

# A Writing Life

Tom McGonigle

*New York University*

Has the curse of being a man of letters—should I write *person of letters*—ever been harder than in the year 2002, in the year 2003, and on into the foreseeable future?

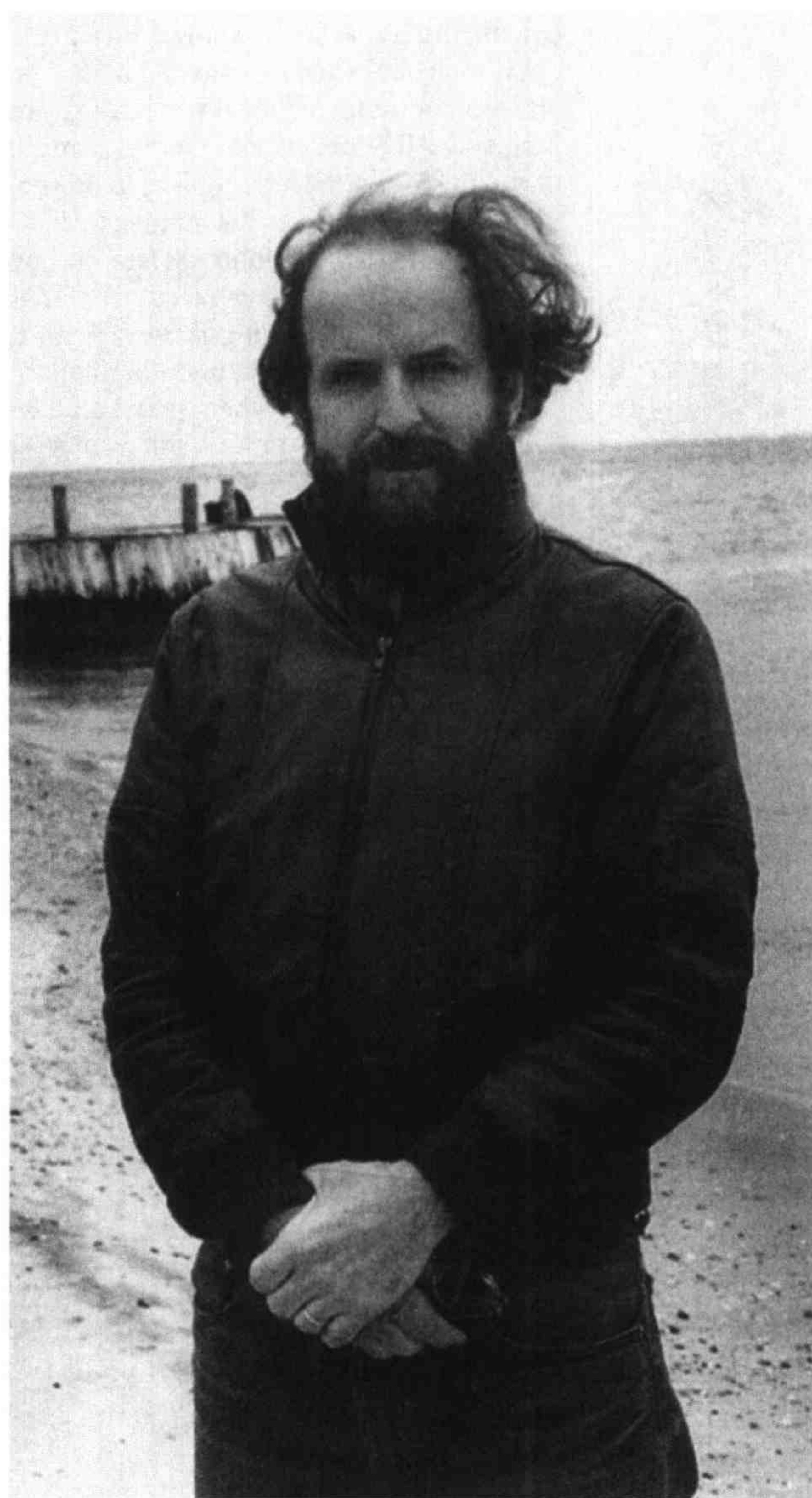
Has the fate of being a man of letters—should I write *creature of letters*—ever been harder than in the year 2002, in the year 2003, and on into the foreseeable future, or should we track it back to the caves of Lascaux, for the sake of argument?

Rhetorical questions asked without the sureness of either the Psychic Hotline or the willful and pleasureable forgetfulness of a messianic generalizing delusion.

Of course, taking up the vocation of writing is always voluntary: you brought this upon yourself, no one asked you to be . . . no parent even in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Berkeley, California, could be sadistic enough to encourage or expect a child to take up the vocation of writing when there are such viable alternatives in carpentry, truck driving, and chemical engineering; not even to speak of careers in the military, the priesthood, or in long-term welfare dependency if the capacity exists for filling out the forms or having them filled out.

Never as a child in Patchogue, a village on Long Island, sixty miles from New York City, could I have imagined or dreamed of or longed for the place where I have ended up: a room on East First Street (between Second and First Avenue) in Manhattan, a room stuffed with books, an oven stuffed with books since I turned off the gas—a friend asks do you use the broiler for the art books?—a room choked so that even I have to walk at times sidewise through the shelves and piles on my little journeys from bed to desk to toilet to refrigerator to bed to desk, which is now a table supporting an aged computer still using WordStar, the shelves to either side of the screen piled high with papers of what might be and underfoot, more papers. I sit on the only physical reminder of that house in Patchogue, a red leather backed chair, on the left arm of which I rest my left arm as I type. . . .

