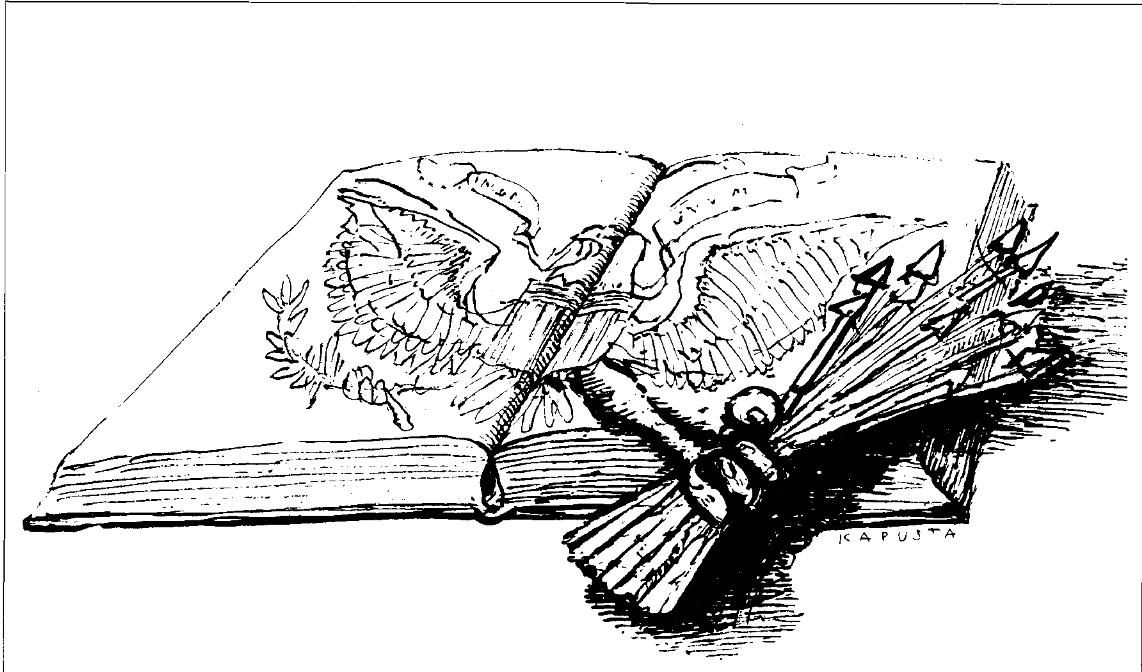
Once Upon a Time in America

by Bill Kauffman



Janusz Kapusta

One of the strangest rituals in the United States Senate is the annual reading of President Washington's Farewell Address. The chore of recitation usually falls to a freshman nonentity eager to curry favor by performing what is regarded as a drudge task. The chamber is empty, save for the classical remnant: New York's Senator Moynihan and West Virginia's Robert Byrd, the pomaded knight from the mountaineer state, who, with his florid defenses of American sovereignty and the Daughters of the Confederacy and the United States Constitution (as opposed to the Republican pollsters' Contract with America) has become something of a statesman. "I do not see in front of this chamber the U.N. flag," Byrd told the Senate during the Bush-Clinton Somalia debacle. "I never saluted the U.N. flag. I saluted Old Glory, the American flag."

This is a homey patriotism that traitors can never understand; which, indeed, they sneer at. It is of a piece with the remark by Wild Bill Langer of North Dakota during the original NATO debate that "when a Senator casts his vote in favor of the Atlantic Pact, in favor of getting us mixed up in all the problems of European nations, that Senator says to the American people, 'I know more about things than George Washington ever knew.'"

For saying this Langer was deemed a provincial idiot. The real fools, though, are the Honorables who every February read Washington's Farewell Address, with its injunctions against "overgrown military establishments" and "permanent alliances with any portion of the world" and "excessive partiality for one foreign nation," which leads to a disastrous situation wherein "real patriots who may resist the intrigues of the favorite are liable to become suspected and odious." (Whichever favorite can he mean?) After this perfunctory nod, the Senate spends the next 364 days of the year repudiating the Father of our Country. Or as an insurrectionist shouts in *Caesar's Column* (1891), Ignatius Donnelly's dystopian novel of late 20th-century America: "We are a republic in name; free only in forms."

