

The New Criterion

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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the work of literary art disappears simply into *écriture*, in which the "prison house" of language is said to be a "self-enclosed system in no relation to reality," in which "there is nothing but text." J. Hillis Miller has suggested as much, and it was Paul de Man's view that poetry only "names the void, asserts itself as pure nothingness." But for Wellek, if criticism is aesthetic invention, if the art work dissolves into psychology, if the poem is indistinguishable from the comic book, "if every text is ambiguous, polysemic, 'undecidable,' we arrive at the end of scholarship . . ." Luckily for us, as Wellek points out, most literary critics in the present situation have rejected such unearned skepticism and egocentrism and—through their editions and annotations, source studies, biographies, bibliographies, and studies in the social and historical conditions in which art is produced—have reaffirmed the great task of literary criticism: to elucidate, analyze, and evaluate literary works and thereby to preserve the past and transmit to the future "the heritage of great literature in an age of technological civilization." No one, of course, will be able to agree with all of Wellek's judgments of the modern critics. But I for one cannot disagree with his defense of the New Criticism or with his assessment of the current critical scene. And his call for a return to "a proper respect for facts, for evidence, for established values and traditions and simply for common sense and rational approaches to the study of literature" is most timely indeed.

Hopper's scene

Gail Levin Hopper's Places.
Knopf, 89 pages, \$10.95

reviewed by James R. Mellow

Edward Hopper was an artist who did not want his paintings tagged with ulterior meanings. He tended to view the critical profession with suspicion and doubt. When critics commented on the stark "loneliness"

of his subjects—gas stations on deserted country roads, bleak Victorian houses on the opposite side of railroad tracks, men and women isolated in characterless hotel rooms—Hopper objected. As Gail Levin notes in her highly informative monograph, *Hopper's Places*, the taciturn Hopper responded by saying "the loneliness thing is overdone." He was, however, often ambivalent and sometimes furtive about expressing his opinions. On another occasion, answering the same charge, he commented: "It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could be the whole human condition."

When partisans tried to enroll Hopper in the ranks of the American Scene painters of the 1930s, he rejected the notion, claiming that painters like Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry "caricatured America." He plainly wanted none of it. "I always wanted to do myself," he said. "The French painters didn't talk about the 'French Scene' or the English painters about the 'English Scene.'"

Hopper was, of course, one of the innumerable painters engaged in the nagging and seemingly obligatory search for a truly native America, just as American writers were expected to pursue the phantom of The Great American Novel. The Hudson River School painters, for example, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, were intent on capturing the idyllic and rustic aspects of a vanishing American landscape; painters like Church and Bierstadt wanted to acquaint the art public with the grandeur of the wilderness and the Rockies. There was a large element of the romantic and nostalgic in their undertakings. Among Hopper's nineteenth-century predecessors, it is Thomas Eakins, with his clinically unsentimental approach, who serves as a real comparison with Hopper. Hopper's regionalist contemporaries—Benton, Curry, Grant Wood—went in for folksiness and down-home ruralism: baptisms in Kansas or the myth of Persephone transposed to the Missouri wheatlands. Modernists like Marsden Hartley or Charles Demuth brought a calcu-

lated primitivism to Maine landscapes or a fastidious Cubistic approach to American church steeples.

Like Hartley, Hopper had studied and painted in Paris and Europe early in his career. He later claimed that when he returned from his last trip abroad in 1910 he felt a sense of shock, finding the American scene crude and raw: "It took me ten years to get over Europe." But having found his real vocation here, Hopper made the assertion without the fashionable chauvinism of the regionalist painters. He created his own version of the American Scene, one that was something more than a topical cliché.

It was never, however, a definition of the American character as distinct from the American Scene. Hopper is seldom very convincing in his treatment of the human figure. He lacks the obsessive attention to anatomical detail and dress that one finds, say, in Eakins's figure paintings. One never mistakes Hopper's always bosomy women, or his anonymous men in shirtsleeves or nondescript business suits, for personalized portraits of real people. In this respect, Hopper is hardly the father of the warts-and-all school of photographic realism now in vogue in American painting. (Significantly, Hopper once complained that photographic images "do not have enough weight.") It is in the interaction of the figure with its setting, its milieu, that one immediately recognizes the accuracy of Hopper's grasp of certain phases of the American experience—the dull chronicles of wasted time, the doldrums of small-town life. In a Hopper painting, the figure, when it succeeds, vitalizes the particular mood or atmosphere.

