

centration-camp guards, "brought back to endure a fate similar to that of their victims." (Strangely, this odd idea has found many followers among the disease's sufferers.) He is particularly good on the goings-on at Maharishi International University, in rural Iowa, where Transcendental Meditation and "yogic flying" are among the few subjects taught under a tuition-fee schedule that rivals Harvard's. He exposes the unlikely accomplishments of "psychic surgeon" Bernie Siegel, now a staple of that bastion of reason, PBS; best-selling guidance counselor M. Scott Peck, a master of the psychology of blaming others for one's own flaws; and Lazaris, spirit medium or "channeler" to the rich and famous, whose followers like to claim credit for such things as having ended apartheid by meditating from afar through the spirits of de Klerk and Mandela. (I'd like to be making this up, but it's true.) It almost goes without saying that such men and women are earning substantial fortunes spouting this and other nonsense, and that their market seems infinite.

*Heaven on Earth* is reportage, not sociology. D'Antonio offers plenty of useful observations—notably, that the New Age is the province of well-heeled, moneyed, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, with few subscribers among the growing underclass. In his determination to be objective D'Antonio gives repellent ideas more benefit of doubt than they deserve, and he deliberately avoids "value judgments." An unrepentant believer in certain Old Ways, I often found myself wishing that D'Antonio would cry, "Balderdash!" or even some stronger expletive, instead of simply smiling numbly at the countless charlatans he has met along his way. This is a heartless world, and while we all need succor, there's entirely too much suckering afoot. D'Antonio might have said as much.

What he leaves unsaid remains for another book, awaiting which we can reread Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, a novel that skewers the New Age of the 19th century and retains its razor edge today. In the meanwhile, *Heaven on Earth* serves very well as a catalog of current tomfooleries. At the very least, it warns us of even stranger days to come.

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## Onan Agonistes

by J.O. Tate

The Runaway Soul  
by Harold Brodkey  
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux;  
835 pp., \$30.00

I've been trying to figure out what somebody could do with the thirty bucks (plus tax) that they're asking for Harold Brodkey's word-processing product. My copy was no bargain for free. You could buy two pizzas and two six-packs and have quite a party for that sum. You could wire your sweetie pie a nice bouquet by FTD. If movies were worth seeing, you could buy five tickets. There are all kinds of things you could do with the money, but the big loss is in time and energy—time that might have been spent on subgingival curettage or root canal work or study of feminist theory or whatever. Perhaps a mercifully brief description of *The Runaway Soul* will show just why its perusal would seem fitting for few others besides Harold Bloom, Gordon Lish, Keith Mano, and those who have puffed Harold Brodkey's "genius." There are two elements of the novel that I can bring myself to comment on. The first is substance; the second, style.

*The Runaway Soul* is a highly subjective *Künstlerroman* freighted with an elaborate psychological apparatus, a Freudian family romance, and a concentration of the hero-narrator's "growth," "genius," consciousness, and masturbatory sex life. The orphan Wiley Silenowicz, whose adoptive name suggests both wiliness and Silenus, relates somehow the tangled bafflements (he does not or cannot "tell a story") concerning his second family: his father S.L., his mother Lila, and his older sister Nonie. These characters each have their moments, their presences in Wiley's life and consciousness; of the three, one inspired in me a flicker of interest—Nonie, who seems to be pathologically wicked and hates Wiley, and who appears to have killed two other siblings. My own hope—that she would terminate Wiley's interminable "narrative" by stabbing him to death with a sharp instrument, by killing him with a revolver or with a sporting rifle or shotgun or semiautomatic or fully automatic weapon, by setting him on fire with

gasoline, or by squashing him to death with a laundromat—was not fulfilled. Other characters in the novel include a lover of Wiley's later years, Ora (a.k.a. Orra), whom I took to be female even though at least one of Wiley's sexual encounters with her/him seemed to end—if that is the right word—in yet another of his physical and literary masturbations. Anyway, Wiley's homosexual episodes with Remsen and Daniel and others are entirely suited to his character, being either literally or essentially masturbatory in those same senses of that word by now extremely familiar to both the reader and the explicator of *The Runaway Soul*.

Reading between the lines that are themselves unreadable, we may discern the elements of a novel that somehow escaped the master's grasp. There are even brief glimpses of daylight and of the out-of-doors, as well as of social life, which in other hands would have constituted a narrative; though even here, we would have had to admit that touches like Ora's father, the literary scene as embodied in New York cocktail parties, and a few others, constitute material that has already been treated adequately by Norman Mailer.

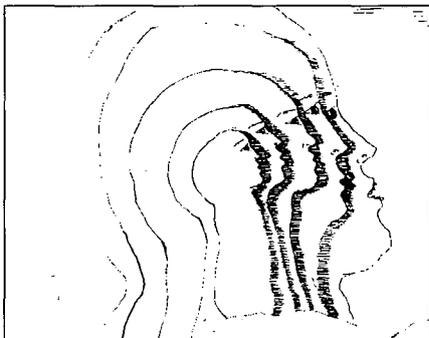
Even granting the genius his *donnée*, there may yet be some slight reservation about a prose style that would gag a buzzard. The trouble with Wiley-as-narrator is that he writes like Harold Brodkey on a good day. He seems to have an ungift, an ineptitude with language that he inflicts unsparringly on his audience: he goes for the off-putting word—even the wrong sound, not to mention the unwelcome thought—unerringly. As Wiley lovably says, "But, for me, isn't it self-love that starts the progress towards orgasm?" He knows himself: "I sort of gawp—inwardly." Ain't it the truth.

