

mistakes was his knowledge that he had made them and would learn from them. What makes George Lucas's mistakes harder to bear—what keeps them from being "beauts"—is his apparent obtuseness about them.

Lucas's last film, *Howard the Duck*, was so stupid that it could have been made only by a financially independent producer, free of obligation to advisers. His new production, *Willow* (written by Bob Dolman from Lucas's story, directed by Ron Howard), is not as stupid as *Howard*, it's just dull, clumsy, and misconceived. *Willow* is a fairy tale, with a wicked queen and her mistakenly loyal daughter, an abandoned baby, and a valiant knight who fights to straighten things out. Trite as all these elements are, it's the attempt at the unusual that sinks the venture. The title character is a dwarf, and we see him as husband and father in a community of dwarfs.

Willow befriends the abandoned baby, and his pilgrimage with the infant brings about the plot. The idea of using dwarfs as the center of sympathy simply doesn't

function in a live-action picture. The idea might have worked (has worked) in an animated film, where temperings of various kinds are possible and where human beings who happen to be dwarfs aren't asked to behave as if they were unaware of it.

Lucas and his sometime partner Steven Spielberg have made their names and fortunes as Innocents—Hansel and Hansel in the Hollywood forest. When each is at his best, alone or with the other—*American Graffiti*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—they make films with the ingenuity and self-confidence of children.

But, as the most adoring parent knows, children can become tiresome. When the innocence loses its singular, freshened insight, when it becomes in a sense self-centered, children become boring. It's too late, and possibly irrelevant, to expect Lucas to grow up. But since he apparently operates by childlike instinct rather than adult plan, we have to hope that this instinct regains its former clarity.

EDWARD ROTHSTEIN ON MUSIC

The Dada of Us All

Virgil Thomson has always seemed to risk meriting the verdict he once bestowed on a colleague: "The career is more interesting than the music." For though a list of his works fills up three dense pages in the American Grove Dictionary, and though he is accorded mention in nearly any short roster of important American composers, how much of his music has made its way into the repertory? How many of the most avid concertgoers and record buyers have heard any particular work more than once? How many of our most literate listeners can be said to have more than a casual acquaintance with even a handful of his works?

As for the career, now in its seventh decade of fearless and frank and cheerful expression, it has been spiced with more than ordinary charm and honor. Born just before the turn of the century, Thomson was baptized by high modernism. He studied with Nadia Boulanger in the Paris of the 1920s, as did Copland, Harris, and an array of other American

composers aspiring to find their native voices on foreign soil. He socialized with a generation of artists and writers in Paris: Joyce and Pound and Gertrude Stein and Cocteau, Picasso and Christian Bérard and Maurice Grosser.

He mixed with the avant-garde theater crowd of New York in the mid-'30s, when John Houseman and Orson Welles were fresh-faced iconoclasts. And he settled, during the war and postwar years, into a grand middle age as music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, where his criticism infuriated precisely the people it should have, while setting standards for newspaper criticism that have yet to be matched. By the time he retired from daily criticism in 1954, he had become the senior intellectual observer of the musical scene. His autobiography, written in 1966, could presume upon the reader's acquaintance and curiosity about the dazzling career; it merely bore the title *Virgil Thomson*.

Now we have a volume of correspondence, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*

(Summit Books, 413 pp., \$24.95), which completes the canonization of a career. It begins with letters home from the medical detachment of the 129th Field Artillery at Camp Doniphan in Oklahoma, where the young Virgil was stationed in 1917 ("You mustn't believe anything you read in the newspapers about Camp Doniphan; it is all faked. Such stories and rumors we call here 'latrine wireless.'"), and ends with a 1985 note to a friend with ten rules, well tested by Thomson, about how a composer should promote his career ("... 7. Make friends among composers. Be a good colleague. 8. It helps to teach a little; pupils make good fans. 9. Writing about music is also valuable..."). These letters, selected and annotated from a collection of 25,000 by Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page, are in the shadow of the classic autobiography, which drew recollections from the most substantial of these documents, filling them out with mordant commentary. Moreover, either by editorial judgment or authorial choice, the letters seem to float Thomson in some vague social jello where few of his correspondents bear any clear relation to each other; lovers, close friends, and strangers become nearly interchangeable recipients of Thomson's prose.

