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Yuppies in Rhyme

Carol Iannone

TO HAVE written the "perfect book for the 1980's" may sound like a dubious achievement, but in the case of Vikram Seth's first novel, *The Golden Gate*,* a publisher's blurb may for once approach accuracy. The thirty-four-year-old author, a Stanford Ph.D. candidate in economics, has spun an up-to-date tale of San Francisco "Yuppiedom"—and he has done it, what is more, in verse, broadly modeling his book after the subject (young love) and the tone (mild bemusement) of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and adopting that classic Russian poem's intricate form as well (iambic tetrameter sonnets rhymed aBaBccDDeFFeGG).

And he makes it work. As a formal device, Seth's versification is engaging, clever, and responsive to the subject matter. One is pleased, and even (although that may not have been the intention) reassured, to find that computers and nuclear arms can be treated without embarrassment in narrative verse. The vocabulary is rich and varied, ranging as needed from the lofty, erudite, and archaic to the trendy and quotidian. The verse can be lyrically fresh or dramatically intense. Line groupings and sentence structure are handled flexibly and, when necessary to punctuate an idea or shape a point, ingeniously. If occasionally a rhyme seems forced, a word choice awkward, a meter strained, overall the language proves remarkably elastic and capable.

Seth's efforts have by no means gone unappreciated. Critics of all stripes have responded to *The Golden Gate* with respect, affection,

and even gratitude for what the poet John Hollander has called "a charmingly unique sort of minor masterpiece, a tour de force of the transcendence of the mere tour de force." If ours were a versifying age like the Renaissance, when, as Virginia Woolf noted in another context, every man seemed capable of song or sonnet, it may be that the critics would have been more stringent in their assessment of Seth's prosodic efforts. But in our poetry-starved time, who can fail to welcome such an exuberant and expansive resuscitation of a verse form from a golden age of literary and imaginative possibility?

Unfortunately, there is a problem with this elegant literary divertimento, and that is its content. The ideas and themes of *The Golden Gate* derive wholly from the arsenal of contemporary liberal orthodoxies, now apparently so deeply entrenched in the literary imagination as to have achieved defining moral status. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a writer's appealing to current ideas and beliefs, or to his incorporating them as elements in telling his story and shaping his vision—but in *The Golden Gate*, the ideology is the vision.

The story begins when one John Brown, a successful twenty-six-year-old product of Berkeley and Silicon Valley, is nearly "brained" by a frisbee while walking through Golden Gate Park, and is thus with amusing improbability made to feel the loneliness of his emotion-dry, work-centered single life. His ex-girlfriend, Janet Hayakawa, a Japanese-American sculptress and part-time drummer in a rock band named Liquid Sheep, sympathetically takes out a personal ad in his name. Through this thoroughly contemporary contrivance, John meets and falls in love with Liz

Dorati, a Stanford Law graduate. As they blissfully set up house-keeping, Liz's brother Ed, and John's best friend Phil, a young divorced father who has quit his Silicon Valley job to become a peace activist, also begin an affair. But Ed, deeply in thrall to traditional Christianity, raises religious objections to their love and Phil sadly gives him up. In a sudden twist, partly precipitated by the news that her mother is dying of cancer, Liz realizes that her own relationship with the still emotionally rigid John cannot work and decides to marry the more easygoing Phil, not out of "love" but out of "like," which both now believe is the more reliable emotion.

For his part, John is horrified and disgusted to learn of Phil's homosexual indulgence, and is further hurt and angered by Phil's and Liz's marriage. After a bitter spree of one-night stands and singles bars, he starts up again, promisingly if tentatively, with Janet, only to lose her in an automobile accident. While Phil and Liz care for their expanding family, which includes Phil's son, a child who survived the auto accident that killed Janet, and their own newborn baby boy, John is left aching and alone. But the book closes on a note of bittersweet possibility: now that he has learned of life's fragility, John may at last be ready to accept whatever love or friendship comes his way, on whatever terms.

MORE than one critic has conceded that, the feat of versification apart, the plot of *The Golden Gate* is slender, the characterizations sketchy and flat. It might be closer to the truth to say that, in the hands of a lesser artist than Pushkin, versification of this sort actually seems to encourage flatness and superficiality of a kind that would be intolerable in prose. But whatever the reason, *The Golden Gate* sports a slick emotional veneer such as one associates less

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with serious fiction than with a Hollywood film like *The Big Chill*, with a few Snoopy greeting-card sentiments about love and friendship thrown in for good measure.

But its problems go deeper than this. Seth does not so much create characters, round or flat, as grade them on a scale of prefabricated moral possibilities. As one critic remarked, apparently in admiration, "the novel's ultimate morality is severe. Crucially, it's the bisexual and idealistic Phil . . . who quit his job at Datatronics to join the peace movement, who ends up favored by fortune while priggish homophobic John emerges with his initial desolation intact." Characters are defined in terms of where they stand on the issues, with life's sweetest secrets yielding to those on the correct side of the correct causes.

