

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

Lovers and Enemies

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EDWARD HOPPER: An Intimate Biography. By Gail Levin. Knopf. 660 pp. \$35.

Edward Hopper was deeply read as an artist, though one would not ordinarily think of his paintings as literary in inspiration or in reference, and indeed they present themselves initially as documentations of bare visual truth—of light striking cornices of white American houses, or filling interior spaces in which men and women of recognizable types pursue the most ordinary of activities, including, on occasion, the activity of reading. To the American viewer the paintings have an almost aching familiarity, of scenes viewed through passed windows along barren metropolitan streets, or at daybreak or sunset driving past houses standing at the edges of upstate villages, isolated amid their shadows; and they instantly convey an oppressive sense of a loneliness so palpable that one feels it as the American soul objectified, the spareness of American spiritual life made visible, as if our light, our trees, our houses, our very garments are an inner emptiness translated into the language of commonplace objects, postures and perspectives. More than any artist in our history—more than Inness or Eakins or Homer—Hopper found a way of showing not just how America looks but how America is, lived under illuminations so harsh and unforgiving they feel like moral searchlights, punctuating the bleakness. Enough of Hopper's America survives beneath the Americanization that has overtaken our country, along with the rest of the world, that we can project Hopper's vision onto McDonald's and Wal-Mart, Victoria's Secret and The Gap, were we to imagine him as having painted these, and realize how little Americanization has to do with being American. Hopper infused gasoline pumps and Ex-Lax signs with the same unredeemed pathos he gave to railroad tracks and hotel lobbies, so the Golden Arches and the shopping cart would hardly have daunted him.

Against this visual record, which, save for the occasional portrait, is pretty much about generic Americans, Hopper's last painting seems literary in an unexpected way, and at the same time exceedingly

personal, as if he had turned the spotlight on himself and Jo, his wife, and sought to put into a single image the meaning of their life together as lovers and enemies. I suppose there must be a small set of paintings that are "last" not merely temporally but dramatically, as closures and summations of the lived life. But few have the power of Hopper's *Two Comedians* (1966). The tremendous virtue of Gail Levin's "intimate biography" is that it prepares us to feel that power. It is "intimate" in part because it is the biography of that marriage. It was a deep but terrifying marriage, as frustrating as it was fulfilling.

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The painting shows two actors—"comedians" in the sense that their costumes are roughly those of Columbine and Pierrot in the *commedia dell'arte all'improvviso*—and indeed Jo logged the painting as "The Two Comedians," using the Italianate spelling. They are holding hands and taking their bow at the edge of a proscenium. The painting condenses many of the things that gave meaning to their life together: They loved the theater, which is a motif in many of Hopper's works, and figures from the Italian comedy appear in the poetry of Verlaine, through which they courted each other ("French remained the language of romantic imagination for Edward and Jo all their lives," Levin writes). The Hoppers read for the sake of finding parallels in their own lives, and I cannot help thinking of the passage with which Thackeray concludes *Vanity Fair* ("Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out") whenever, as in the current show at the Whitney, I see the *Two Comedians*. Since reading Levin's book, I have become almost painfully sensitive to the symbolism of the male

sharing the last fall of limelight and the final applause with the female. There was a fierce competition between them as artists, and one has the sense—though admittedly much of it derives from Jo Hopper's diaries, which Levin uses as a major source and which are filled with resentment, anger and even hatred toward her husband—that "Ed" rarely let pass an opportunity to thrust his wife into the shadows with the same vehemence that she sought to thrust herself into the light alongside him. The collector Roy Neuberger "vividly recalled Jo's comment that she did not know why he was fussing so much about Ed when she was just as good an artist." This was in 1965, just two years before Hopper's death at 85, when the consensus was that Hopper was among the great artists of the century.

Jo's relationship to her husband is marvelously captured in an Arnold Newman photograph, *Edward and Jo Hopper in South Truro* (1960), which Levin uses as her frontispiece. Hopper is seated at the base of the hill on which he and Jo built the house on Cape Cod where they spent their summers. The house seems to hover in the space above his head, like a dream-image, with the large single window of his studio facing out. Next to the house, Jo seems to be waving her arms in some agitation—a tiny figure on the slope, whose whole figure is not as tall as Edward's monumentally bald head is high. Newman, commissioned to photograph Hopper for an article in *Horizon*, had been "cautioned that Jo considered herself as good a painter as Hopper." He recalled, Levin writes, that "Jo kept getting into the picture. She wanted to be in it. She stood there and started prancing around. Suddenly it hit me. This was their relationship."

Levin's book is halfway between Newman's photograph and Hopper's last painting, where man and wife are given equal billing. The book is as much about her as about him, and in a certain measure is written from Jo's perspective. (History is written from the point of view of the diarists.) Edward—one is tempted to say "Poor Edward"—does not come off well. He certainly felt himself victimized by his termagant of a wife. But she felt herself victimized by him, no less as an artist than as a wife. And there is probably more than a measure of feminist truth to her constant litany, though from the meager evidence of her artistic estate—her work, left as part of the Hopper be-

quest to the Whitney, has simply been allowed to disappear—it is difficult, however awful to her he may have been, to imagine her work as even close to the kind of achievement he exemplified. Levin, whose sympathies for Jo are transparent, tacitly concedes as much. She uses “collaboration” in characterizing the relationship between Hopper and his wife, as if Jo has to be given a collaborationist’s credit for his work—to the study of which, one is obliged to say, Gail Levin has made the greatest scholarly and curatorial contribution of anyone alive. There are certainly some remarkable husband-wife partnerships in the art world—I think of Arakawa and Madeline Gins, Newton and Helen Harrison, and of course Christo and Jeanne-Claude. These collaborations are acknowledged as such, but the Hoppers lived before this was altogether thinkable. The extent to which posing for and discussing the works with her husband constituted collaboration is questionable, especially since Hopper apparently wanted nobody in the studio as he worked and Jo’s notations on the progress of a painting came only after the day’s work, when she was allowed to see it.

