

by existing as silent, noble presences. Powell as president would be under constant pressure from blacks to embrace black nationalism. His white constituents, on the other hand, seem to think that Powell isn't going to want to tax them to improve conditions in black America. Not likely: every government racial initiative Powell describes, he portrays as an unalloyed success.

Powell's book contains nothing at all about how America should handle its dilemma, except to imply that it would help a lot to end overt discrimination. The main racial news in the book is that, to recast a remark that Powell makes about Reagan, the general feels comfortable in his own skin color. *My American Journey* lacks the pain, the anger and the confusion that we find in the autobiographies of blacks who rose to prominence from a poor, all-black environment, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Black Boy*, and it lacks also the assimilationist anxieties found in the memoirs of children of the black Establishment who early entered an integrated world, such as Roger Wilkins or Stephen Carter. Powell has an ethnic consciousness rather than a caste consciousness. Being black is part, but not all, of his public self.

Thus he joins an informal black officers' organization and pushes for a monument to the Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Leavenworth, but lets the black-power movement proceed without him. He jokes about lacking "the basketball and dance genes." He says things that, much more than his recent public remarks, would imperil any race-man status he might have, such as "the Somalis were apparently feeling sufficiently well nourished to begin killing each other" and "we are currently witnessing the chaos that occurs when states revert to anarchy, tribalism, and feudalism," citing only African nations as examples.

What Powell does not do is wrestle with the tough questions. Perhaps he hasn't had to wrestle with them in his life so far, or perhaps he hasn't wanted to. In the course of recounting dozens of job offers, only once does he mention being wanted because of being black (and he turned the job down). The implication is that all the other times race was not a factor or a negative factor to be overcome, and that the same applies to America. He objects to the Willie Horton ad, but he lavishly praises Reagan and Bush and never mentions their social-welfare policies, or social-welfare policy generally. He deals with the question of what stance prominent blacks ought to adopt by saying that "a movement requires many different voices." He specifically praises Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael and

H. Rap Brown on the grounds that "the tirades of the agitators were like a fire bell ringing in the night, waking up defenders of the status quo with the message that change had better be on the way," while insisting on the importance of his own quieter contribution. Invited to speak at Morris High School in the Bronx, his alma mater, a good school then but not a good school now, he responds to this example of disastrous change over a generation by telling the students, "When I was coming up, the opportunities were limited. But now they are there. You can be anything you want to be."

Presidential candidates are usually not Mandarins or Lifers, but Talents — especially third-party candidates. Ross Perot lasted about ten minutes, at IBM, as a Lifer; Powell, in a similar position, would have stayed and become CEO, not left to start his own company. After every election, Mandarins get the Cabinet positions and Lifers operate the government. The protagonist of *My American Journey* is an implausible presidential candidate, not because he doesn't seem up to the job, but because he isn't risk-prone and self-dramatizing enough for it.

Ronald Reagan's first autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?*, began with the young Reagan opening the front door to find his father passed out drunk on the steps. Powell informs us that "our earliest memories usually involve a trauma, and mine does," but the trauma turns out to have been an accidental electric shock that left a residue "not of the shock and pain, but of feeling important, being the center of attention, seeing how much they loved and cared about me." Do people this happy and this normal run for

president? Powell pretty clearly would like to run the country, but in 600 pages he doesn't display the tiniest hint of wanting fundamentally to shake up the political system, or any system. His "doctrine" is about the avoidance of risk. Agreeing to serve a term as vice president in the expectation of a presidential anointment four years later would be entirely in keeping with his way of operating so far.

Every national craze rests atop some large underlying problem. In the case of the obsession with Powell, the problem is contemporary American dissatisfaction not with the political system but with the success-distribution system. We have spent fifty years elaborately creating a meritocratic leadership class, the Mandarins, and now that we've got them we don't like them. The Mandarins come across (except to themselves) as arrogant, culturally liberal and egotistical out of proportion to their accomplishment. It doesn't help that the Mandarin selection system generates racial and ethnic divisions even more stark than those that existed previously (except, of course, in the Jim Crow South). *Forrest Gump* was all about hating Mandarins and imagining an alternative America where individual success, decency, and racial and class comity all go together. Even *The Bell Curve*, for all its defense of the success-distribution system, was fundamentally anti-Mandarin.

