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The body politic

by Richard Selzer

There is much to enjoy in Gerald Weissmann's new collection of essays. As readers of his previous books know well, this is a man conversant with lore in many areas— medicine, science, art, and history among them. Few are the doctor-writers who can draw the reader into a story with so sure a hand. He does this here in his account of the "Saturnine Gout," that affliction of Englishmen in the eighteenth century. It seems that the British Foreign Minister of that time, objecting to the importation of so much French wine, arranged with the Portuguese to buy theirs instead. But the Portuguese wine was "fortified" with whiskey that had been aged in lead-lined containers. What the Minister had done was to poison a vast number of middle- and upper-class English gentlemen, giving them red noses, inflamed joints, all the stigmata of gout immortalized in the pictures of Rowlandson and Hogarth. The English poor who drank gin and beer were not so afflicted. "Saturnine," because lead was the sign of Saturn, the farthest and most morose of the planets.

Riveting, too, is Dr. Weissmann's account of the creation of New York's Central Park under the guidance of the abolitionist and sanitarian Frederick Law Olmsted, a man for whom morality and hygiene were linked. Central Park was Olmsted's answer to the cholera epidemics of 1848. It was deemed necessary to give the city "a cleaning as it had not had in years" and to provide a free space where fresh air might be breathed. In another chapter, the author takes you along on a canoe trip to the virgin lakes and mountains of the Adirondacks. Your companions are none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, John Holmes (Oliver Wendell's brother), and Louis Agassiz, the country's major natural philosopher (and scientific rascal). These Boston nabobs "swept with oars the Saranac" and endured "hard fare, hard bed and comic misery—the midge, the blue-fly and mosquito" even as they "trode on air." Most moving is the account of the heroism of such as Robert Gould Shaw and Thomas Wentworth Higginson in their leadership of the black regiments that did so much to turn the tide of battle in the Civil War.

The conceit at the heart of this book is that social reform is the sister of scientific medical progress. The most splendid deed of the late twentieth century, the "Flowering of DNA" (to paraphrase Van Wyck Brooks's reference to New England) had its roots in meliorist soil. Meliorism is the term invented by George Eliot that signifies progress through reason, not sentiment. The meliorist sees what society needs and acts to produce it. "An altruist feeds the beggar; a meliorist feeds the beggar and vaccinates his children." Meliorism is the spirit that unites the age of abolition with the age of DNA, or so the author would have it. The city of Boston is seen as the hub of both social reform and medical progress before the Civil War. It is personified in Oliver Wendell Holmes, physician and literary figure. An intrepid band of Bostonians is enlisted to advance the thesis of *Democracy and DNA*, among them Emerson, James Russell Lowell, William James, Margaret Fuller, and Katherine Lee Bates. Katherine Lee Bates? One of the most entertaining chapters is devoted to this professor

of English at Wellesley, who, after visiting Pike's Peak in Colorado, wrote the words to "America the Beautiful." Her zeal for social reform and equality for women was shared by her lover and colleague at Wellesley, Katherine Coman. It is a sign of our times that many readers will take satisfaction in the news that so many of the great women who figure in this book were lesbians—Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman medical graduate; and Alice James, the gifted sister of Henry and William. (One wonders whether, even today, patriotism would be stifled by bigotry if those who sing "America the Beautiful" were aware of who had written it.) As for Alice James, she spent years as an invalid afflicted with an incapacitating hysteria until her death of breast cancer. Dr. Weissmann sees her powerful and moving memoir not as the brilliant work of art it is and worthy of her family name but as the case history of a patient searching for a doctor who would listen to her "while the longing pallid victim stretches out a sickly tendril," as Alice James put it herself.

When the author attaches the same diagnoses of depression and invalidism to Emily Dickinson, he miscalculates seriously. In a lapse of taste as well as judgement, he contrasts Dickinson with Walt Whitman: " 'I hear America singing,' chants Walt Whitman. 'I hear America sobbing,' sighs Emily Dickinson.' " Such a reduction of the great poet springs from an egregious cleverness. Emily Dickinson was no more a patient than any of the rest of us are. Nor were her poems a reaching out by a poet in pain. She wrote about death as a fate not to be denied but to be faced as both an old adversary and a friend. She was a strong, determined artist who knew her own worth. "I taste a liquor never brewed/ From Tankards scooped in Pearl./ Not all the Vats along the Rhine/ Yield such an Alcohol." It is nonsense to insist that Dickinson's poetry "has about it the sounds of a patient carefully arranging her symptoms." Dr. Weissmann's misreading was matched by that of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the same who led the black regiments to such good effect and became a minister and editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*. Dickinson had been led to seek out Higginson after reading his "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the *Atlantic* in which he gave advice to those who would submit their work. Dr. Weissmann gives the editor full credit for "discovering" Dickinson. "Were it not for Higginson, … Dickinson might have remained … voiceless." In fact, she sent six poems to the baffled Higginson who was incapable of recognizing Dickinson's radical new art. Shocked by her experimental creations, he proceeded to mutilate them in the name of editing; he then published them in their bastardized form. Understandably, the poet sent him no more except for a gentle admonition in the form of a merry, bardic poem full of music and minstrelsy:

> I cannot dance upon my Toes—
> No Man instructed me—
> But oftentimes, among my mind,
> A Glee possesses me—
>
> That had I Ballet knowledge—
> Would put itself abroad
> In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe
> Or lay a Prima mad.