But the volume does contain an invaluable collection of sharp-tongued letters to readers from Thomson's years at the *Herald Tribune*, and it offers something his other more considered writings may not: a record of a temperament and style that has much to do with Thomson's music as well as his career. That style is idiosyncratically direct, presenting an almost notational record of passing moments, mention of books read, people seen, meals cooked and eaten. The temperament is just as unadorned: "I've no plan or intuition for the future," writes the 29-year-old composer. "I shall practice my trade. If I practice it competently, I shall make money. Some, at least." These abrupt phrasings of fact can even turn out to be quite melodic. "All life is good now," he writes the following year. "Nothing exigent. Only simple behaving and quiet working and no thinking to speak of."

The belief behind that simplicity is hard to characterize. There is never any bitterness. There is hardly a hint of what the autobiography refers to as his "*pessimisme américain*." The letters also omit any explanation of what he calls, in one cryptic letter, his "turbulent and unhappy mind." It may be because this unhap-

piness—and the early years of financial struggle and career setbacks—seems to be eminently erasable. “The world is blank and lovely as a clean blackboard,” Thomson writes at a better moment during his apprentice years. And even when filled, it is as easily apprehended. “Language, to me, is merely for telling the truth about something,” he wrote in the autobiography, and the truth about something is a matter of evidence rather than excavation: it is there to be read in the surrounding scene, lying open and apparent, on the surface. There is no esoteric mysticism about life or art, nor any ponderousness about its passing and its practice. It simply is what it is, a peculiar mixture of private and public, touching inwardness and calculated manipulation. “One is always interrupting some really poignant emotion to go to bed or lunch.”

There is a certain impersonality in this gaze that reads the world. For it seemed as if Thomson presented only his own surface in return. Thomson notes in one letter that Boulanger complained to him: “In spite of the fact that I am acquainted with you as a talented musician, a charming person, and an incredibly intelligent young man, I have the feeling of not knowing you at all inside.” But this impersonality is not a coldness; it is a matter of taste. He complained about Boulanger’s: “Her lack of comprehension of everything that is vivid or simple is complete.” And Thomson’s simplicity was uncompromising. What made it affecting was an undercurrent of a quiet sentiment that vaguely resembled nostalgia. Its musical analogue might be a subtly melancholic harmonizing of a simple hymn tune. Such undercurrents are few and far between in these letters, indications of love and feeling muted by propriety of one kind or another.

The letters seem spontaneous and unmediated sketches, like Thomson’s “Mu-

sical Portraits,” which he began writing in Paris and still writes today. A figure sits for such a portrait just as for a painter, and Thomson writes a composition based on the sensations received—the physical and spiritual aura of that person at that moment. Musical portraits exist of nearly every friend and artist Thomson came across; those I have heard are wry, compact, subtly various, unself-conscious, crystalline.

The letters, in fact, do not suggest



DRAWING BY JACK COUGHLIN FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

only the portraits, they suggest the musical style in general—at least the style I know from the small number of Thomson’s works now commonly available. In 1921 he writes back home about the French landscape; it seemed “like French art, simple and plain, clear, and always delightful with the same delicately varied monotony.” This could almost become an aesthetic ideal. Thomson writes to a correspondent curious about Boulanger: “Nadia made me understand that writing music was like writing a letter. All you had to do was to say what you had to say clearly and stop.”

This notion of composition as a form of correspondence, making no claim to the religion of art or aesthetic hermeticism, was a dissent from the Central European tradition—and it was one reason why Boulanger may have had such an impact on young American composers seeking a native style. Thomson, though, was more radical than most of Boulanger’s other pupils, taking this message literally. While Copland could begin by writing music that aped the Germanic style, Thomson seemed to have begun straightforwardly and never wavered. His compositional career does not “develop” or evolve any more than his individual compositions do.

Music, for Thomson, is simply a part of ordinary discourse; it could make free use of all materials at hand—including popular song and dance. It also was written to be heard by particular listeners of his own time and place, not for some transcendent judge of beauty and truth. If so much of Thomson’s music has remained unpublished and unheard, it is, paradoxically, because this particular vision of music had so little influence among the power structures that grew up around modern music. (“I was clearly not grist either for the French immortality-mill or for international snob-bohemia.”) In his autobiography, Thomson attributes his failure to be adopted by one or

another of such groups to his “frankness”—his undiplomatic comments about colleagues’ compositions and their value. But it is also because in such compositions as the “Sonata da chiesa” and the symphonies of these early years, there is so little “success-rhetoric,” as he said of Satie, so little demand or command that these compositional “morceaux” should become part of something as stolid as “repertory.”