So what can solve the Mandarin problem? A Lifer on a white horse, who represents an undeservedly obscured, fairer and better success-distribution system. Colin Powell is only the first of them.

NICHOLAS LEMANN is a national correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*.

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## The Trouble With Harry

BY C.K. WILLIAMS

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### The Poet Dying: Heinrich Heine's Last Years in Paris by Ernst Pawel

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 277 pp., \$23)

Imagine a poet with the lyrical delicacy of Campion, the self-dramatizing flair of Byron (he called himself the German Byron) the wit of Burns, the satirical ferocity of Swift; a poet who also wrote prose like a more political Sterne, with that much verve, that much hilariously digressive amplitude, wrote enormous

quantities of it, on every subject, from politics to art to philosophy and religion to folk traditions, revolutionizing prose-writing in his language while he was at it; a poet who lived through one of the most turbulent and fascinating periods of Western history—and you will have Harry Heine, the son of a failed businessman, born in Dusseldorf in 1797,

who died Heinrich Heine, a famous poet and social critic, in Paris in 1856, admired, and sometimes despised, in all the countries of Europe. (And in the Americas as well: the first edition of his complete works was a pirated version published in Philadelphia.)

Now take that enormous, seemingly undeniable figure and blur him, almost erase him; make his poetry untranslatable, at least in the dominant poetic modes of our time (imagine a poet with the visionary scope of Whitman writing in the meters of Poe); and make a good portion of his prose seem dated, almost quaint. Heine's primary analytical and polemical tools were irony and satire, which are so intricately woven into the particulars of their occasion that they often don't age very well, and lose the edge of their indignation, the pressures of their conviction. His poetry untuned, his prose distempered, what happens to Heine? Do we lose him, and condemn him to a footnoted life in comp lit?

The late Ernst Pawel had the felicitous notion of using the story of Heine's grueling and noble death to resurrect him for us. Pawel also provides a concise recreation of his social and political moment, and he restores Heine as the powerful cultural protagonist that he was considered to be in his own time. And although he never quite says so, Pawel,

who wrote a celebrated study of Kafka called *The Nightmare of Reason*, also wants to make of Heine one of those heroes, like Kafka, who are an essential element of our intellectual identity.

Even for an experienced biographer like Pawel, this is not an easy endeavor. For one thing, there's the problem of Heine's poetry in English. It has been rather brutally treated. Listen to Schubert's setting of Heine's little poem "The Doppelgänger" in the *Schwanengesang* cycle, and you will hear a passionate, tempestuous love story charged with a rich and convincing pathos, a miniature three-act tragedy. Then read the version by Hal Draper, whose dutiful translation of the complete poems has become the standard version in English, and you will hear something else:

The night is still, the streets are dumb,  
This is the house where dwelt my dear;  
Long since she's left the city's hum  
But the house stands in the same place  
here...

This is the first stanza. And it could have been worse. A passage from a recent translation of the same poem reads:

When of a morning early  
I happen to pass your place,  
I am happy to see you, dear girlie,  
Stand at the window case.

But we shouldn't entirely blame the translators. The reasons a poet can't be brought across a language barrier have to do with larger matters of literary tradition and taste. (Witness Nabokov's ill-fated effort to do Pushkin in English; despite the former's assurances to the contrary, the latter's genius remains as obscure to the American reader as ever.) Given the musical norms of contemporary American poetry, there's probably no way to make more than barely acceptable versions of Heine. Except for *The North Sea*, a book written in free-verse, Heine used a regular line, most often the four-beat line of German folk-song, whose austerities served him as a way of purifying some of the emotional excesses of romantic poetry.

The result is that most of his verse simply chimes too much for our taste. For us, relentlessly regular verse has too long a history of humor, of irony at best and farce at worst. Palgrave's anthology, and Robert Service and company, have enervated that music. We still love and value regular verse, to be sure; but as the conflicts and the vexations of the poets more closely approach our own, we want a verse that strains against the measured line, or overflows into free-verse. We prefer Keats to Byron, Wordsworth to Pope, Dickinson to Poe.