Not the least of the pleasures of reading this book is the implicit invitation to debate the author. It is no easy thing, however, to pin Dr. Weissmann down long enough to get a firm hold. He is adept at espousing both sides of a question. Just when you're sure he's given evidence to support one notion, you are given equal evidence to suggest otherwise. It rather precludes debate as that term is usually understood. But let me try. The impression is conveyed that the "Flowering of New England" and the "Biological Revolution" constituted a renaissance of some kind, that there was a creative ferment in the air shared by science, literature, and culture. Edgar Allan Poe is brought forth as a link

between the two by virtue of his having invented the mystery-story genre and thereby encouraging the use of conjecture in the taking of a patient's history. One might as well say that Einstein was immediately preceded by the Russian ballet. Oliver Wendell Holmes went to Paris to study medicine. So did Elizabeth Blackwell and a great many other Americans. It scarcely needs pointing out that it was the Paris of Charcot, that Barnum of the mental wards, and the vogue of neurasthenia. DNA and abolition? It would be equally easy to manufacture a causality between war and medical progress. It is at least as convincing that an aversion toward death is the engine that drove, and still drives, medical research. We hate death and so we have learned how to subdue the immune system and transplant organs in order to avoid it. And who would deny that money is a goad to science? Personal and corporate gain have brought about the development of new drugs and ingenious instruments. And where is it written that the medical scientist must be of good heart? It is precisely the disinterestedness of the scientist that makes his research glorious. He is not motivated by good or evil. He is driven by the need to know; it is a sublime curiosity that is all too often corrupted by the lust for fame and fortune, as the notorious skirmishing between laboratories will attest.

Gerald Weissmann is the quintessential scientific humanist who scoffs at anything that cannot be replicated in the laboratory, such as the miracles of God. He finds it refreshing that the sole purpose of DNA is to copy itself. We are not, he muses, "a little lower than the angels, but a little sloppier than a virus." Absolved of the need to divine the motive of its maker, "we can begin to tinker with our DNA, to meliorate its errors in the dish." This comes as no surprise. Science is devoid of sacrament, and rightly so. But it is in the nature of man to cling to the sacramental lest he become estranged from society.

Dr. Weissmann is also a punster who does not shrink to place this writerly sin in service of an elitism that some might find unappealing. On TV there is "the cackle of shysters or bleat of strumpets." About the singer Madonna's leather and metal costumes, it is "difficult to tell the singer from the thong." The clock that sets the time to copy DNA was figured out in quahogs, and so, naturally, "we are such stuff as clams are made of." That sort of thing. Much of the book is written in a tub-thumping prose that serves to weaken rather than bolster his case. What the human genome will predict will not always be good news. "The facts of life, just the facts, ma'am, will make few of us happy. We tend to prefer the fancy music of hope to the plain speech of fact." Contrasting the nineteenth-century poet with the twentieth-century scientist, Weissmann becomes Jeremiah. "As our violent century sputters to the millennium, as gun-toting tots spill out of schoolyards to the amplified doggerel of misogynist war chants, belief in the Romantic equation of ethics and aesthetics seems like geriatric nostalgia." The lipfoam sprays on the other arts as well: "… our cacophonous avant-garde is no more encouraging than our low life. The post-modernist high jinks of our time ought to make anyone nostalgic for a golden age of poems that rhyme, paintings with figures in them, and operas with tunes to sing." Even reading such paragraphs is exhausting. Where was the editor to save the well-intentioned author from his own excesses?

The last chapter of the book focuses on Lewis Thomas as the embodiment of medicine and humanism, and on Bellevue Medical Center as the beating heart of the whole marvelous enterprise of medical science. We are in attendance at the first Lewis Thomas Award Ceremony. Thomas himself is to be the recipient. One of his daughters reads a passage from one of her father's books that tells of her grandfather's late-night house calls as a general practitioner. As she herself is about to publish a volume of short stories, we are reminded of the familial bond between literature and medicine. Oscar Wilde was the child of a doctor, writes Weissmann, as were Sinclair Lewis, Proust, Flaubert, Auden, and Gerald Weissmann. Another daughter plays Mozart on the piano, which the author also relates to nighttime house calls and a doctor's black bag. As for the distinguished audience, "some of these might pass for temporal saints who had fulfilled the dreams of sanitarians and reformers, able to accomplish God's work on earth. Unlike those of the deity, however, the miracles of medical science are reproducible." Then it is Bellevue's turn, where both Lewis Thomas

and Gerald Weissmann worked. It is portrayed as "the home of star-eyed Science." Reading on, we find ourselves in Valhalla with the clouds piled up high on either side. One can conjecture on the wry amusement with which such institutional chauvinism will be met.

The struggle between Art and Science, between the Virgin and the Dynamo, will not end with this book. Perhaps they are incompatible. Metaphor and imagery, while desirable for the artist, are anathema for the scientist. The artist explores a myth-haunted cave; the scientist stands atop the crystal pyramid of intelligence. If the scientists are the hunters, artists are the shamans; we need them both. For the scientist, the past is something to be moved on from; the artist is given to backward glances. The mark of Science is progress; in Art, there is no such thing as progress. The cave paintings of prehistory are just as "up-to-date" as the work of Picasso. Were I to draw any connection between the advances of science and any other influence, it would be to consider Yeats's Great Memory, the "foundation of nearly all magical practices." Everyone partakes of the Great Memory but only a few have the gift to evoke it by symbol, language, dance, painting, or scientific research. In Joseph Campbell's example, the newborn chick reacts with fear to the shadow of a hawk; it is equipped with a biological nervous mechanism that enables it to respond to a circumstance never before experienced. The image of the hereditary enemy is already sleeping in the new chicken. In man, too, there is a whole body of vestigial biological images that can be awakened equally by art and science. Whatever satisfaction Science may take in the proceeds of its ingenuity, it would be well to remember that some mysteries are not meant to be solved; they are meant to be deepened.

Notes

Go to the top of the document.

1. *Democracy and DNA: American Dreams and Medical Progress*, by Gerald Weissmann; Hill & Wang, 263 pages, $23. Go back to the text.

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more from this author

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