“Anti-Dominant” Journal

Christopher Agee ’79

never took a poetry class with Seamus Heaney. “I shopped his seminar,” Agee recalls, “but when he was at Harvard I never mustered the courage to take any of his courses.” Yet today, even the Nobel laureate sends poems to Agee, founder and editor of what has been called “one of the most important cultural journals in Ireland.”

Agee’s biannual Irish Pages, now in its fifth year, publishes both luminaries and lesser-knowns, Irish citizens and foreigners—anyone, really, as long as the writing is good. “You have to judge on the sole criterion of quality,” says Agee. “Not friendship. Not quid pro quo. Just the work itself.” The current issue contains a short story by William Trevor, a Heaney poem, and a print version of “The Third Annual Irish Pages Lecture,” delivered by the essayist Sven Birkerts at the Royal Academy in Dublin in December 2006.

Agee and Birkerts, a Briggs Copeland lecturer on English and American literature and language at Harvard, both worry about the fate of reading and writing in a digital society. (Agee likens the difference between what’s written on line and in print to the difference between an industrial shed and a Roman arch.) Birkerts’s lecture, entitled “The Drowning Signal: Self in the Information Age,” argues that we tend to lose our sense of self when bombarded with information, whereas good writing reminds us of our own individuality.

“Imagination creates shape; information imposes shape. The former is the energy of self, the latter of the world,” Birkerts tells the attendees. “When it is encountered in the right way, attentively, great art, ambitious, realized art, not only lifts us to its level, but…offers an inward integrity to help counter the dissipating force of signals.” Agee readily quotes the lecture in conversation and says that “the gist of the Birkerts essay is almost our credo.” In Irish Pages, he seeks to gather together this sort of imaginative writing.

At Harvard, Agee studied poetry with Robert Fitzgerald and spent two summers in Ireland as a research assistant for Agee (no relation) professor of social ethics Robert Coles, who was studying the effects of Catholic-Protestant violence on Irish children. After graduation, the New England native decided to move to Northern Ireland in part because he found the U.S. literary world “less than compact and coherent, a scrambled cultural landscape.” The poetry scene in Belfast suited him better. “I’ve often said to myself that Irish literary culture is like a large village,” he explains. “Everybody has a kind of place, as opposed to the balkanized schools and hierarchies of the American scene.”

Agee’s place at first was at a community college, where he taught literacy skills to teenagers. He eventually met, and became friends with, Seamus Heaney. He also wrote poetry and, in 1992, published a
small collection, In the New Hampshire Woods. His growing reputation—and unusual status as an immigrant—brought an invitation to guest-edit an issue on American poetry for Poetry Ireland Review and, in 1995, another invitation to edit a double issue on contemporary Irish verse for the venerable Chicago magazine Poetry.

In 2002, Agee saw an opportunity to apply his editorial experience to a magazine of his own when Belfast was furiously seeking to become “European Capital of Culture” (an award bestowed annually by the European Union). “You don’t have a really good literary journal in the North,” he told a member of the bid council. Northern Ireland had great poets, but nowhere for them to appear readily in print, he explained. “Notwithstanding Heaney, and Paul Muldoon, there are only a few local journals with a very poor standard of writing.” The council gave him $7,000—enough to fund the first two issues.

Suddenly, he had to figure out what sort of journal he wanted. He studied his favorites: the New Yorker, Poetry, Orion (an environmental magazine), and the Bell, an Irish journal from the 1940s and ’50s. “How do they do it? How do they lay it out? It was like studying form in horses,” he recalls thinking. He decided an Irish journal should have selections in Irish Gaelic, and invited the poet Cathal Ó Searcaigh to become Irish-language editor. He settled on a few regular features, including an editorial essay he or Ó Searcaigh would write and a section called From the Irish Archives, which reprints an author who Agee feels was unjustly neglected in his or her day. He also wanted to focus on “primary,” rather than what he calls “mediated,” writing, meaning there would be no reviews. And he insisted on bringing it all together in a handsome volume with sturdy pages and vivid photographs, despite printing costs that threatened to swallow more than half his budget.

