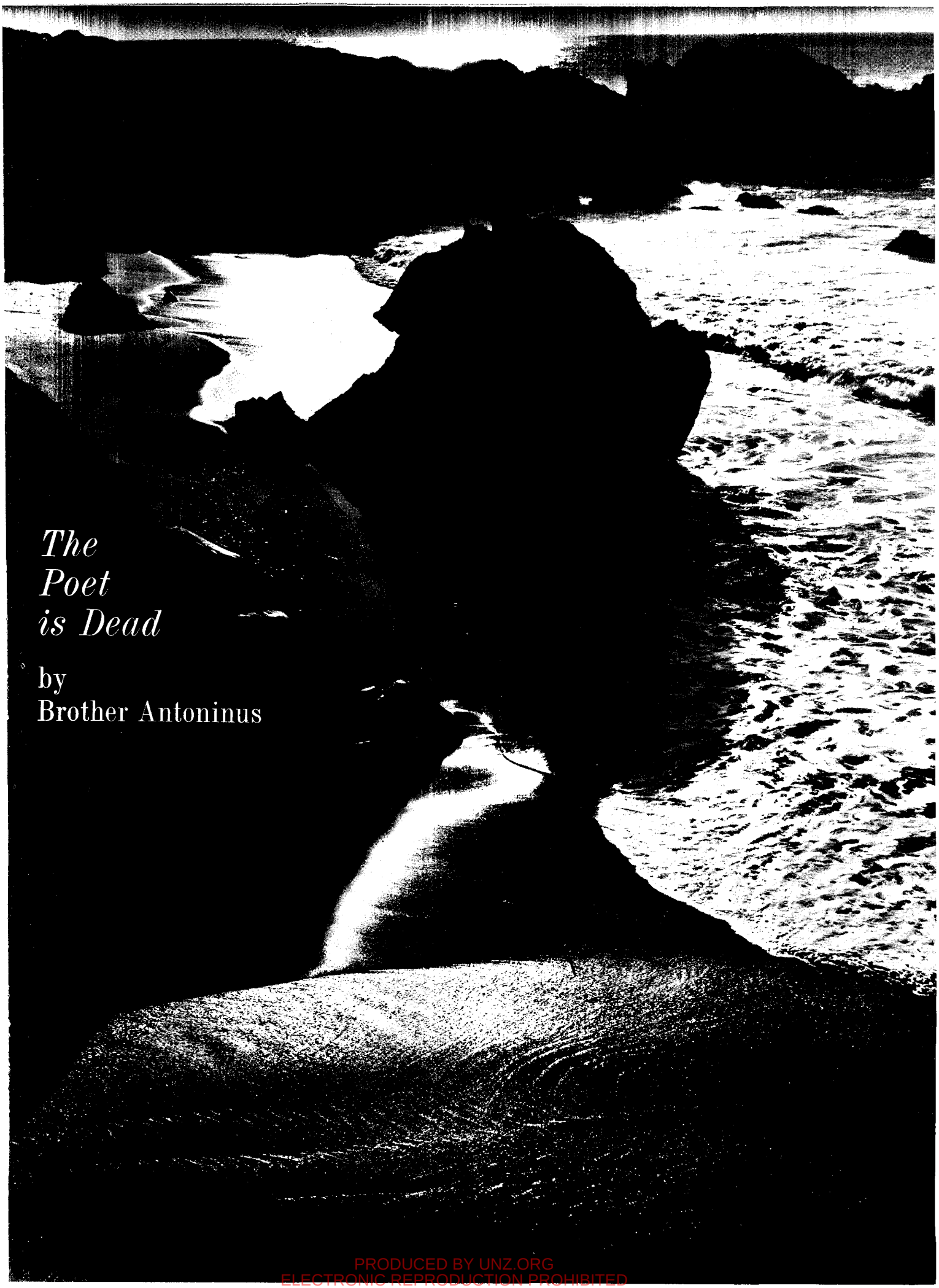

The Poet is Dead

by
Brother Antoninus

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A Memorial for Robinson Jeffers, to be read with a full stop between the strophes, as in a dirge.

IN THE EVENING THE DUSK
Stipples with lights. The long shore
Gathers darkness in on itself
And goes cold. From the lap of silence
All the tide-crest's pivotal immensity
Lifts into the land.

*

The great tongue is dried.
The teeth that bit to the bitterness
Are sheathed in truth.

