

Edward Rothstein on Music

Heart of Gould

During the second movement in Glenn Gould's recording of Bach's Clavier Concerto no. 7, there is a series of trills. A trill is just a quick movement back and forth between a tone and its neighbor. Even in the best of hands, it is no more than a decoration, an ornament. A trill sustains a note, keeping its melodic strength alive, drawing attention to its continued presence.

But Gould's trill is something else. The movement back and forth between two notes that most keyboard players turn into a shimmer here becomes a rocking. The rocking changes in speed and intensity. It takes on a rhythm that instead of simply reinforcing the music's pulse plays with it, propelling and teasing, stretching and pulling. Gould's trill does not emphasize a note at all, it emphasizes the spaces between the notes. His trills direct and suspend musical space and time.

I risk turning a trivial moment into something portentous, but that is only because when Gould played Bach there was hardly a trivial moment. Of course, willful eccentricity and deliberate provocation often went along with his extraordinary technique, the crystalline independence of melodic lines, the rhythmic exuberance, the subtle structural articulations. But this trill is evidence of the sort of power that suffused all his playing, even the most outrageous renditions of Mozart piano sonatas. Of all the pianists I have heard, Gould had the keenest sense that music occurs not in the tones themselves but in the spaces between them. He seemed constitutionally unable to play two notes without feeling them as part of a gesture in musical space.

This is why Gould can sustain a line at a tempo so slow it would splinter under most pianists' hands. It is why his playing of Webern and Schoenberg can be as poignant and translucent as his articulation of a Bach fugue. It is also why he sat so low at the keyboard, his face hovering just over the keys, one hand conducting the other's playing, ecstatically and uncontrollably humming or singing the gestures his hands were spinning out in sound. The playing of the piano, Gould explained, was not a matter of vertical action of the hands, but of horizontal

movement between the keys. In this ambition Gould was solidly in the mainstream of piano philosophy; but in his execution of his ambition he was hardly in the mainstream of anything.

It is now nearly seven years since Gould died suddenly of a stroke at the age of 50, and the loss still seems beyond reckoning. This might seem a radically strong statement about someone who was, after all, an interpretive artist, not a composer, and one who caused not a little controversy over what many saw as his whimsical and perverse approaches to music. But among the many remarkable things about Glenn Gould is that opinions about his achievement are so drastically opposed; they are nearly reduced to fundamental notions of musical belief.

Many still believe that he was a great talent tragically led astray by his baroque personality and exotic neuroses. The gloves and scarf in summer, the soaking of hands, the pills for every manner of physical and mental ailment, the battered 14-inch-high piano chair, the weird mannerisms at the keyboard, the bizarre retirement from public performance at the age of 31 with a proclamation that the concert was dead: "eccentric" seems an adjective bonded to Gould. There was the lawsuit against the piano technician who Gould claimed had nearly crippled him by what some witnesses saw as a friendly clap on the back. There were the critical proclamations like "Mozart died too late rather than too early." There were his suggestions that an ideal Barbra Streisand album should include songs by Dowland and Bach and Mussorgsky, that Beethoven was overrated, that art should destroy itself, etc., etc.

What was one to make of a brilliant pianist who made his debut recording in 1955 with Bach's Goldberg Variations (a recording that has never been out of print), who went on to an extravagantly successful concert career in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who then simply dropped out? What was one to think of his subsequent career, holed up in a room in Toronto, sleeping all day, popping pills, calling friends after midnight, laboriously splicing together his recordings out of multiple takes? Who can blame the skeptics?

But Gould often spoke of the intimate relationship between player and listener

made possible through recordings. It is that relationship—personal and impassioned—that his admirers claim. What draws them, as much as the beauty of his sound or the intoxicating power of the music, is an expectation of something resembling revelation, some glimpse of transcendental truth. There is a sense of secrets being revealed by Gould, something private being shared, in sharp contrast to a musical culture in which marketing and performance are primary values. The mystery of the man and the artist who could elicit such a response—and its opposite—remains. But in the closing years of the 20th century, Gould's musical achievement is likely to become more, not less, important; his recordings are likely to become more precious as recordings themselves become more common.

