

From *The Other Statue*

## EDWARD GOREY: LIFE AND WORK

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

I've never cared to learn about the lives of the authors and artists I admire. When I look at the biographies that have made their way to my shelves, I realize that they are all books by authors I like and so don't care much *what* they're writing about (Fay Weldon, Virginia Woolf), or else they're biographies of people I know I ought to admire but don't (Charles Dickens, Anais Nin) and so want some dirt on with which to justify my low opinion. Or else they're of people I'm only carelessly interested in (Mary Queen of Scots, Margaret Wise Brown) and can therefore read about without fear of disillusionment. I'm always surprised, reading the notes on the Jane Austen list serve I subscribe to, how well-versed

the members are on Jane Austen's life, not merely her works. It's taken as a given in the often heated discussions that ensue that I will know when and why, say, she moved to Bath. And I don't want to. I only want to know that she wrote six of the best novels the English language has to offer.

With this working philosophy, I spent many happy years knowing nothing about Edward Gorey (who actually dedicated one of his books to Jane Austen) except the bare fact of his existence and, more importantly, the existence of his rather uncategorizable body of work. Better writers than I have struggled to describe just what it was he did. Was he a cartoonist? The work is small enough, but too fine — often found in the

humor sections of bookstores, but that might be only because it would vanish among the art tomes. A writer and illustrator of children's books? Sometimes — but children lead such ghastly lives in his miniature books, and achieve such cheerfully dire deaths, that it's not one title in twenty you could in good conscience leave a little one alone with. All right, yes, he's the guy who did the drawings for the beginning of the PBS *Mystery!* series. But that says nothing about his brilliant writing, and he considered himself more a writer than an artist when push came to shove.

"I think of my books as Victorian novels all scrunched up," he said once in an interview, and that's as good a summing up of

his work as anyone's likely to find. *The Hapless Child*, for instance, and I'm about to ruin it for anyone who hasn't read it yet so don't say I didn't warn you, is either the ultimate Victorian weepy or a satire of the above. Little Charlotte Sophia, the child in question, is a happy, lovely girl whose parents "were kind and well-to-do." So naturally they don't last long. Her father is reported killed in a native uprising in Africa, and her mother goes into a fatal decline on hearing the news. Charlotte Sophia is sent to an evil boarding school, and runs away only to be bought, sold, and forced to make artificial flowers. Once more she flees, only to be struck by a car driven by no other than — of course! — her long-lost father, not dead at all. She dies without seeing him, naturally, and "she was so changed, he did not recognize her."

Children often die noble deaths in Gorey's work. The title character in *The Pious Infant* makes Little Lord Fauntleroy seem a crack-dealing thug in comparison. This noisome little tyke would, by the tender age of four, "go through books and carefully blot out any places where there was a frivolous mention of the Deity." Thank God he contracts a fatal illness a few panels later, brought on by being caught in a bad storm on the way home from bringing his bread pudding to an unfortunate widow.

If your spirits need lifting after perusing this brief work (none of Gorey's books take longer than five minutes to read, which explains why it was possible to collect so many of them into the perfectly ordinary-sized anthologies *Amphigorey*, *Amphigorey Too*, and *Amphigorey Also*), you might want to take a gander at *The Beastly Baby*, which Gorey wrote early in his career under the anagrammatic nom de plume Ogdred Weary. Gorey loved messing with his name, and in fact dedicated *B.B.* to another self-anagram, Ydora Wredge. (The one bummer about the *Amphigoreys* is that you don't get to see the original dedications, one of which was to a brand of soap whose name Gorey found irresistible.) Anyway, *B.B.* is just plain evil — so sick and wrong from the outset that his parents won't even name him. (I'm assuming it's a him. Gorey refers to him consistently and primly as "it.") Their only aim in life is to get rid of him — somehow, anyhow. This isn't just misguided family dislike, as in Gorey's *The Tuning Fork* where poor little Theoda is persecuted by her nearest and dearest sim-