When I began to write more than forty years ago, did I have an inkling of the fate that awaited me? Is



*Tom McGonigle (from the dust jacket for Going to Patchogue, 1992; Richland County Public Library)*

there a moment when I knew in a dim fashion that this, this room, was where I was aiming?

The necessary and required acknowledging of the genuine monstrosity: I have only myself to blame.



Yes, and double yes, myself to blame and I guess I can absolve Melinda for far from being alone, was unknown to herself, thanks to the abysmal education in Patchogue, New York, ignorant as was I of our ancestors in the shapes of muse and writer: the company of Beatrice and Laura and Dante and Petrarch.

You see, as the kids say, the stretch: Dante, Petrarch, Laura, Beatrice, Patchogue, Long Island, a real village just beyond the suburbs on the Great South Bay and I had been struck speechless, powerless, shy by the vision of Melinda in the upstairs hall of the high school either taking out or putting books into her locker—it could have been a coat or whathaveyou and having been caught by the photographs in Laurence Stallings' *The First World War—A Photographic History*.\* I found myself writing of all things first in a notebook and then letter by letter on the old office typewriter my father had brought home from the American Can Company as Joey in the mud of those trenches thinking of Melinda with one letter changed in her last name as I was about to be killed a few days before the end of the war in 1918.

To check the suspense. Nothing happened. The story was published in *The Red and the Black*, the newspaper of the Patchogue Senior High School, by the editor, Al Willis, who also hung out on the wrong side of the lunchroom over near the window across the room from where the guys who *knew* danced with girls but I couldn't then and won't now reveal how little I knew, really about all of that; though in Julian Green's memoir of his first love while at the University of Virginia is the closest approximation I have ever read of the genuine innocence and not knowing—a consolation coming too late to do any good—why hadn't I known what it was all about?

That is another story, as they say, and I was lucky because Al had a lot of pages in the paper to fill and my story went from the front to a whole page deep into the paper.

Nothing changed. I had written my story and nothing happened. I received no courage and Melinda did not know who I was or at least she did not come up to me. Why did I expect her to come up to me? My mother typed the story again and we sent it to *The Saturday Evening Post*, the only magazine we received, and it

came back a few weeks later with a little printed rejection slip. A not uncommon experience. I was no Rimbaud—my fate sealed at 18, the writing done and now on to the real business of life: slave trading, gun-running and immortality.

Three years later, when I finally did have the courage to talk with Melinda she asked me, having acknowledged that she had indeed read the story back then: how did you know my birthday?

I had been killed on her birthday, November 6.

I had no answer but I had in those few years read Dante's *A New Life* and Petrarch's sonnets to Laura. Now, forty years later, each of us has been married three times, not even once to each other.

I am well aware of the decline in the quality of literature, but will be a gentleman enough to refrain from commenting on the muse . . . death at an early age does have its advantages though who would not rather find all of this in the early pages of a Don Quixote where Cervantes sings the praises of his imperfect offspring. Melinda lives in a big house in Maine, one of her several homes both there and way out on Long Island, and I live in a room on East First Street in Manhattan thinking about her first husband who ignored her, the second who died alone while watching television and the third . . . as to my own wives and children . . .

However, SLASH CUT, did my life actually as a writer begin in sixth grade when Sister Alfred Terese asked us to memorize "Prayer of a Soldier in France" by Joyce Kilmer?

My shoulders ache beneath my pack  
(Lie easier, Cross, upon His back).  
I march with feet that burn and smart  
(Tread Holy Feet, upon my heart).

And, come to think of it—sigh of exasperation—I have two other memories of poetry: having actually to write a poem and going to the library and finding a dusty anthology to copy out the shortest poem. The poem is now lost and I am now thinking suddenly of the large retarded woman, who would ride a big three wheeled bicycle around in the streets of Patchogue and, when I had made fun of her, my mother said it was wrong, since she was made that way by God . . . I wish I knew what I had said . . . I see in this moment that woman's hands taped to the handles of that large black bicycle pumping away with feet fastened to the pedals by brown leather straps and her head moving uncontrollably about but later I shoveled snow for this woman's mother who said her daughter had to be put in a home Upstate because . . . I don't remember the reason the mother gave but the why of those lives and Oh yes another actual bit of poetry which I can not

\* *A pictorial history (originally published in 1933) of stark photographs and bitter commentary highlighting the contrast between the romance of war and the reality of mud and violent death but jumping forward in the last pages, labeled 1933, to pictures of the four men, Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Ataturk, those legatees of the war who would create the world in which you are reading this . . .*



locate the discovery of—Alan Seeger's poem, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death":

I have a rendezvous with Death  
At some disputed barricade,  
When Spring comes back with rustling shade

Maybe it is all so obvious and dreary.

Three years after I saw Melinda I published my first piece of writing, a poem in *Arena*, a magazine published in Dublin for which the editor, James Liddy, paid me four guineas of which I had to spend one guinea on a round for the boys in O'Dwyer's on Lesson Street near St. Stephen's Green, around the corner from where the hero of *At Swim Two Birds* pukes upon a gentleman speaking of Voltaire and down the street from where Stephen argues with the priest in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* . . .