That year Agee accompanied Heaney to a poetry festival in Macedonia and asked him for a contribution; Heaney provided two poems and a printed version of the festival’s keynote address. Agee built the issue around those works and, after assembling more than 200 pages of text, threw a launch party. The first run of 1,200 quickly sold out, and Agee had to return to the printer for 800 more. (His regular print run now stands at 2,800; see
also www.irishpages.org.) He subtitled the first issue “Belfast in Europe,” and subsequent issues have had themes ranging from “The Homeplace” to “The Media” (in which the Birkerts lecture appears).

Agee thinks that the Internet will bring down a large portion of the print world during the next 30 or 40 years. “That’s inevitable. Unstoppable,” he says. The result, he believes, will be a stark choice: readers can choose to go deeper on line, or step back into a hard-core print culture. Irish Pages, he hopes, will be part of the latter. “This journal, by preserving a kind of classic print culture and a classic belief in the imagination and the written word on a complex level, becomes an anti-dominant,” he declares. “It becomes a dissident energy.”

Feltonious Mayhem
Enron and other capitalist calamities
by Paul M. Barrett

As an ironclad rule of American business is that eras of great profit give rise to fantastic excess in the executive suites, and then someone gets sent to the slammer.

In June, while I was reading the book under review, we witnessed the first major indictments from the subprime mortgage fiasco: once-mighty financiers shuffled into federal court in Brooklyn in the tender grasp of deputy U.S. marshals. This particular pair from the disgraced and sold-off investment bank Bear Stearns was charged with misleading investors about the plummeting value of complex securities linked to mountains of home loans that should never have been made in the first place. Leaving the question of criminal liability to one side, it’s fair to say that Wall Street and the mortgage industry conspired to inflate a housing bubble that inevitably, and violently, exploded. As foreclosures proliferate in California and Florida, and tens of thousands are laid off on Wall Street, many ask how we didn’t realize sooner that a real-estate market that seemed too good to be true was... well, you know.

Recent decades have brought us the savings-and-loan scandal, the Michael Milken insider-trading skein, the first-generation dot-com frenzy, and a series of corporate debacles related to the Internet boom of the late 1990s. And who could forget Enron: hands down, the most byzantine saga in memory of hubris, greed, and deceit? The tale of the shiny Houston energy-trading juggernaut that crashed in late 2001 has been told so often that it has entered the realm of mythology. But Malcolm S. Salter, an authority on corporate management and Hill professor of business administration emeritus at Harvard, argues in his new volume that lessons from Enron’s rise and fall can guide business leaders—and the rest of us—in pondering how to regulate the great engines of capitalism in a way that will generate jobs and income without all the felonious mayhem.

As its title may suggest, Innovation Corrupted: The Origins and Legacy of Enron’s Collapse is not a brisk read; nor is it meant to be. Salter offers instead a sober case study that steers clear of narrative thrills and puckish personality portraits. His confidence that better-constructed boards of directors following common-sense principles will protect against future Enrons strikes me as overly hopeful, if not downright naive. But Salter’s heart is in the right place, and his exceedingly rational dissection of Enron will be instructive for any aficionado of big business and human frailty.

Enron had its roots in prosaic natural-gas operations that merged in 1985 and fell under the control of an amiable and eggheadish executive named Kenneth Lay, a Ph.D. economist better known for his enthusiasm for deregulating the energy business than for his managerial mastery. Lay hired Jeffrey Skilling, M.B.A. ’79, a brash and charismatic consultant from McKinsey & Company, to oversee Enron’s expanding gas-trading business. In the words of a former colleague, Skilling “could out-argue God.”

In the 1990s, Enron grew into an innovative and prosperous force in the newly deregulated natural-gas industry. It rode the Internet wave to create an on-line trading system that swiftly became the world’s biggest e-commerce site. This digital system allowed producers and users of natural gas to manage their risks more efficiently. Enron profited handsomely, as it should have.

Then Skilling and Lay let their success...