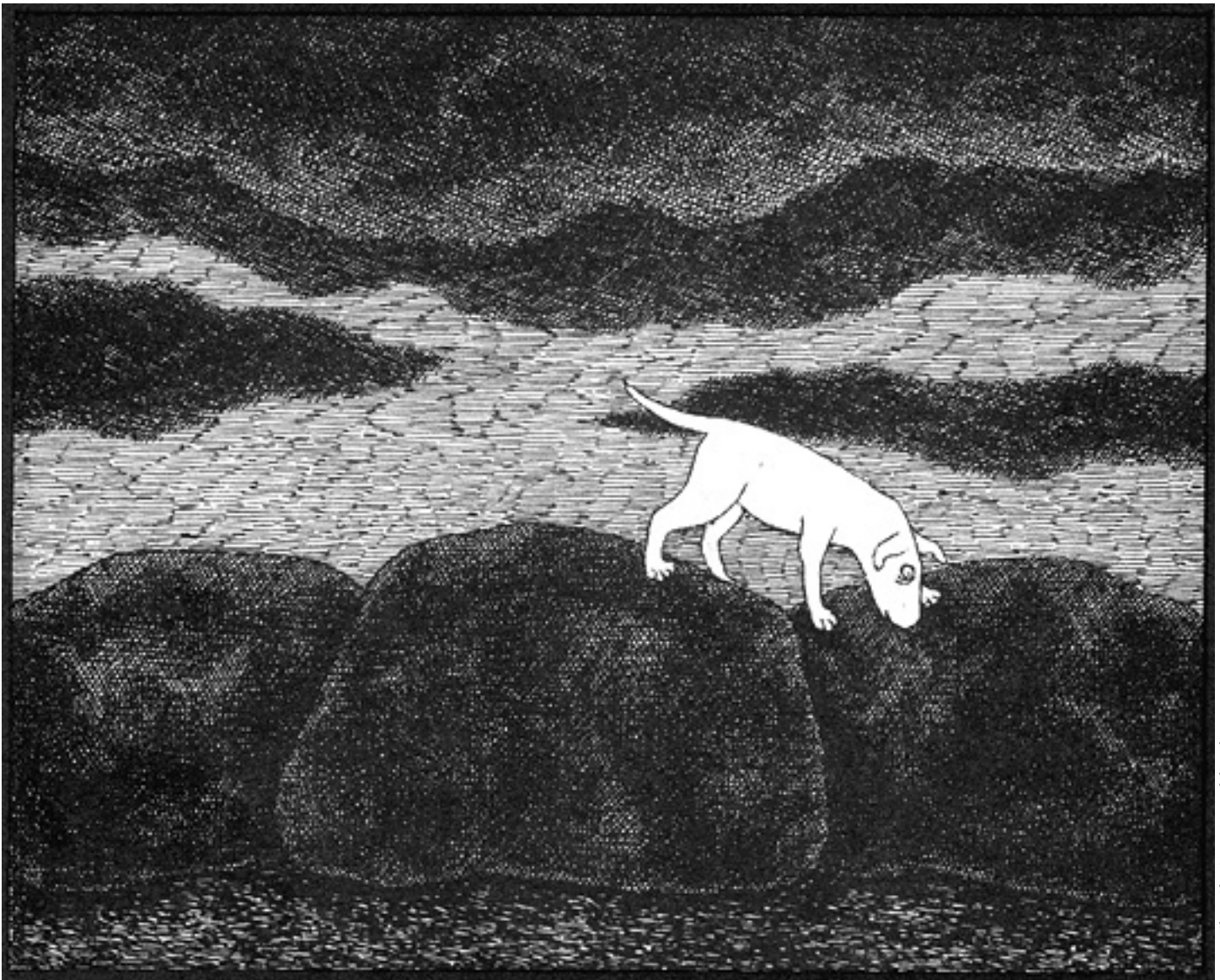
ply for being homely. No, the *Beastly Baby* really is just that. I won't tell you about the picture of "when it had succeeded in doing something particularly atrocious," but trust me — beastly doesn't go half far enough, and in this case is an insult to beasts. But the adorable little wretch meets a suitable ending involving being dropped from a great height, the reader cheers, and life is good again.

If all this sounds too horrid for words, I'm not telling it right. The books of Edward Gorey are screamingly funny, chillingly clever, and thoroughly addictive. They're like nothing else. They're definitely desert island material. I've been reading them since the guy I was going steady with lent me his precious copies some twenty years ago, and I haven't tired of them yet. (Or of the guy, for that matter, but that's another story.)

I especially love the many Gorey alphabets, all of which I wish I'd had when I was learning to read, none of which I'll let my four-year-old anywhere near. And all of them, like all of Gorey's work, with beautifully hand-lettered rather than typed text. Some of them are almost Seussian, such as *The Utter Zoo*, an A to Z of nonsense animals. There is the Quingawaga, an elegant dragon who "squeaks and moans/While dining off of ankle bones," and the Jel-bislup, who "cannot get far/Because it's kept inside a jar"; but I think my favorite, and certainly the easiest to commit to memory, is: "The Yawfle stares, and stares, and stares,/And stares, and stares, and stares, and stares."

Other alphabets are not so benign. *The Fatal Lozenge* features the Lazar, "blessed with an appearance/Enough to give the strongest qualms," and the Resurrectionist, pictured with a half-wrapped corpse slung over one shoulder, who "goes plying/Without ado his simple trade;/Material is always dying/And got with nothing but a spade." Then there's *The Glorious Nosebleed*, in which each letter of the alphabet has its own adverb in a single strange sentence. "She knitted mufflers Endlessly," "He fell off the pier Inadvertently;" and then, at the end, a drawing of a man who bears a remarkable resemblance to his maker, right down to the floor-length fur coat and white sneakers he was famous for, with the caption: "He wrote it all down Zealously."

