

A Calculating Poet Behind a Very Gamey Book

by PAUL
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Intersecting veins of absolutely priceless irony await anyone who digs into the background of *The Exhibitionist*—newest in a recent line of big, popular (i.e., dirty) novels which distort the lives of famous real people. Surface excavation is easy enough. The book was commissioned by Bernard Geis Associates—publishers of *Valley of the Dolls*—a firm which attempts to prefabricate best-sellers by demanding gaudy themes of its authors and insisting that their work conform to chapter-by-chapter guidance from its editors. *The Exhibitionist* concerns itself with the careers, personal dilemmas and varied sexual aberrations of a middle-aged movie star, his actress daughter and a steamily neurotic secondary cast. It libels a nice man and a talented girl, both of whom will be recognizable to many readers, and—at the rate a 90,000-copy hard-cover edition is selling—seems quite certain to make an enormous amount of money.

A certain crassness, a certain cynicism, a certain aura of the carney lot which may be suggested by these aspects of the book are not remarkable in themselves—they are standard ingredients of success in a growing cash-is-everything school of publishing. But Poet-Critic-Dramatist-Novelist David Slavitt, who wrote *The Exhibitionist* for Geis (under the pseudonym Henry Sutton), is no

standard hack—he is an honors graduate of Yale (1956) and the most ostentatiously literate fellow to have materialized on the autographing circuit in years—and one is forced, if only by the author's contempt for others who do similar work, to weigh this particular exercise in lurid prose on the scales of Slavitt's own literary pretensions, lofty iconoclasm and intellectual accomplishment.

This is no simple matter. It is

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inevitable and, thus, blameless in itself. On reflection, however, it is hard not to feel that the Case of *The Exhibitionist* is more important, more questionable and far more puzzling than these judgments would suggest; that it is more significantly a kind of moral-social riddle than a publishing "event"; that it indicts as well as mirrors the times and does so for the same reason that makes it

David Slavitt wrote 'Exhibitionist'

for dough—and got a lot

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easy to write Slavitt off, as have his critics and enemies, as a kind of literary turncoat; easy enough to dismiss his best-seller in a bored sentence or so, as has the *New York Times* ("All sex and nothing else makes a really dull book"); easier yet to consider it a phenomenon so symptomatic of our culture and our times as to be

deserving of attention—because of the sardonic and baffling way it reflects its author's ego, ambitions and assessment of his literary era.

David Slavitt is a big, dark, faintly pudgy-looking man of 32 who quit a job as movie reviewer at *Newsweek* ("I'm retiring from children's magazines") two years ago, holed up in an old house at Cape Cod and set out, after his wife found work as a teacher at the local high school, to devote himself to serious—and more fitting—literary endeavor. He hes-



Over a Scotch, wearing his velvet jacket, David Slavitt superciliously considers a conversational gambit.

vastly different. His father is a successful lawyer and a man of intellect, and David grew up amid an atmosphere of culture and comfort in White Plains, seat of New York's suburban Westchester County. But he wanted something more. He seems to have detected evidence of genius in himself at an early age—"I knew I was going to be a writer; if I were a religious fanatic, I could say I had seen signs and wonders"—and to have labored madly for a breakout of his own ever since.

He had difficulties at Massachusetts' prestigious Phillips Andover Academy to which he was sent for the last two years of high school. "He was an odd sort," says a man who remembers, "and you know how cruel kids can be." David was undeterred. He had a goal; he devoted himself to a ferocious and "weirdly imbalanced" concentration on poetry and achieved so astonishing a technical mastery that he was able, not without calculation, to deliver himself to Yale as a boy wonder and to exist there on his own terms.

"I wasn't really a scholar," he says. "I was too arrogant. I wasn't any good in math or languages—although I *did* teach myself Homeric Greek on the train when I was commuting later on. But I was a pro in poetry when I got there and Yale is very aware that it has not produced writers, like Harvard or even Princeton in its fluky way."

