

brought the Christ Child, with the snake facing the greatest challenge. The anachronisms are funny, as intended. Of the remaining contents, including a "Masque in Five Tableaux" and a short story, the greatest entertainment comes from a few poems by the redoubtable Joycelyn Shrager, the story's protagonist, in whom Disch sends up an all too common example of the modern poetess whose poetry can only be distinguished from prose by close scrutiny of the white space at the margins. Here again, Disch does not elude the claims of science fiction: the corny images and shallow sentiments are straight from the preoccupations of fandom.

The book that best serves Disch's vi-

sion of literature is *Neighboring Lives*, published with an endorsement from Anthony Burgess. A rambling account of the *literati* of the Victorian era provides him (and his collaborator Charles Naylor) with an opportunity to practice that most mature of the novelist's arts—gossip! So effective is the author's technique that one becomes absorbed in the personal lives of the Carlyles, John Stuart Mill, Whistler, Rossetti, Swinburne, and even Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). The only drawback is that this remarkable cast of 19th-century luminaries is *observed* rather than used in any dramatically satisfying manner. The only personage who is portrayed as eccentric and egotistical enough to rise above

the narrative is Thomas Carlyle, whose passions against everything from the piano to books like this one enable the reader to escape the tediously accurate portrayal of his times.

Admittedly, Disch and Naylor did not set out to write a novel of ideas in the manner of Chesterton or Wells. The disappointment is that Disch's experience with science fiction did not creep up on him, providing a central metaphor or point of view by which his natural talents as a satirist could have made this a great novel. If *Neighboring Lives* is any indication, Disch the novelist may finally satisfy Disch the critic in his flight from the "callowness of youth" and "Big Ideas," as he identified the problem in his piece for the *Atlantic*.

BRIEF MENTIONS

THE DESERT

by John C. Van Dyke

Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith; 272 pp., \$9.95

That the desert has been time and again the subject of a compelling work of literature—Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, Krutch's *The Desert Year*, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*—is proof both of the infinite subtlety of God the Creator and of the nearly infinite resourcefulness of the genuine literary artist. The word "desert," in fact, has come under attack in recent times as a philistine misnomer, whose most virulent critics are those desert rats who happen as well to be writers. The writer has as his job to make apparent what people ordinarily fail to apprehend, and so it might be thought that, in taking the desert for his subject, he is accepting the highest challenge his craft can offer him. But that is not how it appears to John C. Van Dyke. "And so it is," Van Dyke writes in his "Preface Dedication," "that my book is only an excuse for talking about the beautiful things in this desert world that stretches down the Pacific Coast, and across Arizona and Sonora. The desert has gone a-begging for a word of praise these many years. It never had a sacred poet; in me it has only a lover."

The Desert was originally published by Scribner's in 1901. Van Dyke was an asthmatic art historian and critic at Rutgers who, in the summer of 1898 and at the age of 42, mounted an Indian pony and rode away into the Colorado Desert in the company of his small dog. For the next three years, he crossed and recrossed the "wastes" of California, Arizona, and Mexico, including the Salton Sea Basin; it was during these wanderings that he composed this book, "at odd intervals, when I lay against a rock or propped up in the sand." His training as an art critic explains his wonderful appreciation and understanding of the effects of light across the desert spaces, in the mountains and in the canyons, but his understanding of these phenomena is scientific as well as aesthetic, as is his interest in the physical forces that create and shape the landscape (such as moisture and wind erosion) and in the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Ultimately his love for the desert is a spiritual, rather than an intellectual, passion: "The weird solitude, the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love."

Van Dyke was a forerunner of today's environmentalist who lived to see the irrigation of the Imperial Valley: "The desert should never be reclaimed!" he writes. And the final lines of the book are a prophecy, as well as a description: "The glory of the wilderness has gone down with the sun. . . . It is time that we should say goodnight—perhaps a long goodnight—to the desert."

—Chilton Williamson, Jr.

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Satyr and Satire

by J.O. Tate

The Satyr

by Robert DeMaria

Sag Harbor, New York: Second Chance Press; 176 pp., \$21.95



I think it only right to declare my interest at the outset, for I have known Robert DeMaria for a quarter of a century as a friend and as a colleague at Dowling College. After all these years, I should have learned something from that experience, and just now three pieces of advice come to mind: always accept an offer of homemade lasagna from Professor DeMaria; never raise after he calls during a poker game; and read *The Satyr*, now that you've got a second opportunity.

First published twenty years ago, *The Satyr* is the fourth of DeMaria's 14 novels and stands apart from his other works for its sheer playfulness, its experimental nature, and its brevity. This work denies ordinary reality, focusing on the psychology of the individual—or so it seems, if we are to take at face value the

claims of the sex maniac who is the narrator.

