

"But in this March we stare each other down / two rams caught in a thicket by the horns." One can everywhere find examples of good beginnings, of thoughts that aren't completed, of non sequiturs that form nothing more than a vague mood, and of strained conclusions. But Davison's talent calls for a different observation.

If bad poets, plentifully supplied by the academic world, wish to defend and enjoy the formless, incoherent state to which they've reduced contemporary poetry, that's fine: even if they abandoned their doctrines against poetic meter and rhyme and simple intelligibility, they'd probably still not expand the audience for new poetry. But if a man of Peter Davison's powers and experience were to pick up the gauntlet, it seems probable that he—and others who'd no doubt follow him—could save contemporary American poetry from the discredit in which it's held by its potential readership. We can only hope that Peter Davison, with *Praying Wrong* behind him, will accept the challenge. cc

William Rice is a fiction writer in Philadelphia.

## Eye-Openers

by Sandra Sider

Roger Shattuck: *The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature and the Arts*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

*The Innocent Eye* is a collection of 22 essays by critic and historian Roger Shattuck. Divided into three main sections, the book spans 20 years of critical writing, though most of the essays come from the last decade. These representative selections demonstrate Shattuck's continuing concern with the creative process as focused in French literature and art of the 20th century. Writers and artists considered here include Balzac, Baudelaire, Valéry, Artaud, Malraux, Monet, Stravinsky, Magritte, and DuChamp.

Four new essays, first published in this collection, display Shattuck's earnest involvement with artistic consciousness. His usual whimsy and playful wit are noticeably absent in these four pieces—hardly surprising for a writer immersed in the self-destructive course of modern society and the awesome responsibility of self-realization or attempting to interpret Apollinaire's visual poem "Ocean-Letter." Shattuck's concern with the foibles of modern

culture culminates in his afterword, "The Innocent Eye and the Armed Vision."

Shattuck calls for a critical disarmament, which he likens to Keats's "negative capability," Rimbaud's "dérèglement de tous les sens," Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt," and Ruskin's "innocence of the eye." He calls for faith in the particular (obviously based in a particular culture) rather than the abstraction of semiotics or the absurdity of textuality. Shattuck argues that a "responsible education" (which one assumes would include travel, historical research, and interdisciplinary studies) might teach us "tolerant wisdom in the face of what we both know and don't know." Such training (the "armed vision") does indeed liberate the eye to explore works of art from all cultures with renewed candor and wonder.

The problem with *The Innocent Eye* is that Shattuck addresses his plea to critics, who must resort to the limitations of language for their critical interpretations of art. The "innocence" of the passive eye must always be compromised by the all-too-active critical tongue. The best that we can do is to keep our minds as open as our eyes. cc

Sandra Sider is an art critic who writes from New York.

## Grendel Redivivus

by E. Christian Kopff

Marijane Osborne: *Beowulf: A Verse Translation With Treasures of the Ancient North*; University of California Press; Berkeley.

This is a beautiful book, artfully crafted, fitting attractively on a coffee table, though somewhat outsized when you try to put it on a shelf. Scattered on the page next to the translation are pictures of Anglo-Saxon art, to give the reader a feeling of that ancient culture, distantly related to our own. The translation itself is straightforward, composed in a meter echoing without reproducing the metrical pattern of the original. Although Osborne fights shy of the difficulties of the meter, after Kennedy and Chikering among translators, Lewis and Tolkien among scholars, and Ezra Pound, Basil Bunting, and John Peck among poets, it is getting harder to treat the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line as an obstacle to fine verse, instead of a challenge.

When Osborne confronts the density of Anglo-Saxon poetic diction and its

verbal music, she typically prefers to simplify. Some may feel that she is ironing out the creases along with the wrinkles. So *firena hyrde*, "shepherd of sins," used of the monster Grendel, becomes "that cruel fiend." In pedantic contrast, a number of Old English words are kept in the text and translated in the notes. These range from essential Old English concepts like *wyrd* and *shope* ("bard," spelled *scop* in Old English texts), common words like *sarks* and *athelings*, for which equivalents or paraphrases exist in English, and words like *thane* and *byrnies*, which do survive in 19th-century literature and should be familiar to readers of, say, Sir Walter Scott.

The frequent Germanic compounds of the original are consistently avoided. The result is an anomaly. The translation is well-fitted for an undergraduate translation course on the epic or "Great Books," since its simplicity of language does not put too great a strain on the current undergraduate while signaling to the only slightly better-read graduate instructor when to pause to comment on "Fate in *Beowulf*" or "The Role of the Bard in Anglo-Saxon Epic." The work, however, is an oversized book, loaded with artistic pictures that invite the reader to peruse slowly and thoughtfully.

Osborne and the Yale Anglo-Saxon scholar Fred Robinson each contribute an essay to the volume, the latter on the

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background of the poem. Intelligent and useful though both essays are, most readers will still need Charles Kennedy's introduction to his translation (now in paperback from Oxford), since that essay presents the scholarly "problems" of *Beowulf*, summarized from Friedrich Klaeber's standard edition, in a clear and sometimes original fashion. It cannot be said that Osborne's translation is a definitive advance over Kennedy as a whole, though it certainly is in parts. The package is attractive, though, and the *Beowulf* amateur will derive much pleasure from it. cc

E. Christian Kopff is professor of classics at the University of Colorado and an editor of *Classic Journal*.

## Modern Mobs

by Richard A. Cooper

Elias Canetti: *Crowds & Power*; Continuum Books; New York; \$9.95.