And no, this is not going to be an annotated bibliography of the works of Thomas McGonigle. But I should quote the poem:

#### SHORT THOUGHT ON DEATH

Bright white bird COME  
Claim me  
for black paradise.

When I look at that issue of *Arena*, now republished with the other three issues of its life, I see I am in the company of Patrick Kavanagh, Thomas Kinsella, Michael Hartnett, Edward Dahlberg, Brian Higgins . . . the barely living and the dead pile up and James Liddy mentions in my author note that I have met Tuli Kupferberg and almost met Allen Ginsberg. This was back in 1965. To have almost met Allen Ginsberg was something to be proud of in Dublin, at least in certain circles . . .

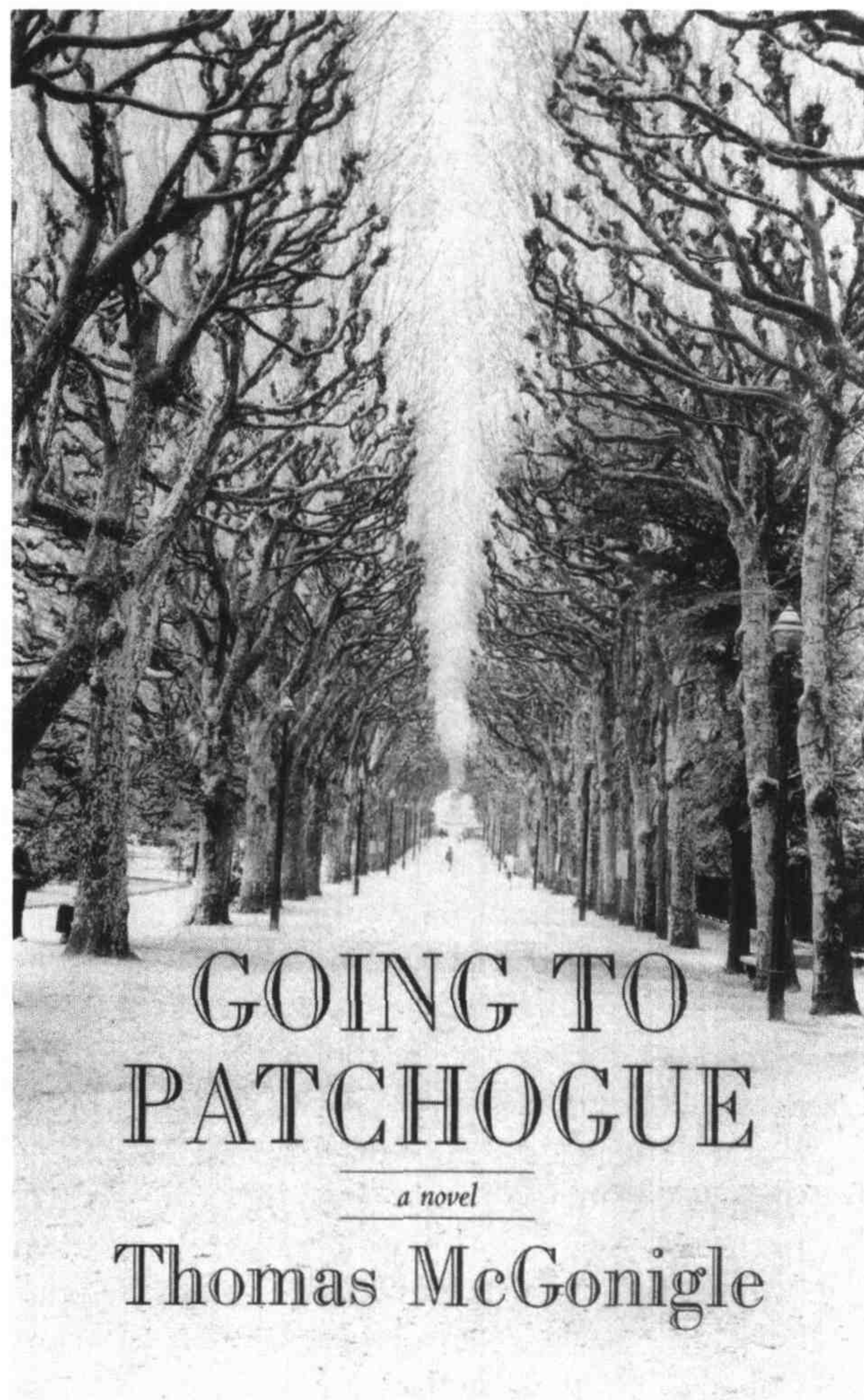
I said this would not be an annotated bibliography but it might eventually become a necrology.

My first published poem in 1965. My first published book in 1987 when Dalkey Archive Press published *The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov* and five years later they did *Going to Patchogue*. A few years ago, Northwestern University Press published *Petkov* in paperback.

All the books remain in print and every once in a while I receive either a tiny check or a reminder that I owe Dalkey a few dollars because another copy has been returned. St. Marks Bookstore in New York City as far as I know is the only bookstore to stock these books on a regular basis though they are available online from all the usual places (an advertisement).

However . . . that man of letters business?

Yes, I published myself a little saddle stitched book, *In Patchogue* (1984), paragraphs about the village



## GOING TO PATCHOGUE

a novel

Thomas McGonigle

Dust jacket for McGonigle's second novel  
(Richland County Public Library)

of Patchogue. I published and edited *Adrift*,\* a magazine of Irish and Irish American writing. It went for three issues between 1983 and 1985. I still receive submissions and requests for sample copies. It is and was the only magazine devoted to Irish and Irish American writing.