But of course the queen of all the Gorey alphabets is *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, with its young life lost for every letter. "A is for Amy, who fell down the stairs. B is for



From The Glorious Nosebleed

Basil, assaulted by bears.” And before you start howling indignantly at the very concept, just answer this: how upset can you really get over “N is for Neville, who died of ennui”? A fate you’re secure from as long as you keep reading Gorey.

Which I did. And I continued happy to know next to nothing about the author/artist. He was famously reclusive and eccentric. That was enough for me. Which was a good thing, because although Gorey had generously (and rather surprisingly) been giving interviews for years, there was no single volume dedicated to the man, no bio authorized or un-. I continued to hunt for old titles coming back in print, and I rejoiced in new titles. *The Haunted Tea-Cosy: A Dispirited and Distasteful Diversion for Christmas* came out in '97, and *The Headless Bust: A Melancholy Meditation on the False Millennium* in '99. They contained phrases that sounded as if they shouldn't make sense, but did, such as

*Initial, dash* cannot conceal  
The fact that everything is real,  
But whether it is also true  
Is left entirely up to you.

and lines that seemed sensible at first glance but didn't really mean anything at all, like

Reversing at a tango tea  
In Snogg's Casino-not-on-Sea  
L\_\_ tripped and cried, 'I am afraid  
They tampered with the marmalade.'

and sentences that I rather wished didn't make sense, namely: “To the house opposite Fido was returned from the taxidermist and set down by the fireplace.” They also both ended with acts of generosity involving fruitcake: a quarter ton is offered to guests in the first, while in the second the detestable substance is “sawed in blocks” and sent off to poorhouses,

where the residents use it “for scouring floors/And propping open banging doors.”

Delighted as I was by the writing, I found myself puzzled by the illustrations, which seemed heavy-lined and crude compared to his earlier elegant works. No lovingly-crosshatched expanses of wallpaper, no delicate deadpan expressions, only simple blank backgrounds and characters who looked blocky and bulgy-eyed. Well, I thought with a pang, he must be getting old. I should be glad he's still working at all.

Gorey passed away in the early spring of 2000, and I was as selfishly grieved as any reader who loses an author is. I still felt no particular pricklings of curiosity, but I felt as if at least I wouldn't be intruding if I learned more about the man. And anyway, from the little I *had* managed to hear about him (a friend of a friend actually knew him, and then there were those terse biographi-

cal statements on the back flyleaves of his books), he had spent his life sitting at home writing and drawing. Where was there room in such a brilliant, self-circumscribed life for any disillusion or disappointment on my part?

In fairly short order biographies were published, and they found their way to my shelves. And I haven't regretted the fact yet.

If there were room for regret, it would be for the slimmest and most personal of the bunch: Alexander Theroux's *The Strange Case of Edward Gorey*. I admit I'm not a fan of Theroux's, but I did want to be, I really did. I started *The Primary Colors* when it first came out (no, you're thinking of a different book: this one is about the actual colors, not politics) with every intention of enjoying it. A biography of colors! What not to love? Well, the writing, it turned out. I was so put off by the self-important prose that I had to quit halfway through blue.

I was disappointed, then, when I received the Gorey biography as a gift and saw who it was by. But I decided to persevere. After all, it was short — under 70 pages, and even that is pieced out with ample illustrations. But it took me several hours to read (which is better than how long it *felt* like it took to read, which is several years, and yes my eyes are still burning), mostly because I kept having to stop and call my husband (the one who'd given me the book, after all, and started me on Gorey in the first place yea these many years ago) and scream, "Listen to this!"

All right, the writing isn't *all* bad. Some of it is even quite good, when Theroux will let himself concentrate on and write about his alleged subject. Here, for instance: "With their hand-lettering, queer layouts, their framed and ornate borders, the small books seem frightfully old-fashioned and biscuity." That's wonderful for two reasons. It's good in and of itself, and it's a fine description of Gorey's books.

The problem is, I lied. That's not the end of the sentence. *This* is:

as if they had been secretly pressed out and printed in suspiciously limited editions in the cellar of some creepy railway warehouse in nineteenth-century England by some old pinch-fisted joy-killer in a black clawhammer coat with red-hot eyes, a black scowl, and a grudge against the world — and then managing to

survive the must of long years by their sheer grotesquerie and horror.

*What?*

That's not writing about Gorey's work. That's barely writing. That's purple prose at its worst, and the problem is it's not bad enough to be funny. It's also nowhere near on-target. There is very little "sheer grotesquerie" in Gorey — even in *The Beastly Baby* — and no real horror at all. There's the impression of it, there's the echo of it, often there's a mockery of it; but the real thing, no. Anyone who thinks Gorey's writing is genuinely frightening either needs to get out more — a lot more — or stay firmly inside for fear of being startled by a shadow on the lawn.