This makes Otto Friedrich's biography of Gould, *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (Random House, 441 pp., \$24.95), all the more disappointing. Despite its surface competence and its dutiful coverage of career markers, there is little light shed below the surface, and almost no useful discussion of musical issues. This is the first biography written with access to Gould's papers; but at the end—after unrestricted access to "72 meters of shelves" of papers, 80 recorded interviews, 2,000 pages of transcripts—little is added to our understanding of Gould as person, pianist, or writer.

Gould's mother, for example, was his sole piano teacher for many years, but Friedrich gives no sense of the approach she took with her son. Gould's father, a furrier, is still alive—he was even interviewed—but he remains a cipher, oddly stiff and formal. Even the speculation about Gould's own character seems stilted. Gould seemingly lived a monkish existence. Yet there was, apparently, an affair with a musician's wife. So what, exactly, was the nature of Gould's sexuality?

There is no answer given, and more important speculations are never even attempted. Gould's very approach to music itself was immensely physical. He couldn't sit still while playing, and a listener can have a hard time sitting still while listening, so potent was Gould's sense of gesture and pulse. That physicality was never seductive (as it could be with Arthur Rubinstein) or sexually driven (as in some of Vladimir Horowitz's performances). Yet Gould loved the spun-out desires of Tristan: once he began playing that work in his own piano transcription, we are told, there was no stopping him.

When it comes to music, Friedrich's views are often mislearned pieties. Beethoven's last piano sonata, Opus 111, is called "one of those grand statements of

heroic purpose, like the Fifth Symphony and the Emperor Concerto." But the sonata is not from Beethoven's "heroic period," nor does it share much with either of those works that are. Friedrich discusses Renaissance music as if it were just a sort of folk music. He refers to Liszt's transcriptions of Beethoven symphonies as "almost laughable." He even takes Gould's denigration of the Goldberg Variations in one interview—a typically "naughty" Gould proclamation—at face value.

The most significant revelation in the book is a journal that documented a crisis in Gould's playing in the late 1970s. It interests Friedrich primarily for medical reasons. (He gave it to doctors to evaluate for its physiological and psychological elements.) Yet the musical significance of the few fragments Friedrich quotes are fascinating. Gould was having trouble playing, noticing "uneven and uncontrolled," "unbalanced" and "insecure" playing. No stranger to neurosis, Gould wondered whether there was a "psychological" source of these failings. But he treated them as physical problems.

Gould, whose hypochondria knew no limits, didn't bring in medical consultants, take pills, try different therapies. This was a problem in another realm: it was pianistic, something private, personal, the object of determined labors. The remaking of his body was a project for him, an attempt to reconstruct an interior image of sound and play. He engaged in nightly struggles with his keyboard demons.

This was how Gould developed his style in the first place—ending all lessons at the age of 20 and withdrawing into near isolation for several years, accompanied by a tape recorder, refining and redefining his approach to the piano. His technique, with its burnished tone, was totally individual; anybody imitating his posture would create a dull, faceless sound. Gould's solutions to the problems of turning an instrument played by impact into one that sang was to struggle for a continuity of musical and mental and

physical movement. The hands, judging from videotapes of Gould playing, do not strike, they grip the keys in passing, almost pulling the sound from their surfaces.

But during this crisis, it is as if all his early labors were being undone. Gould's posture at the instrument, his wrist position, the way in which his finger muscles were used, the placing of knuckles and joints—these again became matters of extraordinary calculation. In the midst of his struggles there were moments of hope, like gasps for air:



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Suddenly, last night, I determined that the common denominator in *all* these problems . . . was the lack of *constancy* in shoulder elevation. For one brief moment, and only in r-h [right hand] I *had* it; that gleaming lustrous sound was back and I realized more than ever, that *that* was the sound of control . . .