Take, for example, that *summa* of causes, peace. As an activist, Phil is obviously the most advanced on the moral scale. Next comes Liz, who grows increasingly enlightened through contact with Phil; at a peace rally, she makes an impromptu speech in defense of "all the other fauna/that have developed here on/the earth." Ed, who believes in working for peace in the individual heart—"to curb our own complicity/In violence and in exploitation"—is judged to be simply ineffective; as Phil puts it, "By the time your catholicon/Acts on our guts, we'll all be gone." Finally there is John, who despises the antinuke movement.

John believes the U.S. is superior to the Soviet Union, and he worries that the peace movement will "give them the rope to hang us with." He remarks to Phil: "Spout here: you'll come to little harm./Spout there: the KGB will sell you/A ticket to a dexterous shrink/Who'll drug you dumb to help you think." But Phil has a response to this: "But their state wouldn't look so bad/To someone sunk in unemployment/—Of which we've plenty—or disease./Bankrupted by his medical fees./I doubt that he'd get much enjoyment/From all his fabled freedoms." And besides, Phil asks, "How can you think of we or they/When we're both in the soup?" The two go back and forth,

with Phil predictably gaining the upper hand each time.

Seth lays out the case for "peace" in other ways as well. He mockingly describes the presumed attitude of the scientists who make the bombs: "When something's technically attractive/You follow the conception through,/That's all. What if you leave a slew/of living dead, of radioactive/'Collateral damage' in its wake?/It's just a job, for heavens sake." And he devotes a large section of his book to a loving evocation of a peace demonstration (no mildly bemused tone here) including a ten-page speech by an activist priest who follows a Christianity clearly more to Seth's liking than Ed's. In this speech the whole argument against nuclear defense is piously set forth, and we are reminded how our country always seems to need an enemy to hate—"Even before we'd reached Berlin/Moscow was our new sump of sin."

Another gauge of moral beatitude is one's attitude toward work. Phil has already seen the light and quit his defense-related job at Datatronics in order "to save the world." Liz continues to work "at the staid law firm Cobb & Kearney," requesting just six months' maternity leave at her baby's birth but also demanding the privilege of defending needy political clients independently and *pro bono*. The benighted John, meanwhile, remains at his job at Datatronics; although troubled by his discussions with Phil, he continues to defend "The assuring axiom that the more/The bombs, the less the chance of war." As for Ed, by book's end he seems to have quit his job in advertising but, having no social vision, remains adrift and aimlessly self-absorbed.

PERHAPS even cruder than these judgments is the book's system of racial and ethnic characterizations. John, for example, is the only child of an apparently loveless Wasp home. His father, his only surviving parent, is English, and "Retired in his native Kent, Rarely responds to letters sent/(If rarely) by his transatlantic/offspring." The presumed emotional aloofness of the Anglo-Saxon appears, indeed, to be a

cardinal sin of the West in the eyes of the Indian-born Seth. Phil's former in-laws do not care for "Claire Cabot marrying Philip Weiss—/For all their Wasp stings of advice." As a "good atheist Jew," Phil serves in Seth's universe as a desirable foil to a poker-spined Anglo society: his "scorn of 'country-clubbing rabble,'/His jangling views, his uncouth jokes,/And (once, at Christmas with Claire's folks)/His use of 'queynte' to win at Scrabble,/Resulted in a virtual ban/On Phil from the whole Cabot clan." But on the book's terms it is the Oriental Janet Hayakawa who is the most firmly fixed in a sense of nurturant family solidarity, selfless, giving, unconditionally loving, creative (one of her sculptures is entitled "Mother Hen").

As a woman, Liz is by definition emotionally more elastic than John, while John, a typical young male of our time, is of course a problem to begin with. In his emotional reserve, his tendency to possessive jealousy, his disdain for peace activism, and his repudiation of homosexuality, we are clearly meant to discern the root problems of patriarchy. At times *The Golden Gate* almost seems patterned after an episode of *All in the Family*, with John, a younger, educated, sophisticated Archie Bunker being tutored in simple truths by representatives of various human groups in possession of the warmer and more natural impulses of life.

Perhaps nowhere is Seth's trusting subscription to current orthodoxies more glaring than in his casually sophisticated portrayal of homosexuality. It is taken for granted in this book that the only permissible attitude toward homosexuality is one of complete and favorable acceptance; indeed, in Seth's eyes, whatever moral complications may surround homosexual practice are ascribable not to that practice itself but to cultural and religious prejudices against it. Ed's objections, religious in nature, are rendered in caricature—after his first night with Phil, he agonizes: "O my God, I've muzzled/Love's only true voice, Jesus Christ./Who came to earth and sacrificed/His life for me . . . for me, a sinner." He cautions