Too much of Theroux's book is like that passage above — overwrought, underconsidered, and just basically about Theroux's love affair with his own writing. Gorey's work takes a backseat, and what genuine information you can glean is half-strangled by adjectives and adverbs. Which I enjoy using as much as the next writer, and more than many, but there are limits.

It's also upsetting to see someone so obviously familiar with Gorey's work write so misleadingly and even inaccurately about it. I'll stretch a point and reluctantly allow the point about horror and grotesquerie to stand, sort of, since so much of Gorey's work *does* involve darkness and demise (though even this is ignoring a sizeable portion of his work: *The Remembered Visit*, for example, is about nothing more alarming than a young girl on her first trip abroad who meets an old collector of paper and promises to send him "some insides of envelopes she had saved"; *The Sopping Thursday* is about a rainy day and the hunt for an umbrella. Oh, shiver). But Theroux goes altogether too far once he gets down to what he appears to think are specifics.

"The only book of Edward Gorey's with a happy ending is... one that deals with eight microscopic bugs," he insists. Brushing aside the question of why he thinks these bugs, stars of *The Bug Book*, are too small to be perceived by the unaided eye, contrary to what the pictures show us, this is problematic for two reasons. It gives such an open definition of "a happy ending" that other books would certainly qualify — think of *The Tuning Fork*, or *Story for Sara*. It also ignores the books that have neither happy nor sad endings. What about the alphabets, [*The Untitled Book*], *The Epileptic Bicycle*? These have what can

only be described as neutral endings, as do probably the majority of Gorey's books. Not to understand this is not to understand Gorey.

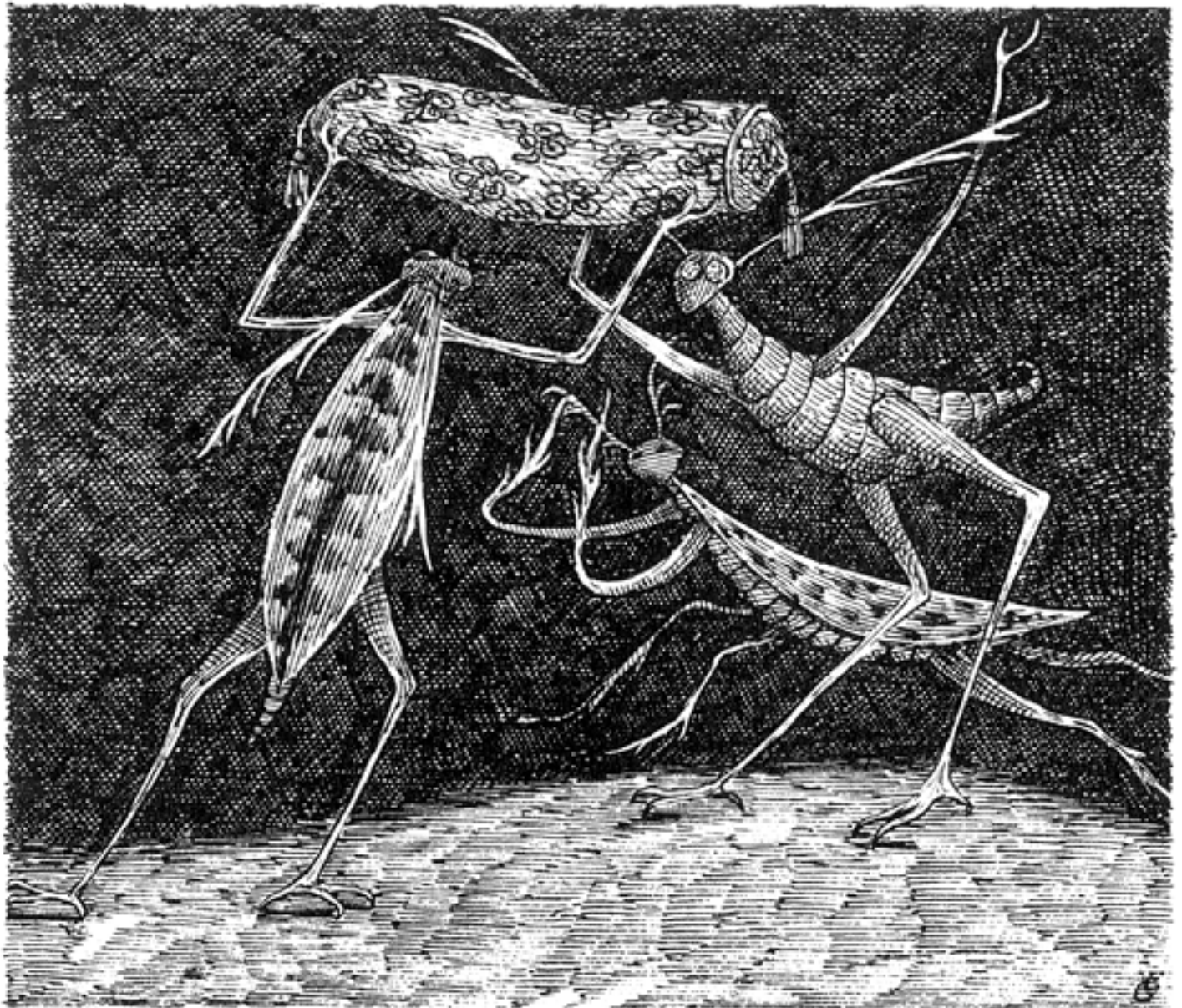
Theroux goes blithely on in what sometimes seems almost a campaign of disinformation. "Foundlings with small, weary faces are beaten to death by canes," he gloats; "icy-souled coloraturas sneer at peniless clerks in love with them; buzzing insects rape and sacrificially embalm five-year-old girls."