Slavitt was treated as a prodigy. He did not demur. Expanding, he cultivated a certain eccentricity. He became a debater, and in one appearance at Princeton insisted that he and his colleagues dress in Boy Scout uniforms and drink milk between arguments to dramatize the purity of their position. "Debating," he says happily, "taught me intellectual mendacity. Pure charlatanism." But he also wrote and published verse—in the *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review* and other first-rate journals. He was an academic smash. He took graduate courses as a junior, was a "scholar of the house"—which freed him from all classroom work—as a senior, and was graduated *magna cum laude*.

No one applauded at all, how-

ever, when he stepped into the cold world outside New Haven. He hated his teaching job at Georgia Tech. "They used a big machine to paint their damned football field green every Friday—the grass down there was brown—and I used to watch out my office window and think they were spending more than they paid me for the year." He had to toil in the mailroom at *Newsweek* before

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gradually being allowed editorial work; he reciprocated by refusing to spend more than 20 minutes on any one article and by attempting to get "nugget clichés" past the editors. "I got the name of Olive Higgins Prouty, author of *Stella Dallas*, in once (of course, I never read *Stella Dallas*). It took months." He became, in his seven years on the magazine, a very competent and entertaining movie reviewer although he considered the process comparable to "playing the piano in a whorehouse."

His retreat to Cape Cod in 1965 was an act of courage nevertheless. He had married a smart and handsome Vassar girl named Lynn Meyer and now had three small children; the big old house they found at Harwich was a high-ceilinged wreck (lately much renovated) which had neither central heating nor hot water. Sacrifice, however, did not engender recognition.

Slavitt is an enormously industrious writer. He has turned out three volumes of poetry in recent years and has finished three "serious" novels—*Rochelle*, published last summer; *Feel Free*, to be published next year, and *Anagrams*, to follow later on. He has also prepared to rescue the theater from "the grunt and scratch of the Actors Studio" and the tradition of "wretched prose left in the shadow of Eugene O'Neill," and has done two plays in the process. But few Americans read poetry. *Rochelle* has been snubbed. Producer Frederick Brisson has

taken an option on one play, *The Cardinal Sin*—and is "delighted," Slavitt says, "with its elegant, high style, hippie Congreve writing"—but any plans for actually staging it have remained vague.

One must be astonished, nevertheless, at the alacrity with which Slavitt embraced Publisher Geis two years ago; not so much the Geis cash—since even serious writers must feed their young or endure intrusion from social workers—as the Geis philosophy of Great Books. Geis gave him an expensive lunch, handed him the Geis Handy Dandy Writer's Kit (containing essays suggesting that the 19th Century or storytelling novel was not all bad) and a first, nonreturnable advance of \$3,000. He agreed to feed Slavitt another \$9,000 in \$3,000 chunks as, and if, the book developed satisfactorily and after that, if all went well, to guarantee him riches—90% of movie returns, though only 10% of hard-cover receipts and 50% of paperback earnings. He readily conceded that other

publishers guaranteed larger shares, but pointed out that Geis—"designed" and Geis-promoted "blockbusters" made real money: "50% of a million is better than 100% of nothing." Slavitt was delighted. He set to with a will and not only accepted interminable chapter-by-chapter revision, but—once he got the hang of it and took the bit in his teeth—began to improve the Geis concepts on his own.

Slavitt became convinced, as indeed he still is, that 1) he was more capable of "designing" a best-seller than Geis and that 2) he was in the process of creating a "double book," à la Nabokov, which would have "all sorts of

games running through it" and which "should vastly amuse my friends, all of whom are terribly literate and sophisticated people," without "turning off" the masses. "Geis," Slavitt now says with satisfaction, "was white-faced at some of the things he got from his belles-lettres poet." It is hard to think Geis really lost much sleep over the "games" with which his author fondly hoped to titillate the literati—having the heroine's stepfather kicked to death by an ostrich, for instance (an idea advanced by a former Andover classmate), or swiping the names of two characters from *Great Expectations* ("I don't suppose anyone at Geis reads Dick-

ens") or inserting nugget clichés ("I never knew it could be like this") in love scenes. But his belles-lettres poet drove the publisher up the wall, for all that.