*

For the poet is dead.
The pen, splintered on the sheer
Excesses of vision, unfingered, falls.
The heart-crookt hand, cold as a stone,
Lets it go down.

*

If you listen
You can hear the field mice
Kick little spurts in the grasses.
You can hear
Time take back its own.

*

For the poet is dead.
On the bed by the window,
Where dislike and desire
Killed each other in the crystalline interest,
What remains alone lets go of its light. It has found
Finalness. It has touched what it craved: the passionate
Darks of deliverance.

*

At sundown the sea wind,
Burgeoning,
Bled the west empty.

*

Now the opulent
Treacherous woman called Life
Forsakes her claim. Blond and a harlot
She once drank joy from his narrow loins.
She broke his virtue in her knees.

*

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In the water-gnawn coves of Point Lobos
The white-faced sea otters
Fold their paws on their velvet breasts
And list waveward.

*

But he healed his pain on the wisdom of stone,
He touched roots for his peace.

*

The old ocean boils its wrack.
It steeps its lees.

*

For the poet is dead. The gaunt wolf
Crawled out to the edge and died snapping.
He said he would. The wolf
Who lost his mate. He said he would carry the wound,
The blood-wound of life, to the broken edge
And die grinning.

*

Over the salt marsh the killdeer,
Unrestrainable,
Cry fear against moon set.

*

And all the hardly suspected
Latencies of disintegration
Inch forward. The skin
Flakes loss. On the death-gripped feet
The toenails glint like eyeteeth
From the pinched flesh.
The caged ribs and the bladed shoulders,
Ancient slopes of containment,
Imperceptibly define the shelves of structure,
Faced like rock ridges
Boned out of mountains, absently revealed
With the going of the snow.

*

In the sleeve of darkness the gopher
Tunnels the sod for short grass
And pockets his fill.

*

And the great phallus shrinks in the groin,
The seed in the scrotum
Chills.

*

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When the dawn comes in again,
Thoughtlessly,
The sea birds will mew by the window.

*

For the poet is dead. Beyond the courtyard
The ocean at full tide hunches its bulk.
Groping among the out-thrusts of granite
It moans and whimpers. In the phosphorescent
Restlessness it chunks deceptively,
Wagging its torn appendages, dipping and rinsing
Its ripped sea rags, its strip-weeded kelp.
The old mother grieves her deathling.
She trundles the dark for her lost child.
She hunts her son.

*

On the top of the tower
The hawk will not perch tomorrow.

*

But in the gorged rivermouth
Already the steelhead fight for entry.
They feel fresh water
Sting through the sieves of their salt-coarsened gills.
They shudder and thrust.

*

So the sea broods. And the aged gull,
Asleep on the water, too stiff to feed,
Spins in a side-rip crossing the surf
And drags down.

*

This mouth is shut. I say
The mouth is clamped cold.
I tell you this tongue is dried.

*

But the skull, the skull,
The perfect sculpture of bone! –
Around the forehead the fine hair,
Composed to the severest
Lineaments of thought,
Is moulded on peace.

*

And the strongly wrought features,
That keep in the soul's serenest achievement
The spirit's virtue,

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Set the death mask of all mortality,
The impress of that grace.

*

In the shoal-champed breakers
One wing of the gull
Tilts like a fin through the ribbon of spume
And knifes under.

*

And all about there the vastness of night
Affirms its sovereignty. There's not a cliff
Of the coastline, not a reef
Of the waterways, from the sword-thrust Aleutians
To the scorpion-tailed stinger Cape Horn –
All that staggering declivity
Grasped in the visionary mind and established –
But is sunken under the dark ordainment,
Like a sleeper possessed, like a man
Gone under, like a powerful swimmer
Plunged in a womb-death washed out to sea
And worked back ashore.

*

The gull's eye,
Skinned to the wave, retains the ocean's
Imponderable compression,
And burns yellow.

*

The poet is dead. I tell you
The nostrils are narrowed. I say again and again
The strong tongue is broken.

*

But the owl
Quirks in the cypresses, and you hear
What he says. He is calling for something.
He tucks his head for his mate's
Immemorial whisper. In her answering voice
He tastes the grace-note of his reprieve.

*

If there is fog in the canyons
The redwoods will know what it means.
The giant sisters
Gather it into their merciful arms
And stroke silence.

*

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When you smell pine resin laced in the salt
You know the dawn wind has veered.