But then the problems recur: "nothing has worked." The journal continues without resolution, with only intermittent solutions, breaking off, finally, with Gould giving accounts of "disastrous" playing of Bach and Ruggles and Krenek. We do not know, in fact, whether he ever solved these problems, or

whether the increasing use of the editing studio was an attempt to conquer them technologically.

In fact, Gould's isolation and the determination, the scrupulous attention to sound and image, are almost frightening to read about, even in Friedrich's fragments. This episode was not the exception. Gould attempted, again and again, to make something new of himself and his playing. He had an almost obsessive drive to remake, possess, control. This is what inspired him to ignore a composer's explicit requests about tempo and phrasing; but it is also what made his musical achievements possible.

Gould was so self-conscious about the nature of his musical project that solitude itself became a subject for his solitary labors. One of Gould's most cherished projects after his departure from concert life was a series of radio documentaries he called "The Solitude Trilogy." Each documentary dealt with cultures and character in isolation, removed from society by choice or chance. The most important was called "The Idea of North," which presented the musings of travelers to the Canadian arctic, their voices spliced by Gould to compose something that has been called "contrapuntal radio." Running under the sound of often three or four voices talking at once, describing the effects of isolation and risk, was an ostinato bass line of a train clacking along the tracks, heading north to Fort Churchill.

In "The Idea of North" the frozen tundra of Canada is turned into an allegorical region. Travelers into arctic solitude argue over the effects of isolation and hardship. "Any person who makes the trip," a surveyor narrator says of the journey north, "is up against himself." "There's such a thing as being a hermit by choice," says another voice, who could be referring to Gould himself. "Are you answering a challenge or escaping from yourself?"

This question was never answered by Gould, who knew that he was doing both. He knew, too, that his peculiar path was fraught with risks. "The biggest danger of all," says one character of northern

solitude, "is getting lost." The person dwelling in the north is "kind of odd. You get a kind of cult of personality. . . . You get people with a built-up style, a front. You come to believe in your own role." With his fingerless gloves, overcoat, and scarf in the middle of the summer, Gould dressed the part. Musically too, Gould was drawn to the Nordic: to scrupulous counterpoint or interiorized landscape, to Sweelinck and Sibelius.

But what prevented his "getting lost" was something more serious and fundamental: an impassioned and obsessive concern with a certain kind of musical experience that was opposed to what he called the "tyrannical" force of the "Zeitgeist." That tyranny did not just require a pianist to tour concert halls around the world playing the same compositions again and again in a setting Gould considered vaudevillian. It incorporated a way of listening and playing as well. The player had to attempt to reach the last row of the balcony with his sound and gestures while creating a performance that would work once and possibly only once.

Gould's move "north" was to the recording studio, where at night he journeyed through strange seas of thought we can only imagine, constructing performances in isolation that were more coherent and concentrated and compelling than any given in a concert hall. He understood that a record was a distinct form of musical presentation; it did not have to be a "record" of a particular performance, but could be constructed the way a movie is, out of fragments of recorded moments. By the end of his life, Gould was spending eight minutes playing the piano for every hour in the recording studio. The objective was to create a performance specifically meant to be played again and again.

This is, to a certain extent, the objective of every record producer; but most limit their sights to a notion of "definitive" performance, one that gets the phrasing and expression and notes "right" for a given performer at a given time. Gould believed that the function of a record was to present a dissenting view; the only reason for creating a record was to create a distinct musical universe. If Bach's first prelude in the "Well Tempered Clavier" had traditionally been treated as a wash of arpeggiated chords, Gould would make the work not chordal, but almost contrapuntal, splitting the patterns into detached phrases. If Brahms's First Piano Concerto had been treated as a heroic pianistic drama, Gould would turn it

into an orchestral one, making his voice one among many.