The following lines, chosen by a *sortes Brodeyanae*, represent the ineffable style of the revered master: "I don't know of what elements my heterosexuality consists. Or my androgyny." And this paragraph:

It wasn't that I was so grand sexually. I am acceptable sexually (which is actually quite a lot), but I make a point of it, of being that, and that doubles the acceptability for some people, that it is something known, and that one *tries* to be it. Often, then, I am a little bored sexually—that redoubles it

... Only a little bored . . . "You are the handsomest man in the world"—she says that; it is a metaphor of a kind. She was collecting herself, finding herself, in an inconsecutive way, among the consecutions of our invention of our sexual tone back and forth, and in the faith that in the sequence of moments something might happen and all the moments (all our moments) were unbetrayed so far and would be unbetrayed still at the end, sort of.

The combination of substance (masturbation and genius) conveyed by style (noisome droning—the Brodkey touch) is one that leaves something, anything, and everything to be desired. Reflection suggests that *The Runaway Soul*, besides not having any soul, didn't run away far enough, and that if there had been any *Kunst*, then there might have also been some *Roman*. As it is, this thing ranks not only with the worst novels I have read in the last 35 years but with the most unpleasant experiences I have ever endured. To listen to Wiley Silenowicz relate the uncanny growth of his narcissistic mind, only to wind up with yet another tenderly rendered masturbation scene after some seven hundred pages, is enough to confirm thoughts about the New York literary



scene that I have long entertained.

Considering with how much breathless expectancy this book was anticipated (for 27 years), we may well wonder about the competence of those who touted the author for a generation. And when we consider the price that is asked not so much in money as in exasperation and degradation, we may also wonder about the state of culture in a nation with such an inverted sense of art.

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## Poetry That Matters

by R.S. Gwynn

The Gods of Winter

by Dana Gioia

St. Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press;  
62 pp., \$22.95



In the May 1991 issue of the *Atlantic* poet and critic Dana Gioia asked "Can Poetry Matter?" Gioia, who has spent most of his working life outside of the academy, warns of a species in danger of extinction, the vanishing general audience for poetry that existed in this country only a few decades ago. He finds it paradoxical that poets "as individual artists . . . are almost invisible" in a time when, judging by the sheer numbers of publications, readings, and professional sinecures, the art and its practitioners would seem to be in the middle of an American quattrocento. Gioia does not slight the complexity of the cultural antecedents of a "boom [that] has been a distressingly confined phenomenon," but his chief culprits are the wildly proliferating spawn of the creative writing programs, which have stratified into "a large professional class for the production and reception of new poetry, comprising legions of teachers, graduate students, editors, publishers, and administrators." Indeed, the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) have become, in the space of only two decades, one of the most powerfully entrenched organizations in American academia.

The result of this increasingly inbred "poetry subculture" is that "the energy of American poetry, which was once directed outward, is now increasingly focused inward. Reputations are made and rewards distributed within the poetry subculture. . . . [A] 'famous' poet now means someone famous only to other poets. But there are enough poets to make that local fame relatively meaningful. Not long ago, 'only poets read poetry' was meant as damning criticism. Now it is a proven marketing strategy." Gioia is not alone in these fears and is by no means the first to voice them. As early as 1957 Hugh Kenner remarked, "I cannot help thinking that a civilization is in very perilous condition when all its writers have been driven into the universities." It is worth noting in this respect that when we refer to a matter as

"academic" we are in fact dismissing it as unimportant.

Gioia offers a few suggestions by which "poets and poetry teachers [might] take more responsibility for bringing their art to the public," among them, reading from other authors at their own readings and perhaps allowing performance of other art forms to be integrated with their own; more candor by poets in reviewing and greater rigor in editing, especially in the production of anthologies that "should not be used as pork barrels for the creative-writing trade"; and an increased attention to the public performance of poetry, both in the classroom and over college and public-supported radio, a medium hitherto largely neglected. These are indeed modest proposals, more of a wish list than anything, but they and the article's other remarks occasioned several hundred letters to the *Atlantic*. The editors were surprised by the breadth of the response, observing several months later that they had received as well many newspaper clippings from around the country that commented on the article.

Because Gioia dared to call America's poetry establishment into question, he has probably managed to place himself permanently outside its circles of power; his new book has been only sparingly reviewed. Yet *The Gods of Winter* is as good a book as one is likely to see this year—varied, formally complex, ambitious in its two longer poems, and unusually free from the sort of adolescent self-indulgence that characterizes much contemporary American poetry, particularly that which comes from the writing workshops. In this second collection Gioia is writing for *adults*, not the captive college reading-circuit crowd, and it is clear that he respects his audience's intelligence. Here, in "The Next Poem," he presents an aesthetic description of the type of poetry that he rarely encounters yet still desires to write:

The music that of common  
speech  
but slanted so that each detail  
sounds unexpected as a sharp  
inserted in a simple scale.

No jumble box of imagery  
dumped glumly in the reader's  
lap  
or elegantly packaged junk  
the unsuspecting must unwrap.