*

And on the shelf in the gloom,
Blended together, the tall books emerge,
All of a piece. Transparent as membranes
The thin leaves of paper hug their dark thoughts.
They know what he said.

*

The sea, reaching for life,
Spits up the gull. He falls spread-eagled,
The streaked wings swept on the sand.
When the blind head snaps
The beak krakes at the sky.

*

Now the night closes.
All the dark's negatory
Decentralization
Quivers toward dawn.

*

He has gone into death like a stone thrown in the sea.

*

And in far places the morning
Shrills its episodes of triviality and vice
And one man's passing. Could the ears
That hardly listened in life
Care much less now?

*

The great tongue
Dries in the mouth. I told you.
The voiceless throat
Cools silence. And the sea-granite eyes.
Washed in the sibilant waters
The stretched lips kiss peace.

*

The poet is dead.

*

Nor will ever again hear the sea lions
Grunt in the kelp at Point Lobos.
Nor look to the south when the grunion
Run the Pacific, and the plunging
Shearwaters, insatiable,
Stun themselves in the sea.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Puzzles and Epiphanies. By Frank Kermode. New York: Chilmark Press. 234 pp. $4.95.

To review a volume of collected reviews, some of which are, in turn, reviews of works of literary criticism, may seem like the ultimate in telemachy – the art, as Homer delicately hints, of fighting at a distance. But this collection of Frank Kermode's essays and reviews, written for various British and American magazines between 1958 and 1961, has a consistency which makes it add up to a provocative statement of literary principles rather than a random set of essays. It is thus doubly welcome. The reader can now consider a substantial portion of this stimulating critic's work, and can begin to understand what basic theories of literature determine his critical judgments.

I should classify him roughly as a Symbolist; he values a book in so far as it is "an intimation of otherness," a phrase which he quotes approvingly from David Jones. He looks for a meaning dependent on but larger than the book itself, and his method is to tie an individual writer – Allen Tate or the Prince di Lampedusa, Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene – into a larger debate of which that writer's work can be seen as a part. All puzzles, he feels, should lead to epiphanies, that is, to revelations of a pattern and order imposed on a book by its author but corresponding to an external and universal – Kermode does not quite say divine – order. Speaking of Joyce, who emerges as a close spiritual ancestor, he comments on "his desire to make of a book . . . a reality which, like normal reality, is a paradigm of some inaccessible truth," and he seems to agree with the Joyce critics' "underlying assumption . . . that the books . . . are *fully* meaningful."

To Kermode the work of art should be a revelation of order, and the critic's task is to assist in bringing this revelation about by discovering the system of philosophic equivalents to which the book relates. It will be seen at once that this is a far cry from New Criticism, with its close attention to the text, or to Aristotelian and other forms of structural criticism, in which the critic limits himself to a purely literary inquiry. Kermode's work is, in fact, closer to exegesis than what is currently considered criticism, and like Joyce he ultimately owes much of his method to the allegorical Biblical exegetes of the Middle Ages. Literature is treated almost entirely as a comment on life, as a revelation which needs to be further explained. The danger of this approach is that it can often lead to a debate at a level which leaves the work of art far below, hidden and forgotten. The book under discussion becomes merely a launching-pad for a metaphysical revery.

But Kermode is far too careful a critic to allow his method to fail him in this way very often, and at his best he is often remarkably illuminating. Thus his comments on the revised version of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* explore the novelist's preoccupations and fit the theme of the book into the Augustinian context of the earthly and heavenly cities. The essay suggests just how the image of order which Waugh professes to find in the hierarchic forms of British society is used as a kind of earthly reflection of the City of God, and Waugh's favorite locale, the stately British country house, becomes the symbol of that City. Kermode is very persuasive on this point. His arguments absolve Waugh of the charge of mere snobbishness which has so often been raised against him, and by referring to the biography of Campion and some of the other writings, the critic is able to suggest the orthodoxy – and honesty – on which the novelist's vision is based.

A rather similar inquiry into the theories underlying E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* explores the probable relationship between that novel and the excited interest in clarity, civility, and order which characterized Cambridge University in the Edwardian era. The Cambridge philosophers – Russell, G. E. Moore, and Yeats' "profound McTaggart" – are studied as literary influences, especially Moore's *Principia Ethica*, which "treated personal relationships as if they were subject to the same conditions as works of art" and argued that "the fundamental principle of organic

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