This sort of opposition to accumulated manners and traditions had, of course, its aura of fetishism. Gould was well aware that one of the distinguishing features of our musical age is that the music written in our time is not part of our time. This contributes to the "tyranny" of performance culture; it also contributes to the "tyranny" of idiosyncrasy Gould was sometimes prey to as he devoted himself to interpretation. For a pianist not actively involved in new music, there was nothing else to do but reinterpret; for a pianist like Gould that meant to reinterpret differently.

But this was not a naive iconoclasm. Gould wrote that he had a "century-long blind spot" in his own musical taste, demarcated by the Art of the Fugue on the one hand and Tristan on the other. This precisely demarcates the heart of our public musical culture: out goes Mozart, the classical style, the Romantic love of melody, the culture of virtuosity, the development of the concert and the maturing of the piano itself. What was left on one side of the boundary was the music of Bach—above all, Bach—and of such earlier composers as Orlando Gibbons. This is not fundamentally public music at all. Bach's keyboard music is often private, idiosyncratic, his counterpoint creating a musical space that had no foreground or background. It is all foreground, a musical universe that is at once selfless and filled with ego, like the playing of Gould.

On the other side of the boundary was the music of late Romanticism. This music—particularly of Richard Strauss, but also of the Viennese modernists—was music of "spacial" complexity, in which, again, music was not mere melody and accompaniment, but full of intricate inner relations; it would be impossible to treat any of this music as primarily "thematic." And like the playing of Gould, it possessed a character of knowing melancholy, expansive and withdrawn at the same time. These boundaries of taste did not mean Gould couldn't be compellingly articulate about the music of Haydn and (some) Beethoven, but he tended to treat the classical style as an intoxicating combination of Baroque contrapuntal lines and late Romantic brooding.

Gould knew, I think, that his rejection of the mainstream culture, with its accumulated manners and its methods of performance, was itself a theatrical participation in the world he was rejecting. He became a radical ironist, mocking himself along with that world. In creat-

ing, for example, a cadenza for a recording of Beethoven's First Piano Concerto he deliberately went against the grain of the classical style, writing a sort of late-Romantic fugal escapade. Gould claimed to be discarding the whole concerto ethos, with its notion of putting the pianist on display in opposition to the orchestra, yet in his individuality and perversity he ended up restoring it. I think Gould knew this; I think it even amused him that his journey north was a public journey, not a private one, that his solitude was a matter of public proclamation as well.

In a recording celebrating the 25th anniversary of his debut, Gould actually produced a miniature drama called "The Hysteric Return." It mocks the concert occasion, alluding in particular to Vladimir Horowitz's return to public performance at the very moment Gould was leaving it ("An Historic Return" was the recording of Horowitz's 1965 Carnegie Hall recital). But it even turns the pose of Gould's opposition into an ironic jest. Byron Rossiter, a Canadian radio broadcaster, is the news commentator for Gould's return to concert life. The scene, we are told, is the antarctic drilling platform XB-67, where Gould's pianos are set up in the frigid weather. Gould, wearing an "inflatable scarf," plays his transcription of Ravel's "Valse"—a concert piece that did not particularly warm Gould's heart. The distinguished sponsors of this live broadcast concert—the Board of Directors of Geyser Petroleum—hastily evacuate the platform at the conclusion of the work as the winds pick up, leaving the virtuoso alone on deck. Seals bark their acclaim, flapping their flippers. Gould is heard saying, all too sincerely, "Thank you, thank you, thank you very much," as the antarctic winds howl.

In this scene of Gould surrounded by ice, the wind whipping around him and his instruments, there is something not just crazy but exhilarating. Gould often spoke about ecstasy—a matter of being lifted out, stepping away—as a musical goal. Ecstasy is communal in its creation of expansive feeling; isolating in that it is an ultimately private sensation. His vision of ecstasy involved both intoxication and distance, submersion and detachment. In his best work, Gould kept these two seemingly contradictory spirits in balance. In his solitude he was a melancholic ecstatic.

