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**The One Day: A Poem in Three Parts.** Donald Hall. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1988, 67 pages, \$16.95.

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At intervals the best human minds create monuments of integration. Some change the course of history, science, or art. Many inspire awe, admiration, imitation and, ultimately, fragmentation. Consider the great world religions: Christ's teachings, for example, inspire and unite diverse beings and disparate cultures. But even at a great movement's origins it is dividing like some zygotic idea: Eastern Church and Western Church; Protestant and Catholic; Baptist and Anabaptist; the sects continue to proliferate as the great ideas disintegrate into fragments and elaborations of their original forms. It is difficult to think of a discipline in which disciples are not doing battle: from philosophy through politics to psychology. Disintegration, segregation, is invariably much easier than integration in all areas of human behavior. Sociologists gracefully separate, readily explaining why human groups exist apart, why Waterside is and will remain very different from the Bogside, but they can rarely help in reconciliation, in union; of black and white, Arab and Jew, Brit and Provo.

In poetry, the disciples are usually critics arguing over the proper way to read a poem, over the proper function of poetry, over form. And the rare poet reminds us now and again that the very best poetry transcends and unites the functions and forms of poetry, the approaches to a poem. Yeats managed it in the twentieth century; the International Modernists realized that in the specialized and modern world, unification was a special problem. Artists could no longer appeal to a single tradition, or even a single discipline. In a sense, the very best poetry and art, the greatest monuments of integration, have moved in function closer to ancient forbears: poetry is history and medicine, code of behavior and miscreant's punishment, reconciler of opposites, melder of then and now.

Donald Hall's *The One Day* is a masterpiece of unity. It may well be the American poem of the twentieth century, for it puts all together again. One hears echoes of Eliot shoring fragments against the ruins of the twentieth century in *The One Day*, but it is echoes only. Hall continues where Eliot stopped and detoured into religion, devaluing the poem: making it a part rather than a whole. Donald Hall is the first legitimate American heir to the International Modernist tradition. As Joyce did with Dublin and Yeats with Sligo, Hall has done with the American northeast: it is all America, it is the cosmos, it is the then and now. *The One Day* restores the faith: poem as the world; the world as poem.

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Although it is a commonplace that the artist's is the least reliable commentary on his/her own world, the best artists study the mystery of creation and attend to the details of their craft. They do not pretend to be mere messengers of inspiration, but painstaking shapers of the raw materials inspiration may offer. In spite of supposed remorse for his annotations to *The Wasteland*, Eliot provided readers with a reliable and rewarding approach to what was once a very difficult poem. Hall ends *The One Day* with "A Note On This Poem," and it is as lucid and beneficial as one would expect of a poet who has written extensively and well about the craft of poetry. He says, for example, "It's a commonplace of psychiatry that it may be useful, thinking about a dream, to consider that all of its characters are versions of the dreamer. Picasso said that every human being is a colony. Notions of human multiplicity, derived from experience, make the structure of this poem; but in the usual Heraclitan truth of contradiction, the multiple is also singular." Hall's prose is as careful, concise, and myriad as his poetry. These three sentences reveal the thesis expressed in terms of psychology, reiterated by a great modern painter, whose Cubist paintings expressed a simultaneous perspective paralleling the efforts in literature of the International Modernists—and indeed, by Hall in this poem—and expanded and turned back on itself by a reference to the Greek philosopher of the 6th century B.C. Sandwiched between Picasso and Heraclitus, Psychology and Philosophy, is the empirical I, the poet whose own experience is the gauge, the guide, and the recapitulation.

While *The One Day* lends itself to serious deliberation, it is also plain and simply great and exhilarating fun. It can be read, from multiple perspectives, as a long narrative poem: the modern American experience through the lives of a man and a woman, from childhood to impending death. The poem opens with a central image: "Once a little boy and his sister'—my mother lay/on top of the quilt, narrow and tense, whispering—'found boards piled up, deep in the woods, and nails,/and built a house for themselves, and nobody knew/how they built their house each day in the woods . . .'/I listened and fell asleep, like a baby full of milk,/and carried the house into sleep where I built it/board by board all night, each night/from the beginning . . ." In the very next stanza the middle-aged "I" sits "staring at the vacant book of the ceiling, unfit/to work or love, aureoled with cigarette smoke in the unstoried room" daydreaming "to build the house of dying . . ."

Youth and age, story and dream, the mysteries of creation and destruction are immediately presented. The economy of Hall's method is remarkable; on first reading it is seamless and simple, almost prose. But extraordinary images contradict, reinforce, and inform one another. "The unstoried room" of the middle-aged "I" gains subtle significance from the mother's story in the first stanza: at once the reader is given the dream world and the world of experience, the realm of psychiatry and Heraclitus' truth of contradiction, the simultaneous perspective of child and old man: Picasso's multiple perspective made verbal.

Building a house is a major theme and image. The poem's working title was *Building the House of Dying*, and in his note, Hall makes it clear that this poem is at one and the same time the house of the first stanza's story and dream and the house of dying. "We enter and explore this house, moving from room to room surprised sometimes by the door, always remaining within the single structure. Or so I hope." Form and technique, too, support the structure: "I arrived at my form: I would shape this material into ten-line bricks which could build the house and remain whole." It works. The regularity of form conveys a notion of solidity, and at the same time each stanza is quite often like another room of the house.

