

LITERATURE

The Golden Goose: A Recollection

by Robert Beum

In the bright, warm autumn of 1947 that followed a chilly summer, several hundred bewildered 17-year-olds found the Ohio State University campus in Columbus swarming with an alien and formidable species: veterans. The war, though well over, was still more a reality than a memory. The Great Depression was over too, having disappeared insensibly in the war years. But the Affluent Society had not yet made its self-congratulatory appearance. There remained a creative poverty, the thrift that spurs imagination and makes it possible to rejoice in building something out of nothing; and there remained what affluence had set its sights on destroying: a certain settledness, a measure of the old quietness, in people and in the streets, that had linked the generations. Sheer “making do” made sense, even to the young. So did discipline, prudence, scholarship, good looks, good clothes, and even, to a certain extent, modesty and chasteness. In 1947, service and good manners were still almost routine. Literacy, including cultural literacy, was an expectation with a moral force behind it. Everyone read, if only Street and Smith pulps, and words seen, heard, formed with the fingers, and unhurriedly turned over in the mind did what can be done for sensibility in no other way.

The scene had something to do with the hatching of *The Golden Goose*, a little press and little magazine that published established and unestablished writers from 1949 through 1954. The history of the *Goose* has never been written. Richard Wirtz Emerson, the man best qualified to write it, died in chaotic circumstances, and what papers he kept may well have disappeared along with him. Frederick Eckman, co-founder of the enterprise, died in 1996, leaving only scattered notes on his years with the *Goose*. But his death seems to have revitalized the long-standing awareness that

we published some of the earliest work of writers who would go on to make their mark (Robert Creeley, Kenneth Rexorth, Charles Edward Eaton, and Eckman himself were among them) and that our proselytizing for William Carlos Williams was not without effect.

But that renewed awareness can say little or nothing about what we were and how we worked. It seems almost impossible for anyone born later than 1950 to realize how much could be done on a shoestring in the earlier half of this century. The *Goose* was able to fly pretty high and a long way without government or foundation grants or university connections, even without personal fortune. It seems equally unimaginable today that a seminal and productive venture in writing and publishing could be personal, judgmental, anti-democratic, irregular, and free of committees. But such we were, and worse: In a fashion thoroughly antique, we put friendship and loyalty to one another ahead of success in the venture itself. In fact, that venture was only one aspect of an exuberant camaraderie and a youthful commitment to spontaneity. In the present world of packaged living that substitutes careerism, specialization, and self-conscious ideology for personal identity, such an insouciance may be equally unpicturable.

In any event, the late 40's were the right years for poetry and its printing. The potential audience remained: Poetry—as distinct from poetized ideology—lingered on in the school curricula, luring those who were capable of being lured and who might not have known they were unless there had been assignments and homework on Keats, Tennyson, Bryant, and Poe. There were incidental but not inconsiderable postwar felicities: High-quality paper had returned to the marketplace—we dug up Ticonderoga laid text like buried treasure—and labor costs, though they were going up, were still well below the stratosphere. The really big things were the Depression and the war. The Depression had sobered the country, deepened it a little. The war, following immediately, extended that sobered consciousness. The tragic sense developed and was not erased at once by victory and peace. Poverty and loss—from late 1929 through 1941; then several years of sacrifice, disruption of lives, carnage; it was

another, and very long, interruption of America's pursuit of the happiness of materialism; and when heroic and tragic values become meaningful, the poetic life within us revives and flourishes as well. One unmistakable sign of the national lapse into spiritual life was the immense popularity and prestige of serious music during the war and for several years afterward. In a relatively dull and uncouth prairie town like Columbus there were more Bach concerts than one could possibly attend; Schumann was almost as well known as John Philip Sousa; even Brahms, that backward-looking, broken-hearted idealist, commanded an audience inconceivable today.

Another unmistakable sign appeared to me one October afternoon. I had wandered into one of the North High Street shops across from the main gate of the campus, gone directly up a short flight of stairs, and had something to eat—the fast-food palaces were not yet pandemic, and to eat you sometimes not only had to go inside but also handle a short stairway. On the way out, I noticed what any observant person would have noticed on the way in: a huge wooden rack overflowing with the latest issues of arty and generally exotic little magazines. There were names like *Imagi*, *Cronos*, and *Tiger's Eye*, and all of them featured poetry. I dared to leaf through a few but was too dazzled, and probably too pressed for time as well, to read much. I had been writing poetry—that is, trying to write it—since my early teens, and I was suddenly aware that there was a much bigger market than I had supposed. How recently that market had expanded, or why it had expanded, I had no idea. I only knew that, at that moment, my urge to write and to publish expanded a hundredfold. I wanted my name in that rack.