The substantial public dissatisfaction with the New World Order suggests that Americans remain essentially Washingtonian in their reluctance to subjugate distant brown people, subsidize distant white people, and subserve distant yellow people. (By the way, why is it that those who *object* to killing foreigners are the ones called xenophobes?)

A Potomac chin-puller recently boasted to *Time* magazine that for half a century "only a bipartisan consensus among elites kept the country's latent isolationism at bay." This consensus has been enforced, in part, by smearing any outlaw who holds, with Wild Bill Langer, that the counsel of George Washington contains more wisdom than the effluvial pool of the Newt Gingrich-Clark Clifford Party. We have been taught, in Gore Vidal's phrase, that the price of freedom is eternal discretion.

"Well," as the song goes, "how did we get here?" One hundred and one years ago a Nebraska congressman was defeated in his bid to represent his state in the United States Senate. So he

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became chief of the editorial staff of the *Omaha World Herald*; two years later he stirred the hearts of Democratic conventioneers in Chicago with an address that, come the revolution, will be read in the Senate every July 9:

> Ah, my friends, we say not one word against those who live on the Atlantic coast, but the hardy pioneers who have braved all the dangers of the wilderness, who have made the desert to blossom as the rose—the pioneers away out there, who rear their children near to Nature's heart, where they can mingle their voices with the voices of the birds—out there where they have erected schoolhouses for the education of their young, churches where they praise their Creator, and cemeteries where rest the ashes of their dead—these people, we say, are as deserving of the consideration of our party as any people in this country. It is for these that we speak. We do not come as aggressors. Our war is not a war of conquest; we are fighting in the defense of our homes, our families, and posterity. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned; we have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded; we have begged, and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them.

Thus spake William Jennings Bryan.

In 1900 a ten-year-old boy in Rochester, New York, named Henry W. Clune heard candidate Bryan speak. The Clunes were a prosperous family, stalwart Republicans, yet Bryan's vision incorporated them in a way it might not have two decades earlier. By succumbing to the imperialist temptation—over the objections of his Ohio advisors, especially William Rufus "Good" Day of Ravenna—President McKinley galvanized an anti-imperialist movement that was breathtaking in its breadth. From prairie populist to Main Street shopkeeper, from Henry James to Mark Twain: defenders of the Old Republic were legion. They would, in time, include the young Bryan auditor Master Clune.

On February 8 my friend Henry W. Clune celebrated his 105th birthday—with a martini and his dog-eared collection of Addison. I have described Henry in these pages ("Henry and Louise in the Lair de Clune," August 1991) as probably the most rooted writer in the history of American letters. Novelist, historian, and (according to the *Saturday Evening Post*) the most popular local newspaper columnist in midcentury America, Henry was also a classic Main Street Republican. (He did recently confess to me, with a conspiratorial wink, that in 1920 he voted for the noble Eugene V. Debs of Terre Haute, Indiana, because the Socialists knew the score on the war.)

Henry was a fixture on the pages of the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle* for more than 50 years; in 1940 and 1966 he penned some of the most blistering criticisms of the War Party I have ever read. His theme, in both wars, was the way in which militarism corrodes our soul. He came to agree with his Upstate New York compatriot Edmund Wilson that the government of these United States had become "self-intoxicated, homicidal and menacing."

And in retaliation . . . nothing. Henry was untouched. Oh, his America First columns drew the fire of a few typewriter hawks perched at the University of Rochester (though the University's president, Alan Valentine, was a prominent isolationist); still, Henry suffered no infamy: his reputation in Rochester was unsmirchable. He knew everyone in town, from the late George Eastman to the ticket-taker in the burlesque hall, and as a result the Smear Bund was powerless. The lesson I draw from this is that dissent is possible, even protected, within an America of distinct and self-confident towns, cities, and regions; an America in which Rochester and Richmond and Omaha and San Francisco are more than administrative units of the New World Order.