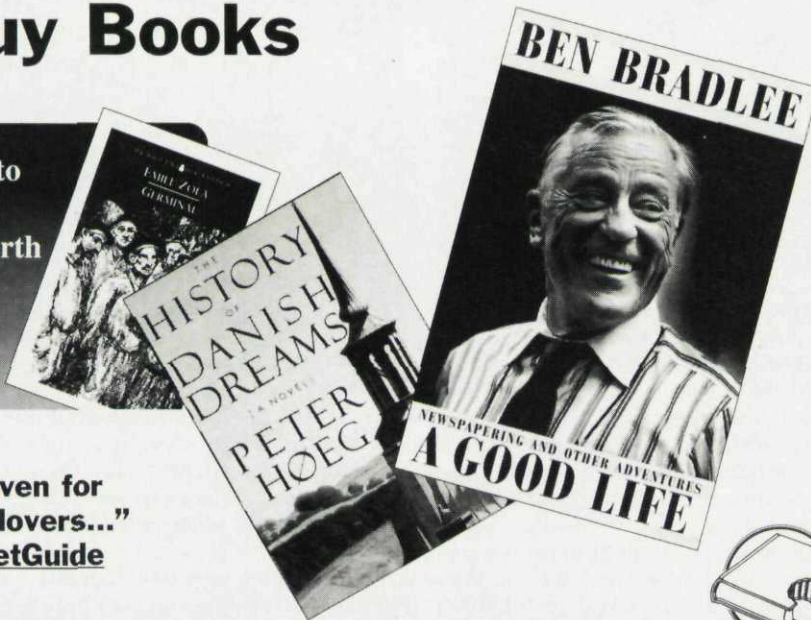
Heine himself recognized the prob-

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lem. He detested the imperious strictures of French classical verse, and called it "rhymed belching." The translations of his work into French that he found most satisfying were by his friend Gérard de Nerval; Nerval's versions, he said, "grasped the essence" of his poems. Nerval was a metrical poet of genius, but he translated Heine's poems into prose, into a marvelously supple, luminous prose. These are the most satisfying translations of Heine I know, but they work resolutely against the musical identity of the originals.

But there are other difficulties in trying to make Heine live for us. In his poetry and his prose, Heine depended a great deal on irony and satire, and he was often very funny. ("The despairing republican who plunges a dagger into his heart, like Brutus, may have smelt the dagger beforehand in case it had been used to cut up a herring.") We prefer our exemplary figures more somber, more solemn, even grim, even suicidal. It's hard for us to believe that a wag such as Byron could have been considered one of the most important figures of his time. And the same is true of Heine.

Despite their humor, of course, both Byron and Heine were completely, deadly serious; and in some ways Heine may have been too serious for his own good. He was generally considered as far and away the best German poet of his generation. He was enormously popular in his time and after: there are some 8,000 musical settings of his poems by 2,500 composers, including Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Liszt and Ives. He was much beloved in the German-speaking states, at least until he began to alienate his audience with his attacks on the nationalism that had made its ugly, violent and anti-Semitic appearance both on the Right and the Left, and with the skeptical tensions of his later poetry, which made it less accessible to a public which had come to expect a romanticism whose emotional excesses he had consciously set out to purify.

He was also detested on other

grounds. Carlyle called him a "...slimy and greasy Jew — fit only to eat sausages made of toads." Heine was routinely vilified as a Jew, a fate which was painfully ironic to him. He never hid the fact that he was born a Jew; he was unashamedly attached to Jewish history and tradition, and he wrote a number of poems and an unfinished novel, *The Rabbi of Bacherach*, which incorporated and sometimes celebrated that history and that tradition. For most of his life, however, he was a passionate Deist, and he tended to make little of his Jewishness, as well as of

*meine Zeitung* were identified in the paper's editorial offices by a Star of David.

