian mountains, the hallucinatory challenges of the Meseta, the rain-greened hills of Galicia, and the camaraderie and hospitality of the trail itself. The plateresque façade of the church of Santiago, swathed in mist, reduces many footsore pilgrims to tears; it is surely one of the glorious sights of Europe.

The literature of Santiago is plentiful, as is the literature of medieval pilgrimage. Detailed and handsomely illustrated, Millan Bravo Lozeno's PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PILGRIMS: The Route to Santiago (Madrid, Everest, n.d.) is a terrific book both for travel and reminiscing. Of the personal accounts, my favorite is Conrad Rudolph's PILGRIMAGE TO THE END OF THE WORLD: The Road to Santiago de Compostela (University of Chicago, 2004). Aymeric Picaud's medieval Latin Pilgrim's Guide is translated and included in THE PILGRIM'S GUIDE TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA: A Gazeteer, edited by Annie Shaver-Crandell and Paula Gerson (London, Harvey Miller, 1995). If you're going to brave The Song of Roland, Dorothy L. Sayers's translation was the one that got me through it. There are good websites, and the Friends of the Road to Santiago is based in Kingston, Rhode Island.

A different pilgrimage, a very different terrain, a very different book. In the western fastnesses of Tibet, Mount Kailash is considered sacred by both Buddhists and Hindus. The point is not to climb it: it takes us Westerners a long while to realize that for Tibetans climbing a holy peak is a desecrating and ludicrous egotism, rather worse than a poodle pissing on a great Sequoia. The pilgrimage is to do the several-day clockwise trek around the base, and on the north face of the mountain, Robert Thurman's teacher told him, is a site of enormous spiritual power, where "one can plant one's deepest wish for the world, and all the Buddhas and gods and dakini-angels would see to its accomplishment." CIRCLING THE SACRED MOUNTAIN (Bantam, 1999) is the story of a trek to Kailash and to the neighboring holy lake, Manasrovar, told in two voices. One part of the text is the dharma talks by Robert Thurman in his role as longtime student/master of the Vajrayana. This is Tibetan kamikaze Buddhism, going at the preoccupations of the ego with a diamond-point drill, and the talks have the special vernacular efficacy of being from someone who speaks English as a first and very lively language. The narration proper is by Tad Wise, Thurman's student/friend and the trek's resident groundling. His tone is the candid amusement of one too well familiar with his addictions—wine, women, song, and in one case a round of billiards. Beneath that is clearly a hope of breaking the shackles these addictions have become—of receiving a crack in the skeptic, materialist viewpoint, which seems to be the special, even unique promise and gift of Tibet. From these two voices we triangulate the presence of Kailash—we circle around it, as they do. Thurman's wish was to plant a prayer not just for the freedom of Tibet but for the releasing of its spiritual vision into "a world that has very nearly blown it." CIRCLING

THE SACRED MOUNTAIN is not so much armchair travel as a contagion of that hope: like those hidden Tibetan treasure texts, a thought-pilgrimage of its own.

#74: REREADING: SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE THREE MUSKETEERS. In his poem “Each June I Made a Promise Sober,” Ogden Nash voiced the common cry of those who work in bookstores or libraries or live otherwise surrounded: so many books, so little time! Always the guilt-inducing pile of unread books, eyeing us like neglected pets. He lists some of the classics he hasn’t read—my own list includes, I blush to say, Moby Dick, War and Peace, The Brothers Karamazov, The Faerie Queen, etc. etc. etc. etc.—and concludes, “So every summer I truly intend / My intellectual sloth to end / And every summer for years and years / I’ve read Sherlock Holmes and The Three Musketeers.” I read those lines and I know my fate.

