

Readers' Subscription (no relation to the current club of that name), later reconstituted as the Mid-Century Book Society, provided its members with recently published works of literature and history selected by these three celebrated men of letters. "Poets and Professors," wrote Auden, "and all those whose love of books exceeds their love of automobiles will welcome a chance to save in excess of 50 percent on their book purchases." Each month a newsletter carried an essay—enthusiastic, learned, personal—on the club's main selection, and 45 of those pieces have been collected here.

It's a wonderful book, as exciting and pleasurable a gathering of essays as anyone could ask for. Auden on the *Short Novels of Colette* must be one of the best book reviews ever written. He opens, "For years I resisted every recommendation to read her"; in the middle, cites a passage "so beautiful one could cry"; and ends with a ringing statement, after summing up Colette's virtues: "I am reminded of only one other novelist, Tolstoy." In a piece on Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill, Auden describes how he approaches a new book of poems, "from the part to the whole," looking for a single striking line, and then sampling a stanza, and finally perusing the complete volume, "comparing one poem with another," to discover whether the poet "possesses what I value most of all, a world and tone of voice of his own." Robert Graves, needless to say, displays the requisite distinctiveness, for "he has been one of the very few poets whose volumes I have always bought the moment they appeared."

As a man who lived by his pen, Auden might be expected to write engagingly, but, to my surprise, his partners from Columbia University are just as entertaining. Trilling could be earnest and pontifical in some of his literary criticism; in these pages, though, he writes boldly about the "obsessive, corrosive, desperate, highly psychologized" depictions of love in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, tosses out aperçus about the notion of will in classic fiction, and observes that the magic-realist stuff in Durrell may be "all storyteller's nonsense, the usual mystery of the East, but it consorts with my sense of the way people ought to be, in a novel at any rate—that is to say, objects of wonder." Elsewhere, Trilling reflects on Kenneth

Clark's *The Nude*, the work of James Baldwin, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Wind in the Willows*, Ingmar Bergman's films, and Kenneth Tynan's early theater criticism—and in every case the result is shrewd, unexpected, and sometimes moving. Who else would have remarked on the "Vergilian sadness" and "Lucretian desperateness" of *Ulysses* and *Remembrance of Things Past*?

Well, Barzun might have. Even 50 years ago, the author of last year's *From Dawn to Decadence* possessed a magisterial grasp of art, history, and just about everything cultural. Barzun suggests that Montaigne's motto "*Que sçay-je?*" might be slangily translated as "Don't be too sure," reminds us while praising Hugh Trevor-Roper's *Men and Ideas* that history should give "pleasure and instruction," notes that Erwin Panofsky's 15 pages on Dürer's famous print *Melencolia* are this distinguished scholar's "critical masterpiece," suggests that Molière's *Misanthrope* may be "the comedy of comedies," and proclaims Bernard Shaw "the greatest master of English prose since Swift."

Though one may quarrel with aspects of Krystal's introduction—like his teacher Barzun, he pretty much loathes academia's current focus on theory—one can have no argument with his taste or his punctilious scholarship. He provides a full bibliographical record of all the articles written for the newsletter by its editors, not just those included here. I only wish he had been able to reprint all 173 of them. I want to read Auden on C. S. Lewis's history of English literature in the 16th century, and Barzun on Spengler, and Trilling on Claude Lévi-Strauss. There really were giants on the earth in those days.

—MICHAEL DIRDA

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**CLEAN NEW WORLD:  
*Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design.***

By Maud Lavin. MIT Press. 201 pp.  
\$27.95

**GRAPHIC STYLE:  
*From Victorian to Digital (rev. ed.).***

By Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast.  
Abrams. 240 pp. \$24.95

Lavin, who teaches art history and visual culture at the School of the Art Institute

## Current Books

of Chicago, is one of the most incisive thinkers about graphic design. Here she examines design as it relates to power, communication, and democracy—or, as she puts it, “who gets to say what to whom.”

Her favorite period seems to be the Weimar Republic, and for good reason. The publishing house Malik Verlag, co-founded by John Heartfield, his brother Wieland Herzfelde, and George Grosz, showed how photomontage and other graphic art of ferocious originality could help create a powerful political voice on the left—a voice financed in part through sales of Grosz’s prints to bourgeois customers. Other members of the avant-garde, including Kurt Schwitters and Jan Tschichold, helped shape a modernist business culture with their equally striking photomontage images for makers of industrial equipment. And the photographers Ellen Auerbach and Grete Stern infused women’s hair-products advertisements with both feminism and humor, breaking two taboos of German advertising of the era.

The downside of today’s peace and prosperity seems to be an impoverishment of ideological zest. Only a few of Lavin’s recent examples are both memorable and widely circulated. Perhaps it is not just the

new global corporate order in general but the broadcast industry in particular that has hamstrung (to use Lavin’s word) the graphic designer. To generations raised with the visual grammar of the video and the 30-second commercial, graphics of the 1920s and 1930s may be more remote than Baroque scenography. Today’s politically engaged graphics won’t be seen unless carried in a televised demonstration—and seen then only through the grace of producers and tape editors.

*Graphic Style* makes an excellent companion volume to Lavin’s. It is as comprehensive as hers is selective, and, because it has been edited by practitioners—Heller is art director of the *New York Times Book Review*; Chwast directs a New York design firm—it is also a visual feast. We are plunged into a world of relentless persuasion, a reflection of the rise of mass consumption and popular politics from the 19th century to the present.

*Graphic Style* reveals the Internet to be a surprisingly disappointing source of design innovation. As Heller and Chwast put it, “the paradigm one minute is an artifact the next.” Perhaps the problem is that few computer monitors can display even a full letter-sized page. Toulouse-Lautrec never had to contend with a scroll bar.

—EDWARD TENNER

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### COMMON PRAYERS: *Faith, Family, and a Christian’s Journey through the Jewish Year.*

By Harvey Cox. Houghton Mifflin.  
305 pp. \$24

Cox, a Christian theologian on the faculty at Harvard Divinity School, and the author of *The Secular City* (1965) and *The Seduction of the Spirit* (1973), among other works, is obviously a man who takes religion seriously. So when he married a woman from a secular Jewish background who was becoming more involved in her own faith—Nina Tumarkin, professor of Russian history at Wellesley College—the age-old question arose: “What about the children?” It grew

increasingly pressing with the birth of a son. The couple decided that she would keep her faith and he his, while each would respectfully participate in the traditions of the other. They would raise their son, however, as a Jew, in deference to the Jewish conviction that a child’s religion is derived from the mother. Thus, through marriage and fatherhood, Cox became what he calls a latter-day “sojourner” in the “Court of the Gentiles,” that outer court of the ancient Jewish Temple in Jerusalem where non-Jewish “God-fearers” were welcomed. He experienced Judaism, he writes, “not as a complete outsider, but not as a full insider either.”

From this perspective, immeasurably