This aesthetic, at its cartoonish extreme, can become anti-intellectual, eclectic to the point of postmodernism. But Thomson was too acute a thinker and

listener to go that far; he required the context of high modernism for his own approach to seem so vital and light-headed. It would be a mistake to see Thomson as a sort of mock-innocent, plainspeaking composer, homey and charming, invoking his American hymns and simple counterpoint. There is a more critical aspect as well, an aggression against the musical scene, though Thomson's mockery is continuously sublimated into play. "Koussevitzky refused my symphony cold," he writes to Gertrude Stein in 1927. "I was a little surprised. I knew it was pretty good, but hadn't really imagined it that good." Thomson's music had a particular audience in mind—not the bourgeois listener of the concert hall or mainstream repertory, but a member of his own class; and that listener would have shared his attitudes as well, a sophisticated irony aimed at his origins, an opposition mixed with deep affection.

THIS COULD come very close to Dadaism, which for Thomson was once "an ethical ideal," being relentlessly "frivolous" and "resistant to being governed." In 1927 Thomson divided up Paris into two representative camps, one consisting of Bérard, Joyce, and Antheil, whose taste ran to pictorial explication and demonstrative emotion, and the other of Tchelitcheff, Stein, and himself, whose focus was "play, construction, interest centered in the material, nonsense, magic, and automatic writing." This was a metaphysical division—too artificially made—that Thomson saw dividing the culture: "Between knowledge and wisdom. Between the tabloid newspaper and Mother Goose. Between culture and anarchy. The law and the prophets. Kant and Spinoza. Duty and pleasure." Wisdom, Mother Goose, anarchy, the prophets, Spinoza, and pleasure all aligned with Thomson. It is surely an alliance that could have led as easily to banality as to charm; the music was saved from dissolution by what Thomson once described as the "discipline of spontaneity."

The apotheosis of this discipline was the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, written with Stein in 1927-28. ("We got on like Harvard men," Thomson writes.) "The theme we chose," Thomson later explained, "was of my suggesting; it was the working artist's working life, which is to say, the life we both were living." It was also to be about the "religious life"—"peace between the sexes, community of faith, the production of miracles." The result was a sort of ecstatic

volubility, an outpouring of verbal play and liturgical allusion. The plot is an accumulation of images, with one act consisting of seven tableaux, including visions of various saints being photographed or serenaded with a guitar, lost in ecstasy or dreaming of children. The words themselves are in the best Stein manner ("The difference between saints forget-me-nots and mountains have to have to have to at a time"). Even the stage directions were sung. I have never seen the work staged, nor heard the early recording conducted by Thomson, but the recent recording by Nonesuch grew out of a concert presentation I did see, and the work, which on paper stupefies, in performance intoxicates. There is never a hint of irony or expressionism or decay or dissolution. All is forthright and cheerful, the work of Americans playing abroad; it is an expression of a very particular attitude.

The attitude aggressively dissolves all attempts at categorization and restriction; it is "avant-garde" in the typical way, but its urge to shock is accompanied by an urge to amaze and to play. Such an urge must have also lain behind Thomson's then radical decision to cast the work using only black singers when

it received its premiere in Hartford in 1934, though he attributed his choice only to matters of diction and timbre.

The iconoclasm is built into the work. There are questions of number throughout: "How much of it is finished?" "How many saints are there in it?" "Could four acts be three?" It turns out that the four saints number over 30, the three acts, four. The work will permit no logical or numerical constriction. Thomson wrote: "If through the poet's liberties with logic and the composer's constant usage of the simplest formulas in our musical vernacular, something is evoked of the inner gayety and mystical strength of lives consecrated to a non-material end, the authors will consider their message to have been communicated." The work turns Dadaist impulses into transcendental ones, insisting on the spiritual element of play. "When this you see remember me" are the words to the opera's final communion hymn; the opera canonizes itself with sly innocence.

