

The New Criterion

Notebook

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I.M. Thomas M. Disch, 1940-2008

by [David Yezzi](#)

On the death of the author and poet.

Thomas M. Disch, the poet and award-winning science fiction writer, committed suicide on July 4; he was sixty-eight. I first heard his name in 1990, while misspending my youth as an actor in New York: Tom Disch was notorious. I showed up to a rehearsal at the now-defunct RAPP Arts Center on the Lower East Side (where I was cast in a forgettable bit of avant-gardism) the day that Tom made headlines for his play at the Center, *The Cardinal Detoxes*. The theater's landlord—the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, as it turned out—took exception to the play's savage skewering of the Church, and the Buildings Department attempted to chain the door.

Several years later, at *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, I was introduced by a fellow editor, Ben Downing, to Tom's poem "At the Grave of Amy Clampitt" ("she is a monument/ At last among the multitude that she has visited"), a straight-faced but ultimately sly elegy, since Clampitt was still alive at the time. My initial wariness at the *cause célèbre* provoked by his play gave way to awe at this stark disregard for the proprieties of the go-along-to-get-along "poetry business": who, after all, would beat up on dear old Amy Clampitt? Looking back on the poem, I can't help but detect notes of silliness and even sweetness, as it takes aim (it seems to me) at poetry that lacks the requisite red corpuscles. I had never before seen anyone break ranks to lampoon approved taste in that way, and it left the impression of a unique sensibility: caustic, principled, irreverent, original, and not a little intimidating. And if the photo of Tom on the cover of his essay collection *The Castle of Indolence* isn't intimidating, I don't know what is: a man the size of a Buick, against a crinkled background (as if he'd mangled it with his own hands), his Popeye forearms inked down their lengths with dragon tattoos. Terrifying.

The impression was misleading. After publishing a piece on Tom in *Parnassus*—"Tom" wrote the poems; "Thomas M.," the novels, essays, libretti, plays, and pretty much everything else—I feared, despite my ample praise, becoming the next victim of his eviscerations. Instead, I got a charming note, in almost pixyish tones, full of warmth and good humor. This was typical of Tom, I later learned.

In recent years, he suffered a series of devastating blows: the loss of his long-time partner, the poet Charles Naylor; threatened eviction from his apartment on Union Square; and a series of scourges that included flooding, fire, and toxic mold that rendered his country house unlivable. Tom had a number of good friends, yet he'd become rather isolated, virtually home-bound by illness (walking was a great difficulty for him). His solitude was relieved somewhat by regular visits from his neighbor Ben Downing, now the co-editor of *Parnassus* and a contributor to these pages. Occasionally, I would accompany Ben on these visits, which were invariably high-spirited,

uproarious even, as Tom recounted a number of his favorite stories.

Other poets came as well, constituting in the end something of a ragtag salon held in Tom's ramshackle apartment walled with books and his brightly colored paintings. We went to pay tribute to the author of those inimitable poems, scathing essays, and Orwellian novels. Tom was both delightful and, I believe, delighted on those occasions. With his gray beard and beaming smile, he looked like Burl Ives in a Hawaiian shirt. He was easily enticed to recite poems and was always keen to impart tidbits from his reading, which lately included biographies of Shelley and Whitman. His voice would flute lightly through a tremendous range of pitches, punctuated by amused exhalations and hiccups of laughter.

His tales of globe-trotting bohemianism—attending black-tie balls in Paris as a young writer, touring in North Africa, being denounced to the FBI by a paranoid Philip K. Dick, etc.—made our own seem pale by comparison. But in fact, though we had no idea at the time, our stories were being written there and then: stories of this most original of writers, trading swipes at bloated literary reputations, one-upping each other's gossip about writers and composers, enjoying the company of poets. This, of course, is one of the few dividends that accrue to writers: money is too soon spent, acclaim elusive, work solitary, but the sympathetic company of like-minded unfortunates provides a kind of satisfaction. These soirées seemed to bolster Tom's spirits.

Satire is an outsider occupation, requiring a commanding height from which to observe human failing. Tom was not without his own foibles, I suppose, but I would be hard-pressed to name them. He was susceptible in the way that most writers are to the histrionics of the wounded ego, but his griping was amusing and easy to forgive. And in fact, he had a right to any feelings he might have harbored about not receiving his due. Last year, a splendid book of his poems appeared in England from Anvil Press but, to my knowledge, it had no publisher here. Are American publishers so blinkered by period fashion that they no longer recognize wit and the serious pleasures that light verse affords? But "light verse" doesn't quite capture Tom's poetry. It's satiric verse in the light style, serious verse playfully brought to heel, adult verse sung to a nursery tune.

Porcupines make difficult friends, but as prickly as Tom could get regarding his pet peeves—smug academics and radical Islam, for example—I never saw him flare his quills at a friend, even in his darker hours. One such bleak interlude came a year or so ago, when his blog—on which he posted poems and animadversions—crashed. He was disconsolate. (James Panero here at *The New Criterion* was instrumental in restoring the site.) The blog had become a kind of lifeline for Tom. After a long dry spell, Tom was writing poems again, at the rate of nearly one a day. Before he died, he completed a sequence of elegies for Charles Naylor that will now serve as an elegy for him as well.

Tom's death closed the book on a particular kind of New York bohemianism that once flourished (in an era of cheaper rents) and is now largely extinct or shunted out of sight. Literary New York is a poorer place, its poets mostly professors desperate for preferment. Few challenge the status quo or generate an incorrect thought. Tom Disch was a true original, like Guy Davenport or ... who? There are so few. It's not that one agrees with everything such writers think and say (they can be, by their very natures, contrary and provocative). Rather, one admires the cast of mind that refuses to mince or recycle prepackaged notions and emotions. Tom Disch's novels and poems may be applied as touchstones against cant and mealy-mouthed self-deception. Vigilance will be much harder with him gone.

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