

Fall 1973

on Dan Gerber and Thomas McGuane

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Recommended Citation

McCormick, Michael (1973) "on Dan Gerber and Thomas McGuane," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 25.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss2/25>

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AMERICAN ATLAS

by Dan Gerber

Prentice-Hall, 1973

\$5.95

NINETY-TWO IN THE SHADE

by Thomas McGuane

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973

\$6.95

In *American Atlas* and *Ninety-Two In the Shade*, Gerber and McGuane have mastered a style of writing that has been submerged in American fiction since the mid-fifties: the art of telling a story. Both write well-honed, evocative prose and avoid the stylistic gimmickry of the so-called experimental writers. Both books deal with visions of America as it exists today; Gerber's through the eyes of a poet in search of poetry, McGuane's through those of a novelist looking for something better than he has been promised by a politically, technologically and morally corrupt society.

American Atlas is the story of Larry Bancroft, heir-apparent to Bancroft Pies, a company that for two generations has pushed millions of multi-flavored pies on the American republic. When his father dies, Larry is expected to carry on the tradition, in effect, to dress, talk, and think like a strawberry cream pie, to believe in the goal of his own funeral, where he imagines himself crawling into the fetal position surrounded by a soggy crust and waving goodbye to the people that made it all possible. Instead, he walks out on his father's funeral, knowing that increased pie sales have nothing to do with the immortality of his soul. He isn't sure what he wants, but he knows that he doesn't want to meet his Creator as a man who never accepted the responsibility of deciding for himself what he would do with his life. After a free-wheeling romp through the side of America that his wealth gives access to, he still isn't sure what Larry Bancroft is all about. But he has learned something about the human relationships in his life, and learned that money is only a cure for certain kinds of pain. In the end he finds an image of himself outside his mother's house:

She closed the door and I was left standing in the cold wind staring at the dark mahogany door and the brass knocker engraved with the name of Bancroft, the door I'd entered freely as a child. I thought how many times I'd dreaded that innocuous door as a prelude to another subtly vicious family fete. I turned and looked at the Russian olive trees in the yard, the wind blowing through their silver leaves, how they seemed more silver in the cold and wind. They'd been planted when I was fifteen. I'm sure they'd grown a great deal since then, but I couldn't really remember how small they'd been.

In his essay on Milton, Thomas Macaulay said that literature is entertainment; maybe he didn't, but he did say that language best serves the poet in its rudest state. That nations, like individuals, first perceive and then abstract, advance from particular images to general terms. Hence, the vocabulary of an enlightened society is philosophical, that of a half-civilized people is poetic. Then, are we to assume that America today is half-civilized? Yes. But it is not necessarily a derogatory comment; that is why in Gerber's and McGuane's work we have an example of the immensely needed change in fiction since James.

Fortunately, McGuane has forgotten his "enlightened" education of the fifties and cashed in on the language and style of a half-civilized society. Like others writing in the seventies, McGuane has not let his language take control of him. Instead, he forces the words to express each character, scene, and unit of action as individual personalities. Each personality suggests a way traditional society has affected him; each interprets its basic environment differently, and when they clash, the outcome is a serious statement about life in the seventies, always undercut by McGuane's sardonic humor.

Nichol Dance is the antagonist's antagonist in *Ninety-Two In the Shade*. He admits to the hero, Thomas Skelton, that although he likes him personally, he will kill him if he tries to guide fishing boats in the Florida Keys. Without "Credence," as Dance puts it, a man isn't much of anything.

Skelton tries to escape society for a while, living in an abandoned airplane fuselage in Key West, as he takes time to regroup his thoughts. He watches the rituals enacted by the other players like a spectator, sees the violence and absurdity of everyday life, and decides that a life ruled by such insanity must have something to offer him. He already knows the outcome of the course he sets for himself, but he believes that the struggle and confrontation involved will be enough to satisfy his worldly desires. There is wonderful satire in his choosing "credence" as the center of his philosophy. To Skelton, it is just a symbol of that one vague, invincible belief that everyone around him clings to in his own individual soul-saving journey through life.