Thomson has been able to continue this opera's balancing act throughout his career, staying always on the margins of the repertory, while easily seducing music culture's more literate representa-

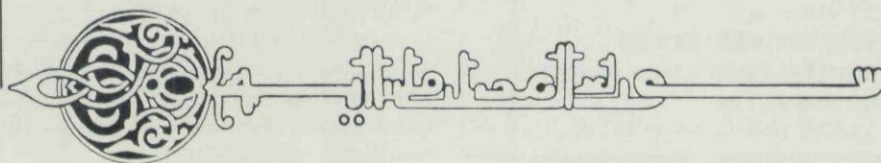
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tives. But it is a pose full of risk; it required a combination of ennui and innocence. Even the collaboration with Stein was risky; the pair did not speak for several years, for reasons this collection's notes leave mysterious but that are explained in the autobiography. The quarrel was over matters of loyalty and allegiance, which this vision of the spiritual and aesthetic life omits. This artist's life is a fantasy that even its fantasists could not sustain.

By the time Thomson's second opera with Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, was composed in the late '40s, the delicate balance had already begun to turn. It has been hailed as his masterpiece, with its schematic account of Susan B. Anthony's struggle for the women's vote; its rural American music invokes what Thomson called "gospel hymns and cocky marches . . . sentimental ballads, waltzes, darned-fool ditties, and intoned sermons." But Stein seemed to have written this libretto knowing she would die before ever seeing it; the text bristles with hard-edged animosity, with Susan B. becoming a stand-in for Gertrude herself, expressing with a literal clarity her scorn for men, who are referred to as "animals" and "brutes," noting that the

production of children depended on the "rather horrible" link between men and women. She even seemed to demand homage from her composer-colleague; the libretto ends with a character, Virgil T., unveiling a statue of Susan B. Anthony. Thomson's music treats these aspects with as much sympathy as possible, with the villains coming off cocky, the finale even becoming a sort of elegy for Stein, but the play of *Four Saints* has here turned deadly serious, with devils in the act. This is an opera not about the artist's life but about the demands of devotion and power, demands that the music refuses to address.

THE MUSICAL achievement of Virgil Thomson has been to elude those demands, to continue composing, up to the present moment, with simplicity and care, not straying from the path first chosen in the '20s. This has not been a musical career strewn with success—apart from years when his influence as critic was at its peak. Thomson's recent opera, *Lord Byron*, is a case in point. It was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, which characteristically chickened out after it was delivered; the work was performed in New York in 1985 at Juilliard, but it has never been recorded (and I have yet to hear it). But even in Thomson's greatest successes, his unwavering commitment to his early aesthetic condemns him to a marginal grandeur. His music is ironically too sincere for the contemporary temperament.

But the grander irony of the career is that Thomson did move into the heart of the 20th-century musical scene—through criticism. By standing outside of the musical power structure, he could regard it all with a seigneurial detachment tinged with an air of disfranchisement, which gave his criticism precisely the right mixture of disinterestedness and passion. His 1939 book *The Musical Scene* (excerpted in *The Virgil Thomson Reader*) dissected the sociology of the musical scene, demonstrating the relative isolation of the contemporary composer with the metaphor of an "island home." The virtuosic heart of the book was the linking of musical style to the source of a composer's income—whether it comes from a rich spouse or government commissions, teaching or royalties. The motivation for the internal workings of music becomes material, but this is no crude Marxism. His analysis of the embattled avant-gardist, subsidized by the world he attacks, is withering:

Composers living on subsidies personal or impersonal tend to write introspective music of strained harmonic texture and emphatic instrumental style. They occasionally write very long pieces. They are not much bothered about charm, elegance, sentiment, or comprehensibility, though they are seldom deliberately hermetic. . . . Appearing to be persecuted is, of course, their way of earning their living. The minute they lose the air of being brave men downed by circumstances, they cease to get free money.

The analysis of styles in the book is scathing: an exposé of the influence of commerce in a world that pretends to be beyond it. Thomson himself—living off small doles, begging a thousand here, five hundred there—never had any illusions about his own claims. The nostalgic element in Thomson's music, in fact, is absolutely sincere, a longing for a period in which the relationship between the composer, the music, and the listener was intimate and direct, when patronage was (or at least imagined to be) a support rather than a constraint. Thomson's own music is a form of refuge. It is directed to the individual listener in order to escape the commands of the audience, taking on idiosyncratic forms to avoid the demands of the art market.