That very autumn, though I didn't know it, Richard Wirtz Emerson was editing his first magazine, *Cronos*, right across the street, with assistance from Fred Eckman. Many years later, Fred described Dick's editorial debut:

a month or so after I arrived at OSU in the fall of 1946, I saw a bulletin-board notice somewhere or other that there would be an organization meeting of a “writers workshop” in the (old) Ohio Union. The usual motley crew as-

sembled—maybe a dozen or so. The meeting was called to order by one Ward Taylor, a pleasant chap—stocky, horn-rimmed, prematurely balding—who looked more like an accountant than an English major. About 10 or 15 minutes into the meeting our old pal Dick the Dude made an entrance. Tall, very blond, wearing an expensive trench coat with a white silk scarf and pigskin gloves. Big theatrical smile. Apologized for being late, but explained that his uncle, Russell Wirtz, had treated him to “a magnificent filet mignon” at some private club or other, and that they had “lingered over a snifter of 4-Star Hennessy Cognac.” Theatrical, hokey—but nonetheless impressive.

It wasn't long until people quite willingly ceded the leadership to Mr. Charisma. A few proletarian grumbles could be heard, but by and large the whole group felt that here was a character out of F. Scott Fitzgerald, not some pushy little s--- from Fraternity Row. Emerson had ideas, was a good critic, showed a genuine interest in everybody, etc. etc. We had a number of meetings at various places on campus, and 2 or 3 times out in the ever-popular basement study at 1927 Northwest Boulevard. By late winter the idea of *Cronos* was born, and by spring it actually existed.

This vignette may be taken as Holy Writ: Fred Eckman was the closest observer and the most disinterested, if also comic, reporter I ever knew. Dick Emerson was Gatsby himself, an “elegant roughneck” more moneyed than the rest of us, intelligent, articulate, impenetrably private, and—like Gatsby before him—obsessed with a latter-day Daisy he was losing or about to begin losing. (She was known to us as Frances Helen; Dick dedicated his first and best book—now a collector's item—to her: *Poems from the River Lo.*)

The classrooms, jammed with those lean and hungry G.I.-Billers, intimidated some of us. As a child, I had played on the long, quiet greenswards and climbed with the quieting ivy, and at 17 I had still envisioned college life as an idyll, the lifting landscapes and the leisurely pursuance of texts blending into a high-minded, almost too satisfying pastoral. I woke to find that I had to hurry every-

where and work too hard and that even speed and persistence did not suffice. Two years went by before I was able to put together a few poems I thought fit to be read, nerve myself up, and submit them to *The Golden Goose*, the phoenix that had risen from the ashes of the short-lived *Cronos*. The response to my poems was a phone call from Fred Eckman. The *Goose* needed an editorial assistant, and I was a possibility. The interview was to take place at Larry's Tavern, a favorite haunt of campus *literati* and other odd sets.

I got there first, all nerves, hoping to make a good impression. For one ready to commit himself to modern poetry, I had plenty of limitations aside from the bright green color of my years. I had read some Pound and Eliot and most of Stevens, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams with a certain pleasure, but I was no devotee of literary or any other modernism. I liked Nietzsche's prose better than most moderns' verse, and I supposed I would have to keep quiet about my attachment to Keats and the Impressions poems of Wilde, not to mention the exploits conjured up by Rider Haggard and Abraham Merritt.

Eckman the Unknown arrived on time. Big enough to make the varsity in those days; fully as fair as Emerson, but of smaller bone and finer features; cool eyes reticent but generous; a posture ever so slightly stooped, a walk with a barely detectable shuffle; a weak, hanging handshake; and overall a certain limpness suggesting not weakness or lack of tone but a retiring and contemplative nature. Wittily ironic in every phrase: Raymond Chandler as an overworked graduate student but equally acerbic on the scene at hand or distant.

For my nerves, he proved to be all remedy: He was understanding, obliging, intelligently self-effacing. Like Emerson, he had the unconscious assurance that can come—though it doesn't always—from sheer physical magnitude; it was complemented by a touch of phlegm, as it was in Emerson by far more than a touch of courteously menacing aggressiveness. Both men projected a calm with kindness behind it—a Northern European, slightly taciturn kindness, not the effusive thing that targets you and hems you in. Much Fred's junior, and readily given to admiration, I immediately made him an heroic figure. Of course, I had already made First Reader for *The Golden Goose* an heroic position.

