



Continuing a December *Journal* tradition...

The books for this month are a holiday gift list:
books to broaden the library and the mind,
to provide pleasure and enjoyment,
to give to oneself and others.

***A Month in the Country*, by J.L. Carr. New York, New York Review Books, 2000, 160 pp., \$12.95.**

From a distance of 40 years, Tom Birkin looks back on the summer of 1920, when he lived and worked inside an old church in a small village in the North of England. J.L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*, first published in 1980, is the story of that summer. World War I has ended 2 years before the novel begins, but not for Tom, a shell-shocked veteran. His inner trauma is reflected in a humiliating facial twitch that comes, he tells us, "spasmodically.... It began at my left eyebrow and worked down to my mouth. I'd caught it at Passchendaele and wasn't the only one either. The medics said it might work off given time" (p. 12). He was a signaler in the war, the person out alone beyond the front line, transmitting reports of the enemy's movements. Like many traumatized people, 2 years later he is still out on his own, emotionally. His connection to the world around him is as tenuous as a signaler's wire.

The novel is told in Tom's self-deprecating, gently humorous voice. His tone is nostalgic, suffused with pleasure and affection and yearning for lost youth. Trained as a restorer of paintings on stone, he has been hired to uncover a medieval mural in the church of a rural Yorkshire village. He camps out in the church, since besides having his "nerves shot to pieces" (p. 34), he is close to penniless. He wants only to be alone to get on with his job, but that simple desire turns out to be impossible. For one thing, the kind stationmaster, Mr. Ellerbeck, observing Tom's forlorn arrival, mobilizes his own family to the task of keeping the stranger fed and plugged into village life. Tom finds himself umpiring games and teaching the boys' Sunday school class, which in his hands means answering eager questions about "the exact nature" (p. 52) of the dangers awaiting in London. Then there is an eccentric archaeologist, Charles Moon, himself a veteran, camping out in the field beside the church, and the vicar's sensitive wife, Alice, with whom Tom conducts a wistful flirtation. He is not alone, nor is his work simply a job to be done. The painting emerging under his hands is revealed as an extraordinary work of art. Gradually, absorbed in his task, accepted by these new people, under the spell of the long, beautiful summer, Tom

finds that life has, "flooded back, tingling to my finger-tips" (p. 95).

This short novel unfolds so artfully that it seems no more than a straightforward account of a summer idyll. But it is also a story of healing. It shows us the totality of one person's experience. Is there a reproducible, therapeutic factor (or combination of factors) that helps Tom Birkin recover from trauma? Is it the Ellerbecks' nonjudgmental kindness, or the companionship of Moon, who understands, from first-hand experience, Tom's shell-shocked state? Or is it unreliable chance, which brings Alice into Tom's life at just the right moment, or simply beauty itself, to which Tom is very sensitive: the golden summer, the breathtaking hidden painting?

The novel offers no answers. We are left with a nostalgic remembrance of a particular summer in Yorkshire. Somehow, Tom is reconnected with the human family and with himself; time no longer begins and ends at Passchendaele. This understated, whimsical novel has captured a small miracle.

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***Art & Psychoanalysis*, by Maria Walsh. London, I.B. Tauris, 2013, 176 pp., \$25.00.**

The latest in a series of books called "Art &" (the series includes *Art & Science*, *Art & Sex*, *Art & War*) comes *Art & Psychoanalysis*, by Dr. Maria Walsh, a senior lecturer in fine art theory at the University of the Arts in London, where using psychoanalysis to interpret artwork is more popular than it is in America. Citing the usual suspects—Baudrillard, Derrida, Fer, Foster, Lacan, Mulvey, and Krauss—Walsh takes us on a visual tour of the 20th century through a psychoanalytic lens.

One not versed in the application of psychoanalysis to modern and postmodern art might think first and only of the Surrealists, who actively utilized Freud's theories of the unconscious to

create and discuss their art. However, psychoanalytic theory has been a go-to for art historians, philosophers, and critics looking at work that was made both before and after the Surrealists. Freud himself wrote an entire essay about Da Vinci's paintings, and psychoanalytic theory has been used to help understand the work of modern and postmodern artists, from Jackson Pollock in the 1940s to Andy Warhol in the 1960s to Jeff Koons in the 1980s and Tony Oursler in the aughts.

Indeed, the application of psychoanalysis to art is vast, and Dr. Walsh had to carefully curate a small selection of applications in order to fit the slim, almost pocket-size format of the "Art &" series. She chose to focus on post-Freud art, beginning with the Surrealists and their use of dream-work, and then skipping ahead mostly to the conceptual artists of the 1970s to 1990s to illustrate how abject art, appropriation art, and identity art (primarily black, gay, or female identity) can be viewed through the psychoanalytic lenses of fetishism, narcissism, and the death drive. She draws a helpful distinction between the psychoanalytic *object* and the *objet d'art* but then shows how these two are conceptually intertwined, and, when combined with the notion of *objectification*, can go a long way in explaining much of the Western canon from 1960 to 2000.