Without wishing to spoil the book for anyone who hasn't gotten through to the last page, I should discuss "face value" if only to dismiss it later. The narrative purports to be a Gogol-like diary of a madman. Marc McMann, who works as an editor in a publishing house in New York, wants to explain why he must murder his mother, Gertrude. But in explaining his motives he also reveals a satyriasis, a hypertrophy of the imagination, and a bent for philosophy that is compelling if perverse.

Killing your mom ain't easy and Marc flounders at the task, but he does adopt a brilliant stroke. He decides to murder her as someone else: namely, as Claude Elmath, whose anagrammatic name requires that his father hail from Stratford and further implies why the book must end as it does. A flow of allusions to *Hamlet*—and to *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Tempest* as well—quotations from the sonnets, and reshufflings of soliloquies, themes, and images, all combine to fortify this narrative and establish even its unreliable narrator as an inspired response to Shakespearean provocation. The power of poetry is transformed into the texture of the novel; the mad narrator acts out our dreams and our nightmares even as he acts out the role of Claude Elmath.

His "act" is literally the novel's imposture. The themes of acting, of masks and masquerade, of *eros* vs. *thanatos*, of the Oedipus complex, of the castrating bitch-mother, of the confusion of hate and love, are paraded and drilled in full development. The monstrosity of misplaced desire, the hysteria of incest, the parody of Freudianism, the narcissistic self-love of the masturbator, the vanity of the seducer, the instability of identity—all these are arrayed in full panoply. Somehow through all the couplings and passionate scheming and moaning of the narrator, there emerges what Raymond Chandler once called "a quality of redemption." There's something positively good about the crazy Marc McMann and his struggles with his self and with his mom.

The power even of "Marc McMann" to dominate reality by his utterances, to capture our provisional allegiance through his voice, and to compel belief in his unbelievable diary, is itself a demonstration and a celebration of the

magic of narrative, of the potent hocus-pocus of writing, and of the reader's necessary complicity in imaginary creation. If, by a false etymology, *The Satyr* satirizes the swinging 60's, it also trumpets the death-defying sway of Shakespeare—and even its own spellbinding strength as a page-turner.

Marc himself says, "I am a very unusual person. I am, for one thing, a kind of literary genius. I dream metaphors. I know the secret meanings of words. I understand the magic of poetry. I feel, at times, that I can open my mouth and allow to issue there from a stream of verbal music." The proof of the pudding justifies his swagger, though not, of course, in the sense he means. He also says, as he maneuvers to kill his mother, "I used to get up at dawn and read furiously until it was time to go to school." Behind these words lies the author's, not the narrator's, keen awareness of the allegory of composition he has encoded in the frenzied fable of Marc McMann.

Like a poker player peering over his cards and trying to maintain his deadpan expression, Robert DeMaria is nothing if not sly. Though the author once had the narrator's publishing job, there can be no confusion between them. The preemptive dismissal of *Portnoy's Complaint* on page 140 ("You shouldn't be reading things like that") is a tricky aversion of just the comparison that suggests itself—one which this novel easily withstands. And I must admit that references here to one Aldo Zappulla, a theatrical supplier, and to a hotel named the Saxon Arms, are the sort of thing that must elicit a knowing smile only from those who have spent rather too much time in Oakdale, New York—the glosses will wind up in a dissertation one day. Nevertheless, I will point out here, at least as far as the second in-joke is concerned, that the legend of Hamlet is derived from Saxo Grammaticus—the Saxon who could write Latin.

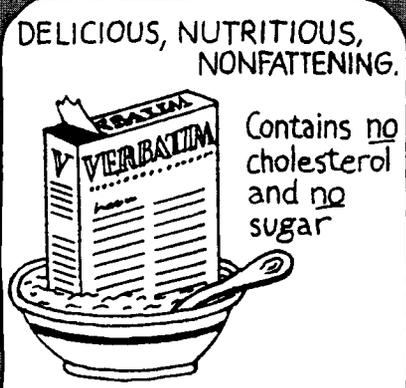
Our collaboration with the author ends with the foisting of perhaps the most outrageous "happy ending" in literary history—one that is literally self-effacing. In a consumption devoutly to be wished, the sack of the story is pulled inside-out by an "act" not so much of self-destruction as of auto-deconstruction. And having come thus far in this conspiracy of reading and writing and imagining together, we may be ready to understand just how right it is that the words *grammar* and *glamor* are cognates.

Perhaps that makes Robert DeMaria an Italo-Americo Grammaticus; or perhaps it goes to show that Shakespeare wasn't the only one to wave Prospero's wand.

The point is that in a period of declining artistic resource and of degeneration in the publishing industry, the reappearance of *The Satyr* is particularly appropriate and welcome. Its affinities with some of the experiments of Poe, James, and Nabokov are self-recommending, and the laughter and wonder it inspires are self-rewarding. And the pleasure of pondering the teasing puns on Marc McMann's name and other such quibbles is only one of the reasons we like the cards to be dealt down and dirty.

Check to you.

J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.



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