Dance and Skelton are both products of the half-civilized society that emerged 20 years after Hemingway. Hemingway had a reason to kill. In McGuane's world, where little is worth saving, a man can at least keep his word—Dance must kill Skelton because he said he would. Beneath the brilliant metaphor that McGuane directs at the insouciant and apathetic civilization of America is an anti-cynical system of moral value that surpasses that of Hemingway; survival of the fittest becomes *survival for the hell of it*. The question for McGuane isn't whether or not he is going to die, it's whether he is

going to live. For Skelton, any decision he makes is OK and how he lives isn't going to send him to a heaven or hell. What counts is that he made a decision—right, wrong, or anywhere in between. Skelton dies, finally, because he isn't going to live and not guide skiffs. The story closes with an innocent accomplice smashing Dance's head in with the gun used to kill Skelton. He does so simply because it seems appropriate. He then leaves the two bodies in a "foiled and strangely synchronized pile at his feet" and exits knowing that society will not know what to do with them either.

Beyond the honesty of McGuane's vision, it is his sense of language that sets him apart. His prose style is both exacting and flamboyant; he is able to capture the unique spirit of each character's actions:

Sometimes when a wino comes off a bat he is as unmanageable from this grape residue in his "system" as he would be with semi-fatal dum-dum rounds in the brain pan; he is, moreover, spavined in the morals. If he is in a neighborhood, he looks darkly about himself at his neighbors. A dire grape madness is upon him; and not the Castalian libido Olympiad of the wine's first onslaught that ends with an alpha-wave glissando into sleep; from which he has every expectation of waking in other than this Wild Kingdom Mutual of Omaha rhino rush, smashing of beak and noggin against the Land Rover of life itself. Especially not if the wine is one of the chemical daydreams of the republic's leisure-time industrial combines that produce and bottle curious opaque effluents in the colors of Micronesian tides or meteor trails; these things are called "beverages" and exist not only in their bright fruit-festooned bottles but conceptually in the notebooks of technicians, diagrams of hydrocarbon chains that can be microfilmed if another "winery" should be after their secrets. It is, you suppose, one of the troubles we are having with our republic.

Such a wino had abandoned himself upon the interior of Skelton's fuselage. Skelton found him asleep in a bed of his own trashing. He woke the man up. The wino, whose delicately intelligent face was that of an amateur translator or local begonia prince, looked about himself at the wreckage and asked, "Did I do this?" cringing for the first of the blows.

"It appears that you did."

Long quiet.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to clean it up," said Skelton.

"I mean what are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to be disappointed in you."

"How can you be disappointed in me. You had no expectations."

This stumped Skelton for a moment. "I have expectations about humanity in general," he finally said.

"Please, why don't you come off it. I'm a sick-ass drunk and I don't need that kind of romance."

"What do you want?"

"I want nothing. But I want plenty of nothing."

"Well, let me tell you as proprietor of this place what I got in mind. First I'm going to roll your sorry hide into the roadway so that I can clean up your damn wreckage."

"That's more like it. We are in extremis here, chum. And it's time for a dialogue."

"I don't want it—"

"It's time for polemics."

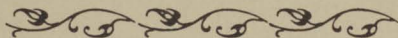
"—You wrecked my home."

"Precisely."

For Skelton, this brought back terrible memories of school. He looked about himself and thought, Why did this interlude seek me out?

The coalescence of *American Atlas* and *Ninety-Two In the Shade* is in the vision of a society where there is nothing to do. McGuane and Gerber have shredded the mythological conception of the artist's traditional and sacred omniscient view of destiny and pre-destiny. They are both bored with their lives, not life. They are bored knowing they were born sometime and knowing that they are going to die sometime. They are trying to find some enjoyment in between, and that lies in not knowing *what* the journey will entail. What they show us is the passage through mid-destiny; they learn that the only real thing that anyone inherits is death.

—Michael McCormick



UNDER COVER

by Albert Goldbarth

The Best Cellar Press, 1973

\$2.

FOOTHOLDS

by Thomas Johnson

Ironwood Press, 1973

\$1.50

Under Cover, a recent pamphlet by Albert Goldbarth, takes the reader into the field. Goldbarth, the archaeologist-scholar-poet draws upon various literary sources in many poems in this book, as well as in some of his other work. This use of established information, and the transformation it undergoes under the direction of shaman Goldbarth, leads the poems, which often contain source