

Synaptic Gap

by Daniel Franko Goldman

In no other species but Man
are disparities of intellect so glaring.
No doubt some apes are underachievers; some dogs and bears
learn circus tricks more readily than their duller brethren;
among birds of a particular species, some use sticks as levers
to pry their shellfish open, while others, more dimwitted, pound
the bivalves repeatedly on rocks, a plodding, less elegant process
than that of the tool-users. This skill (or its absence) is passed
by bird parents to offspring, and the inequity persists, down
avian generations. All of that said, it is nonetheless true
that the intramural gap between the brightest and the dullest
individual members of subhuman species is really quite narrow;
in Man, it is huge, and nothing can alter it. Moreover, in Man, the
gap makes more mischief. It is a matter of degree, but with a
salient, fateful difference: bears and birds obey their genes,
exempt from the need to engender organization. Man is mere
potential, helpless, frail, unprogrammed for achievement or even
for survival on his own, gravid with promise, but unequipped
to top it much, without a flawed and artificial overlay
of polity and politics, such fertile ground for the poisonous weeds
that sprout in our unique synaptic gap. These pettifogging perils
bedeviled bands of hunter-gatherers, and later, tribes
and cities and nation-states and bloated empires, in
exponential, malignant growth. Soon or late, they foundered,
all, in waters whipped to needless froth
by the struggles of the stupid, the frustrations of the wise.
The strong balk at supporting the weak. The feckless
scorn strength once their bellies are full, a state of affairs
that soon becomes the norm, for their demands are enforced
as their numbers mimic strength and the strong grow ever weaker
in reciprocal decline. Desperate for order and falsified fairness,
Authority prescribes Procrustean beds, devices seductively simple
but too often fatal to those who lie on their leveling frames.
The shaken survivors of these hideous experiments hold seminars
around smoky fires and tug their smelly, yellowing beards.
Soon another tack is tried, and it too feeds
many a happy hyena before the bones
of a new crop of victims are bleached by the sun.
How then shall we order our affairs,
when the least of us understand nothing,
and the best not nearly enough?

Donald Davidson and the Calculus of Memory

by M.E. Bradford



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

The opening scene of the folk opera *Singin' Billy*, for which Donald Davidson wrote the book and lyrics, takes place in the yard of Callie Wilkins, "Miss Callie," the matriarch of Oconee Town in Pickens County, South Carolina. Two young people have married, John and Jennie Alsop, and are in danger of a shivaree. They flee but are caught by boys and girls from their community. Because all of this happens on her ground, "Miss Callie" is able to deliver the Alsops from the rough celebration that was in prospect. But before bride and groom depart in safety, the matriarch decides to give them a wedding present, a quilt from her own collection. Baskets full of her sewing are brought out and Callie, with the girls she has instructed in her art, sings "The Quilt Song," telling how to "read the signs" sewn into their work. Seen in context, her song is a proper introduction to the role of memory in Davidson's conception of the artist and to his view of the place of art in reinforcing and directing that faculty in its cultural and political work.

By the firelight, in the night-time

M.E. Bradford (1934-1993) was from 1967 to 1993 a professor of English at the University of Dallas.

I sewed laughter, I sewed tears,
Woman's sorrow, woman's gladness,
Cloud and sunshine, days and years.

What the sword said in the battle,
What the axe said to the tree,
All our travels, all our wanderings—
Sewed to keep in memory.

All our travels, all our wanderings,
Sewed to keep in memory.

While the candle guttered slowly,
I remembered times of men.
I remembered kings and heroes,
Deathless deeds of now and then.

Red Culloden, grief of Sedgemoor
Washington and liberty,
Mountain riders, mountain rifles,
Sewed to keep in memory.

Mountain riders, mountain rifles,