Today, the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle* is run by remote control from the Gannett Corporation's headquarters in occupied Virginia. Frank Gannett, Henry's boss and friend, was an inquisitive—and, alas, acquisitive—farmboy, and vain withal, but nonetheless he was an American, first, as were most publishers and editors. Not so today, when foreigners own and edit so many of our magazines, interpreting our lives for us and displacing American collaborationists as the brains, so to speak, of the Vital Center. The command barked out by these imperious imperialists is, in the words of a recent *Economist* editorial, "You can't go home." Oh yes we can—and we would appreciate it if your agents would do likewise.

(Speaking of our transatlantic tourists and their brochures, Thomas Hart Benton, Old Bullion, the Jacksonian senator from what the Rainmakers called the great state of Misery, wrote Martin Van Buren in 1851, "Have you read Tocqueville? He is the authority in Europe and with the federalists here and will be with our posterity if they know nothing but what the federalists write." Interesting, is it not, that whenever sinister political celebrities reach back to that misty, hazy, prehistoric America prior to 1941, the only guy they ever quote is a French vagabond?)

But back to Henry W. Clune, our upright avatar of the America that was, and ought to be. Henry's novel *Monkey on a Stick* was the uncredited—though not unremunerated—source of Frank Capra's movie *Meet John Doe*. Capra—like Henry and so many other hale Americans—loathed Franklin D. Roosevelt. Capra and FDR were really antitheses: the Sicilian boy dressed in rags who sold papers to put himself through Caltech and the lazy child of the patriciate, mocked by his arch cousin Alice as "Nancy"; the artist who saw his creation (Longfellow Deeds) as "the living symbol of the deep rebellion in every human heart—a growing resentment against being compartmentalized," and the lying politician whose sympathies were always with the raw steel-toed-boot-to-the-head power of the state. Capra loved and respected women, coaxing outstanding performances from shy actresses Jean Arthur and Donna Reed; FDR married his shy cousin—and then cheated on her.

The gap between rulers and ruled can be measured in a thousand anecdotal ways. My maternal great-grandmother, an immigrant from Northern Italy, cursed FDR for blackening the final years of her life. Two of her sons were conscripted into Mr. Roosevelt's Army to kill or be killed by foreigners who, however depraved their rulers, had never done them any harm. (Or as a great Kentucky pugilist once put it, "I ain't got no quarrel with no Viet Cong.")

My great-grandmother's attitude, and that of so many Americans in both world wars, was expressed by a character in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*: "It's not our fight. I don't want to send my boys three thousand miles across the sea to get shot for those foreigners. If they come over here, I'll shoulder a gun with the best of them, but until they do they

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can fight it out among themselves."

Fittingly, the deciding vote in favor of the 1941 draft extension, which passed the House 203-202, was cast by the fox-hunting lord of the Genesee Valley, Congressman James W. Wadsworth, Jr., who for bucking his party and authorizing the abduction of thousands of his farmboy constituents won the obscene sobriquet "Conscience of the House." The Wadsworths were famous for their superciliousness: they once fired an uppity hired hand who dared purchase a Model T. But wops and micks and appleknockers made fine fodder for the war machine, and though my great-grandmother died of a broken heart, her beloved sons thousands of miles removed . . . well, such is the price of being a Great Power. Empire kills and Empire deracinates.

Proverbs promises that when a wicked man dies, his hope perishes, and all he expected from his power comes to nothing, and I suppose we can take solace that Hitler and Stalin are playing Risk in Hell and FDR is playing with his toy boats in, at best, Purgatory.

Once upon a time in America there existed political figures who spoke for the tens of millions of normal Americans—Henry Clune Republicans, Paulina Stella Democrats, Frank Capra populists—who did not want to squander blood and treasure in un-American wars on distant shores. This was, in fact, the original rainbow coalition: black Americans have generally been wholesomely isolationist, and for the last two decades virtually the only congressional opposition to foreign aid and our never-ending series of massacres of dark-skinned people has come from the black left. (The Haiti occupation has little support among ordinary blacks; it is the fever dream of the bootlicking Uncle Toms of the Ron Brown Democracy.)

