

Imagined, or imaginary?

DONALD DAVIE

A FEW WEEKS AGO I HAPPILY revisited my old haunts in California, staying two nights in the old wing of the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, refurbished but still solidly and delightfully old-fashioned; then driving south on Interstate 280, high above the bayshore cities and not far below the forested spine of the peninsula. We were headed for Palo Alto, named for the vast old redwood that confronted Gaspar de Portolá in the base camp that he established at San Francisco Creek on November 6, 1769. Two days later on the Stanford campus we helped to celebrate publicly the eightieth birthday of Janet Lewis, poet, librettist, and author of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, *The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron*, and other neglected masterpieces.

Having so lately reexperienced this humane and various and decorous ambiance, so resonant with pieties, with achievements of austere resolution, with long and settled affections and loyalties, what am I to make of a book that tells me, "California is a paradise because it grants human beings the freedom to be inhuman, either as psychedelically enlightened angels or as carnal animals"? Or what can I be but bewildered when I read that "California, cosmetically pampering and chemically immortalizing the body, has frustrated evolutionary progress, and even made death into hedonistic self-indulgence"? Again:

Art dies in Europe, and is born again in California. Forest Lawn at Glendale is Italy reproduced and therefore resurrected. It grants a stay of execution to works which time is steadily ruining, like Leonardo's 'Last Supper' (which it has transferred . . . to the indestructibility of stained glass) or Ghiberti's bronze Baptistery doors from Florence.

I am baffled by this, not only because I always thought glass was eminently de-

DONALD DAVIE is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities at Vanderbilt. Among his books is *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: Essays of Two Decades*.

structible, but because as it happens I write within one mile of a replica of the Parthenon, and this stands not in Glendale, California, but in Nashville, Tennessee. For this author, then, are "California" and "America" interchangeable terms? Sometimes they seem to be, as when he declares: "America makes the rejection of literature easier because it estranges the artist from the society he knows, and thus baffles his imagination." But at other times Aldous Huxley's and Christopher Isherwood's California seems to be distinguished sharply from other American places like W. H. Auden's New York; thus it is specifically California that "abets the mystic by confounding time, reshuffling history, giving the past a face lift."

It hardly matters, however; for the two judgments are equally insulting to Janet Lewis, historian and author of scrupulously well-researched historical novels, as well as insulting to the native and adopted Californians, writers and musicians, who gathered to honor her. What we were applauding in her was an exceptional and beautiful alertness, sustained with serene self-discipline through a lifetime—and this in a milieu where, so Peter Conrad the Oxford don assures us, "The blithe seasonless weather, the hypnotism of piped music, the bland enticements of television, all are preparations for death. California lulls one gradually into insentience, so that when death comes it is hardly noticed."

Let no one say that the occasion I remember was an exception that proves the rule. I lived in northern California for ten years and found such fortifying experiences more common there than in other places I have dwelt in. And let me not hear that what Conrad is talking about is southern California, for I have lived in Los Angeles and have found the same civilities and the same vivacities there. So, trying to measure up Peter Conrad's confident formulations against one's own experience, what can one say? The obvious temptation is to say that what Conrad calls "California" exists nowhere but inside his head. But that won't do either, and for two reasons. In the first place we have been told of this mythical California before; it is not in Conrad's or anyone else's head, not really conceived at all, rather it is "in the air" wherever glib and journalistic people gather and are heard from. Across the English-speaking world (including other states of the Union), just such pronouncements, delivered with just such aplomb and meretricious sparkle, are

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the common currency or wretched hand-me-downs of the superficially knowledgeable.

