Jun-2006

Poetry

Don Johnson

_East Tennessee State University_

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol25/iss1/15
Whether he’s dependent on his father, his mother, his Lévy suggests, “that this man is something of a child. The truth is, Lévy’s portrayal of George Bush, whom he clearly observes at the outer margins of our society provides a flash of intellectual insight or simply a diminished life, a bloodless life, but a life all the same.”

Who has the right take on Lévy—Keillor or Peretz? Yet, in a strange way Lévy finds an inequality with which Lévy claims hurricane Katrina devastated America in its marginal institutions. Visiting a gated retirement community in Sun City, Arizona, he finds a middle American shoppers content themselves with their malls for recreational walking as well as shopping whose display their economic habits in their shopping whose winning the most difficult competition in America…. The answer is, to recall James Carville’s advice to Bill Clinton. “It’s the economy, stupid.” For Lévy Americans display their economic habits in their shopping whose quintessence he finds in Minneapolis’ Mall of America. The Mall is “an adventure” Lévy tells us—not for him but for the shoppers—“an experience in and of itself.” What, he asks—again rather rhetorically—“do we learn about American civilization from this mausoleum of merchandise, this funereal accumulation of false goods and nondesires in this end-of-the-world setting?” Lévy sees in the faces of the Mall shoppers “the easily led, almost animal-like face Alexandre Kojève [a French philosopher] said would be the face of humanity at the arrival of the end of history.” The Mall of America represents in microcosm for Lévy the United States as an economic gated community—or, if you’re one of Lévy’s mall walkers, a gated community—whose middle American shoppers content themselves with childish and ephemeral pleasures. Lévy reduces Americans to banality and—in what he sees as our innocence—brutality.

Still, France is not without shopping malls, quite large ones like the one I had occasion to visit in St. Laurent du Var just outside Nice. The French apparently use their malls for recreational walking as well as shopping, accompanied quite frequently by their dogs. The signs above the spacious entrance to the supermarket that occupied an entire section of the mall read “pas de chien dans le marché.” The French, I’ve noted on my visits, tend to view any sign prohibiting something as an affront, so dogs accompanied their owners into the market. I began to wonder whether the sign above the market entrance shouldn’t perhaps have read “don’t purchase items off the lower shelves.” But, I’m pretty sure a French person would have informed me, had I made the suggestion, that I lacked a clear understanding of the cultural signs.

Charles Angell is Professor of English and Book Review Editor of the Bridgewater Review.
After the Ice Storm

for Doris Toyoko Johnson

In the crawl space under the kitchen, I kneel
in a bubble of light where the ruptured fitting
drips, though I’ve shut off the flow at the valve.

Outside, under the ice-storm’s glittering tonnage
sycamores burn and groan. When their limbs explode
I think of your father on his hands and knees
tamping black powder into the hole he had drilled
in the lava rock beneath your house in Honolulu.
Upstairs your baby brother slept. You sliced
ginger for the chicken hēkka while your mother
stitched futons in the alcove just above the detonation.

Only the persimmon balanced on the New Year’s shrine
topped. The Morishiges next door never knew
how with each small charge he lowered the floor, pushed
back the walls of a cellar he could finally stand in.

Now you watch his monitored sleep, gauging the slow
spillage down a silvered tube. Nurses carry away
whatever breaks down inside him.

Here, on my knees
in cold mud, I finger the bread he taught me to pack
into wet pipes to halt seepage, so the joint
will heat up, liquefy the flux and suck in solder
seal the fitting right, so it won’t let go, ever.

—Don Johnson

The Latin Root for Cultivate
Means Cherish

My ninety year old neighbor’s winter crop
Has sprouted, softening October’s show
Of brittle reds and yellows. Through leaf drop
And frost these fields against the hill will glow
Green, percolating up through snow, that first
Leveler, to pool, as light unbends each stalk,
Until all sixty acres lie immersed
Again in green. Those winter days when I walk
His road, I’ll picture him overalled in sun
Collecting wagonloads of windrowed stones,
A yearly harvest, labor never done,
A miracle of strength in those old bones.
His verdant fields illuminate dark days.
Those hard loaves stacked enlighten other ways.

—Don Johnson

—Don Johnson is Professor of English
at East Tennessee State University.
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Only the persimmon balanced on the New Year’s shrine toppled. The Morishiges next door never knew how with each small charge he lowered the floor, pushed back the walls of a cellar he could finally stand in.

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