In the nineteenth century in England, the change in mandatory education laws had brought a boom in literacy, a boom in book publishing, and an explosion in magazine publishing. Dickens and others cashed in hugely on the serial publication of novels, and one of life’s instructive pleasures is to find an edition of Dickens that indicates the two- or three-chapter segments in which, say, OLIVER TWIST was published, and to see how Dickens kept readers on the hook. The trick was, of course, that if you missed an installment you were sunk. Arthur Conan Doyle had published two novella-length, single-installment stories of Sherlock Holmes, A STUDY IN SCARLET (with that embarrassing libelous Mormon interlude) and THE SIGN OF FOUR; but in 1891 he had the idea of running a series of self-contained stories in which Holmes was the recurring main character—an idea briefly anticipated by Poe’s three Auguste Dupin stories. The Holmes stories, published in the STRAND Magazine, were an immediate sensation and secured Doyle’s fortune. By the end of the first set of stories—published as THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES—Doyle had tired of Holmes and wanted to move on; by the end of the second set, he contrived to kill Holmes off but, in a classic Freudian slip, failed to produce a corpse; the public revolted and inundated Doyle with protesting letters; Doyle relented, Holmes was resuscitated, and in the end there were five collections of stories and four short novels. They were written in haste; they were full of inconsistencies (John Watson? James Watson?); they were full of bloopers (snakes can’t hear); they became not only immortal, to Doyle’s lasting irritation, but the basis of an ongoing library of mock exegetical literature, stage and film versions, pastiches (what we now call fan fiction) and parodies—a virtual world in which, per Vincent Starrett, “it is always 1895.” Some of it, for my money, must be chalked up to Doyle’s gift for dialogue—I rarely read Holmes and Watson without reading aloud. But on the list of characters who seem not to have been invented so much as discovered and reported, Holmes and Watson are right up there, through endless rereading. The endlessly reprinted Doubleday COMPLETE SHERLOCK HOLMES is the one-volume standard; Leslie Klinger’s new three-volume edition of THE ANNOTATED SHERLOCK HOLMES (W.W. Norton) is a fresh and informative skim off the top of the voluminous Writings About the Writings.

With THE THREE MUSKETEERS we run into a slightly different order of creation. After Walter Scott, the historical novel fell into its way of mixing the historical with the

imagined; Dumas grabbed the mix and ran with it, so much so that it takes considerable annotation to sort out fact from fiction in his books. D'Artagnan actually existed. Dumas discovered his memoirs in the library (he took the book out and never returned it), which had been written up by Courtilz de Sandraz, who, shall we say, embroidered; Dumas proceeded to embroider the embroidery. He devoured, pillaged and embroidered the memoirists of the time, digested and embroidered the history, hearsay, legends and gossip, and spun out one of the richest, most perfectly shaped of all stories of adventure. As with all great adventures, it hinges on friendship: "Tous pour un, un pour tous": "All for one and one for all," a phrase I bet is still widely recognized. But it hinges too on a certain youthful headlong recklessness ("La vie vaut-elle autant de questions?" Athos says—"Is life really worth so many questions?"), at least until rough justice is meted out to Milady, and the book ends with the parting of the company. It's these qualities that keep the book alight and make it, as with Holmes and Watson, so endlessly and refreshingly rereadable. There are innumerable editions in French and English; the translation in the current Penguin edition is pretty good. The annotation by Gilbert Sigaux in the Pleiade edition will help you do some of the historical sorting out; it's interesting, but maybe it really doesn't matter. The historical D'Artagnan lived; Dumas's D'Artagnan lives.

#75: VASKO POPA. One of the first of praises for artists of any stripe is for originality, and part of the particular aesthetic thrill of reading Dickinson or Hopkins or Han-shan or Rimbaud or Szymborska is the feeling they give us that we could never mistake this poet's work for any other's. Even at the remove of Charles Simic's superb translations, Vasko Popa's book HOMAGE TO THE LAME WOLF (Oberlin College Press, 1987), when I came upon a copy recently after not having seen Popa's work for thirty years, amazed me with its instantly familiar tone and whole poems I had virtually by heart. Popa seems to me simply one of the most original poets I've ever read, and I'm at a loss as to how to describe him. Born in 1922 in Serbia, he served as a partisan fighter during the war and was a concentration camp survivor; he went on to the literary life of a European author, editing and writing and founding an Academy of the Arts; he died in 1991 of cancer. And I doubt that the information will really be of any help. The poems are impersonal, mythic in tone, whole light-systems away from, say, Greek classicism or European romanticism. The book blurb talks about "elements of surrealism, folklore, and trenchant logic": close, I suppose, but trying to convey the lost-in-the-dark pathos and eeriness of these poems about pebbles, bones, the lame wolf (as potent a presence as Hughes's Crow) or, most haunting of all, a little box, I find I'm pretty lost myself. These irreducible little poems can only be left to speak for themselves, in a language we never knew we knew. Go.