Hopper knew all about the isolated life, even in a big city; he led one of the most cloistered and circumspect lives of any of the modern American masters. He was noticeably cautious about money, avoided the entanglements of the art world, and for most of his adult years lived in a cramped apartment in Greenwich Village. He remained faithful to those two essential people in the life of an artist who wants to survive

into posterity—a determined wife, jealous for his success beyond that of any other artist, and a dealer, equally committed. His wife, Josephine Nivison, a painter herself, kept a tight rein on her husband; for forty-three years, she posed for just about all the buxom women in his paintings. And Hopper, until his death in 1967, remained loyal to his original dealer, Frank Rehn.

There is, not surprisingly, a trace of the voyeur in Hopper's work that adds to its uniqueness. He made an art out of the invasion of privacy, the thrill of the outsider's brief glimpses into lighted interiors at night: a woman undressing in her apartment; a businessman and his secretary, after hours, in a glare-lit office; people engaged in apparently innocent activities that nevertheless carry an air of the sexually provocative. There is always something more going on in a Hopper painting than meets the casual eye. A woman in a parlor car turns to give another woman, across the aisle, an unaccountable stare: the mystery of the unexplained.

Gail Levin has written perceptively about these aspects of Hopper's work in an earlier volume, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (1980). In *Hopper's Places*, she narrows the focus to Hopper's portraits of streets and houses, which tend to be more particularized in every detail than his paintings of people. Hopper seemed to delight in the tawdriness and seediness of his mundane settings. Writing about his contemporary Charles Burchfield, Hopper, with an expansiveness rare in his pronouncements, described a subject matter that was in reality closer to his own vision than to Burchfield's: "Our native architecture with its hideous beauty, its fantastic roofs, pseudo-Gothic, French Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what not, with eye-searing colors or delicate harmonies of faded paint, shouldering one another along interminable streets that taper off into swamps or dump heaps—these appear again and again, as they should in any honest delineation of the American scene."

In this realm, Hopper *is* closer to the present-day photo realists. To discover how close is the central purpose of Levin's monograph, for she has searched out and painstakingly photographed the sites of Hopper's favored locales—Gloucester, Massachusetts, where, in 1924, he honeymooned with Josephine; the coastal villages of Maine, where they later summered; and Cape Cod, where, in 1934, the Hoppers finally built a permanent summer studio for themselves. Levin observes that people often make the mistake of thinking they have discovered Hopper motifs everywhere in these regions because the run-down streets and houses seem so familiar—due, in large part, to the authenticity of Hopper's paintings. Hopper made coastal New England, with its frame houses, his own. She notes that Hopper tended to paint "backwater locations" that were not so afflicted by the American disease of progress. That, too, tells us something about the character of Hopper's choices. Decades later, even with renovations and inevitable changes, the buildings and the settings are still recognizable in their down-to-earth seediness. Levin's book, however, is more than an exercise in historicism and landmark preservation. It illuminates Hopper's method, making it clear that, for strictly compositional reasons or in order to underscore the mood of emptiness or isolation, Hopper, on occasion, willingly altered the details of the actual scene. But the surprise—shown by Levin's juxtapositions of her photographs of the extant sites with the paintings in question—is how frequently Hopper could achieve his aims *without* changing the details. In that respect Levin's monograph does double duty; for it reminds us that what we often attribute to the artist's style is some element drawn from the scene itself.

But there was more than an obsession with realism at the base of Hopper's ambitions. Like the great masters, he wanted to force the "unwilling medium of paint" into a record of his emotions: "I find any digression from this large aim leads me to boredom." But, of course, boredom was

Hopper's subject as well, the boredom of hotel lobbies, the boredom of blank streets and all-night diners, the boredom of an usherette in a movie house, waiting for the second feature to end.

It was Hopper's need to get the "whole human condition" into his paintings that separates his peopled (or deserted) landscapes and cityscapes from those of the American Scenists with whom he was bracketed. Now we are beginning to distinguish his ominous and encroaching woods from their artificial trees. Hopper was a more intellectual painter than we gave him credit for during the long unfolding of his critical reputation. In Paris, he had developed a taste for the Symbolist poets, particularly Verlaine and Rimbaud, whom he was fond of quoting. Later he became interested in Proust, Freud, and Mann, as well as Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Frost. Since his death, scholars like Levin, who is now working on a critical biography of Hopper, have been exploring the played-down personal life of the artist. And at last we are getting a sense of the character and personality of the man, the quirks of mind and curiosity that led him to bring to the ordinary and banal aspects of American life in his time a unique and mordant poetry.

Americans in Mexico

Carlos Fuentes The Old Gringo.
Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
180 pages, \$14.95

reviewed by Mark Falcoff

The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes is perhaps one of the best-known Latin American writers in the United States, nowadays not so much for his novels as for his strident polemics against U.S. policy in Central America, and his relentless liberal-baiting. People who do not know the man personally are often surprised to learn that he is not only extremely amiable in person but speaks