On the stage of history, the crowd plays a dramatic and often critical role. Our own era has seen many powerful and ferocious crowds. Indeed the Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti, a Sephardic Jew from Bulgaria who lives in London but writes in German, contends that the crowd springs from the hunting packs of our primitive ancestors. As befits its violent origins, the crowd seeks to "discharge" its energy against a target, usually human. In the crowd's fascination with incendiary destruction, Canetti sees the survival of ancient passions. Driven by a "will" to subsume everyone under its banner, the crowd seeks to destroy those who stand apart. Canetti's belief that the quest for power within crowds is the desire to be the solitary survivor surveying the silent crowd of the dead explains why so many of our modern leaders have presided over hecatombs of corpses. It is in war that modern crowd behavior best illustrates Canetti's thesis of hunting-pack origins.

*Crowds and Power*, however, suffers from some of the worst faults of 19th-century writing: the substitution of analogy for proof; the careless use of explorers' accounts; and the question-begging concept of vestiges from the primeval past. How do we know that the crowd is a vestige of the hunting pack? Canetti does not say. His concept of vestiges requires acceptance of racial memory, an inherited unconscious memory of the species' past. Canetti creates a "metahistory," a history of what might have happened if only we

accept his conclusions.

Canetti examines unionism and union strikes—with its language of "Brotherhood" and "Solidarity"—as prime modern examples of crowd behavior, but curiously, he omits any discussion of Georges Sorel's compatible conception of the general strike as myth. Given the role of the crowd in 20th-century revolutions, it is even more curious that Canetti barely mentions National Socialism and Communism. Consider the Nazi Party's name: National Socialist German Workers' Party. Every single word refers to a crowd. "Party" is most congenial to Canetti's thesis: the political party was a "pack" organized for the pursuit of power. In ideology and practice, National Socialism was statist and collectivist. The "race," the "volk," and the "Aryans" are all crowd symbols.

If the crowd and its link to power is primeval in origin, as Canetti says, why does it persist? Canetti does not consider how modern politicians have deliberately reinforced the crowd mentality in the public schools and through propaganda and military conscription. Few people today can resist the influence of those who engineer mass conformity.

Canetti's *Crowds and Power* forces the question: How can we defuse the crowd's explosive potential? Our future requires an answer Canetti does not supply. cc

Richard Cooper is a graduate of Columbia College.

## The Politics of Gullibility

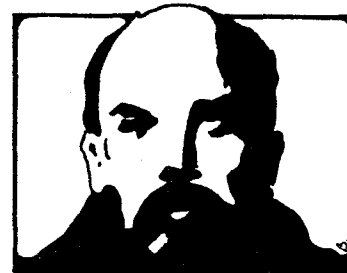
by Gary S. Vasilash

Gregory O'Brien: *Lenin Lives!*; Stein & Day; New York.

The degree to which Americans live in a media-contrived world is well illustrated in Gregory O'Brien's slim novel *Lenin Lives!* Mr. O'Brien shows the distortions in this world by imagining what would happen should the Soviets one day claim "they have performed a medical feat of sensational proportions: the resurrection of Russian revolutionary leader V. I. Lenin." O'Brien follows the story through newspaper reports, magazine articles, and transcripts of TV and radio broadcasts. At first, the oracles of information call the whole thing a tasteless hoax. Sixteen days later an *LA Times* editorial concludes: "In our news space, we have until now

dealt gingerly with Western sensitivities on this matter by placing the name Lenin in quotation marks. Beginning with today's edition we have stopped. Lenin lives." The proof? No medical exam, not even finger prints, but instead charisma and manners of bygone days. Surely O'Brien has given us a caricature. But how often does the insatiable American audience demand much more of its visible or invisible talking heads? cc

Gary Vasilash is a contributing editor to *Chronicles*.



## A Fighter & An Oiler

Russell Pulliam: *Publisher: Gene Pulliam, Last of the Newspaper Titans*; Jameson Books; Ottawa, IL.

Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier: *Dirksen of Illinois: Senatorial Statesman*; University of Illinois Press; Urbana, IL.

While national politics is largely an East Coast affair and the national media split their operations between New York and California, recent biographies remind us that the Midwest has provided some of this century's leading figures in both. Son of Methodist missionaries, Eugene C. Pulliam was born on May 3, 1889, in a sod hut in Ulysses, Kansas. After learning the fundamentals of newspaper journalism in Kansas City, he went on to become one of America's leading publishers, controlling four metropolitan dailies and a string of smaller papers. Son of a design painter, Everett McKinley Dirksen was born (with his twin brother Thomas) on January 4, 1896, in Pekin, Illinois. After polishing his rhetorical skills as an amateur thespian, while earning his living as a baker, Dirksen successfully ran for Congress in 1932 and eventually made his way up very near the top—the Republican leader of the Senate.

Both were hardworking and ambitious men. Both acquired reputations as