

PAUL HORGAN

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When Paul Horgan was given its Laetare Medal by the University of Notre Dame in 1976, it may have been the first public recognition of this Catholic writer by his Church. Horgan was born in 1903 and had been publishing poetry and fiction for forty years. In his adopted New Mexico -- the family moved there for his father's health in 1915 -- he was honored and feted; he had been invited to lecture at the Iowa Writer's School, and from 1960 was involved in Wesleyan University's Center for Advanced Studies. Why did Catholics wait until he was 73 to recognize this writer?

The immediate occasion was the magnificent biography Paul Horgan had published in 1975, *Lamy of Santa Fe*. The book won him a Pulitzer Prize as well as the Laetare Medal. It told the story of the man who had inspired Willa Cather's *Death Comes For the Archbishop*, a French missionary who, after beginning his apostolic work in Ohio, became the first bishop of Santa Fe, a diocese that covered a good part of the eventual western United States.

In extenuation of Horgan's apparent neglect by his co-religionists, it must be said that if he was not precisely a late bloomer as an artist, there

was for some time indecision as to which art he would pursue. In 1923, Horgan returned to his native New York and entered the Eastman School of Music in Rochester where he studied for three years. This musical background was important throughout his life. *Encounters with Stravinsky* appeared in 1972, but he had met the musician in 1958.

But music was not to be Paul Horgan's primary art. Perhaps he would be a painter. Throughout his life he produced watercolors and a friend from boyhood was the painter Peter Hurd, whose portrait in words he published in 1965. He published poetry and then turned to the novel. *The Fault of Angels* won the Harper Prize Novel Contest in 1933, and for the next ten years, until his wartime service caused him to lay aside his imaginative writing, he published ten books.

World War II had a decisive effect on Horgan's career as a writer. He did not publish a work of fiction for ten long years, and it was his history of the Rio Grande, *Great River*, published in 1954, that earned him his first Pulitzer.

His next popular success was the historical novel, *A Distant Trumpet*, which in many ways is more history than novel. This involvement in history was to continue in a series of narratives of the South West, culminating in the magnificent *Lamy of Santa Fe*.

Horgan's wartime career in Washington widened his circle of friends, his musical and operatic beginnings gave him entree to the world of

musical production. It was in his capacity as Director of Wesleyan's Center for Advanced Study that he was in Rome and found himself in St. Peter's at the opening of a session of Vatican II in 1963. An account of this is to be found in his essay, "*Roma Barocca*." His judgment of the music was mordant.

The several choirs were involved by turns, all equally strident, faithless to pitch, indifferent to rhythm, tempo, and ensemble. Female voices were heard, sounding like matronly crows answering the quavering gobbles of their male kind. But like redemption, a white blade of pure tone from a boy cut through to the vault. The Sistine Choir had once been incomparable, according to eighteenth-century travellers who wrote to say so. The child Mozart went ravening away to write down what he had heard.

A disenchanted Catholic? Not at all, just a man cursed with a sensitive ear. But it is his eye of which we are principally aware. "Before us in the shower of light falling from within the lappets of the baldochino, the shift and weave, the unfolding of the Pontifical High Mass was beginning as Paul VI, attended by prelates who managed the folds of his huge white and gold cope, censed the altar at all its dimensions; for it stood there as an image of the body of Christ upon which the holy sacrifice itself would once again be enacted." He was also making sketches for future watercolors

during the Pope's two hour long address to the Council fathers.

One introducing himself to Paul Horgan, might do worse than begin with the essays collected in 1993, under the title *Tracings. Lamy_of Santa Fe* is a must, of course, summing up as it does the study and wisdom of an already long life and bringing them to bear on an extraordinary churchman who provides a lens through which we can see Horgan's beloved Southwest. It is interesting to learn that the young Horgan met the much older Willa Cather in New Mexico.

His studies of Peter Hurd and of Igor Stravinsky give a sense of Horgan's cultural range. *A Distant Trumpet* could serve as transition into Horgan's non-historical fiction.

What is to be said of the novels? Consider two trilogies, the so-called Richard novels and then those brought together under the collective title of *Mountain Standard Time*. The novels in the latter date from the first, pre-war period. They share the common Horgan theme, evil, sin, original and actual. Few writers can put so relentlessly and simply before their reader human evil, that of the individual, that of the crowd. The novels turn on a woman's seduction by a traveling salesman, social agitation in the Depression, and then in *The Common Heart*, the story of a family like Horgan's own, coming from the east into Mountain Standard Time.