I published introductions to the English editions published by Quartet in London of Julian Green's *Avarice House* and E. M. Cioran's *Anthem and Admirations*. I also published an introduction to Michael Stephens'

\*In *ADRIFT* I published among others James Liddy, Francis Stuart, Gilbert Sorrentino, Eamonn Wall, Beatrice Smedley, Michael Stephens, Thomas McCarthy . . . I published a few friends who came to the traditional Irish music session that put up the money for the magazine. There is always room in a magazine for friends; something Elliott Anderson forgot when he edited *TriQuarterly*. If the magazine had gone to a fourth issue I had poems from John Montague and Thomas Kinsella. Samuel Beckett sent me a nice regret. The files for the magazine are available, for sale to a library if and when.



*Season at Coole*. And I have published around 125 or so reviews and interviews in newspapers such as *The Guardian* in London, the *Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Three times a year I do reviews for *The Los Angeles Times* and sometimes the same number for the *Washington Post*. I usually review translations. I am not well known enough to do any of the American authors. I have over the years received two notes as a result of these reviews. One reminded me that he would never forget the negative comment (I had reviewed a Charles Baxter book in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*) and another was thankful for my review of E. M. Cioran.

(How I loathe that I, I, I . . . but that is another story as is the art criticism in *ARTS Magazine* and in a few catalogues for John Wesley and Howard Finister.)

Both *The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov* and *Going to Patchogue* were reviewed in newspapers across the country from *The New York Times* through the *Chicago Tribune* to *The Los Angeles Times*. There were profiles in *The New York Times* and *Newsday*. Months later there were articles and reviews in quarterlies and magazines. There were chapters devoted to *Going to Patchogue* in three university press books.

*The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov* appeared in Bulgarian in the "thick" journal *Cvremenik* in Sofia. Bulgaria is again a whole other story and it should begin in a reading from the book, "I Nikola Petkov was hanged by the neck until dead . . ."

I have my folder of photocopied reviews—the photocopies have grown a little dim with age and repeated copying but I send them out when asked to identify myself. I used to send a copy of both the reviews and my own reviews, as they were published, to about ten people, but that has stopped. No one knew what to do with them. These people were not literary. There is something a little pathetic as I find it hard to imagine John Updike doing this or fill in the blank for any other author's name . . .

You can go to Google.com and plug in my name which I share with a lawyer and a priest; you can read excerpts from those reviews both by me and about the books. Google only goes back a few years and as the kids say, *who cares about the old shit, anyway*.

But there are those other books: *St. Patrick's Day*, *Dublin 1965*, *Forget the Future*, *Just Enough*, *The Plastic Slaughterhouse*, *The Wounded Seasons*, *Loss of Dignity*, *Just Like That*, and *Friday Saturday Sunday*. All published in heaven, as Jack Kerouac wrote somewhere, and they do exist visible, accusing in the manila folders on a shelf near the bed where I sleep, a constant reminder of . . .

Well, maybe the one revelation you will never read after the long slog of this march through . . .

Think of how they usually wave away the answer to the question: how many copies have you sold?

As of the last statement from Dalkey Archive: *Going to Patchogue* has sold 1,221 copies between January 1992 and December 2001 and *The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov* has sold 316 copies between March 1987 and December 2001. I have never received a statement from Northwestern University Press. I sold about 150 copies of *In Patchogue*.

And here is where the excuses arrive—usually, but no: the books have been published, they are in libraries and are occasionally checked out. Yes, I have looked and I look in the various title and author searches to see if they are still in the libraries. That is what a man of letters does on certain days.

When you get to be 58, the dead have started to pile up and even with a new younger wife who wants children and two young children, whose mother was my second wife, mortality is licking at the ear. In the English papers as I write are reviews of the first biography of Anthony Burgess.

It is the first biography of a writer I have known beyond the printed page. Well, there was a short biography of Francis Stuart but that is another story. I knew Burgess ever so briefly in the late 60s and early seventies. Being human I didn't want to find out that Burgess was a paragon of virtue, generosity and kindness. But the point is: Burgess is no more and it is hard to convey what it was like when he was alive. More often than not if you were in Dublin, London or New York you could open a newspaper or magazine on any Sunday and read an essay or interview with Burgess in at least one of those cities and possibly in more than. He wrote with facility and I do remember him once saying that it was really an insult to his imagination to expect him to read a book before reviewing it.

Do machinists think of all the great machinists they have known and who are now dead? Does this question grip workers in Cleveland and Birmingham, Alabama? Do any regret their passing?

But machinists do not receive letters such as the one which arrived the other morning from Richard Seaver to whom I had sent my most recent manuscript:

Sorry it's taken me so long to get back to you on this, but we've been overwhelmed with sales conference and pressing editorial matters for soon-to-be-published books. There was much intriguing about *Just Like That* (assuming that it is the working title). There is also much to recommend it, starting with the writing, but in the harsh publishing environment in which we live, I think this would be a very hard sell. Therefore, I'm afraid that we will not be making an offer on the book, with regrets. I don't know to whom we might recommend you, but perhaps you've already tried a



few of the independents. In any event, good luck in placing it, and I would be delighted to buy a copy as soon as it comes out.