Slavitt, while writing hopefully away, developed an enormous feeling of contempt for Jacqueline Susann—who, as author of *Valley of the Dolls*, was Geis's No. 1 moneymaker. He expressed his reaction to her and her "indescribable clunkers" in an interview for *McCall's* magazine. "When I think

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of her, I think, If she could do it, why can't I? Then I think, But if she can do it, why *should* I?" Jackie—who no longer needed Geis's promotional help and was apparently willing to shuck him for a publisher who would give her a bigger cut—descended on Geis forthwith and demanded that he dump Slavitt. When Geis refused, she hit him with a lawsuit calculated to break her contract and swore that their association was finished forever. The suit is still dragging through the courts.

Meanwhile, Slavitt, entranced by the "great giggles" inherent in sexual perversion, began pushing the Geis philosophy of readability to a point at which even its inventor blanched and sputtered.

The Exhibitionist's endless

"steamy" scenes were mostly contrived, amid "whoops of laughter," as a dialogue between Slavitt and his wife, who—after picking a suitable aberration from a copy of Krafft-Ebing—would invent conversation for the characters involved and recite it into a tape recorder. "We were being *le babaumisme* simply as a means of staying sane." In so doing they made certain that the book became, if nothing else, the most salacious of its kind; the heroine alone, to cite just a few examples, enjoys perverted sexual activity with a young actor, has a lesbian affair with her stepmother, and is forced to cope with incestuous intentions on the part of her father while engaged in naked dancing with him at a Venetian ball. The publisher objected vehemently, however, when Slavitt also included a scene in which a naked motion picture director is urologically degraded during a Hollywood party by four giggling and equally naked women. Slavitt indignantly refused to take it out and six of Geis's partners—including fellow publisher Bennett Cerf, who cried that he would not touch the book with "a 40-foot pole"—withdrew from the firm.

But in the dirty book business, as in Shakespeare, all's well that ends well. Slavitt, contrite at having cost his publisher an author, sat down after finishing *The Exhibitionist* and has written him another big, readable book, *The Voyeur*, "about a man who runs a girlie magazine," over which Geis rubs his hands but which he proposes to hoard until he has squeezed the last nickel out of the current "Sutton" blockbuster.