One of Henry Clune's contemporaries, the late poet-folklorist Carl Carmer of Oak Orchard, just up the road from me, rhymed:

Late June he died
Don't mourn, said she
Things keep on
That folks don't see

Good old American isolationism has kept on, and will keep on keeping on as long as we have enough "insubordinate Americans," to use Robert Frost's self-description, who still value the importance of "doin' your own thing in your own time," as those two deeply American filmmakers Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda (our Kansas-Nebraska Act-ors) said in their wonderful movie about the perdurability of pioneer virtues, *Easy Rider*.

What we need to do is find our way back to an America in which a William Jennings Bryan and a Henry Clune understand just how common are their interests as freeborn Americans aligned against a ruling class whose rapacity and bloodlust will not be sated until every last Angolan and aborigine and Abyssinian is either dead or watching *Ricki Lake*, and every American native is disarmed, docile, and ductile, pledging allegiance to the U.N. flag and never forgetting, as the scent of charred flesh from the Waco holocaust drifts across the land, that there, but for the grace of Boutros Boutros-Ghali, go you, white trash.

An incendiary band of the late 1970's used to end its chaotic concerts with a declaration—"we mean it, man"—that applies to us as well, and explains why we, the faithful sons of Bryan and Mencken, of Lindbergh and Debs, of John C. Calhoun and Silas Wright, of Robert A. Taft and Thomas P. Gore, are all outlaws in the eyes of our un-American rulers. Because in our fealty to our American ancestors, our steadfastness in upholding the flags of the 13 stars and the coiled rattlesnake, our dedication to a peaceful America of healthy self-confident regions, untainted by militarism, untempted by imperialism, we are, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh described Senator Wheeler and his wife, "American, American, American." And we mean it, man. ©

LIBERAL ARTS

JUDICIAL TYRANNY IN CALIFORNIA

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, federal judge Mariana R. Pfaelzer has ordered the state of California to post notices at schools, medical clinics, and welfare offices stating that Proposition 187 will not be enforced before a hearing can be held on the legality of the initiative. Pfaelzer issued this injunction at the request of the ACLU, which feared that illegal immigrants might not know that they still qualify for many services paid for by the public. Of course, the statewide notices will be posted at public expense.

Upon learning of Pfaelzer's injunction, Horacio Grana, a legal immigrant from Mexico, wrote her a letter decrying her lack of respect for the voters who overwhelmingly approved Proposition 187. "What I do not understand," he said, "is that if we pay the salaries of judges that represent the laws of our nation, how is it possible that judges like yourself . . . attempt to support those people that break our laws? . . . I feel that you are not aware that you are the one who is committing unconstitutional acts."

After reading Grana's letter, Pfaelzer dispatched Federal Marshals to investigate and question the citizen. "What are you guys," asked Grana's friend Glen Spencer, "the Gestapo?"

Meanwhile, another federal judge in California, Stephen V. Wilson, barred the government from deporting two members of the terrorist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, on the grounds that classified information about their membership in the organization had not been turned over to the two men. Eligible for deportation under a 1990 law, they will nonetheless be permitted to remain in the United States. "It's a great decision," said David Cole, a lawyer at the Center for Constitutional Rights in Manhattan.