Wrong, wrong, wrong. Children are certainly often menaced in Gorey's work, but Gorey would *never* show one meeting such a brutally realistic death. This is the writer who, in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, has young Xerxes meet his end by being "devoured by mice," and the mice pictured, some four or five of them, are ludicrously small. As for the supposedly bitchy opera-singer — I assume Theroux is talking about *The Blue Asp* here — she never sneered at the clerk because she never knew he existed. And isn't it a little twisted to make it sound as if he were the sole sympathetic party when the book gives us every reason to believe he's a serial killer, and we know of a certainty that he ends by murdering first the singer and then himself?

And then those insects. Oh, Mr. Theroux. I reread *The Insect God* three times, and pressed it on others, and couldn't find a trace of sexual content. Just to sum up for those unacquainted: Millicent Frastley, not yet five, is abducted by giant insects one day while playing in the park (no, really); we see her family fearing the worst, eventually even sinking to the vulgarity of calling the police, and watch the fetching motorcar the big bugs are driving arrive at "a vast and crumbling hall." Just to make sure that there is no mistake, I'm going to quote in full the final two stanzas of the work:

They removed the child to the ballroom,  
whose hangings  
And mirrors were streaked with a  
luminous slime;  
They leapt through the air with  
buzzings and twangings  
To work themselves up to a ritual  
crime.

They stunned her, and stripped off  
her garments, and lastly  
They stuffed her inside a kind of a



From The Insect God

pod;  
And then it was that Millicent Frastley  
Was sacrificed to THE INSECT  
GOD.

Show me the sex. Please. Point out even a HINT of insectopedophilia here. You won't find it, because Gorey NEVER talks about sex head-on. He just doesn't. It's part of his charm. He approaches it at an oblique angle when it's present at all. Look at *The Curious Sofa*. This is such an allegedly sexy book that Gorey even subtitled it "a pornographic work." And yet the most graphic reference to the naughty act is when a woman named Scylla demonstrates the "Lithuanian Typewriter". Your guess is as good as mine. But Theroux keeps tarting Gorey up, so to speak. He refers to the headmistress of the cruel school poor little

Charlotte Sophia is sent to as "a ferocious-looking dyke." The woman looks like Princess Leia, for God's sake. That's a hell of a stretch.

Worse than the factual inaccuracies is the grave misunderstanding — or at any rate misrepresenting — of Gorey's work. Like the way Theroux made it sound as if the books were genuinely scary. In the first paragraph of this biography, he uses the word "doomscape"; a few sentences later, he refers to Gorey's "doomful pages." Maybe Theroux is assuming that anyone reading his book is already acquainted with Gorey's work; but in that case, he should expect his readers to be that much more annoyed by his errors. And anyone who hasn't read Gorey but somehow stumbled across Theroux's book first — well, the right kind of people will be scared clean

away, and the kind of people who won't appreciate the subtlety and humor of Gorey's work will seek it out eagerly and be promptly disappointed.

Everything I've just discussed and disliked takes place within the first ten pages of Theroux's book. Miraculously, after that there is actually some really fascinating biographical information, some of which I didn't find in the other bios I'll discuss. It was worth all the slogging and screaming to learn about the publication history of *The Beastly Baby* (no one would touch it, Gorey eventually published it himself and, once it started selling, had the pleasure of receiving copies of it in the mail ripped to shreds). It was something to hear that *The Bug Book* was another work Gorey had trouble with, this time because the villain was black. (That he was also a large beetle was apparently irrelevant.) I just wish I could have

learned all of this without the constant intrusion of Theroux's voice. The title subject of any biography ought to be the most interesting character in it. Gorey is, in this case, but Theroux seems to resent it and can't let a page go by without butting in like a small child afraid of being upstaged by an older, brighter sibling.

If I sound cruel, it's because ultimately I can't forgive any writer who can use the word *asynartesia* with a straight face, as Theroux did in those doomful first ten pages of his book. That's not taking joy in obscure words, as Gorey often did. That's telling the reader that you've got a bigger dictionary than he has. Excuse me for not being more impressed, Mr. Theroux.