A week or so later, I met Emerson at his Arlington apartment, the office, though not yet the printery, of the *Goose*. The man must have approved of his talent scout's choice: That same evening, I carried home a large stack of manuscripts; my elation was considerably larger. The adventure had begun.

In it, I figure as the most minor of all the characters. I was six or seven years younger than the two principals, and of course the emprise was already well under way before I joined it. But even Fred discovered there was and would always be only a single protagonist: Dick the energetic, suave, gracious tyrant. In any mild or wild *Goose* hunt that develops in the future, the trackers are as likely as not to bag the wrong game: To follow the lines of sheer probability is to conclude that the story of the *Goose* is one of humanitarian dedication and literary patriotism—surely the three of us must have been *pares inter pares* dedicated to the furtherance of American literary culture by providing new talent with a way into print. Far from the truth. Pronounce *Golden Goose*, and you've uttered Dick Emerson.

First and last, the adventure was his. Dick drew up the plans, cut the lumber, built the shop, and ran it; with assistance, sometimes valuable no doubt, but probably never indispensable, from us. As for that incorrigibly rhetorical word “dedication,” it just doesn't fit. To some extent, all of us were happy to be trying to promote good literature for its own sake; but we were also happy to have found a place, a noticeable place, within the activity of contemporary letters; Dick, in particular, possessed the motive of empire; and much of what we did was . . . to have larks. Working quietly through the late hours, the tireless letterpress kissing the beautiful paper again and again, sometimes until dawn or later; deciding on a format; anticipating a manuscript from William Carlos Williams—we published his *Pink Church*; telephoning Ernest Hemingway in Havana; analyzing the handsomeness of final print copy; handsetting our names and lines in the pre-democratic elegance of Caslon Old Style or in the clean modernity of Garamond Light; writing a letter of acceptance that would make some young poet whistle, do handspings, or run rather than walk . . . with tricks and games like those, who gave a thought to “dedication” or to some self-conscious category like “American literature”? The golden

goose was a living bird, instinctive, spontaneous, self-delighted, not the stuffed trophy of academics or politicized gnostic dreamers living in the future and dead in the present. Emerson's energy, ambient and unstoppable, rhythmic as the kissing platen, was itself a lark to behold. He insisted too often on imposing his will, but after all, it was a will born to be imposed; and it brought home the horns of plenty. Break that will, and you would break the whole man. All or nothing. Fred and I were amply prepared to endure a bit of silent pique now and then rather than indulge the temptation to make more than need be made over some disagreement on a choice of cover stock or a point of literary theory.

In the modern world, writers are expected to be not only dedicated—to something beyond “mere” writing, that is—but “humanitarian” or “humanist” as well. None of us qualified. We considered the preaching of humanitarianism to be a projection of ego writ large, and we couldn't see that collective egotism was in any way superior to the individual variety. In any event, without being visibly religious, we listened to our instincts and, if only unconsciously, put God where we thought He belonged: ahead of man, collective or otherwise. Our instinct had been bolstered by experience: Consistently, all three of us had found the “lovers of humanity” to be self-deluded people with heads full of fuzz and hearts full of materialism. Like many other young people in that long-ago time, we were idealistic, but mainly about art and aesthetic imagination, not about human nature or “the future.” None of us could have been completely comfortable on top of Parnassus: We were too American—insufficiently rarefied. But it was good art, and beauty in general, that beckoned us, and we were aware that when it came to a forced choice—honest, insubservient art on the one hand or comforts and amusements for the masses on the other—the Humanitarians, often people of learning and sensibility, usually went over to Demos, thus confirming their suspicion that art was the enemy of the people.

None of us were comfortable in bohemia or in proleedom, and none of us had ever seen a melting pot that wasn't full of dross. America had come straight out of Europe—originally, for the most part, out of its north—and we considered that a highly acceptable provenance. In short, though we befriended and

published anarchists (Leslie Hedley), communists (Horace Schwartz), Jews (Stanley Rosen), hippies (Christopher MacLaine), and what not, our own place, home sweet home, was on the right, especially that large section of it where one is far enough away from abstractions, activisms, and unreal social or chronological speculations to be free to listen only to instinct and imagination and to focus keenly on little things of insuperable importance, like phrases and metrics. We had leanings and preferences, not *esprit de parti*. Emerson would have established a benevolent autocracy—preferably with himself as autocrat. Fred felt that right-wing Republicanism was probably the least evil of American political choices. I agreed with him but was already becoming the royalist I was to remain.