One example of how Dr. Walsh uses psychoanalysis to derive meaning from otherwise abstruse art objects is her discussion of the role of fluids in the work of Kiki Smith. Smith, whose paper and wax sculptures of women often have a long trail from the genital region of the sculpted figure that extends along the gallery floor, uses the symbolic significance of fluids to convey meaning to the viewer. According to Dr. Walsh, fluids "entrain psychic fantasies and desires around issues of sexual difference and the relation of self and other" (p. 74). Whether the viscous trail represents blood, urine, feces, or umbilical material, it delineates the separation between self and other, and in the case of umbilical or menstrual fluid, the separation between the infant and the mother.

Dr. Walsh, though clearly a proponent of using this theoretical framework, does not, for the most part, address works past the 1990s. Her methods of studying abjection and objectification could be successfully applied to the work of Damien Hirst, John Currin, and Ed Ruscha, among many other contemporary artists, and the book would be strengthened by the inclusion of truly contemporary artists, who could illustrate the relevance of psychoanalysis to art theory today. Another criticism of the book is that it over-represents female artists—with its focus on Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, Mary Kelly, Rachel Whiteread, Marina Abramovic, and Kiki Smith, it reads as a guide to the major female artists of the 20th century, at the expense of key male artists.

Unfortunately, the book is riddled with copy editing errors that detract from the intellectual rigor of the writing.

Dr. Walsh apologizes (though insists that she does not feel "guilty") in her introduction to readers, noting that psychoanalysts may criticize her book for not delving deeply enough into theory, while artists may say the book lacks focus on artworks themselves. As a former art historian who is now a psychiatrist, I had neither criticism and would recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding the sometimes baffling conceptual art of the latter half of the 20th century. Recreational viewers often complain that modern and contemporary art is not visually pleasing or demonstrative of technical talent. They are correct: conceptual art—the art that is discussed in this book—requires rigorous thought and

interpretation to be appreciated. *Art & Psychoanalysis* demonstrates a successful way (or ways) in which this can be done.

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The Swerve: How the World Became Modern, by Stephen Greenblatt. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2011, 356 pp., \$16.95.

Poggio Bracciolini's handwriting was among the best in all of Europe in 1417. Stephen Greenblatt observes that the importance of handwriting before Gutenberg is not easy for us, today, to understand. But Poggio's elegant, easy-to-read hand and equally elegant classical Latin opened doors for him, first to the Vatican (where he served eight popes, most often as apostolic secretary), then to libraries of monasteries.

Poggio's tale stands at the crossroads between the Middle Ages and the new humanism of the early Renaissance. The Middle Ages were full of angels and demons and immaterial causes and preoccupation with postmortem rewards and punishments. Furthermore, "curiosity was said by the Church to be a mortal sin" (p. 16). Humanism, on the other hand, was interested in desires and achievements of this world and thus drawn to the science, philosophy, and art of ancient Greece and Rome. Book hunting and translating had, by Poggio's time, grown to near-obsession among humanist intellectuals.

When the first Pope John XXIII was deposed in 1415, Poggio Bracciolini found himself temporarily out of work. So he went from papal court duties and intrigues to book hunting. Successions of monks through the centuries copied codices of ancient texts. The monks themselves, as Greenblatt portrays them, were permitted no inquiry into the texts they ceaselessly worked on in the scriptoria. Finished codices were stashed away or even forgotten in the libraries of monasteries throughout Europe.

It was in this context that Poggio approached central Germany, probably the remote Benedictine Abbey of Fulda, and its library—the more out of the way a monastery was, the greater the likelihood its holdings were still intact. He probably gained entrance easily because of his papal background and literary skills. Fortuitously, he discovered there what was apparently the only copy of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*) to survive from ancient Rome. It is not known whether Poggio had any inkling of the importance this first-century B.C. poem would have in the making of the modern world.

The structure of Greenblatt's book is enticing. He portions out morsels of Lucretius' tenets from the very beginning of *The Swerve* as he describes, in turns, the world of the medieval manuscript; Lucretius' own environment as suggested by the ruins of Herculaneum; the world of Lucretius' intellectual forerunner, the fourth-century B.C. Greek Epicurus; Poggio's life in early-Renaissance papal courts; and his return to the republicanism of Florence. And we are told almost immediately that Lucretius posits a universe composed of identical, eternal, invisible particles that he called atoms. Greenblatt reports that