If I listen carefully to his playing I hear something sad, more than sad—heartbreaking. It is there in the late Brahms performances that have the sense of whispered nocturnal musings, as well as in a remarkable disc of perfor-

mances recorded in Moscow in 1957 (distributed by Harmonia Mundi), which treats Webern's Variations like an elegy and Bach's Art of the Fugue theme like a meditation occurring at the edge of consciousness. The intensity of the playing often becomes overwhelming, as if there were more latent in the music itself than could be safely borne.

In one of Gould's most virtuosic pieces of writing—a portrait of Leopold Stokowski—he describes how in interviewing Stokowski he tried to break through the conductor's armored manners and practiced answers. "Maestro," he said to the aged conductor,

I have this recurring dream. In it, I appear to be on some other planet, perhaps in some other solar system, and at first, it seems as though I am the only Earthman there. And I have a tremendous sense of exhilaration because I seem to believe, in the dream, that I have been given the opportunity—and the authority—to impart my value systems to whatever form of life there might be on that planet; I have the feeling that I can create a whole planetary value system in my own image. In any event, my dream always ends badly. I usually sight some other Earthman on this planet and realize that I am not alone. . . . But now let us suppose that . . . we could transport you to such a planet and give you the power that I do not have in my

dream; and let us suppose also that, on this planet, there is a race of highly developed beings who, to all appearances, have achieved . . . a state of civilization higher than our own—and have done this, moreover, without reference to the notion we call 'art.' "

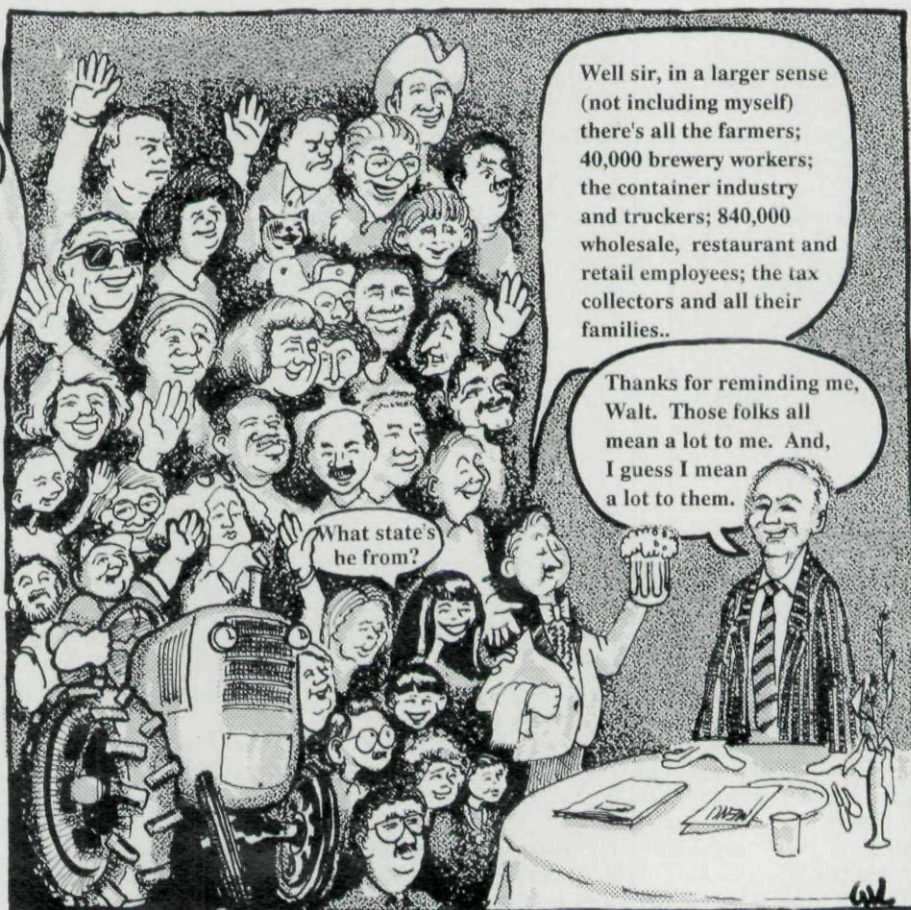
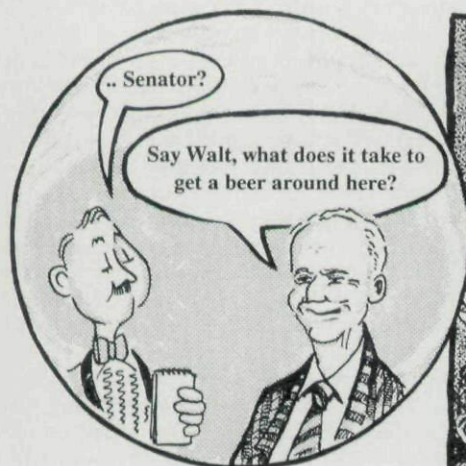
"Firstly," Gould asked, "would you want them to know about the artistic manifestations of our world? And secondly, if you did, how much would you want them to know?"