I mention this “conservatism” because it represented the interior—temperament, and lessons learned the hard way, rather than extrinsic and isolated “political affiliation”—and as such it helped determine what sort of bird the *Goose* would be, and of course whether it would hatch in the first place. I also mention it as a corrective: It is still widely believed, just as it was in 1949, that literature belongs to the left, that a little press or little magazine would be, automatically, at least bohemian-anarchic, very pink if not outright red. In part, our outlook represented the conservatism that inheres in all classicism, by which we understood the recognition and even the appreciation of limits, and the desire to see things as they really are: In our own experience, there really was an Other, and it wasn't us, and the semiotic double-talk becoming fashionable in the classrooms seemed no more than the respectable camouflage by which nihilism covers its desire to pull everything down while it rises perversely above the law. We understood the appeal of Romantic idleness, but we had a taste for ordinary physical work, found responsibility toning, and rejected the psychology of self-indulgence, a psychology that promises the infinite but in the end only delivers self-imprisonment. Dick Emerson sometimes remarked that by “golden goose” he implied, among other things, the desire to “goose” modern letters and so cause it to leap unexpectedly into another golden, i.e., classical, age. Dick was no enemy of multiple meanings and was capable of appreciating the charm of the farfetched. In any event, he considered himself an anti-Ro-

mantic in the tradition of T.E. Hulme and Mario Praz. Fred and I left the preaching to him, but the line was our line too.

To me, literary modernism in general, from Pound onward, has come to seem thin: overly verbal, deifying technique, and often ignoring the depth, variety, and mystery of existence, and I was at least half of that mind in the days of the *Goose*. The modernist element in Emerson was actually modified by the Europeanism, the sense of the past, that had begun to grow strongly in him when he went overseas as a *Stars and Stripes* correspondent. In Rome, he had met George Santayana, lover of tradition, even of throne and altar, despite his skepticism. The young soldier-journalist had been moved, changed, by the old philosopher's retention of youthful alertness within a serenity born of his gladly acknowledged indebtedness to the traditions that had made his own rich-minded life possible. When we knew Dick, he was always much in love with vintage Italy, especially with the Italy of Lorenzo de Medici. He constantly alluded to Lorenzo, obviously identifying himself with that dynamic, if showy, patron of the arts. My own responsiveness to “Europe” came mostly, perhaps, from Bach, Brahms, Balzac, Debussy, Nietzsche, Poe, and other art which bore un-American implications. It certainly made me more comfortable with Emerson than I would have been without it. Of the three of us, only Fred was convinced that it was not only possible but important to create a poetry that was distinctly (I'm tempted to say, pristinely) American in both idiom and outlook. Dick and I agreed that Americanism was a flavor and could be tinted into poetry as into other things, but we couldn't see it as a virtue in itself; there were other flavors, and some people preferred orange.

The situation and operation of the press was this. Dick supported it, and himself, by working for various small printers. He learned to play a Chandler & Price as adroitly as Horowitz played the piano. Early on, one proprietor allowed him to use the shop for his own purposes, *gratis*, after closing time. That way, the press got started without the burden of a large initial expenditure. (Dick's money was more in the family background than in his own bank account.) We brought out magazine issues, chapbooks, and hard-cover volumes irregularly—whenever Dick could, almost, afford to.

A gifted (and self-taught) layout artist with a knowledge of every typeface and laid text ever marketed, he designed most of the books and magazine issues himself. No one could quarrel with the results: Instead of pouring his life down the drain of TV and computer screens, he created paper artifacts, now collectible, of permanent appeal. In the early 1950's, a more lucrative position in public relations (at Columbus Coated Fabrics) permitted him to buy a letterpress; from then on, the printing was done in his Arlington apartment. Dick's expenses increased when, a short time after I came aboard, he married Miriam Chapman of Atlanta, but all along he was being partly subsidized by his mother, a large, square, somberly evangelical woman, happily seldom seen, who disapproved of art, larks, and geese, golden or otherwise.