His stand as a critic is more engaged: he was a representative of composers' interests, sending missives from their island home to the world of musical commerce. He later summarized the goals he took on as critic from 1940-54:

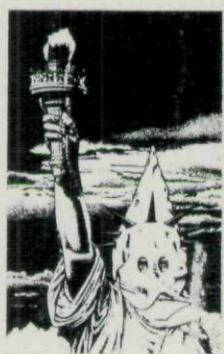
To expose the philanthropic persons in control of our musical institutions for the amateurs they are, to reveal the manipulators of our musical distribution for the culturally retarded profit makers that indeed they are, and to support with all the power of my prose every artist, composer, group, or impresario whose relation to music was straightforward, by which I mean based only on music and the sound it makes.

Where newspaper criticism had become mannered and tied to the interests of the music world it covered, where passions had become muted and vision blinded, Thomson came onstage ready for a fight: at stake was the survival of play itself. He referred to the "silk-underwear music" of Heifetz ("If I ever heard luxury expressed in music it was there") and the "dull and brutal" playing of the New York Philharmonic. He attacked the management network in New York and the meretricious claims of Germanic musical taste.

And though Thomson's reviews are

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—Richard Polenber, Cornell University



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uneven, and his coverage of new music idiosyncratic, his was no mean achievement—the outsider become arbiter. To judge from the correspondence, the letters that came in were precisely those that still come in to newspaper critics who offend interests or accepted proprieties of homage, but Thomson knew how to reply without ever becoming engaged, pulling the rug out from opponents by refusing to join them in standing on it. To the reader who expressed distaste over Thomson's presence on the scene, he replied, "The intensity of your feelings on all these matters is proof of their sincerity and I hope that you will not take my occasional violence of expression as any-

thing essentially different." And to the reader who simply cursed him, he responded, "You should really not use such language in front of my secretary, who is a lady, and who opens my mail."

These answers, and others with more substance, become part of a persona we know again from the music: the gentility and wit are genuine, but no one should doubt they are also strategic. Thomson is never as innocent as he appears, and he grants nobody else that innocence either. This has given his career bite and character and calculation; his music is the Dadaist complement to that life, often lovely, disorienting, heartfelt, but never able to take its innocence seriously.

THE POLITICS OF PATHOS

The Yellow Wind

by David Grossman

translated from the Hebrew by Haim Watzman

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 216 pp., \$17.95)

We have lived for 20 years in a false and artificial situation, based on illusions, on a teetering center of gravity between hate and fear, in a desert void of emotion and consciousness, and the passing time turns slowly into a separate, forbidding entity hanging above us like a suffocating layer of yellow dust. From this point of view, nothing matches the occupation as a great personal challenge. As a personal crossroads demanding action and thought. Sometimes you can gain in this way—for a split second—real mountain air.

Albert Camus said that this passage from speech to moral action has a name. "To become human." During the last weeks, and seeing what I saw, I wondered more than once how many times during the last 20 years I had been worthy of being called human, and how many people among the millions participating in this drama are worthy of it.

With these words David Grossman concludes his report of his journey to the West Bank, written in the spring of 1987, many months before the Palestinians in that territory did Israel the favor of returning its attention to their hold upon its fate. These concluding words convey the spirit of Grossman's book: the eloquence that slips into rhetoric; the air of startlement; of personal discovery, the *vrai naïf* quality; the moral urgency, and

the insistence upon measuring history by ethics; the sincerity; the absence of a voice that is hard to forget. The appeal to Camus, moreover, is dispiriting, if it is Camus on Algeria that Grossman has in mind. *The Yellow Wind* is a valuable, flabby book. It will introduce its readers not only to the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also to some of the most significant shortcomings of a large portion of the Israeli left, of which *The Yellow Wind* is a representative document: the aversion to politics, the enchantment with pathos, the confusion of words with deeds, the surprise about unreason.

Grossman is a young Israeli writer with a growing reputation, whose stories, collected in *The Jogger*, and first novel, *The Smile of the Lamb*, more or less introduced the occupied territories into Israeli fiction. He is not a writer in the grip of a passion, or an obsession, or a vision of the world; he is having, instead, a career. His books move from subject to subject, from style to style, with intelligence, but also with a certain superfluity. In 1987 Grossman was asked by the clever, lively weekly *Koteret Rashit*, a liberal magazine with little patience for liberalism, to travel the West Bank, and on the occasion of the 20th



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