Richard Seaver is the president and editor in chief of Arcade Publishing. He owns the company. It's his money. He goes back a long way in publishing, right back to publishing *Watt* by Beckett in Paris. Translator of the Marquis de Sade, Ionesco, Duras . . . A real publisher whose most recent success is the French/Russian writer Andrei Makine. To lose money he publishes E. M. Cioran and has been loyal to him for more than 25 years. The very titles of Cioran's books both sum up my life and . . . : *The Temptation to Exist*, *The Problem with Being Born*, *The Short History of Decay*.

Of course I am disappointed. You notice his use of the Independents.\* How many of them are there left in the United States? Probably as many as there are real independent literary bookstores. You have too many fingers on your hands to number both the bookstores and the publishers. It has not gotten as bad as saying that the *combined* number of independent bookstores and publishers, but that moment is on its way.

It is sweet of Seaver to suggest that he would buy a copy of the book. People in publishing do not buy books, really. A certain politeness but that wishing of good luck: one's fate.

And of course I do know Seaver is glad he didn't publish the book because one less book to lose money on and you are allowed, even when you own the company, only a few books for which you do really know you are going to lose money; but then that is the part of the business where the art comes in, I hope, really. Where the glamour, the reason to be in publishing. The picking and the choosing which books to lose money on. Naturally when Seaver would do the estimates for the book he could show the potential for how the book would be profitable but still. All publishers are psychic and with the same ability to see what they want or what you want. This wasn't the book to lose money on.

At least Seaver didn't say he couldn't eat lunch off of this book, as one agent once told me. And with that one could go down the path of the publishing horror stories which you will be spared. That is what an agent is: a lunch eater.

And those dead writers: One could write a personal history of the dead: Chad Walsh, Bink Noll, Julian Green, Francis Stuart, Hannah Green, Richard Ellman, Frank MacShane, Anthony Burgess, John Jor-

\*A few days ago I sent an E-mail to John O'Brien the publisher of Dalkey Archive asking what they were going to do with *Just Like That*? They have had the manuscript for two years.

dan, Malcolm Cowley, Emile Donchev, John Currier, myself . . .

But the daily life, while still alive, of a man of letters in New York City: if it is Sunday I read Saturday's *Irish Times* from Dublin. Six or so broadsheet pages of reviews and a profile. Dublin has a million people. How many cities are there in America with a million people? How many book sections in the newspapers in those cities? I am both joking and . . .

On Friday the *TLS* from London is on sale in a shop over on Broadway. When buying it I also look at *Le Monde*, *Liberation* and *Le Figaro*, anything to escape the borders. I always look in at St. Marks Bookstore, one of the five real bookstores in the United States. Then I walk up to The Strand Bookstore to check out the bound galleys. Usually they have hundreds and hundreds of these on sale for 97¢.

Three or four months before a book is published publishers send out advance editions. Many of them end up in the basement of The Strand. This being December there are bound galleys for the books that will be published in March, April and May. The long lead times for magazines and television dictate longer and longer times.

To stay in touch since there are no real book reviews like the *TLS* I go to The Strand. I don't know what a person out in Wyoming or for that matter in New Jersey must do? Well they have the super bookstores, bookstores stuffed with mostly junk. The stores are destinations on Saturday night. You can get a good cup of coffee and browse the magazines, look up new sex positions, how to fix your computer, bake a cake—no one is ever in the literature sections of the superstores at least from my experience in New Jersey, Indiana, Massachusetts, California and Virginia. Maybe out in North Dakota things are different, but I doubt it.

Two or three times a year catalogues come from the publishers. I look forward to Farrar Straus and Giroux, Knopf, Pantheon, Grove, Nebraska, Northwestern, and Dalkey Archive. And sometimes Viking, Harvard and Yale. With those you have pretty much exhausted the publishers who season after season can be relied upon to publish both translations and demanding literary fiction.

But why do I look at this stuff? First to be not so alone. It is nice to know that I am alive in a world of literary fiction that is still maybe alive abroad if not here in the United States. Of course I go back and reread but it is the only advantage that the living have: to be reading the contemporary. The dead are always with us.

But how do I support myself and my habits you might well ask? The real nasty question. Sadly, no trust fund. I have a rent-stabilized apartment so the rent is below what the market would demand. I have no car.



For more than 20 years I used to work as a messenger for a book manufacturing company. At the same time I worked in a bookstore and as a clerk in the Cooper Union library.

Fourteen years ago the godfather of my daughter suggested I teach freshman composition at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY). I have been an adjunct ever since. I am also an adjunct assistant professor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College where I do the same thing. It all pays less than a third of what a full-time professor makes for working far fewer hours. But since I am a white man and do not have a Ph.D., I will always be an adjunct even with the two published books. The chairman once said I could become an adjunct professor if I won the Pulitzer Prize.

Since last summer I have also been teaching an advanced creative-writing class in the undergraduate college of NYU. Forty years of writing have prepared me for this course. A few students have reminded me, *you are just an adjunct*, and one even wondered how I deal with my lack of success as a writer.

Teaching is better than working in a factory, there are no age limits and there are few factories left in New York. I have health insurance. I have seen my fate at a holiday party once at John Jay as an aging adjunct was putting pats of butter carefully wrapped in napkins into his pocket to take home.