As was only fitting, Dick himself kept the accounts of the press and had the last word on all decisions. Fred, Miriam, and I sometimes assisted in print runs, hard-cover binding, and other manufacture. Meetings were by invitation from the amiable autocrat; they occurred at irregular intervals and were usually more pleasure than business. The main entertainment, aside from spirited conversation, was a seemingly unlimited supply of Carling's Black Label. Sometimes there were guests: Professor Hans Gottschalk of Ohio State, a stodgy and unopened but openable fellow who, apparently because of his fondness for the Arlington soirées, came closer and closer to joining the human race; Horace Schwartz, radio announcer (WOSU) and Marxist musician enamored of decidedly un-Marxist music; Cleveland poet Stanley Rosen, who later wrote an illuminating book on nihilism; Christopher MacLaine fresh—or, rather, jaded—from California. Hating all passivity and let-down, Dick encouraged everyone to be bright, anecdotal, jocularly bold. At 1927 Northwest Boulevard, I never heard a mean or even a vulgar sentiment. The rule of hilarity combined with the complete absence of slovenly behavior and four-letter cacophonies was a freedom that has quite possibly never been experienced subsequently in any freewheeling get-together where adult beverages were served.

Herr Doktor Eckman, as I frequently hailed him, was more beautifully independent than Dick. Fred required no hangers-on, no camp followers. He often made negative judgments on the guests and on the writers and editors with whom

Dick carried on what was more often than not a voluminous correspondence. Realizing early that my reactions would generally be much the same as his own, Fred often conveyed his witty critiques in that priceless possession of antisocial intelligence, the whisper. The man was a natural moralist, privately and amusingly suspecting most motives, including his own; but ready to feed, clothe, shelter, and console every drone, drudge, scoundrel, and malingerer in sight. Even Emerson, sophisticated and self-contained, was disarmed by Fred's ability to pass the death sentence and yet welcome the sinner. Scholarly consultant, clear-sighted and supremely sane advisor, Fred was even more important as the paradigm of unself-serious but sensitive moral life. At all points, he was a steady influence, giving me something to want to grow toward, and giving ambitious, unretiring Emerson salutary pause. It may be only a coincidence, but it fits the story well, that Dick began to go to pieces not long after Fred went off—in the early 50's—to a teaching post in West Virginia. In 1954, Dick abruptly dropped the *Goose* and all of us that went with it. Divorce, flight to California with another woman, silence year after year. Fred resented that abandonment more than I did: Dick had never made any personal commitment to stripping me, and the *Goose* was only one, and not the most important, adventure that helped me discover what sort of person I seemed to be.

Broken by the death of his second wife, Juanita, Dick departed from these rounds of seasons too soon, in circumstances more painful than anyone deserves. The years made Fred Eckman ever kinder and more sensibly hilarious. Me, they made ever more grateful for his existence. A nation of loners and self-centered competitors, America has never been long on writers willing to sacrifice even their art, when necessary, for the continuity and deepening growth of friendship. For some time to come, a good many people will pay homage to the Herr Doktor for what he could teach them about the structures and implications of literary texts. For others, perhaps needier and of humbler expectation, he'll remain just the one who never, on any condition, let you down. He walked in the clean, high places and always wanted you there with him.

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HISTORY

Lies, Damned Lies, and Fossils

by Philip Jenkins

Not for the first time in recent years, American history is the subject of a ferocious political controversy, which ultimately grows out of the national obsession with race. What is new about this particular battle is the chronological setting: We are not dealing here with the New Deal, with Reconstruction, or the slave trade, but with a period inconceivably distant, before there was a United States; indeed, long before human beings had dreamed of building pyramids or ziggurats. Recent archaeological discoveries have thrown doubt upon everything we thought we knew about human origins in the New World, blowing large holes in the scientific orthodoxy of the last few decades. It is not surprising to find the new facts challenged by a rear-guard of traditionally minded scholars, whose whole careers were invested in an older model, but what is alarming is that the federal government and even its Armed Forces have become utterly committed to yesterday's orthodoxy, to the extent of resorting to chicanery and intimidation: In short, the Clinton administration has decided to declare war on American archaeology. Even more repugnant, it is doing so in pursuit of doctrines of racial purity. How exactly did we get into such a moral and intellectual quagmire?

To understand this mess, we need to appreciate the traditional view of how human beings reached the Americas. From the 1920's, the standard view was that the New World had no human population before about 15,000 years ago, when hunters following big game trekked across the land bridge which then united Siberia and Alaska. (The date was fixed because that passage had been closed by ice for many millennia beforehand.) They rapidly spread across the continent, leaving as traces stone spearheads of the sort first discovered at Clovis, New Mexico. Other population waves came in over the following millennia, but always over the land bridge, so