It was with relief, then, that I passed along to the more recent, and more attractive in every respect, *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey*. It isn't journals or letters, but "a collection of more than a quarter century of interviews... arranged chronologically." The interviews, and interviewers, are many and varied; Theroux is not one of them, though I was delighted to see him mentioned in the introduction. "Gorey's vaguely nineteenth-century presence and his meticulously wrought prose often seem to elicit a certain amount of high-flown rhetoric and deliberately obscure vocabulary from the people writing about him," Karen Wilkin, the editor, explains. Guess whom she uses as an example of having done just that? Okay, so I'm mean. But it's always nice to see one's opinions verified by others, especially when those opinions are bad ones.

The interviews are well-chosen and cover an immense ground. One can read about Gorey's obsession with the New York City Ballet — he went to every performance, every night, for decades — and learn not just about a personal foible but the direct impact ballet had upon his work. *The Gilded Bat* still strikes me as being far less about ballet than about one particular rather pathetic human being, but now I understand on what firm ground Gorey stood in making all the inside jokes and obscure references contained therein. Far more to the point is *The Lavender Leotard*, which is nothing more or less than a love song to "fifty seasons of the New York City Ballet." Not ballet in general, but a particular time and place. I, who know little and care less about dance, managed to find these interviews fascinating, if only for the look it offered at casual obsessiveness. Gorey col-

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lected ballet performances the way he collected cats, books, finians, and recorded episodes of TV shows. All of which can be read about in *G. on G.*

My favorite interview of the collection is the transcript of Gorey's appearance on the Dick Cavett Show. In all the other interviews, Gorey shows patience, generosity, and even, at times, enthusiasm. Here, he is terse to the point of monosyllabism. Because Cavett is so obviously trying desperately to sound clever. And Gorey isn't interested in helping him. At one point Gorey slips such a neat knife into Cavett's back that Cavett doesn't seem to notice he's been wounded. He's been trying to draw Gorey out about his childhood: surely it was something very weird? No, just "a typical sort of Middle-Western childhood in Chicago, in the suburbs."

Cavett isn't having any of this.

"You didn't lurk in dark alleys, or..."

"No, no," Gorey assures him. "You know, I would like to think that I was much more poetic and sensitive than anybody else, but I don't think it was true."

"But you were not lured into garages by strange people?"

"No."

"Any more than the average child?"

Cavett persists. "Any more than I was?"

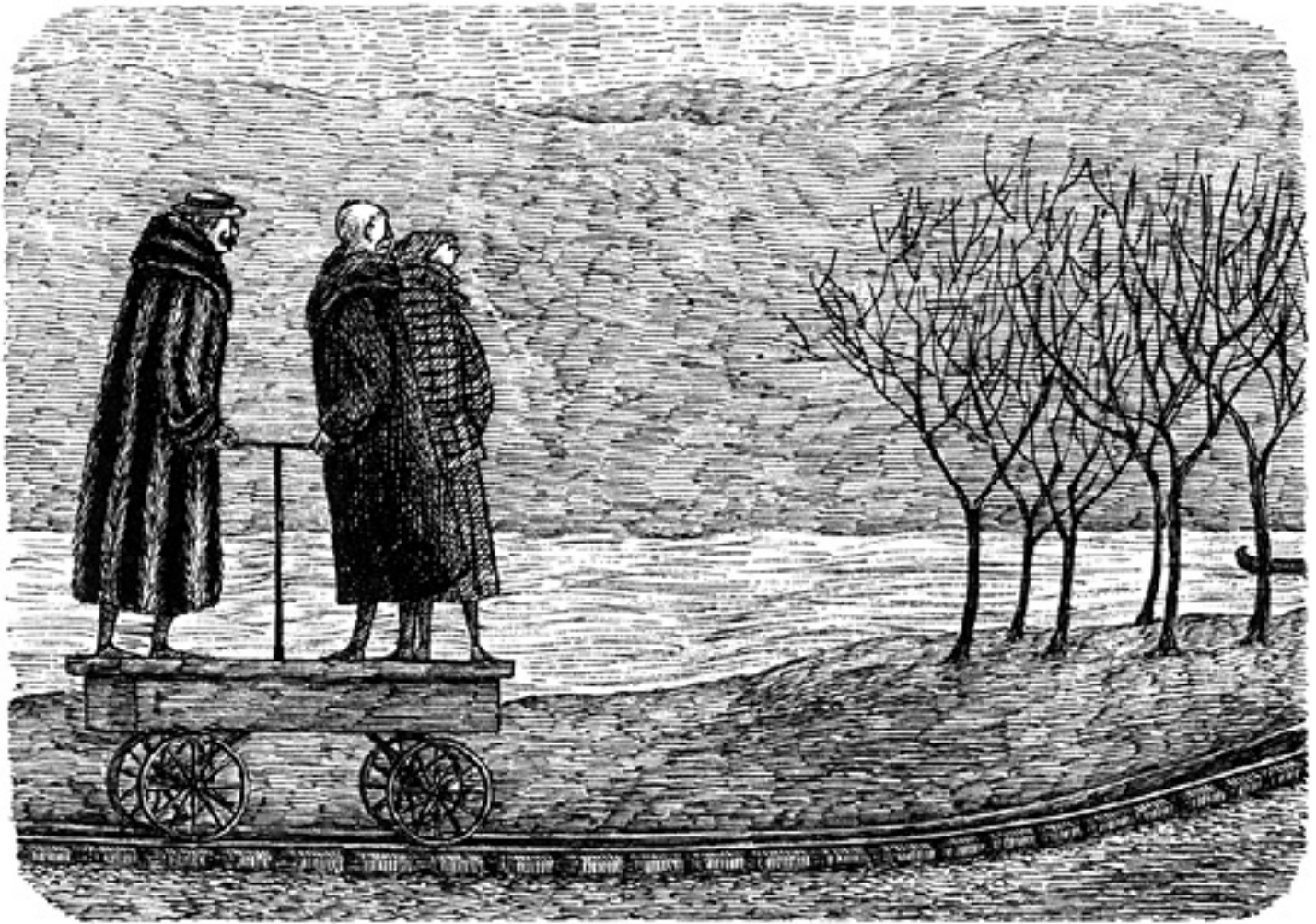
"I think less."