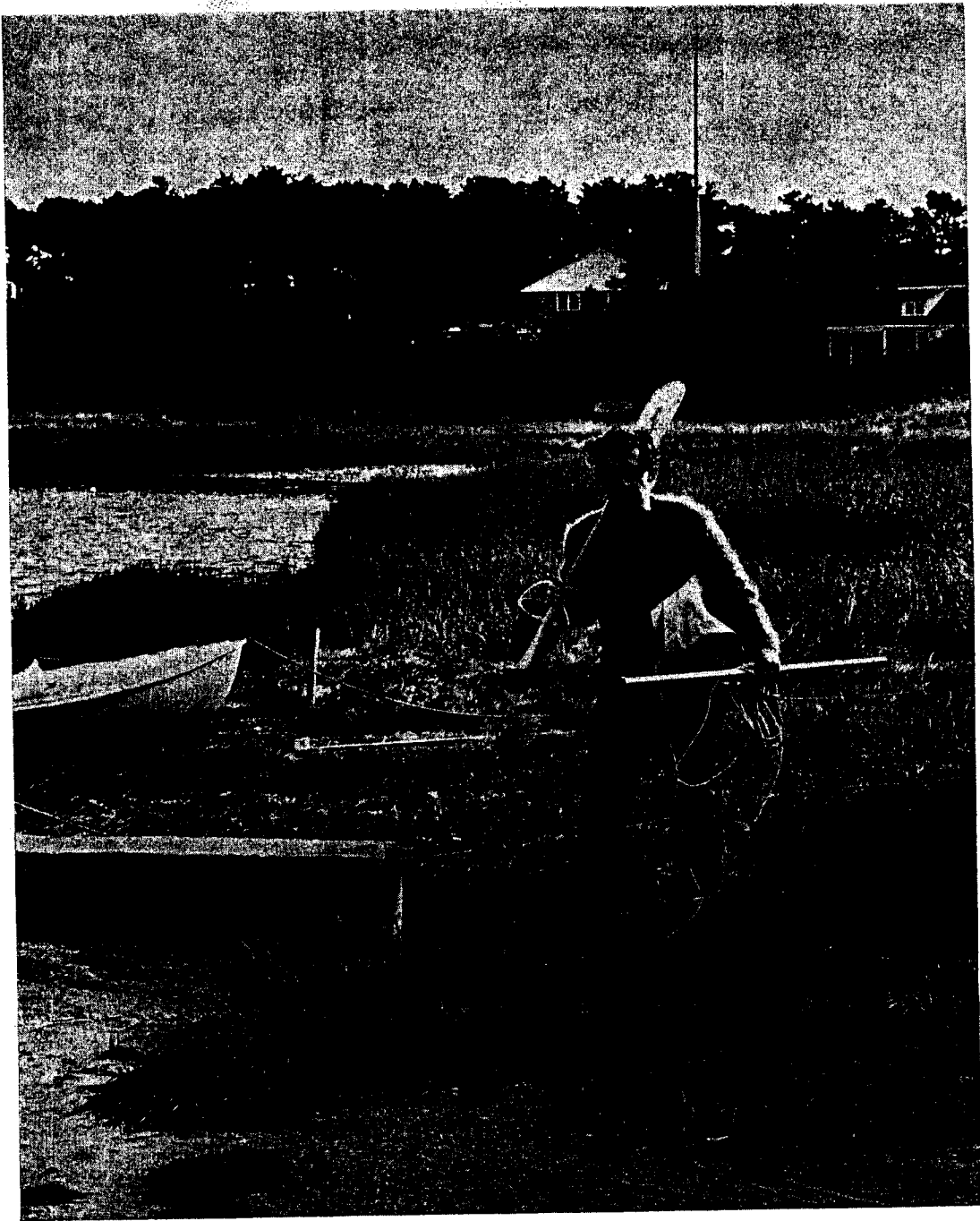
Geis took the departure of his partners with utmost good grace. He announced that he was a champion of "free expression" and utilized his colleagues' protests so ringingly in his full-page ads (a book "which touched off an explosion in the publishing world that reverberated . . . across the country") that he eventually felt justified in raising *The Exhibitionist's* print order by 30,000 books. Money . . . money . . . money is an-

anticipated by all hands. Slavitt expected \$150,000 if the book were a disaster. But he will not have to settle for so demeaning a figure; the book is high on the best-seller lists, the movie rights have brought \$225,000 and he now expects as much as half a million as his cut of the proceeds. He has engaged the New York law firm of Barovick, Konecky and Bomser to help him retain as much of the loot as possible.

Slavitt is not pleased, however—and this is putting it mildly—at the awful thumping he has taken from reviewers since his novel was delivered, in its shocking pink-on-black jacket, to the shelves of U.S. bookstores. He is indignantly willing to say why. There is a certain irony to be savored from this—as there would be, indeed, if any other literary scholar defended so dubious a work as *The Exhibitionist*. And the irony is multiplied when the author states his own case: for if he fails to justify David Slavitt and *The Exhibitionist*, he cuts unnervingly and eloquently close to the truth about the book business in general—and about you and me and the world we live in—when he rises to make his pitch.

He insists that: "The kind of social responsibility a writer is supposed to have is predicated on readership. If a writer is booted right and left and forced to get grants just to eat, to connive while the public looks at the *Beverly Hillbillies*, then he cannot be asked for very much such responsibility. . . . A serious writer either has no audience or he has a ridiculous audience—the kind that took up *Lolita* for all the wrong reasons.