This poem is much too rich to classify or to characterize in a review; its three parts suggest the wide range. Part I is "Shrubs Burnt Away," and Hall provides some in-

sight with an epigraph; "A most desolate spot . . . For fear of them hiding tigers, all trees and shrubs have been burnt." But the technique of this poem is expansive, and the allusion suggests, too, the burning bush and the middle-aged "I" in the unstoried room who is cut off from all divine inspiration. It reminds of the constant references to farming throughout the poem: clearing the land and, too, going beyond a symbiotic relationship with the land to the destructive fires of civilization in the last two books. The female I is linked closely with fire. Burning white houses—of respectability, of order—recur in her stanzas: "When I was in my thirties, in love with the fires/that burned white houses down, desires and treacheries/passed the time. My children receded, waving. Janis/Joplin said, 'It's always the same fucking day.'" [Italics in the original]

*The One Day* is all days. The house is dreamed, built, burned. But it must be built. If indeed "Poetry is preparation for death," as the epigraph from Nadezhda Mandelstam declares, and as Hall suggests throughout his own poem, then work and love are the twin forces of life. Perhaps one line best sums up the poem's core: "Work, love, build a house, and die. But build a house." Houses come in endless variety. Some are real, some are dreamed, some are stories for children. Donald Hall's is a poem.

Many of the poem's most incisive stanzas present versions of the modern world in which inhabitants are no longer capable of working, loving, or building a house: "Ingratiating to boss, insulting/to employees, I endure my days without pleasure/or purpose, finding distraction in Rodeo Drive, in/duplicate bridge, in gladiators, and in my pastoral song." That's a nice minor catalogue of distractions across the centuries, and such lack of fulfillment is generally contrasted with the fulfilling work of farm and mind: "Meantime the day is double/in the work, love, and solitude of eyes/that gaze not at each other but at a third thing:/a child, a ciderpress, a book—work's paradise."

Much work in the modern world is abstract and meaningless. Therein lies a great deal of unhappiness. Therein lies the wonderful sense of satisfaction that most readers will receive from Part II, *Four Classic Texts*, and especially from "Prophecy," with the voice of a modern Isaiah/Amos predicting sorrow and destruction for the modern world: "I will strike down wooden houses; I will burn aluminum clapboard skin; I will strike down garages/where crimson Toyotas sleep side by side; I will explode/palaces of gold, silver, and alabaster." and "Your children will wander looting the shopping malls/for forty years suffering under your idleness,/until the last dwarf body rots in a parking lot."

"Pastoral," *Four Classic Texts'* second part, is a wonderful combination of classic pastoral themes and modern adulteries. "As the blood pelts, we confer;/and we pull off our clothes like opening junk mail./The world is a bed . . ." Occasionally a metaphor captures theme and expression perfectly: "we pull off our clothes like junk mail": Love in the modern world. Yet, the bed is redemption and escape. "The world is a bed" and "A bed is a world" run throughout this work. In love is eternity, a fine Blakean notion, but in love is also the end: "The bed is a world of pain and the repeated deaths/of preparation for death."

The bed is also sensual pleasure: "The world is a bed, I announced; my love agreed./A hundred or a thousand times our eyes encountered:/Each time the clothes sloughed off, anatomies/of slippery flesh connected again on the world's bed/and the crescent of nerves described itself/in the ordinary curve of bliss. We were never alone;/we were always alone. If we were each manikins of the other,/then the multitude as one and one as the multitude;/many and one we performed procedures of comfort."

One encounters delightful surprises made more delightful by juxtaposition. Sensuality and death. Madness and lucidity. "History," Part II's third book, and "Ecologue," it's fourth, represent the principle of juxtaposition on a larger scale. This is a work

whose depth and power increase upon subsequent reading. Gradually, one discovers that lines and stanzas pages apart are inclined one against the other—meaning expands, Daedalean cunning is discovered (and Daedalean it is, in part; viz the recurring airplane and flight images).

The poem's third part, *To Build a House*, echoes the book's opening stanzas, the immobilized "I" of the second stanza understands the child's dream—and the mother's story—from the book's opening stanza: love, work, build, die. All lives are one life. All days are one day. "One day you will love someone." "The one day clarifies and stays only when days depart: 'The days you work,' said O'Keeffe, 'are the best days'." Surely, *The One Day* is a collection of Donald Hall's best days.

This is a major work by a major poet. It is doubtless the best American work of this generation. It simplifies the essential themes of human existence at the same time it presents them in tiers—or perhaps *stories* would be more appropriate to Hall's house metaphor. Its images can be startling and frequently uncommon, yet many of the most powerful are plain, such as this one joining the twin sources of human happiness, work and love: "Our longing/for being, beyond doubt and skepticism, assembles itself/from moments when the farmer scything alfalfa fills/with happiness as the underground cave fills with water;/or when we lose self in the hourless hour of love." Above all, it is a masterpiece of multiple perspective, of reconciled contradiction. The plain and the ornamented, the startling and the ordinary, male and female, every day and the one day merge into a single poem that is at once quintessentially American and international, timeless and timely, provoking and comforting: a monument of unity.