The Richard novels, written over a twenty-five year span, add up to

a single *bildungsroman*, a growing up: childhood, boyhood, young manhood. Writers could perhaps be divided into those who sentimentalize childhood and those who see it as the frightening time when we become aware of our own and others' capacity for evil. A child drowns a kitten, encounters a flasher, sees the cruelty done to a retarded friend, has a delightful uncle who commits suicide...

Horgan's is a powerful moral imagination and his characters disturb by their simple verisimilitude and what they tell us about ourselves. But it would be wrong to convey the notion that Horgan's is a world of black pessimism. It is human weakness, our capacity for evil, that makes goodness stand out in all its wonder. He rejected the notion that *Far From Cibola* was a "Proletarian novel." "The book has nothing to do with masses, or classes, or crippling concepts of man as a being without a soul. It is a poem with as many subjects as it has characters; but the subject underlying all others, though never stated, is human charity -- 'the greatest of these.'"

The third chapter of *Things as They Are* bears the title "Muzza," which is the way the retarded boy John addresses his mother. Richard is John's friend and hears the other boys chant, "John, John, the dog-faced one," and it is that taunt that makes him realize that John is different. But this does not affect his own attitude toward the boy next door even though he is vaguely aware that John's mother is bribing him to be her son's friend.

On the first day of school, Mrs. Burley asks Richard to accompany John to school

That first day is a disaster. It becomes unmistakable that John is incapable of doing what other kids his age do. Richard takes John home after school and on the way they stop at a candy store. When they emerge, they are confronted by other boys who begin to tease John. Richard and John run off but they are pursued and cornered in a garage where the boys turn a hose on John. He is knocked down.

"Get up, dogface," yelled one of the boys.

Obediently John got up, keeping his eyes closed, suffering all that must come to him. The hose column toppled him over again. Striking his face, blows of water knocked his head about until it seemed to fly apart.

The boys strip John, tearing off his clothes, and then turn the hose on him again, making him spin and slide on the oily floor of the garage. Richard runs for help, bringing back Mrs. Burley and she gathers her son, dripping and blue with cold, into her arms. *"Muzza," he said thickly. "Oh, Muzza, Muzza."*

John is wrapped up and taken home and put to bed, He develops a fever. Mrs. Burley is grateful to Richard, but the boy senses that she has begun to accept the tormentors' view of her son.

Thus far we have been given a vivid, heart-wrenching scene, and many authors would be content to leave it there. An unfortunate child,

cruel bullies, a steadfast friend. But we are reading Paul Horgan and the situation and its potential for evil are far from exhausted.

John's fever worsens and he dies. There is a private burial. Richard is asked to select some of John's toys for himself. Mrs. Burley talks to him about her dead son, expressing the thought that it was best that he die.

"Garsh, when you see cripples trying to get along, and the sick people who never get well, you wonder why they can't be spared, and just die."

The appalling truth was gathering in me. I stared at her while she continued.

"John was always frail, and when those horrid boys turned on him and he caught that chill, and it went into pneumonia, his father and I did everything to save him, but it was not enough. We had to see him go."

Clutching John's beautiful power boat in both arms, I covered a little away from her and said, "You never sent for a doctor, though."

A sharp silence cuts its way between us. She put one hand on her breast and held herself. At last she said in a dry, bitter voice, "Is that what is being said?"

"Doctor Grauer always comes when I am sick."

She put her hand to her mouth. Her eyes were afire like those of a trapped cat.

"Richard?" she whispered against her fingers, "what are you

thinking? Don't you believe we loved John?"

I said, inevitably, "Did you have him die?"

The poor woman reacts violently, striking out at the accusing boy, who dances away, dropping and breaking the toy. Then he escapes from the house and runs home, *"frightened by what I had exposed."*

This novel was published in 1952 and reprinted with the other novels in the Richard Trilogy in 1990. Richard's viewpoint, the moral universe in which Paul Horgan's story moves, is quite simply that which characterized our civilization for centuries. It is significant that, even after the Holocaust and other mass scale slaughters of our time, Horgan is able to create circumstances that we ourselves might occupy and where a deed is done that appeals to the same rationale as Auschwitz and the Hemlock Society.