And a second reason why we mustn't say Conrad's California has no existence outside his own mind is that, in a deeply cynical sense, that is just what he wants us to say. As he sees the matter, for us to

rived from reading it in just the way that he tries to rule out of court. Time and again, when he quotes from his authors, one finds them saying things that seem to be penetrating and true about features of American character, and American manners and assumptions; and it's particularly striking and instructive



say this of him would only put him on a level with the authors whose comments on the U.S.A. he passes in review: Frances Trollope and her son Anthony and Charles Dickens ("institutional America"); Oscar Wilde and Rupert Brooke ("aesthetic America"); Kipling ("epic America") and R. L. Stevenson ("chivalric America"); H. G. Wells ("futuristic America"), D. H. Lawrence ("primitive America"), Auden ("theological America"), Huxley ("psychedelic America"), and Isherwood ("mystical America"). Each of these, he would have us believe, saw only what he wanted to see; each of them was equipped in advance with a notional America which he then as it were laid on top of actual America in such a way that any part of the actuality that didn't fit was blotted out of sight. Yet some of these are writers whom we are accustomed to thinking of as great, and some of us are stubbornly naïve enough to suppose that great writers tell us truths that but for them would have gone unnoticed—truths not just about themselves, but about the actualities that confronted them, such as alien places, alien societies, and alien people (including us, their readers).

PETER CONRAD, *WE MUST* suppose, if literature is what he teaches to the young gentlemen at Oxford (and I fear it is), would hoot with derision at any such notion of what we value literature for. And yet in fact such value as his book has can be de-

when one's experience of twentieth-century America bears out the perceptions of nineteenth-century travelers like Dickens or the Trollopes or Wilde. But of course to respond to them in this way is to feel gratitude and admiration, and to forfeit the imperturbably knowledgeable superiority that diagnoses them and packs them into pigeonholes labeled "aesthetic" or "chivalric" or "mystical." And to make sure that we don't easily read Wilde or Stevenson or Isherwood with any humility, our author is careful to supply no page references for his quotations, no authorities for his pronouncements, and no bibliography.

Every few months, it seems, or else every other year, there appears a book like this one about how America and Americans appear through foreign eyes, usually British. They would not appear so often if there were not a sufficiently numerous class of American readers who apparently buy such books for the perverse pleasure of being more or less urbanely "put down," if not quite straightforwardly kicked in the teeth. *Imagining America*, however, is remarkable even among these facile and clever and eminently disposable publications: In the first place, it makes more pretensions than most to being literary criticism, and has been applauded as such by—of all people who ought to know better—Paul Fussell; and secondly Peter Conrad is just as highhanded with the United Kingdom as with the United States: "... personal ties in America remain breezily casual, never becoming

familial as they do in England, where everyone seems to be related if not by birth then by the homogenizing institutions of school, college, club, or adultery."

American readers may, if they please, believe a British reviewer who assures them that there are many thousands of Englishmen for whom school, college, and club supply associations less earnest and binding than such institutions provide for many Americans; also that, for these many thousands of Englishmen, adultery isn't a real option because, if for no more exalted reasons, domestic arrangements are too straitened for it to be—logistically or at all consistently—practicable. In other words, Peter Conrad, confident though he is, knows as little—honestly and inwardly—about British society as he knows about American. Out of that ignorance, and from some interstellar or perhaps just antipodean standpoint, he can manage to be as invulnerably and yet resentfully superior to British personalities and manners as to American. □

KOLYMA TALES, by Varlam Shalamov, translated by John Glad. W. W. Norton, 222 pp., \$9.95.

Prisoners of starvation

ANTHONY BURGESS

MY FRIEND ROBERT CONQUEST has published a book on the Kolyma region of north-eastern Siberia. It is a vast area, desperately cold and desolate but auriferous. In the early 1930s began the process of turning it into a massive forced labor camp. Conquest is not sure whether three million met their deaths there or merely two million. We are living in an age when one can be vague about megadeaths. Solzhenitsyn says little about Kolyma in *The Gulag Archipelago*, having proposed that Varlam Shalamov coauthor the book: "Shalamov's experience in the camps was longer and more bitter than my own, and I respectfully confess that to him and not me was it given to touch those depths of bestiality

Among ANTHONY BURGESS's recent books is 1985.