Death licking my ear. I am thinking of that little necrology of writers I have known. Except for Burgess and Hannah Green all of their books are out of print. Years ago Jack O'Brien at Dalkey Archive told me a cold cruel story of what is to come. When he was in graduate school he thought to do a thesis on Willard Motley, a writer who was once famous. He tracked down the heir of this now dead and out-of-print author. When he asked if there were any papers he was directed to a garage out back. Heaped in rain-soaked cartons were Motley's manuscripts, diaries and letters . . .

My children have promised to not throw out my papers but they have not reached the age when they will decide that I had ruined their lives. Of course there is that constant hope: well, after you die your books will be discovered; but years ago I asked Lawrence Durrell if he ever thought of his future reputation and he replied: what has posterity ever done for me?

#### TO THE READER:

"Clarity demands the price of discursiveness," writes Michel Surya, the biographer of Georges Bataille. So much left out of course. A whole life you might say or be thankful for what has been left out, beginning with Julian Green who I asked at 92 what he looked forward to, replied, Purgatory. Green said he was not unhappy with the prospect as he felt reasonably sure

of eventually going to heaven. In that year he published three books. Later, he asked to resign from the French Academy in which he was the first non-French person, being American born not made. He was criticized by some for being typically American, trying to resign from immortality. And what does Julian Green have to do with my life as a creature of letters? Green lived in a large apartment in the rue Vaneau, wrote in longhand at a leather topped desk. He dressed to sit down to write. He did not go to meetings of the Academy on the future of the French language. We saw each other a few times in Paris and notes were exchanged. He envied my being an altar boy because he had converted to Catholicism too late. Part of my dead. As was Francis Stuart whose "Soft Center of Irish Writing" I published in *Adrift*. In the article he attacked the well-known bad writers of Ireland: Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain and all their many progeny. He accused them of knitting in their stories what was expected of them. Stuart had gone to Berlin in 1939 because a writer is supposed to seek out that place of the greatest moral ambiguity. And there was Edward Dahlberg who would simply say it takes a long time to understand nothing while every decision you make is a mistake. To have heard of a contemporary writer was sufficient. He thought watching the lowest daytime television was always preferable to reading any sort of trash literature: mysteries or books known as a "good read." A badly written book only prepares you to read a poorly written book. The bad always drives out the good and Dahlberg's prediction in 1970 has come to pass when today Jonathan Franzen or Don DeLillo are seen as being good writers. . . .

And I met my wife in St. Marks Bookstore where she was working part-time. She says she was attracted to the guy wearing the green loden coat and when she found out I was a writer she asked me to autograph her copy of *The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov*. Was it the coat or the book? Edward Dahlberg writes that a man spends more time deciding to buy a pair of socks than he does in deciding on a wife.

I had met the mother of my children because she was reading *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes while she was filling in at the reception desk at Holt, Rinehart and Winston on Madison Avenue when I was on my messenger route for Maple Vail Book Manufacturing Company. . . .

Later this week I will sell review copies to The Strand: both books I get in the mail because publishers hope I might be moved to write about them and books I still get from Maple . . . if I don't take them to The Strand they will be burned . . . a real taste of Grub Street. Anthony Burgess used to lug review





Cover for the paperback edition of McGonigle's 1987 novel,  
published by Northwestern University Press  
(Richland County Public Library)

copies up to London from the country in suitcases. The going home with empty suitcases was always a problem.

THAT OTHER SORT OF WRITING CREEPS IN . . . some sort of authority has to be established . . .

Could one write a history of lying on a foldout bed on a front upstairs porch of a triple-decker in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the year 2002?

To start in August. A hot night after 103 degrees during the day. No real relief that evening and the children's grandmother does not believe in air-conditioning. She said there was to be a flock of falling stars at 1 A.M. It will not happen. Lorcan, an eleven-year-old boy, was lying on the aluminum reclining chair with a sheet under him as the plastic was scratching the backs of his legs. Elizabeth, his sis-

ter, is fourteen and sitting on a chair not looking up at the sky.

Or

The man had parked his car at the end of the road and had walked down to the shore of Lake Butte Des Mortes in Menasha, Wisconsin.

Or

He and David were walking through the ossuary at Verdun in January.

Or

When I was told to write my obituary . . .

Or

She said, my feelings for you have changed.

Or

There should be a deluge of books: *Look Homeward, Angel* was the first novel not required for school which I read all the way through. *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, by Alan Bullock was the first hardback I ever bought, followed by *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs, *City of Night* by John Rechy and *Ship of Fools* by Katherine Anne Porter. And the only book from before those moments given to me by a guy who was cleaning out his garage in Patchogue in 1960: *Escape From the Soviets* by Tatiana Tchernavin, the story of a woman and her child walking out of the Soviet Union in 1933 to Finland.

Make of it all what you will.

Or

Last summer in Cambridge, where the grandparents of my children live, I went to the basement and found these books to bring back to the city as if I need more books: why these books? A life in a selection of books. Years ago before the divorce I had moved a lot of books up to the basement of the triple-decker. A few summers ago I sold a lot of books (not to go into the pain) and yet still, boxes remain.

How impoverished my life as I look one by one at the books piled up on the rocking chair next to the foldout bed: In no order but all piled next to *Women and Men*, the novel by Joseph McElroy which I am trying to read for the third summer in a row.

