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# Editors Choice Review of "The Geography of the Imagination"

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## Review · Editor's Choice

*The Geography of the Imagination*. Guy Davenport. 384pp. \$10.00, paperback. North Point Press: San Francisco, 1981. *Collected Poems*. E.L. Mayo. 268 pp. \$5.00, paperback. A *New Letters Book*: University of Missouri—Kansas City, 1981. *Tuesday at Nine*, Hooper Thorne. 12 pp. No price listed. Penny Whistle Press, 1981.

By the time readers come upon this review, others, of the volume I mention first, may well have met their attention. But *The Geography of the Imagination* by Guy Davenport is well worth another report. It comes together as a book in one of the most convincing ways that a volume of criticisms and teachings can, not planned as a book from the first, I suspect, nor laid out to defend a particular thesis, but gathered at length from twenty-seven year's worth of writings—introductions, reviews, biographical sketches, personal essays, essays in criticism—and found to have a point, a set actually of interlocking assessments or theses, which, come at from many angles and found worthy continually of his and our attention, coalesce to give the book considerable force. Ezra Pound is at the center here. Three of the forty chapters are on Pound (though one is a review of Kenner's *The Pound Era*), and Pound and *The Cantos* make other, periodic, not always brief appearances. Other essays are on Whitman, Olson, Zukofsky, Ives, Moore, Stevens, and Joyce; there is no single essay on Williams though he too appears frequently. One can tell from this list the general nature of Davenport's concerns, which extend to Ovid, when pushed in one direction, and to Eudora Welty in the other.

For it is at the heart of Davenport's teachings that the period just after the turn of the twentieth century was the start of a second European renaissance, and that "as the first . . . looked back to Hellenistic Rome for a range of models and symbols, the [second] looked back to a deeper past in which it has imagined it sees the very beginnings of civilization." He speaks of prehistoric civilizations, of cave paintings, Persephone, the attractions of the archaic. This second renaissance was cut off prematurely by the First World War, and our century has been marked by the playing out of those artistic programs already of mature vision by the time of the war and has managed to make no further large and sustained connection with them.

A theme subordinate to this first is the value and fragility of civilization. The city is the unit of civilization, Davenport observes, and it depends on the productive education of each new generation. One of the chief functions of poetry is to teach: "The body of knowledge locked into and releasable from poetry can replace any university in the Republic." And so it is that the poets Davenport admires most are teachers, Pound especially. Invention, far more important to them and to their complex programs than inspiration, is the art of finding things. (Toward the end of his collection, Davenport includes an engaging essay on finding arrowheads.) And Pound's entire career, he claims, can be characterized by this phrase: "to find the best in the past and pass it on."

Corollary to this belief is that the overriding purpose of poetry is to give tongue to what is dumb rather than being self-expressive. That last is but a "current vulgar opinion," Davenport claims in one passage. Here he is on that subject:

That the poet speaks for people who cannot speak, that he makes sentences for people to *say*, is as outmoded a concept in pedagogy as whacking the behind for laziness and insolence. The poet, poor fellow, has become a Personality, and the only authority for his raving is that he stands in his shoes. That pair of shoes over there: in them stands a man who for lack of Personality might be as famous as the poet.

One can think of statements that seem to explain so wry a misunderstanding of the poet as an issuer of personal pronunciamentos. Behavioral psychology, squirted into the ears of students from Head Start through the Ph.D., can account for no action not grounded in self-advancement; it follows that the poet as a voice for other people is suspect. He *must* be expressing himself, don't you see? Poor Whitman. He wrote a corpus of poems for an entire nation, to give them a tongue to unstop their inarticulateness. He wrote in their dialect, incorporating the nerve of their rhetoric and the rhythms of the Bible from which their literacy came. He wrote two elegies for Lincoln, one for grownups . . . and one for school children. . . . He tried to understand the voiceless American and to speak for him, and as much as any poet has ever succeeded, he did. Yet he has been so idiotically deposed from the fulcrum he so carefully selected. He wrote not a

single personal poem and yet every word is taught to students as the self-expression of an elate disk-jockey who made his scene with a poetry book (p. 132).

Round and about and supporting these views, or at least giving occasion for their expression, is a range of essays on many topics. I'll mention but a few. A short essay on Shelley that dramatizes his writing "Ozymandias." Sketches of Louis Agassiz, Wittgenstein, Hopkins, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Tchelitchev, and Jack Yeats the Elder. A review of recent translations of *The Odyssey*. Another of Donald Hall's *Remembering Poets*. One on the Mandelstams, Nadezhda as well as Osip. Even three pages on "Trees," and that is because, perhaps, another of Davenport's themes is that a poet will always be someone who cares for poetry, that is, for its whole history.

We'll let one moment in the volume suffice for dramatizing this belief; if Pound is the recurring touchstone of this collection, this moment, I think, is its epitome. The scene is a celebration at the Library of Congress for the fiftieth anniversary of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Pound, Williams, Eliot, Moore, Warren, Lowell, Wheelock, MacLeish, Aiken, Freeman, Patchen, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Corso, Sandburg, Lattimore, and Auden had all managed to send their regrets. Those who attended weren't exactly teachers; for the most part they were professors. And the occasion wallowed in unrewarding panel discussions on subjects like "What is Poetry?" That is until Robert Frost entered.

