

by JAMEY HECHT

The self-conscious "movements" in poetry, the ones that produce manifestos, influence criticism the most because they openly declare the taste by which they insist upon being enjoyed. The kind of criticism that influences poetry the most is either the dominant strain of the day, since poets aspire to fulfill its implicit criteria of literary value, or the maverick sort which appeals to maverick poets. Often this latter kind of criticism is not in fact about poetry or even literature, but is some fresh auxiliary source in science writing, art criticism, cultural observation, or the historical record; it can be called criticism because it isn't art and it attempts to explain.

RICHARD NIXON AT BOSWORTH FIELD

My kingdom for a horse, a Pegasus to carry me across
The waves from California to Hanoi, higher than my helicopters,
That from her bare back I might cast down through the clouds
My soul-destroying barbéd iron spear into the enemy's brain.

My kingdom for a slice of pumpkin pie on china in her kitchen,
My mother, whose bliss outshines the sphere of Saturn as,
High above Beatrice, she passes her immortal days beside the Virgin
On her throne, in robes of gingham, holding in one hand a silver scepter,
In the other, a wicker picnic basket filled with thin ham sandwiches.

My kingdom for one of those loudspeaker cars, rigged with bullhorns,
That I might drive it through Chicago, Dallas and D.C., its fat Bakelite
Microphone an apple in my trembling hand, the coiled cord pulled taut.
I'd speak again the words I spoke a million years ago into the live machine,
The words whose ghost became the 18 Minute Gap, that spouting hiss
Of Moby-Dick, that Siren's aria, eternal music of the spheres,
Hidden like starlight at noon, or like the skeletons my namesake made
Of those two princelings born between my Lord of Gloucester and the Crown,

Who bled to death beneath their uncle's knife, until he dragged their bodies
To the closet underneath the stairs below the Tower's Chapel
Undiscovered for three hundred years and then sequestered in an urn.

My kingdom for a pint of blood, to render audible the voice my death made mute,
A pint of blood to feed my homeless shade that loiters in lobby
Of the Jefferson Memorial, the Mall, the hot coals of the pretzel cart in January,
Whose smoke stings gently in the carriage horses' blinkered eyes.
My ghost looks out from inside giant Lincoln's giant face of Colorado marble:
I can see for miles, the frozen grass, plastic bags entangled in a million trees,
McDonald's orphaned Styrofoam adrift across the Lower 48, dioxin, DDT,
Mount Arlington's white crosses "finite but unbounded" like the universe, fog,
A faggot's garden thriving in the summer sun, a lamb stew for his husband
Piping hot on their electric stove. If only I could speak, then I would tell you all
What words I let escape the threshold of my face into the tape, that day the devil
Came to Washington and took possession of my tongue, you would be grateful
I erased it all: how my handlers in the CIA, my Mafiosi, my Exilios,
Broke into that hotel to steal some evidence that ten years earlier they did it:
Killed the President, injected me and Lyndon with the cold, black bile of God.