*People Who Pull You Down* by Thomas Baird. Probably the perfect title. My friend Michael Madore studied with Baird at Trinity College or knew about him—a gay gentleman now dead . . . I never read the book but have it because of the title . . . *Works: A Quarterly of Writing* (Fall/Winter 1969) contains Paul Celan translated by Joachim Neugroschel who I first met at Columbia in 1970 . . . I have seen him since: long hair—very gay in swimsuit during the summer . . . also *The Dead Man* by Georges Bataille, translated by Austryn Wainhouse . . . I am reading a bio of Bataille that I first looked at in French in the Sens public library when I was there with the mother of the children and Elizabeth in 1989 to stay



with Pati Hill . . . 10 years ago the mother began to have doubts about her feelings toward me . . . A duplicate copy of *Conversations with Professor Y* by Louis Ferdinand Celine. You can never have too many copies of Celine books . . . Three picture books by Glen Baxter: *Atlas*, *Glen Baxter: His Life, the Years of Struggle*, *The Impending Gleam* . . . I have always wanted to find these books very funny. Now I take them along thinking my son, Lorcan, might eventually find them funny . . . inside one of them a review from Eliot Fremont Smith . . . I once went to his house with Mimi Jacobs when we were sexual friends . . . Smith wrote in a hospital bed with tray attached in a large house in Westchester . . . huge numbers of books as he was, I think, the book editor at *The Village Voice* and a daily reviewer at the *New York Times* . . . *The Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica* by John Calvin Batchelor . . . what happened to him? . . . (these three dots, an homage to Celine) . . . a paperback version of *The Late Mattia Pascal* by Luigi Pirandello, published by Eridanos Press, a vain valiant effort that lasted for some years publishing Junger, Leiris, Musil and then ran out of money . . . I knew the final director, the youngest son of Juan Ponce, who became cultural attaché at the Mexican consulate even before he had his BA . . . a nice guy who never published me . . . I reviewed the Junger books they published—if I said, Ernst Junger is the greatest writer in the twentieth century would that only be a vulgar assertion?—*Post-Scarcity Anarchism* by Murray Bookchin inscribed *To Tom with love and anarchy Murray Bookchin March 31, 1982* . . . I first met Bookchin in 1966 on the Lower East Side when I tried to do an article on anarchists for *The New York Times* where I was a copyboy . . . I couldn't get the hang of it though the city editor, Abe Rosenthal, thought it a good idea . . . I guess I was both drinking and already . . . I was living at the Chelsea Hotel and waiting to go to the Peace Corps training in Los Angeles . . . I went out to Patchogue during this time and tried to punch Melinda and cut my hand badly on the glass door that separated us through a glass door . . . she had been, as you know my muse and had gotten fat and ugly for some reason I didn't want to know and I was going to California and she was getting ready to marry a guy just back from Vietnam or do I still have it all wrong? Had I . . .

Had I

from the Harvard Book Store, published at the University of Chicago: Mark Strand in a magazine . . . he

rewarded, when I was a student at Columbia students who faithfully imitated him: Gregory Orr went very far after that initial push and on the back of his dead brother . . . *The Drunks* by Donald Newlove about alcoholic Siamese twins . . . I met Newlove on the Upper East Side after he was sober for a while. He stopped writing novels and did celebrity biography reviews for Kirkus and went mystical . . . he had lived above a liquor store on Sixth Avenue . . . I keep his *The Painter Gabriel* on the shelf above the radiator in front of John Wesley's Bear painting . . . the classic Lower East Side novel, as they say . . . probably unreadable and I have never read any of his books all the way through though I am always meaning to . . . *Rube Goldberg A Retrospective* . . . when I got this home I noticed that the mother of the children had given this to her mother on 4 September 1984 "MAMA Something to make you laugh a little Happy Birthday . . ." the grandmother is not a person given to laughter . . . I did think Lorcan might like it . . . again another souvenir from my marriage that went from 1978–1992 in spite of Djuna Barnes . . . *The Book of Pleasures* by Raoul Vaneigem, another book from my anarchist days . . . I sold two boxes of anarchist books to McIntyre and Moore over in Somerville as if I was putting aside those years though not really: I left in Cambridge my Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman books but I brought back to New York *Anarchy or Chaos* by George Woodcock which I bought in Dublin or London in 1964–65 . . . when first in Dublin I stayed with the Quakers and went over to London and stayed with comrades as they said in the Freedom Press circle and met an American who had lived in London for many years riding the Underground and never bought a newspaper . . . I met the EGO AND HIS OWN man, Sid Parker and the anarchists in Putney . . . through James Missey who had taught for a bit at Beloit but didn't fit in . . . *THE STORY OF LUCKY STRIKE* a brown book from the New York World's Fair of 1939 which was owned by either my mother or father . . . a paperback of Anthony Burgess's *REJOYCE* a fitting book as he might approve of such an article, a real Grub Street one, Burgess would have said and make sure you proofread, you want clean copy and remember they cut from the bottom . . . have pity always for the typesetters, they are our true masters of literature, the only ones who will read you, word for word . . .

When I write my obituary for Thomas McGonigle . . .



# The Literary Scene 2002: Publishing, Book Reviewing, and Literary Journalism

George Garrett  
*University of Virginia, Emeritus*

I tell people all the time I'm a famous writer in a country where people don't read.