The problem that present-day readers have with Heine is that, except in the disciplines of his poetic composition, he wasn't careful. He was an energetic, sometimes fanatical self-promoter, but he wasn't cunning or cold-blooded enough to care very much about the glances of posterity. His passionate earnestness about so many different issues, which made his writing so fascinating to his contemporaries, works

against him as a culture-hero. He could write more or less systematically about rather abstruse matters, as in his vivacious essay "On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany," which helped to introduce German thought to French readers. He also wrote books and articles on current political events, morals and manners, music, theater and literature, among other things. And he was not above pure and simple gossip in his reporting on the society of the French capital to his German-speaking newspaper audiences, and could be scathing in his criticism of German life in his voluminous writing for French readers.

Heine, in other words, has none of that reticence, that holding back for the effect of mystery, which in our time implies profundity; there's not enough shadow in his light. What an advantage Kafka's circumspection gives him over a blabbermouth like Heine, who has an opinion

about everything, who attacks everyone, and when he is attacked himself strikes back powerfully, often changing his mind while he's at it. Heine had the unendearing habit of projecting his own shortcomings onto others, often onto his friends, and then pillorying them for their errors.

There is not even a good likeness of Heine. The extant paintings and drawings look like portraits of different people, one a rather corpulent self-absorbed aesthete, another an emaciated forlorn lover, one more a dying Christ-like martyr. Even people who knew Heine personally seemed to have manifested a



HEINRICH HEINE BY CHARLES GLEYRE

Courtesy Bettmann Archive

his youthful conversion to Christianity. That conversion was clearly a matter of convenience, meant to qualify him for a university appointment (in law) that he never received anyway. He scorned Felix Mendelssohn for his more sincere Christian convictions: "if I had the luck of being a grandson of Moses Mendelssohn," he wrote, "I would surely not use my talent to set the pissing of the Lamb to music." But Germany was no longer the haven of tolerance that the elder Mendelssohn and his friend Lessing had thought it to be; Heine did suffer anti-Semitic attacks, and even his regular contributions to the *Augsburger Allge-*

puzzling uncertainty about his physical appearance. One acquaintance gives him in one place black hair and in another place brown hair; and most people who knew him said he was dark blond. The only likeness that looks at least like *somebody*—it shows a young man with a haircut so awful that he has to have been real—is a bronze relief by David d'Angers, which has the disadvantage of being in relief, and lacks the character-intensifying high-contrast to which we are accustomed in images of cultural icons.

And yet Pawel succeeds admirably in bringing Heine to life. By focusing on the terrible last years, when Heine was almost completely confined to what he called his "mattress grave" but was still writing, Pawel tempers the occasional harshness of Heine's character, and presents for us a writer elevated by suffering to a more exalted, stoical, self-denying level than Heine himself would have believed possible. His book has an intricate fugal structure which intercuts Heine's life with political and social events, and in this way Pawel gives a strong sense of what a turbulent, terrifically interesting epoch Heine lived through. It was a period of revolution and reaction, of social and political upheaval and spectacular economic expansion. In his books and his journalism Heine managed to situate himself at the very center of his time.

About the more intimate aspects of Heine's life, Pawel can sometimes seem a bit too partisan. Disinterestedness and objectivity are not absolute virtues in a biographer, but Pawel is often irritatingly sniffy about almost everyone—no, about everyone—with whom Heine came into contact. Heine's brother Gustav, with whom "he has nothing in common other than a mother remote in every sense of the word," is "tactless, pig-headed, aggressive ... monumentally obtuse...." Heine's cousin Carl, the son of his very wealthy banker uncle with whom he struggled, often in public, his whole adult life, was "a decorticate bully with no perceptible capacity for human relations ... a troglodyte millionaire." All of Heine's family members are finally lumped together as "the gangsters to whom Heine had the misfortune of being related." Julius Campe, Heine's long-time publisher, with whom Heine had a conflicted, oedipal, but finally mostly affectionate relationship is "Mephistopheles ... not reluctant to squeeze out what little blood was left in [Heine's] pitiable skeleton...." Karl Marx "... knew very little about people, including himself."

If Pawel admits for a moment that

Heine's sister Charlotte's memories of him "reflect genuine sisterly love," he quickly qualifies by announcing that "they may have been somewhat prettified for the benefit of posterity." After Heine's death, his wife, whom he had re-christened Mathilde, engages "a slimy shyster of a lawyer" to represent her in the sale of Heine's papers. And the intriguing Camille Selden, the "La Mouche" who befriended Heine at the very end, becoming his secretary and his last, necessarily Platonic love-interest, was "probably neither as young or innocent as he may have believed."

