

The New Criterion

Books

September 2008

Modern consolations

by [Jeffrey Hart](#)

On *Invasions* by Adam Kirsch.

Adam Kirsch *Invasions*.
Ivan R. Dee, 80 pages, \$15.95

With his first book of poems, *A Thousand Wells* (2002), Adam Kirsch announced his arrival as a poet to be watched, and for this achievement he was awarded The New Criterion Poetry Prize. Now, from the perspective of *Invasions*, that earlier collection, however impressive itself, becomes a foreshadowing of more important things to come. As James Wood, one of our best critics, has commented on *Invasions*, “Adam Kirsch is the most exciting, the most serious, and the most courageous young poet-critic in America.” Indeed young. Mr. Kirsch is in his thirties, and he is clearly launched on a major career.

Kirsch is the book critic of *The New York Sun*, and previously was the assistant literary editor for *The New Republic*. He has also reviewed for *The New Yorker* (where I read his remarkable essay on Wordsworth), for *The Times Literary Supplement*, and for other magazines. His book *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Sylvia Plath) appeared in 2005, exploring how personal pain and confession became transformed into poetry, the “wounded surgeon” an allusion to Eliot’s Jesus in his lines “The Wounded Surgeon plies the steel/ That questions the distempered part;/ Beneath the bleeding hands we feel/ The sharp compassion of the healer’s art/ Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.” The surgeon for the six poets discussed by Kirsch is not Jesus but suffering and delivers not salvation but poetry. Kirsch followed that important book with *The Modern Element: Essays on Contemporary Poetry* (2008). The scope and energy of this first-rate literary journalism reminds me of Edmund Wilson. Both as critic and as poet Kirsch leaves the impression of high intelligence and impressive force of mind.

Parts I and III of *Invasion* consist of related sixteen-line iambic pentameter sonnets, a form used by George Meredith, all reflecting intensely the moment we now all share, the post-9/11 moment of uncertainty and fear. The apt cover illustration of *Invasions* suggests what is to follow, naval guns pointed at Manhattan. The current threat, however, is not from hostile guns but from something much more sinister:

September fifteenth and the house is full;
It seems few patrons died or stayed at home.
The City Opera, brave, professional,
Reminds us and themselves the show goes on.

Ash drifting north has left a coat so thin
The cladded travertine still glitters white,
And so mild no one coughs to breathe it in
On the hot breeze of a late summer's night ...

This imagined moment represents our situation. *The show must go on*. But how? The book in its entirety provides answers.

And then we have:

The mail
Put off its weaponized white coat of spores ...

In 2001 it seemed certain that a terrorist had mailed the anthrax spores to the offices of Senators Daschle and Leahy. Washington was almost paralyzed for a week, as the mails were interrupted, bills went unpaid, and so on. The threat and the fear persist.

Another sonnet gazes from Manhattan across the Hudson to the Palisades on the New Jersey shore. They remind the poet of other rocks:

On Afghan mountains bombproof barricades
Or anywhere a Third World tenantry
Survives our televised annihilation
By clamping down and taking root ...
Our bashful Alexandrian tolerance,
Our glass towers and their common, huddling, cramped,
Impregnable cliffside. We don't stand a chance.

That last sentence dramatizes the moment of despair, and is not to be taken as fact.

Kirsch loves New York, loves it passionately, and here the cultural strength of that great city itself is one reason to believe the show will go on. For example, in the sonnet "Sing Along the 'Messiah,' Disney Hall," the choir pours

down on the silent congregation
Expert harmonies. These volunteers
Who launch themselves into the "Comfort ye,"
Following in the scores they brought from home,
Produce the less angelic harmony
Of singers comforting themselves alone.

Those last two words need not detract from our sense of the value of the moment, the perfection of Handel's *Messiah* nevertheless sounding in our minds.

We have a visit to the Cloisters, recalling the medieval "censer-swinging celebrant/ [who] Would process calmly up the center aisle" and "The masons who set stone on perfect stone/ And artisans who piously inlaid/ Thick stripes of color in the window pane."

Kirsch recalls—he is too young to have been there—the culture of the New York intellectuals:

The shabby Park Slope bookshops that preserve
Their silver age in broken paperbacks

Of Forster's *Two Cheers for Democracy*
And Freud on dreams, and Philip Rieff on Freud,
And Trilling's "exigent" apology
For the dilemmas of the liberal mind—
The scriptures of a time more serious,
Whose sectaries won't congregate again,
Outside these aisles, to praise and criticize
The majestic ambivalence of Henry James.

Yet though that special moment passed, the memory and its enduring achievements are part of Kirsch's New York.

Part II comprises poems in various verse forms expertly deployed, many of them traditional and thus suggesting the permanence of poetry itself fighting back against the fear generated by September 11. Kirsch is well aware of the achievements of Modernism. As he says in *The Modern Element*, "a good modern poem moves us, and a bad modern poem disgusts us, more intimately than their equivalents from previous poetic eras." Nevertheless, he does not accept the Modernist assumption that the old verse forms are outmoded and that we must, as Pound demanded, "make it new." He ably adapts traditional verse forms.

Yet he also knows that today the old consolations are

Obsolete as the ornamental sword
And stylized codpiece as the courtier.
The masculine ambition to secure
Something like deathlessness by deeds or words.

Kirsch is unenthusiastic about the battlefield:

They must believe a stroke's too mild,
A heart attack too slow,
AIDS too easy to avoid,
Tumors hard to grow;
The way these soldiers swap their youth
For uniforms and guns,
They must think God has given death
A less than even chance.

For some, it seems, the lessons of Antietam, the Somme, and Iwo Jima must be re-learned today; at Iwo Jima, if you dig in the dark beach sand you still find buried there the less organic remnants of the battle: belt buckles, eye-glasses, cartridge shells, teeth, bones. I think the clear but unstated point of this poem, *Quid tantos iuvat exitare motus*, one of a series in the book adapted from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, is that the only wars that should be fought are wars that must be fought. The more often you reread *Invasions* the more securely it becomes part of your mind.

Jeffrey Hart's most recent book is *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (ISI).

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 27 September 2008, on page 73

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