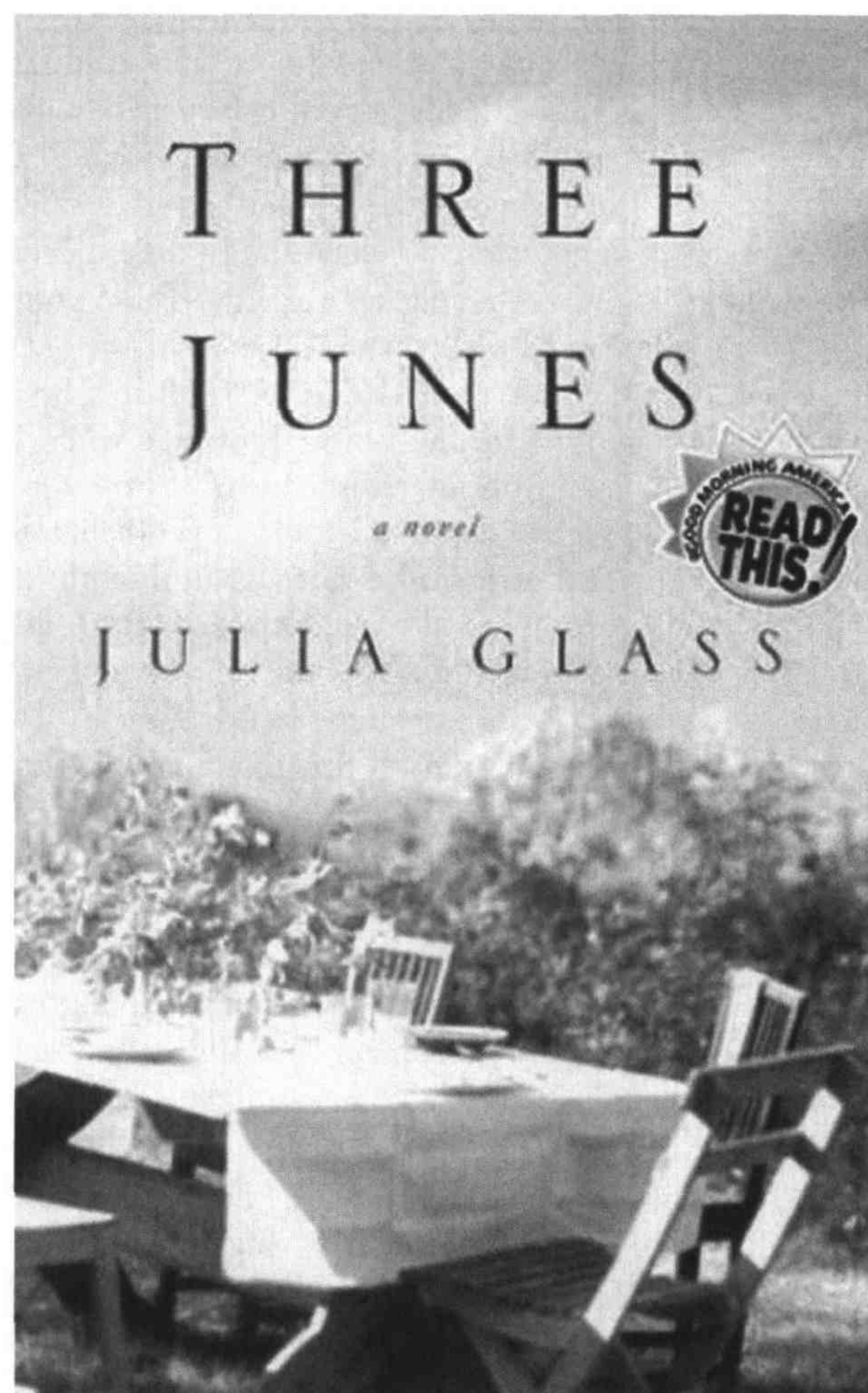
—John Grisham,  
21 June 2000

*Show*, *Good Morning America*, and *Elle* magazine among others—appeared; and some of the older ones, notably the venerable Book-of-the-Month Club, reorganized, took on a new look, and promoted their product vigorously. Another example of the season of paradox: all over the country newspaper book pages were shrinking

## Views of the Literary Scene

From almost day one (see “Publishing 2002: Where the Buck Stops,” *Publishers Weekly*, 7 January 2002) until year's end, it was a year in publishing of steady, unrelenting concern about the larger national and global economy. The publishing industry, which, while not exactly thriving during the Great Depression, did well enough. The major commercial publishing houses, linked now to and at the mercy of huge multinational conglomerates, are more vulnerable to negative global economic forces and have suffered some serious setbacks during the past few years. Independent publishers (Bowker's *Books in Print* lists more than nine thousand of them!) may have endured (see Linton Weeks, “Independent Publishers Make Success by Finding a Niche,” *Washington Post*, 23 June 2002; also “Just how much is the U.S. reading?,” Associated Press, 21 June 2002), but some of the best of the small, nonprofit presses had serious troubles and some, thought to be secure because of valuable backlists, went under. Perhaps the most obvious example was that of Black Sparrow Press, which had published some 650 titles since it was founded in 1966. Owner John Martin sold the rights to 49 of his titles to Ecco, an imprint of Harper-Collins, and most of the rest, including inventory, to David R. Godine.

Throughout the year, much of the literary news was complex and sometimes contradictory. For example, early on Oprah announced that she was scaling down her book club, which had had a significant influence on sales of books that she and her staff had selected. Very shortly, however, others moved in to fill the gap. New book clubs—from *U.S.A. Today*, the *Today*



*Dust jacket for Glass's first novel, which won the National Book Award for fiction (Richland County Public Library)*