Now given Davenport's predilections, it is not hard to believe that Frost, though he is a part of that renaissance generation, is not much present in this volume. If there is other mention of him, I find that I forget it. But he is here at this moment, as the essential voice, an independent person, and the only convincing spokesman for poetry. He talks about his work and about its attachment to tradition, as he found it. He had just been to Russia, and he reports, wryly, on that, and on the revolution's inability to distinguish "grievance from grief, that is politics from poetry." At the moment he spoke, the Cuban missile crisis was reaching its most critical stage: our ships were on their way to blockade Cuba. Frost admitted to feeling "let down" because only shortly before Khrushchev had spoken to him of his "dedication for peace." Frost had some connection to Kennedy too, as we remember. Thus we have the context for the close of this short essay:

But if the manipulators of grievances had let him down, so had the defenders of grief, the poets before him. It was tradition and its memory and care that he insisted on finally. He accused his learned audience of not knowing its real past. To prove it, he quoted lovingly a passage of poetry beginning "The old agitation of myrtles and roses . . ." and confidently but sadly said that no one there could identify it. And no one could (p. 208).

I haven't found that quotation yet; perhaps some reader will let me know.

As much as I admire Davenport's essay, a better book, for the longer run, is the *Collected Poems* of E. L. Mayo, a gathering of 222 lyric poems, thoughtful, musical, and metaphysical, bringing together three earlier volumes and a *Selected Poems*, which this book supercedes because of its addition of poems previously uncollected or that were in manuscript at the time of Mayo's death in 1979. Mayo, the winner of *Poetry* magazine's Blumenthal Prize in 1942 and an Amy Lowell Travelling Poetry Fellowship for 1953-54, taught at Drake University from 1947 on, writing steadily all that while. In recent years his poems have appeared regularly in *New Letters*, and David Ray, its editor, has brought out this volume as a book issue and has added a short introduction. I cannot think of many better ways for a small magazine to make a serious contribution to American literature than to persist in publishing a poet as fine as Mayo and to make us all now the beneficiaries of this collection. It is much less easily digested than a volume of essays. The writing is terse, compacted. Only a few poems are longer than a page, none longer than two. Their subjects, their ostensible subjects anyway, sample many things that caught Mayo's mature and watchful interest. Subjects come from literature, painting, theology and philosophy; they come equally from current events, especially World War II, the Cold War, the atom bomb, questions of space and its exploration, the decay of houses and neighborhoods, nature, memories of youth and childhood and marriage. They add up in such a way as to represent a life that was taken seriously and examined unflinchingly, that was lived with humor but even more with a determination not just to let it pass. And since poems decay much more slowly than ideas and opinions, Mayo has succeeded in giving voice to a representative American life, one that finds an authoritative stance and sounds genuine, one that speaks for many more persons than himself, I suppose, but that came, surely and quietly, only from him.

In a few more months we intend to run a longer review of this book, so I will take only quick notice of it now. Here though are two poems, one from early and one from much later, that may suggest what awaits a reader.

### El Greco II

The Greek began where color ends, with black,  
And wooed the spectrum from the heart of night,  
And though sometimes he trembled and turned back,  
Painted as near as mortals do to light.  
He knew that pictures for the ages' wear  
Are not by tender colors hatched and nursed,  
Nor pay the reckoning of time and air  
Unless they stood on darkness from the first.  
The Greek began with things that make men grieve:  
The heartbreak and certainty of night,  
But in the very midst could still believe  
And on his canvas generated light  
Like the great sun that on so black a thing  
Maintains the tall, blue, catholic sky of spring.

There is more, much more in this fine volume, which grows slowly in the reader's eye. I would not be surprised if the reader who takes it up finds new words to repeat when alone, new thoughts to take out for a walk, more than a little companionship for winters and summers ahead. Here is one more poem:

### Of Angels

Your angel weighs heavier than your mortal.  
It hurts like hell if you run into one.  
Only one wrestler ever made an angel cry uncle.

When they leap off the world it is as though  
Washington Monument flew,  
The whole world wobbles like a soap-bubble. Hang on!  
One will be leaving any minute now.

I love the thought of angels, ethereal to most of our thinking, making a soap-bubble of the earth.

Nor can I leave off without mentioning one more book, a small one called *Tuesday at Nine*, said to be the first edition of the complete works of Hooper Thorne, hand set and printed by the Penny Whistle Press (1981) and carrying no price. The book, a dozen pages with end papers, contains as many poems, each of them brief, short-lined, and deft. My favorite is III.

Street sounds  
are not breakers  
on the coast of Maine  
nor is lunch at Guido's  
a picnic on the sand.  
And seventy is not  
seventeen.  
No matter: I held  
a pretty girl's hand  
last summer.

By its strategic placing we are shown that seventy has much in common with seventeen, a fact with which I am glad to become acquainted. And if, as Mandelstam has said, classical poetry is best perceived, not as that which has already been, but as that which must be, then this small poem has that kind of claim upon us. There is something of the air of the Greek Anthology about it, and the book contains several other possible favorites for other days and hours.

*D.H.*