

A NOTE ON
ERIC LARSEN'S
THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY:
ONTOLOGICAL IMAGINATION RESURRECTS
REALISM FROM THE REALMS OF THE DEAD

by

GREGORY MARSZAL

Eric Larsen's third novel is marvelous. I don't know how I can say it more simply: I love the book. Like *I Am Zoë Handke* (1992), it has all the fundamental characteristics that draw me into a book of fiction. I was completely *in* its universe when I was reading it; I wanted to return to that universe when I was not reading it; and the universe generated by the work lingered and haunted my *seeing* after I completed reading it.

Again, what struck me first was the writer's profound mix of clarity with poetic evocation. How does Larsen *do* that? I assume that it is not only a matter of art, or technique, but that it is the expression of an existential accomplishment, or a way of life.

As I moved through the events of the book, there was never any doubt that I was inside reality; that the materiality of things—their densities and their textures—was always present, but at the same time the question of their ultimate values, or of their potential significance, reverberated with depth and possibility. Isn't this the opposite of the hubris found in the bland "realism" we drown in today? *That* conventional kind of realism believes that somehow it has arrived at the very origin of things, at the one true and fundamental reality of what *is*. There are many reasons for this, and I'm sure that Eric Larsen is aware of all of them. I'm sure also that he is more intensely aware than most people of how we live now in a world aesthetically both alienating and void—so much so that language itself is drained of its potential for seeking depth, newness, or originality either in thought or emotion. All the "market-driven" oceans of work put out by publishers prides itself that by means of its unquestioning "realism," it has arrived at the very origin of things, at (as I said before) the one true and fundamental reality of what *is*. This smug attitude is so pervasive, so deeply entrenched, as to have grown nearly totalitarian in its omnipresence and fake authority.

One of the essential things that I have learned in my own efforts as a writer of poetry is that the poetic consciousness is *generative* of value. And that's why Larsen's books *live* the way they do. He doesn't appeal to any transcendent, any other-worldly value system, to underpin his own purposes, values, or aims. The boy in *The End of the 19th Century* experiences the very *genesis* of meanings, not the *imposing* of them. In Larsen, as in other writers who knew this same truth about the relation between writing and existing—writers as seemingly unlike as Whitman and Joyce—you become aware, as does the character in Larsen's novel, that Being is infinite, and, as such, is capable of being refracted and viewed from innumerable points, and is even then not *fully* known.

Furthermore, each of these points isn't simply a geometric location in time and space, but each one is a potential alpha point for new meanings and new revelations.

In a word, what attracts me to Larsen's writing is his use of what I call "the ontological imagination." Of course, in our age of simple polarities, some will say this makes his work irrational or anti-scientific. I have had such accusations directed at me far too often by readers of my own poetry.

If you assert that the Real may be just a *bit* more possible and dynamic than what the age of literalism says it is, you'll likely be taken as deluded, irrational, anti-scientific, or even worse, mystical. But as this hyper-conventionalized *single* reality—the false, narrow, obedient, and "understandable" one—becomes ever more dominate and ever more embedded in our economic, cultural, and metaphorical life, the more difficult it becomes for the ontological imagination to survive, let alone be valued. Simply put, I understand the history and evolution of human consciousness as the imaginative function in a dynamic and creative interplay with the brute facts of reality: And these brute facts are death, time, hunger, body. And these same brute facts, no matter how light and unassuming one of Larsen's scenes or passages might be on the surface, are *never* absent in his work or in his consciousness *as* he works.

Malcolm Reiner, the boy and central figure in *The End of the 19th Century*, is more incarnated than Zoë, in [*I Am Zoë Handke*](#), was. For all her virtues, Zoë was a more ethereal, disembodied creature, more of a pure consciousness. I don't remember her ever meditating on her femininity or her sexuality. She never seemed to encounter her biological life in the way the boy—and her future husband—does.

The young Malcolm, however, during his most explicitly detailed sexual awaking, struggles to incorporate this new-found energy into his main project, the saving of history itself. His desire, toward the end of the book, to save time itself, to stave off the disintegration of his universe, and to return to the wholeness of his "years of perfect seeing" is extraordinarily moving.

Some may say that this is a nostalgic vision. I don't think so. The boy is at war on two fronts. He is experiencing the inevitable and essential coming of age personally, where loss and pain are unavoidable. We look back, and if we don't give in to despair, we attempt to recover what we can and incorporate these truths and energies into our present life. If they are traumatic, we attempt to exorcise them; if they are moments of beauty and generative of goodness, we remember and we love. And if that love becomes generative of action and Being in the present, its meaning duplicates itself. Meaning is built upon meaning like coral.

But, alas, Malcolm is, instead, experiencing a cosmic death. "The End of the Age of Walking"—isn't that what the phrase must mean, at least in part? Something much larger is occurring beyond one child's growth into self awareness. He is experiencing—and if this sounds strong, let it so be—an apocalypse.

Forces are at work that are changing the very foundation of a person's ability to experience meaning. The acceleration of time and the abstraction of space as embodied, for example, in the highway that cuts right through West Tree, are the vanguard of a new and monstrous modernity. The disappearance of West Tree itself is not simply a personal death, but it is a cosmic one, the end of an age. The end of an age: Can we even begin to grasp what that means?

As a poet who works in short forms, the broader structure of entire novels is not my natural strength, but I had no problems with structure here. As opposed to *I Am Zoë Handke*, nothing is in excess, and nothing seemed to be abbreviated—whereas Part V, to my mind, in *Zoë* was mildly, or arguably, extra. In *The End of the 19th Century* the weavings, the departures, the returns, all of them make perfect sense, vanishing in a fine clean cloth of sound, image, and sense.

Of course I wonder about the future for a book like this. I wish that anything might be possible. There *must* still remain large numbers of people capable of being—and *eager* to be—excited and inspired by this kind of rare, wonderful, essential—and essentially truth-revealing—literary virtues. How to find and reach those readers, I don't know. I myself am lucky to have found the book. I pray that the book may be so lucky as to find many others to read it.

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