

THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCE

RIVER CAMPUS STATION

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK 14627

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dec. 7, 1975

Dear Mrs. Valenstein,

I am happy to report that the poetry jury has concluded its deliberations, and the book we have chosen is:

SELF-PORTRAIT IN A CONVEX MIRROR, by John Ashbery.

In addition, the jury would especially wish to commend the following books:

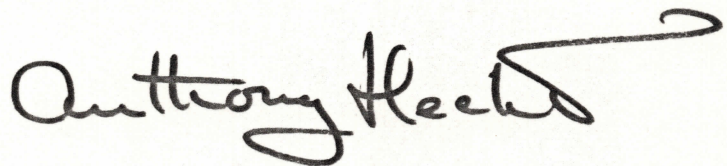
BURIED CITY, by Howard Moss

THE WESTERN APPROACHES, by Howard Nemerov

TALES TOLD OF THE FATHERS, by John Hollander

I am not sure whether you want or need a commendatory statement regarding our first choice. If you do, we will be happy to oblige.

With all good wishes,



Anthony Hecht

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Dec. 26, 1975

Dear Mrs. Valenstein,

Here are our commendations.

In his seventh book of poems, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, selected by the jury for the 1975 Pulitzer Prize, John Ashbery has responded to those impulses of recuperation, of recurrence and reversion which poetry incarnates, observing its beginnings and endings by a prosody of intermittence and collage rather than by any such conventional markings as rhyme or refrain. Ashbery has returned to returning--hence the self-portrait, hence the mirror, hence the convexity.

The subject of the self-portrait is the same new thing: if it is all there, the world, then how does the poet get into it, how does he find a place in what is already given; and if he is already there, how can there be room for anything else? The book is a series of meditations on this dilemma:

And am I receiving
This vision? Is it mine, or do I already owe it
For other visions, unnoticed and unrecorded
On the great relaxed curve of time...

long, radiant visions, cross-cut by the usual opacities of diction and association. But in this book as in none of his earlier works, Ashbery's brooding gets out from under the allusive looniness that was always his resort when the going got rough or smooth; the ride, as he says, continues, and we are presented with "the major movement as a firm digression, a plain that slowly becomes a mountain." The poet, ruminating upon his relation to the past, especially upon the greatness of the past, and to the future, especially upon the grotesquerie of the future, is quite conscious of his idiopathy. They are here, those private turns of event, but what keeps them from becoming entirely fossilized, what keeps the concrete from becoming concretion, is the sense of before and after, the movement of time which washes through these pages, these long-winded portages across "this wide, tepidly meandering, civilized Lethe" which else would become "choked to the point of silence."

"The history of one who came too late," Ashbery puts it in one of the finest poems here, "As You Came from the Holy Land"; yet in the title poem he puts it conversely: "All we know is that we are a little early": we are here, or there, and the rendezvous has not been kept. So speaks a man whom the world has failed, who is not yet fulfilled by anything except his own existence, his abashed solipsism. The point is not to decide, to determine, whether one is early or late, ahead of time or behind the times (the past of

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Parmagianino's portrait); the point is to discover that there is movement, change, and a linking-up, a being-in-league, however bewildering, with all the rest. Again and again, in his room, or under a tree, or looking at an old photograph, the poet has occasion to remind himself of the recurrence:

There is some connexion...among this. It connects up,
Not to anything, but kind of like
Closing the ranks so as to leave them open.

The opacities, what used to register as accidents, are now assimilated into the mastery, so that the poet has gained access to a part of his experience which was once merely a part of his ~~imagination~~ imagination: he has made his experience and his imagination identical.

Taking in the whole world, now, but lightly,
Still lightly, but with wide authority and tact.

* * * * *

The Pulitzer Prize jury wishes to take special note of John Hollander's seventh volume of poetry, Tales Told of the Fathers, in which the resources of convention, the devices and diligence we associate with a mastery of art as artifice, are astonishingly given over to mysteries and wonderments, so that what is known and readily manipulable is employed in the pursuit of what is yet to be created. Nothing is trusted, everything is likely to betray, and it is only by submission, by submersion in the deceiving element (darkness= time=memory=death) that Hollander achieves his curious, qualified triumph, that of ~~his~~ having mythologized his own losses into gains. Masters of philosophy, of the Torah, of poetry itself are invoked, are invited to mitigate the terrors and even the joys of that otherness felt to lie on the far side of language; it is why Hollander is so conscious of his syntactical necessities: language is all he has to deal with that sacred foreigner--whether to praise, avert or execrate--lurking in silence, just out of reach. The poems are difficult because they speak from the edge, at the extremity of pain, the verge of pleasure.

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By the same token, the Pulitzer Prize jury takes special note that with The Western Approaches Howard Nemerov adds a distinguished volume to an accomplished and considerable poetic career that compasses eight previous volumes. His poetry is marked by wit,

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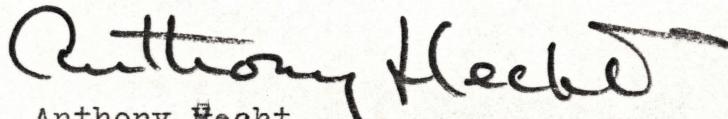
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intelligence, compassion, a philosophic temper and a formal elegance. He has been throughout a poet of singular independence and integrity, nobody's man but his own, enlisted under no banners, wry, amused and distrustful of partisan solutions. His work is unusually rich in its variety, given at times to vernacular fun and high-jinks, but capable as well of a deep and tender gravity that is utterly without fraud. He is the master of an Horatian skill in his eloquent tact and reticence, and uses his considerable learning with a modesty that is everywhere apparent and decently concealed.

We hope that this will serve your purposes.

With all good wishes,


Anthony Hecht
For the Pulitzer jury

(Secretary's Note: John Ashbery is a professor of English at Brooklyn College. He is a graduate of Harvard, B.A., 1949, and received his M.A. from Columbia in 1951. He was art critic of the European edition of the New York Herald-Tribune from 1960-65 and editor of Art News from 1965-1972. He has written many volumes of poetry.)