By diminishing everyone around Heine, Pawel threatens to shrink Heine's

own scale. And sometimes one feels like coming to the defense of the various accused. Cousin Carl, who was certainly not in perfect sympathy with his difficult poet relation, did continue for the last years of Heine's life (and the thirty years more of his widow's survival) the allowance that his father had granted Heine. And if Campe did struggle with Heine about royalties, and did commit the indefensible sin for a publisher of pledging to publish anything Heine wrote and then reneging on his promise, he was also a tireless promoter of Heine's work, and took chances for Heine with the German censors that clearly went beyond mere questions of

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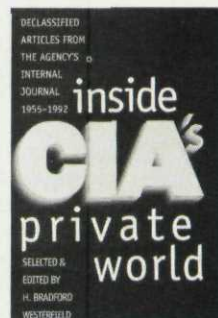
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profit. And Mathilde, whom Pawel all but accuses of infidelity, and whose disappearance for a month immediately after Heine's death he finds despicable and unpardonable, was a healthy young woman who, after all, lived with Heine for eight years after he had become an invalid, and sexually dysfunctional by his own account. That she would have felt released enough by the end of Heine's endless dying to leave Paris was odd, but even if she did go away, as Marx snarled, with her "pimp," we might at least try to understand her.

Pawel even manages to attack Heine, or at least his "more problematic character traits": "the flashes of paranoia, the unrestrained viciousness of his personal attacks on enemies or friends he felt had wronged him, his propensity to desecrate his pen ... in ... infantile temper tantrums..." In all the standard studies of Heine—the best is *Heinrich Heine, A Modern Biography* by Jeffrey L. Sammons—we get the sense that Heine was a difficult person. He was constantly provoking scandals and was thin-skinned enough to have been involved in a number of duels, but he was also endlessly interesting, "... a man of unruly but noble character," as he himself said of Liszt. Though he seemed to have few intimate friends, he knew everyone, from Goethe to Balzac, from Chopin to Wagner, from George Sand to Hans Christian Andersen, from Marx to the Rothschilds. In his youth he worshiped Napoleon and adored all that the French Revolution stood for; but in the course of his life he had to witness its ideals betrayed, in the reaction of 1830 and the more serious conservative triumph after the 1848 turmoil, which he seemed almost unable to bring himself to behold, so much a violation was it of his old aspirations.

Though he consistently managed to offend popular notions of decorum, both personal and political, he was a passionate democrat, and one of the clear purposes of his poetry and prose was to undermine bourgeois and aristocratic hypocrisy, to make a literature that would be more accessible and more truthful. He wrote variations of old fairy tales, which he believed incorporated lost popular wisdom, and generated new ones. (Wagner used two of his poems, "Tannhäuser" and "The Flying Dutchman," as the basis of operas, and later, as his anti-Semitism became virulent, repudiated his debt to Heine. The Nazis, when they burned Heine's books and banished him from the anthologies, had to preserve "Lorelei" under "author unknown," because the poem had become so integral a part of

the German national identity.)

Heine said he didn't approve of "political poetry," because he felt that nearly all the polemical poetry of his time was tainted by the rot of nationalism, but most of his work was profoundly engaged. He wrote the most effective and enduring German political poem of the century, "The Silesian Weavers," which became an anthem for disaffected workers. (Engels translated it into English.) And he even composed a poem about the slave-trade to the Americas, "The Slave Ship," one of his few poems that comes into English with no excuses. (Both works are included in the Pawel volume, in a sheaf of poems appended to the text. Pawel reprints the Hal Draper versions of the poems to which he refers, a useful device in a biography of a poet.)

"The Slave Ship" is brilliant, an almost surreal narrative about a slave-trader in despair because the profits of his Rio-bound ship are threatened by his cargo dying off. The ship's doctor diagnoses the problem by saying that it's the blacks' "own fault," that their "melancholia ... bores them to death." He prescribes music and dancing for the slaves, and in a scene like something from a wilder *Benito Cereno*, the slaves dance and make love as music is played by the crew, as sharks prowl below, wondering why they haven't received their usual breakfast of dead slaves, and the captain prays:

"Oh, spare their lives for Jesus' sake  
Who did not die in vain!  
If I don't end up with three hundred head,  
My business goes down the drain."

