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Review of *Twenty Questions: Posed by Poems* by J. D.
McClatchy

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would provide greater benefit to the reader if they were interpolated into the text, rather than tucked away at the end. Given that the book announces itself as an introduction, it would make sense to incorporate as much explicatory material into the main text as can be done without making the book unwieldy. At times, Russell makes awkward, announced transitions, as happens at the beginning of the chapter on Frye and Jung. Elsewhere, turns of phrase such as "For my purpose of setting Frye in conversation Paul Ricoeur" (132) indicate either sloppy proofing or a quirky prose style. But these are minor complaints, and we can trust that they will be answered in subsequent editions.

Ford Russell has written a book of interest, not only to "Fryedolators," but also to anyone with an interest in literary theory and the history of ideas. As Russell observes, "[...] the *Anatomy* is beginning to look more like the most traditional literary critical work the century produced" (ix). If we accept this, a guide to the traditions that produced the *Anatomy* is a worthwhile project. Russell's work demonstrates just what a variety of traditions merged to form Frye's theory, and it does this in a useful and comprehensible manner.

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Twenty Questions: Posed by Poems. By J.D. McClatchy. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. xii + 200 pp.

Twenty Questions, the poet-critic J.D. McClatchy's second collection of essays, reminds us that the personal is professional—that good reading is a form of play as well as work, and that both play and work animate the best teaching. In twenty essays that he frames as "twenty questions," McClatchy poses versions of one big question: what does life (the lives of readers, the lives of poets) have to do with poetry?

McClatchy, the author of five books of poetry and the longtime editor of the *Yale Review*, is certainly well-connected. But he is "well-connected" not just in the gossipy sense of knowing everybody (although he seems to) but also in the sense of having befriended the dead—as his (now dead) friend James Merrill did in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations* expresses, famously, a desire "to speak with the dead." McClatchy does not just want to speak with the dead, he wants to sleep with the dead—and in the first chapter, "Reading," he describes falling in love with Marlowe's "Hero and Leader" (of all things):

"It was the first time I had felt the erotic power of a poem. In retrospect, that seems a crucial moment in everyone's reading life: to fall in love with a text, to feel its sexual heat, to sense it unbuttoning your shirt" (7). Scholars—even passionate scholars—speak with the dead by historicizing, but to sleep with the dead requires a relentless presentism. What, McClatchy asks, can Marlowe and Pope and Dickinson do for us right now, today?

McClatchy organizes his book into three parts. The first essays are autobiographical; the middle essays are ostensibly about other poets, although they are also intensely personal; and the final essays, on Degas and Horace, abjure directly autobiographical statements and yet—coming at the end of so much autobiography—seem saturated by McClatchy's own life experience. Early on, in "My Fountain Pen," he equates his penis and his fountain pen. But—*contra* the old formulation of the phallus as pen as patriarchal power—for McClatchy the pen is a messy and not entirely controllable instrument: "How many times have I fallen asleep still holding the thing and by morning found it had spilled its secrets all over? Yes, its secrets. That's what my fountain pen holds" (30). For a gay man in love with secrets, poetry becomes a way to engage with language that can work not as a puzzle but as a dream: something to be partially decoded but not solved or explained.

The danger of the narcissistic haze hovers over McClatchy's confessions, and yet he trumps complaints on that front by asserting that American poetry is fundamentally about the self. American poetry, he concludes in the title essay, "Twenty Questions," has always sprung from "the abiding desire for an individual 'voice,' a means to speak to the self under the guise of addressing others" (53). This does not mean that we are a nation of navel-gazers; on the contrary, as his essays on individual poets imply, the search for the self is always a relentless voyage out into literature and into the past. In brief chapters on Pope, Ben Belitt, Dickinson, Jean Garrigue, Stephen Sondheim, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, Richard Wilbur, W.S. Merwin, and Merrill, McClatchy makes their poetry his own, engaging in close readings but also responding with his own verses (a remarkable description of Bishop as a speaking corpse, for instance) and with anecdotes from his own life as a reader.

The strongest among these essays are perhaps the two he devotes to James Merrill. Here, McClatchy's connections come into play, as he makes the case for Merrill as a visionary poet. He suggests that *The Changing Light at Sandover* is—with the possible exception of Whitman's "Song of Myself"—"the strangest and grandest American poem ever, at once eerie, hilarious and heartbreaking" (164). McClatchy backs into this conclusion through his fascination with Merrill as a specifically twentieth-century person with Wall Street money, a loden baseball cap, and a summer house at Stonington. If there is little abstract history in

McClatchy's essays, he is nevertheless well-connected to the material history of American poetry. In his Merrill essays, we get Sandover but we also get Merrill's living room with its bat-motif wallpaper. These details are not extraneous; they contribute to our own rereadings of Merrill by offering a way to approach the poet through his own American history.

In addition to providing rich cultural contexts for familiar poets (we get not only Merrill's living room but Anne Sexton's bedroom) the essays in the middle section of *Twenty Questions* invite the reader to ferret out less well-known work by Ben Belitt and Jean Garrigue. McClatchy's re-evaluation of Garrigue compels us to read her work as energized by her life: interweaving quotes from her poems, her notebooks, and her friends, he underscores not the pathologies of the poet but rather the "reckless grandeur" of the poet's work.

Most of the essays in *Twenty Questions* were published elsewhere and McClatchy implies that the book's structure is deliberately loose, meant to evoke "musing. . . a term that catches up the notion of spellbound inspiration: drifting slowly in a punt down the river of a text, one hand over the side, fingers dipped in the eddying implications. But in fact the word is thought to derive from the Medieval Latin *museum*, or snout. What readers do is nose around in a text, like moles or pigs, sniffing and tunneling, following a trail of evidence through the literature of the past, or rooting for dream-truffles" (3). As dream-truffles, these essays work marvelously well, and indulgence is a pleasure. As a trail of evidence, however, the book's forking paths can be frustrating: one wants more long perspectives, perhaps an essay at the end that takes a bold plunge into literary history and offers a more fully worked-out account of how McClatchy's contemporaries relate to one another and to the project of reading and writing poetry. As a respected anthology editor as well as a poet, he must have a broader vision—especially of American poetry—than his snippets reveal here.

But McClatchy is first and foremost a poet, and by way of conclusion he offers, not a backward look, but a new beginning, in the form of a translation of part of Horace's *Ars Poetica*. In this chapter, he defends the poem against Coleridge's criticism of it as an "unmethodical miscellany": "But that is part of its point, or at least its fiction. The tone and drift of the poem derive from its being a verse letter. Personality rather than philosophy dominates" (181). This defense of Horace also works as a defense of the tone and drift of *Twenty Questions*. Personality rather than philosophy dominates, and yet through the personal we come to a clearer understanding of the art of poetry.

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