—*Ruth Coffey*

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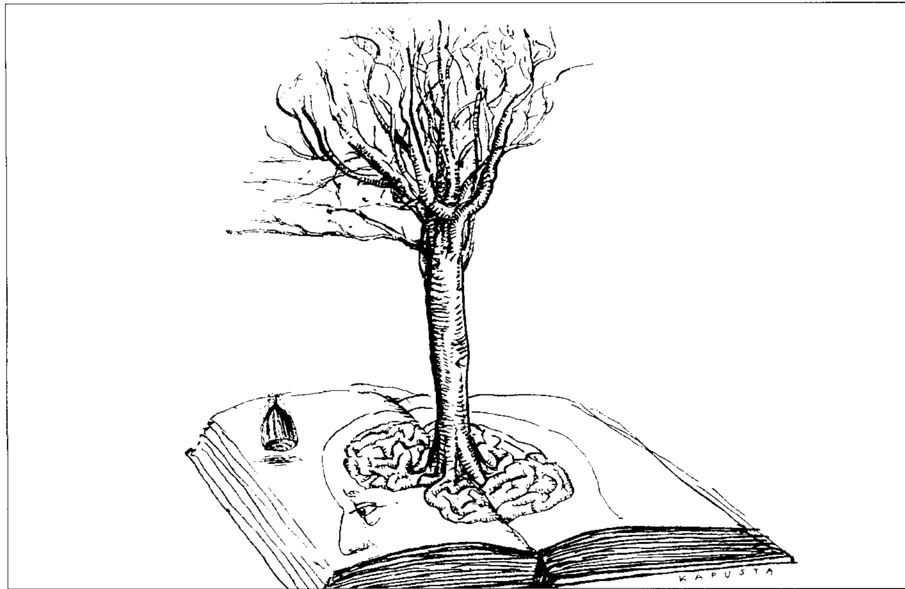
Frederick Turner and the Rebirth of Literature

by Paul Lake



Janusz Kapusta

The breach that opened between the serious and popular arts during the early years of this century has so widened over subsequent decades that the current "postmodern" era is characterized by a kind of cultural schizophrenia. While visual images bombard us through the media, the graphic arts have increasingly evaporated in performance and conceptual art. While recordings go platinum and rock and rap concerts draw huge audiences throughout the world, serious music haunts university music departments like a guilty specter. While popular novels sell by the millions and poetry is read on campuses and in coffee shops from Maine to California, serious literature is increasingly slighted by popular journals and ignored by the public. Published in limited editions and rarely reviewed, poetry is all but dead as a cultural force.

Not coincidentally, it was during this period that the term "serious" art became synonymous with "avant-garde"; that T.S. Eliot's dictum that modern art should be difficult came to imply that art should be impenetrable to ordinary readers. Even serious, ambitious works of art that lack a certain requisite level of difficulty are accorded an ambiguous status in our culture, so that, for instance, novels by distinguished writers such as Alison Lurie and John Updike elicit guilt and embarrassment in sophisticated readers similar to that produced by movies and popular songs. However much we enjoy them, we feel ashamed for submitting to the seductive pleasures of well-constructed plots and for being drawn into the lives of well-drawn, middle-class characters. Serious literature, we have been taught, is supposed to advance the technical experiments begun by Eliot, Woolf, Joyce, and Stein in the heyday of Modernism. It is supposed to be hard and somewhat painful, like a visit to the dentist.

This mixture of guilt and embarrassment is one of the hallmarks of the postmodern era. Narrative, poetic meter, tonality, visual representation—because they remind us of the crude symmetries of our vulgar mammalian bodies—appear in postmodern art, if at all, as parody or pastiche.

At the same time, the historical relation between art and criticism has been altered. Criticism—or critical theory, as we have learned to call it—is no longer ancillary to the arts, but a vast, sophisticated mechanism of equal or greater prestige. Critical theory has even spawned a new species of writing as abstract and antiseptic as its own jargon—"language writing," or "language poetry," as it is called—writing so sterile and empty of human content that it can be said not to have readers, only writers and critics.

One such critic, Marjorie Perloff, in her book *Radical Artifice* has championed avant-garde "language writing" precisely because it refuses any concessions to the vulgar reader, setting itself up in opposition to the language of popular media. Perloff argues that in an age of ubiquitous electronic babble, language writing replaces naive imitations of a debased natural speech with its own "radical artifice," and that while such writing might initially repel the reader, its very difficulty and unpopularity are proof of its authenticity.

For readers unfamiliar with it, here is what one version of language writing looks like. I have chosen the lines at random from a poem entitled "PCOET" by David Melnick, from George Hartley's *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*:

seta
colecc
puilse, i
canoe
its spear heieo
as Rea, cinct pp
pools we sly drosp
Geianto

(o sordea, oweedsca!)

Poetry this disembodied could embarrass no one. Written not so much to please a reader as to provide an academic critic with an occasion for an essay, the poem might be said not fully

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