It is a question Gould no doubt asked himself. If he had the powers he offered to Stokowski—if Gould had been granted this fantasy in which his nightmare was overturned, in which he really possessed the solitude and power and authority that he struggled for in this earthly universe with so much pain and energy—I think he would have chosen a most remarkable course. He would have, I think, offered not Bach's keyboard works, or Strauss's operas, or any other work; he would have offered only silence, unwilling to disrupt the measured enlightenment of this highly developed race.

Gould asked the question because he had the answer: art was too dangerous. Art, Gould wrote elsewhere, is "potentially destructive." He called himself, after Santayana, "the last puritan," be-

cause he held, at least at times, just such severe views. He said of puritan societies that "to be an artist was to put oneself needlessly in the way of damnation," that an artist "would inevitably be exposed to a plethora of dark and troubled thoughts and be compelled to deal with them in such quantity, to represent them with such facility, and to project them with such vitality that one would almost surely in the end be seduced by them."

I think he found, in his own playing, this peculiar and corrupting power. It frightened him, this intensity of feeling, and frightened him too that there seemed in the web of musical connections spun out in solitude not just ecstasy but a threat of something that was not social or moral at all. He opposed, intellectually, the divisive quality of art, its power to differentiate, separate, and then intoxicate. I think that at times Gould would have wished his greatest performances to dissolve themselves, that they undo their willful "sinfulness." Wasn't this the nature of those labors at all hours of the night in his recording studio, cutting his playing into pieces and trying to weave them into some statement so integrated and controlled that the music's power could finally turn truly moral?



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For Gould always hoped that something else was possible. He wrote about the puritan views of his grandmother, who, like him, feared art's sinfulness: "Given exceptional circumstances, impeccable character, and always assuming that vigilant attention which alone holds the forces of darkness at bay, the rarest of artists might indeed be capable of a spiritual transfiguration." Can anyone listen to his playing and not hear the yearning for just such transfiguration or feel in the idiosyncrasies of his genius some hint of what Keats called the "egotistical sublime"?

In one essay, Gould wrote of his childhood memories of church: "They have to do with Sunday evening ser-

vices, with evening light filtered through stained-glass windows and with ministers who concluded their benediction with the phrase: 'Lord, give us the peace that the earth cannot give.'" Gould said he didn't go to church much anymore; he was living, after all, behind other stained-glass windows, devoted in solitude to the risk and possibilities of his art. But, he continued, "I do repeat that phrase to myself very often—the one about the peace that the earth cannot give—and I find it a great comfort." Finally, even music could not give what the earth did not, but there was still comfort to be found. Gould repeated that phrase, again and again, in his playing.

can correspondent, so eager to aid and abet Communist treason against "Hellenism," deserved to be taught a lesson.