Though he never participated directly in any of the great political upheavals of his time, he observed them and commented on them with a fierce independence. He was a man of the left, a liberal, and was even a Saint-Simonian for a period when he first came to visit Paris in 1831, before he was definitively exiled from the German states; and he always shared with the left a genuine indignation at the mistreatment of the common people. In his work, however, he was mistrustful of both right and left, and his refusal to take definitive positions left him, as his sometime friend Ludwig Borne noted, with "two backs," abused by both aristocratic and radical factions.

The various governments of the German-speaking states felt threatened enough by his writing to ban most of his books (Metternich made it a personal cause) and finally to banish Heine himself from their borders; and so he lived the last twenty-five years of his life in

France. But most of the radicals considered him inadequately revolutionary, and he was as trenchant about the left as about the right, and as prescient. "Communism," he wrote, "is the secret name, the frightful antagonist which opposes to the contemporary bourgeois regime proletarian rule with all its consequences ... The dismal hero to whom is assigned a great, if only temporary role in the modern tragedy..." He was drawn to rabble-rousers like Cobbett; but when Cobbett printed a scurrilous anti-Semitic attack, Heine was confirmed in his fears that popular radicalism would generate such monstrosities.

But the project of his writing really went beyond all that. Heine's aesthetic and spiritual purpose was what he called "sensualism," a reassertion of the rights of matter and the body, in art and society. He called for a poetry of "the most self-intoxicated subjectivity, world-unbridled individuality, the divinely free personality with all its love of life." He was like Whitman in his vision of a society in which art and poetry would free the individual from ancient habits of social passivity, and increase the dimensions and intensity of human aspiration and emotion. (Whitman exulted, "Heine was free ... one of the men who win by degrees.") If Heine's poems and songs were often about lost love, that love was never the bloodless aristocratic nostalgia of romanticism: it was rich with physicality and erotic ardor. There are scores of love affairs in his poems, and scores of women. He sings of escapades with the most timid maidens and the boldest matrons: one poem recounts a memorable adventure with a mother and a daughter.

Given the larger ends that he saw for his poetry, it is ironic (and he thought so, too) that the greater part of his fame rested on those gorgeous songs which concerned a few probably fictional amorous episodes of his youth. He considered the poetic perfection of those songs an essential part of his moral undertaking, but he sometimes sounds almost plaintive in trying to reassert the depths of his commitment to his social ideals. "Whether people praise or fault my songs concerns me little. But you shall lay a sword on my coffin, for I was a good soldier in mankind's war of liberation."

That coffin was hard-earned. Heine died a truly terrifying death—from syphilis, he thought, though modern medicine has cast doubt upon that diagnosis. Parts of his body were paralyzed, restored to use and paralyzed again, and finally he became a helpless

invalid, a living skeleton, racked with pain through most of his last eight years, finding relief only in morphine, which was administered to him through sores kept open for that purpose on his back. To read or write, he often had to hold one of his eyelids propped open, and sometimes he could hardly speak. But despite all this, and despite the stream of visitors that came from all over Europe to pay homage to the world-famous poet, he wrote, and wrote, and wrote: poetry during his mostly sleepless nights, prose the rest of the time.

**T**he report of Heine's final moments should certainly be inscribed in the book of last words said to the dying. Trying to the very end to write, he kept asking his nurse to take dictation. She couldn't, but reassured him: "When you stop throwing up, you'll write yourself." It is a shock to realize that when he did finally die, he was 58. Pawel accomplishes the death-bed transformation that Heine himself mocked and despised: by the end he seems reinvested with a kind of innocence; his fantasy love-affair with "La Mouche" has about it the pathetic mortal longing of Keats for his Fanny. The ordeal of his dying burned off much of Heine's desperate narcissism, and at least some of the sardonic cruelty which could afflict his skepticism.