Still, it was not as collaborator that Jo insisted she was as good an artist as Edward. She would have wanted this estimate based on her paintings of still lifes, interiors, landscapes, and the somewhat whimsical memorials to her cat, Arthur, of whom Edward was balefully jealous. One might even concede that the paintings are good while denying that they are as good as. What Jo lacked was the transfigurative vision present in every painting Hopper made, a vision of the same grand stature as Whitman’s or Emerson’s. However good an artist you are, it is no picnic being married to a great one who is celebrated for greatness. But neither was it a picnic for the great artist who happened to be married to a merely good one.

Here is Jo on her nemesis:

Heavens knows why I am impelled to keep records that could have interest to no one. I never reread. They’re not special about the life as he knows it of a great man. His life [is] so more or less uneventful as day by day record. He reads all the time, reads while I try to talk with him, do[es] crossword puzzles, enlarges his culture, contemplates silently himself, devoid of any generous concern for anybody else & for him all goes well. . . . He shares nothing of importance to another’s ego. . . . He’s highly competitive—I win, you lose. He’s fed on his victory over me. . . . What a blow to have it slowly dawn on

me, he couldn’t trump up any live interest in anyone but himself.

“With the hurt, driven ever more deeply home, transmuted resentment into the rudiments of biography,” Levin writes, “Jo virtually seethed: ‘I yearn to smash his glasses, something that would reach his complacency if only in a physical way.’ ” Jo told the painter Raphael Soyer, who came to visit and found Edward sitting in front of the house with Jo sitting at the back, “That’s what we do all the time. . . . He sits in his spot and looks at the hills all day, I look at the ocean, and when we meet there’s controversy, controversy, controversy.” The controversy became physical on more than one occasion: Edward smacked Jo, or dragged her out of the car. Jo bit his thumb to the bone. “For 30 yrs. E. has argued every step of the way, argued & obstructed. In this he finds an unholy satisfaction. Thru me he gains the distinction of having the same kind of wife as Molière, Socrates, Abe Lincoln, Horace Greeley etc. What those poor wives had to put up with from those damned egotists.” A year later she wrote, “He’s a killer, that’s what he really is.” They seemed crafted to thwart one another. Hopper had fantasies of good meals, remembered from his three sojourns in France. Jo hated to cook, and they ate canned beans and soup. Jo’s sexual needs were constantly disregarded, and she complains of Hopper’s “denying of natural sex . . . with nothing whatever for the normal human female” to the point where one wonders if she might not have remained a virgin in the technical hymeneal sense, since she was a virgin when they married in their early 40s. “Isn’t it nice to have a wife who paints?” she took the chance of asking at a moment when he was stretching a canvas for her, to which he replied: “It stinks.”

Yet they had an immense amount in common. She posed for most of his female figures, though I saw no reference to the frequent claim that she would not allow him to use any other model. And even in their 70s, Hopper clearly saw her as sufficiently charged with sexual allure that he used her for some of his most erotic figures. They both worked to resist the domination of the American art scene by abstraction, and especially by the Abstract Expressionists, though Jo’s organizational drive and energy were greater than Edward’s and were characteristically underacknowledged. She gave his life a kind of excitement, and he gave hers a kind of meaning even her beloved

cat could not bestow. Jo really did rejoice in her husband’s growing success, even she was driven almost crazy with it. She died ten months after he did. “Life without Edward was unthinkable,” Levin writes. “Life together, as she put it with telling parenthesis, had been ‘perfective (of its own snappy kind).’ ”

We learn as much as it is important for us to know about Hopper from this meticulously researched study—Hopper as son, as student, as lover and husband, as friend, as grouch and artist. The subject what we might have expected from the painting—frugal, taciturn, honest, chill rarely given to generosity or impulsive behavior, or self-destructive behavior, and marked by a dry, infrequent wittiness. It is not really imaginable that someone who painted as he did would be lavish or self-indulgent, wear expensive clothes, know the names of headwaiters or drive a Mercedes. And it is not surprising that someone who pursued the same vision, decade after decade, should have been impervious to distraction or folly, and hardly a brilliant conversationalist. Burying his nose in a book when he was not painting seems the natural order of his life: He did not, to use his phrase, chat floozies. Without Jo he might have read more but not painted as much, since part of her “collaboration” was to provoke him into painting when, as often happened, inspiration ran dry. Or perhaps she did this out of self-defense, since he found ways of taking it out on her when he was unable to paint. But it could not have been an eventful life, nor is this in consequence a book full of episode and adventure. It is a long book filled with the detail of the daily life of a slowly evolving artistic career, to the point that one feels one has in some measure lived the life it recounts while reading it.

No biography of a great artist can explain the greatness. And if one can infer the character from the work, nothing in the character would have enabled one to infer the greatness of the art. It could have been merely frugal, taciturn, honest, chill, not given to generosity or impulsiveness. Who can figure genius?

Consider once more *Two Comedians*, and pay special attention to the proscenium—“sturdy as a ship’s bough [sic],” Jo records. Whatever is implied about its carpentry, the interesting visual truth is the way the stage slopes up, shown as it would look to someone in the audience whose place can almost be computed. It is not the perspective of the outside view-

er—us—but of the inside viewer, the artist himself. He is inside and outside the action at once—inside as comedian, outside as judge. So even as Hopper represents himself as on the stage, alongside his wife, the perspective situates him by

himself, looking on, not part of the action at all. He existed on two planes at once, and must have been hell to live with on both. But the complex interplay between engagement and detachment is the glory of his art. □