What a man.

And what an artist. His life and habits are everything one would guess from his work — lots of solitude, lots of cats, plants growing through the walls — and, while quietly sure of his work's worth, he is invariably modest and unpretentious. When asked the usual where-do-you-get-your-ideas kind of questions, which are admittedly rather more compelling than usual when faced with such a body of work, he is polite but baffled. "I haven't the slightest idea why my work has taken the tack it has," he says at one point. "I just do what occurs to me — if it occurs to me strong enough."

Past that, this book is rich with non-illusioning specifics, including the fact that Gorey himself thought that "if you know anybody really well, you can never really believe how talented they are." Though it can't be possible to know well anyone as intensely private as Gorey, this book is still a good start. It's detailed and informative without ever being dull. And it takes itself seriously as a survey of Gorey's life. Since one of his great loves was reading books and watching movies almost no one else had ever heard of, his answers to interview questions are often stiff with obscure references. The editor thoughtfully annotated the interviews — in end- rather than footnotes, which I know some readers detest but in this case is for the best. It keeps good background information from ruining the line, as it were, since the book is well-illustrated with both drawings by and photos of Edward Gorey. The notes aren't perfect, speaking purely technically. I found the occasional note without a corresponding number in the text, and vice versa. But the notes themselves are valuable and informative.

Occasionally, they're treasures. Gorey mentions, for example, that *The Object-Lesson*, a work woven together from seemingly unrelated sentences, "grew out of Samuel Foote's poem called *Grand Panjandrum*." All very well and good to the uninitiated; but turn to the notes and you learn that *G.P.* was a nonsense work written specifically to be baffling to an actor who bragged in the poet's hearing that he could memorize any text after listening to it just once. The note goes on to reproduce *G.P.* in its entirety, and reading it one gains a deeper appreciation of one of Gorey's more obscure works, especially when on finishing the interview Gorey adds that he "purposely sat down with the object to write a piece that made no sense." So now you know: it's *supposed* to be obscure. There's nothing wrong with you for never having been able to make heads or tails of it.



From *The Willowdale Handcar*

If this book has a fault, it's that it's perhaps too thorough. "[The interviews] have been selected and edited to lessen repetitions," the introduction states — and then immediately goes on to warn, "—bearing in mind Gorey's observation that 'the trouble with interviews is that you say the same things so often you end up believing them.'" I came away from this book feeling ready to write a school report on Edward Gorey: grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, had an odd but close relationship with his mother, was deeply involved with *The Poet's Theatre* in college, roomed with Frank O'Hara — and I am not one to whom basic biographical facts tend to stick on the first reading, or even the third. On the one hand, it's good that every interview was presented in its entirety; on the other, I wonder if picking and choosing not only among the interviews the editor had to choose from but also from the content of those interviews might have made for a livelier read.

But this is little more than quibbling. Gorey emerges from these pages as the star he never was in Theroux's work — the focus is unapologetically on his words and works. As a speaker, he was a rare combi-

nation of easy and erudite, and while he was modestly diffident on the subject of his own work, he had wonderful, thought-provoking things to say about art and writing in general.

"I have a dumb theory that a creative piece of art is only interesting if it purports to be about something and is really about something else," he explains to Lisa Solod of *Boston Magazine*. In another interview: "I know one is always supposed to throw away one's best lines... well, you know, if you've got something really spiffy you should throw that out because the rest is obviously not up to it." And perhaps most brilliantly — so good that I'm going to quote it in full because it's really not to be missed:

All the things you can talk about in anyone's work are the things that are least important. It's like the ballet. You can describe the externals of a performance — everything, in fact, but what really constituted its core. Explaining something makes it go away, so to speak; what's important is left after you have explained every-

thing else. Ideally, if anything were any good, it would be indescribable. What's the core of Mozart or of Balanchine? That's why I think Henry James is non-existent. The longer he goes on, the more he explains, until there is nothing left.