This was obvious enough at the time. Polk's wife, and a good many American and Greek journalists, assumed initially that the murderer was trying to prevent Polk from reaching Communist headquarters. The suspicion that the Greek authorities would not pursue leads pointing toward suspects on the right was acute; and partly for that reason, a group of distinguished American journalists formed a special "Lippmann Committee" to check up on the case. The committee chose William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan as their representative and legal counsel. Formerly the head of the OSS, the wartime secret intelligence service of the United States, Donovan had retired to private law practice, and undertook the Polk assignment as a public duty, serving without fee. He arrived in Greece with his own special investigator, a Greek-American OSS veteran who had been with the ELAS guerrillas during the war, and was familiar with the leftist cause.

Greek Plots

BY WILLIAM H. MCNEILL

The Salonika Bay Murder: Cold War Politics and the Polk Affair by Edmund L. Keeley

(Princeton University Press, 396 pp., \$24.95)

In May 1948 the body of George Polk, a CBS reporter, was found floating in Salonika Bay, in Greece. His hands and feet were tied together, and he had been shot through the head. Immediately the murder became the focus of a heated political debate in a country situated on the very knife-edge between newly drawn Russian and American spheres of influence, where Communists and other leftists and a mixed bag of "rightists" were fighting a bitter civil war.

Who killed George Polk? The answer to that question seemed to involve the interests and the policies of the U.S. government, which had promised, just 14 months before, to help the Greek government to defeat the Communist insurgency. By May 1948 substantial American aid had begun to arrive in Greece; and American advisers had begun to tell Greek soldiers and officials what they had to do to win the war, and to keep American aid flowing.

What made Polk's murder especially significant was that he left behind a letter to Edward R. Murrow, in which he explained that he hoped to visit Gen. Markos Vafiades, commander of the guerrilla forces, and put him "on the air." Polk continued: "I've offered to let them write the script on every word Markos says while I'll just give

him cues and do the translating."

Visiting guerrilla headquarters, of course, was contrary to military security regulations promulgated by the Greek army. It also displeased American officials in Greece, who were trying to strengthen the still shaky authority of the Greek government. Yet many American correspondents distrusted the Greek government and wished to hear what the other side had to say. Most were unwilling to run the risk; but a few weeks after Polk's body was pulled from the water, Homer Bigart of the *Herald Tribune* actually got the story that Polk had been after. To the chagrin of American and Greek officials, he reached Markos's headquarters from Yugoslavia, and then walked across the lines into Greek government territory.

Greek government officials were entirely determined to find Communist agents guilty of Polk's murder. They feared that if the crime were brought home to the right, American support for the Greek government would be brought seriously into question. Yet on the face of it, the Communists had no motive to prevent a correspondent from getting their point of view across to the American public, as Polk was proposing to do. Moreover, it is easy to imagine that someone on the right might have felt that the ignorant and presumptuous Ameri-

Edmund Keeley's book explores in painstaking detail how Greek and American authorities reacted to the Polk affair. His paraphrases and quotations from official documents go over the same ground time and again, and sometimes read more like a legal indictment than like a history. The text is strewn with a vast number of Greek proper names that will be utterly unfamiliar to ordinary Americans. This is not, therefore, an easy book to read. But the book develops a dramatic power as a result of Keeley's "progressive sense of outrage" against the actions of American authorities who wanted a speedy trial that would find someone guilty of Polk's murder, and preferred to pin the crime on Communists.

Keeley shows how Donovan's investigating agent, after some contretemps with Greek officials and American diplomats, came up with a list of suspects that included a Reuters stringer named Gregory Staktopoulos, whose capacity to speak English distinguished him from most other Greek newspapermen in Salonika. Since Polk spoke no Greek, this made Staktopoulos a plausible go-between for getting to General Markos's headquarters. On top of that, Staktopoulos had a tangled political past: he had been associated with Germans as well as with Communists during the war. In 1948 he was a reporter for *Makedonia*, the most respectable newspaper of Salonika, but also had a British connection through Reuters; and like many other newspapermen he probably supple-

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