But that skepticism was always less savage than it appeared. In a poem occasioned by a visit to Heine's grave, Matthew Arnold caustically wrote that Heine had been destined "only to laugh and to die." This is unfair. Heine's edge was the edge of a great humanist. Indeed, there was so much hope for humanity in Heine's criticism that it seems almost religious in its impulse. The converted Jew who was a dedicated Deist for most of his life returned finally to a personal god, in whom he claimed to believe with a child-like simplicity but toward whom he was not entirely affectionate: "... this great tormentor of animals," he called him. But Heine's mature spiritual convictions were clearly grounded in his skepticism. The fury of his attacks on human folly and human cruelty were animated by a profound affirmation, a cry against the disappointments that so much of the history he lived had brought him.

Our own skepticism is even more fretful and thoroughgoing than his. History has proved even darker than Heine believed it to be, and the affirmations that we salvage from it have been tempered by grimmer denials than he could have imagined, despite his famous prophecy that where books are burned, people

will be burned, too. When we contemplate the energy with which Heine lived and the admirable stoicism of his dying, when we study his poetry, which even in translation begins to regenerate the music of its fervent intentions, he does indeed become heroic, a writer of enor-

mous moral and intellectual power, an ardent and inspiring idealist.

C.K. WILLIAMS's *Selected Poems* was recently published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He teaches at Princeton University.

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## The Floating World

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BY STANLEY KAUFFMANN

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### The Unconsoled by Kazuo Ishiguro

(Knopf, 535 pp., \$25)

**T**hose who were lucky enough, or smart enough, to read Kazuo Ishiguro's first three novels in order of publication came to the third one, *The Remains of the Day*, with an advantage over the rest of us. Ishiguro was born in Japan and he has lived in England since he was five. (He is now 41.) To those who began with the third book, including myself, Ishiguro's huge cultural shift made that very English novel remarkable for what I would now call misconstrued reasons: we thought it an extraordinary feat of osmosis. But viewed through the perspective of his first two books, *The Remains of the Day*, wonderful anyway, seems even better.

Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of the Hills* (1982), focuses on a Japanese woman now living in England, one of whose daughters has recently committed suicide and whose other daughter is in difficulties. The story interweaves the woman's past life in post-war Nagasaki with her subsequent English life and brings the braiding up to the present. The book concludes with a sudden, startling enigma. (That puzzle, though presumably this was not in Ishiguro's mind at the time, prefigures his latest, fourth novel.)

In his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), that world is the pre-war "night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink" in a Japanese city. This world was the chief background for the youthful paintings of the now-elderly painter who is the protagonist. But the phrase has taken on another resonance. Like the first book, the "present" of the novel is post-war; the protagonist and his artist-contemporaries feel some guilt about their work before the war that may have inflamed jingoistic feelings. One of the painters commits suicide in

remorse. The "floating world," particularly as dangled before us by the title, comes to reflect other glints, other kinds of delusory gratification.

Ishiguro's first two books are masterly, in several ways. In each, the control is flawless without seeming arbitrary; every incident, every comma, appears to fit. Balance and rhythm are just, and in a gentle, oblique way, the story amplifies in texture. Remarks, observations, small incidents heighten our interest without the use of anything as crass as overt suspense. Yet the salient quality of these books is their method of characterization. Ishiguro doesn't use much physical description or interior delving. These people become familiar by the shapes of their lives—the way they choose and care, their daily routines, their harboring or shedding of grievances, even their liking of particular foods and their skill in cooking.

With many novelists, including some great ones, we sense that the author is carefully presenting his characters; at its crudest, it's the puppetmaster putting on a play. With Ishiguro, it's quite different. In these two books, he doesn't present his characters, he nestles among them. He watches them, respects them, obeys them, and conveys to us quietly what they tell him. He seems almost to chat with them from time to time "off-stage."

The quietness is the key. The children in these two books make some noise, but only the children. Ishiguro treats them with cunning, as citizens of a tangential world distinct from that of their parents and elders. Sometimes they permit their elders to enter, sometimes not; and often they are rackets. Except for their racket, the air of these two books is quiet. One of Ishiguro's triumphs is that their considerable range of emotion is brought close without a lot of fuss.