Gorey loved to hate Henry James. He loathed him "more than anyone else in the world except for Picasso," he reported to Steven Heller for *The National Post* (Toronto). "I've read everything of Henry James," he moans, "some of it twice, and every time I do it I think, 'Why am I doing this again? Why am I torturing myself? I know how I feel. Why can't I just accept that?'" Edward Gorey exasperated is a treat to read. Discussing his love of mystery stories and murders real and imagined, he confesses, "I've always been interested in True Crime. Now True Crime makes me want to throw up, but I'm talking about the days when people murdered just one person in the household, and that was it, folks. We didn't run amok with serial killers and so forth." There's something oddly innocent — and no doubt intentionally hilarious —

in Gorey's honest indignation toward the tackiness of today's criminals and their lack of restraint.

His funniest interview, though, is the "Proust Questionnaire" for *Vanity Fair*. It's nothing more than a series of brief questions and his equally brief answers — and, not surprisingly, he packs quite a wallop in his miniature replies. And yet refuses to be drawn out at all. "What is your most treasured possession?" he is asked, and answers, "The one most recently acquired." "What is your greatest regret?" "That I don't have one." What on earth kind of person would say that if he could choose to come back as anything at all, it would be a neutrino?

After the rich thoroughness of *Ascending Peculiarity*, there is something refreshingly spare about *The World of Edward Gorey*, by Clifford Ross and Karen Wilkin (the latter of whom, of course, edited *A.P.*). It's a simple, straightforward book. There is, to begin with, a single interview of Gorey by Clifford, and an essay about his work (mostly the art) by Wilkin. At the very end is a good factual chronology of his life, including wonderful photographs of Gorey old and young, and a thorough bibliography of Gorey's work (no small list). The rest of the book is Gorey's art: some from his books, some previously unpublished; book covers he did for Doubleday Anchor way back when he had a day job; drop curtains and costume designs for plays; and sketches, studies, and notes for his own use and amusement. This book was written and published while Gorey was still alive, with his help and approval, and perhaps for this reason and no other is my favorite of the batch. It is certainly the one I would most recommend to anyone who is interested in learning more about the artist but is only passingly interested in the minutiae of, say, when he moved to Cape Cod or what he majored in in college.

The interview with Clifford Ross is delightful. Gorey has a wonderful time discussing artists he adores and detests. He throws out such eyebrow-raisers as "You know, I'd like to think that it was Manet who really wrecked painting forever," and "You could offer me a Bernini or a Canova, and I'd say, 'Oh, take it away, please!'" He eventually, and it would seem reluctantly, turns to the subject of his own art. "You want the sad history of my use of materials?" he asks at one point, and obligingly produces it — Strathmore illustration

board, Pelikan ink, "some discontinued pen point from Gilotte." I found such technical aspects of his work as bracingly refreshing after the richness and range of *Ascending Peculiarity* as a lemon ice after a chocolate feast. You enjoy the one, but you need the other, too.

Karen Wilkin's essay is brilliant, though not without its small faults. Her language can be sometimes overblown to the point of inaccurate. She uses "bemused" once when she clearly means "amused," and I can only conclude that she thinks the one is the twenty-dollar version of the other. But she is generally perceptive and concise. "Although in Gorey's usual way of working, text — a complete, polished text, at that — always precedes image, his drawings are not so much illustrations of his stories as parallel accompaniments," she writes, and I can't think of a better description of Gorey's work than that. She also presents compelling possible allusions in Gorey's art to other works of art. An illustration from *The Blue Aspic* is persuasively compared to Klee's *Virgin in a Tree*; the crashing surf in Gorey's illustrations for Edward Lear's *The Dong with the Luminous Nose* is presented side-by-side with a painting of Hokusai, and the resemblance is unmistakable.

Wilkin even manages, which is more difficult, to find occasional connections between Gorey's writing and the writers he loved. Yes, it's obvious from the get-go that Gorey loved the books of a century or two ago, those multi volume tomes written by and for a pre-television attention span. But that's a little general. How many of us will have the time and inclination to "reread [E.F.] Benson's novels after looking at a good deal of Gorey — or vice versa"? I have great respect for Wilkin for apparently having done just that, and for bringing back the conclusions she drew from the experience.

"There is an enormous sense of achievement in recognizing one of Gorey's more obscure references," Wilkin admits ruefully. Absolutely true. But there is also a fine contentment possible merely from reading the work catch-as-catch-can, knowing that the artist/writer is saying and sketching far more than we'll ever be able to understand completely. It's the pleasure of traveling to a distant land and *not* learning the language — or only learning enough to get by. And so, in the end, the best way to enjoy Gorey's work is simply to buy his books and read them. ~