#76: BUILDING WORDS. I love looking at old buildings, and no other art's terminology tickles me nearly so much as that of architecture. I have no scholarly or deep historical interest in the subject, but I find a delightful pedant's poetry in hearing about quoins, bucrania, blocked pilasters, segmental pediments and pulvinated friezes. I've never greatly cared for vermiculated rustication, but I love a heraldic shield in a spandrel,

and could gaze with great interest on your escutcheon. I can live happily with a depressed arch and have never been bothered by an overhang. If you share this amusement and don't want to wade through the daunting technical depths of so much architectural literature, I highly recommend RICE'S ARCHITECTURAL PRIMER, by Matthew Rice, published by Bloomsbury in 2009. The earth-toned drawings are charming, the brief historical sketches readable, and the book is no end of fun. Here you will painlessly learn much: to tell renaissance balusters from colonettes, and to be told sternly that an Oriel window sticks out but does not go to the ground. It's a kind of Latinate linguistic fancy-dress ball, and could you ask for more? Rice's book is enirely on English architecture; if you want something a bit closer to home, you should dig for a copy of Harry Devlin's TO GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE WE GO: A Roadside Tour of American Homes (Parents' Magazine Press, 1967). It was published as a kid's book but it's a great easy way into the topic, and examples of many of the styles shown are only a short drive away if you live in New England. Another inviting and entertaining book, in which you will be treated to barley-sugar columns, keeled lesenes and waisted-oval lucarne windows, is THE VISUAL DICTIONARY OF BUILDINGS, published by Dorling Kindersley (1992) in the Eyewitness Visual Dictionaries series, and gorgeously illustrated.

#77: THINKING IN THE COLONIES. New Englanders are known for having long memories, and can tend to think of the colonial period maybe not as yesterday but as the day before yesterday, or maybe just last week sometime. It's a little startling to read Samuel Eliot Morison's INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND (Cornell, 1956) and realize that the period described is only some thirty years later than Galileo's forced recantation, and that we are separated from the founding of Harvard by roughly the same amount of time that event is separated from the late medieval period of the European students in Helen Waddell's WANDERING SCHOLARS. Of course in its urbanity, conversational style and graceful distillation of vast knowledge the book itself seems to belong to another, more civilized time. Morison wrote it in part to temper the image of Puritan New England as a dead zone for culture, literature, scientific thought, emotional warmth or humor of any kind; he does so without overproving his case. And he springs a number of surprises on us, as when he shows how the Puritan ideals actually served as an impetus towards education and the intellectual life and how they co-existed with paradoxical ease side by side with the appreciation and preservation of classical studies. (Of Anne Hutchinson and her "radical fringe," with its hostility to the university environment, Morison writes, "There was a peculiar danger of this attitude prevailing in a new country, where social and economic conditions fostered crude materialism, pietistic conceit, and complacent ignorance." Hm.) It's a well-written, absorbing book, and may alter your sense of the period.

Of the poets of the period, the standouts are Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet. Taylor was a divine whose poems lay undiscovered in manuscript until the 1930s; they are fluent pieces, the obvious tail end of the English metaphysical school, but good as he is, he labors somewhat under the vanquishing shadow of Herbert and Donne. Bradstreet's verse is simpler, more halting, but she is in some ways the more interesting personality of the two; there is the raw echo of new experience in them. Donald Stanford's selection of Taylor's verse is still in print (Yale), which will probably hold you unless you have the

irresistible urge to read his 21,000 line "Metrical History of Christianity". There are several editions of Bradstreet, and Charlotte Gordon's MISTRESS BRADSTREET: The Untold Life of America's First Poet (Little, Brown, 2005) is a good and readable biography. The poetical bestseller of the day was of course Michael Wigglesworth's "Day of Doom," a chop-licking and hallucinatory description of the torments of the damned—a sort of "Struwwelpeter" for the elect. This diseased document—running in its dog-trot meter from the repugnant to the ludicrous, as when the infant damned are allowed "the easiest room in hell"—should probably be read by all New Englanders, not as literature but as a mortifying and cautionary reminder of our ancestors' mindset. As the old quote goes: "Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank him not less fervently for being one step further away from them in the march of ages."