"If you want to produce a best-seller you can only appeal to some kind of external reality. If you criticize *The Exhibitionist*, you are really criticizing 10, 15 or 20 million people; if the bulk of Americans hadn't felt that a book like



Slavitt lives at Harwich on Cape Cod and owns the 12-foot craft at center left. He describes his skill at sailing as "adequate —I haven't crashed into other boats or gone aground in some time now."

this was okay, I wouldn't have written it.

"I think it is essentially snobbish of Bennett Cerf, that waste-basket in tweeds, to have defended *Ulysses* (which is about real people, even if they were a bunch of Irishmen nobody had heard of before) and then to tell the reporters he wouldn't touch my book with a 40-foot pole."

But how does a Slavitt justify such a novel's trickery and cruelty—the innuendo by which it attributes startling sexual deviation to real people, who are helpless, because of the device of fiction, to utilize the law of libel in their own defense?

"I didn't," he says blandly, "attribute anything to the people you are talking about."

How could he possibly explain, then, the curious parallels between their lives and the lives of his leading characters?

"Entirely inadvertent. It really isn't about anybody. But now [long silence] if it were [long silence] about real people, there would be two considerations: 1) nobody in the movie business has the right to privacy, having traded it away at the barter stone; and 2) if I were one of those people, if I were a sex symbol, I would hire a guy just like me to write a novel just like *The Exhibitionist*. After all, if you are in that business, you are going to be in those crummy movie magazines."

But the Case of *The Exhibitionist* also offers giggles—to use a Slavitt expression—which are only peripherally concerned with the book itself. Money plus publicity plus a certain interesting whiff of scandal can give almost anyone in the U.S. who is not actually a member of Cosa Nostra a kind of automatic stature. Slavitt's fellow alumni can be expected to accord a classmate with half a million dollars a certain respect, reluctant or not, which they did not necessarily advance him in the days when he was impelled to resign from the Yale Club, poetry or no poetry, for lack of funds. Even so nonworldly an institution as the *Kenyon Review* seems fascinated by Slavitt's new estate

and asked him to write them a critical appraisal of himself under his Henry Sutton pseudonym. He obliged: "Given its peculiar and piquant genre," he said, "*The Exhibitionist* is rather a good book."

But his emergence as a main-events fighter prompts an inevitable question: "Is it possible that

the boy is as good—or even, for that matter, one half as good—as he keeps telling us he is?"

Slavitt possesses impressive literary faculties. He has a fine critical mind, a rare gift of phrase and an understanding of those rhythms by which it is best employed, and a swordsman's instinct for epithet and for adventurism with words. A good deal of his literary and cinematic criticism must be regarded with real admiration. And one must look with approbation, while doing so, on his roaring ego and his instinct for biting the hand which feeds him—both are often the hallmarks of talent. But writing—creative writing, that is, as opposed to criticism—demands more than this. The writer must have something to say about his fellow humans; and the man of ignorance, alas, is often more capable of doing so than the man of erudition—who may prefer to consult the classics in his subconscious mind rather than submerge himself in the people and the world around him.

Both Slavitt's friends and Slavitt's enemies have concluded—after picking feverishly through *The Exhibitionist*—that it "is the best thing David has done." It is. It is well organized, possesses a lucid story line (though how much of this is attributable to Geis and his editors one can only guess) and, more encouraging yet, demonstrates an ability to develop character—even though the characters are oddly motivated and more continuously frenetic than real humans—which was entirely lacking in the "serious" *Rochelle*. But does this mean that Slavitt is actually the possessor of literary

genius? Or can it be interpreted—as certain gleeful Slavitt-watchers have been interpreting it—as evidence that David has simply found the métier to which his talents have been best suited all the time?

Slavitt, of course, has his own opinion—and surely, as a reward for positive thinking, deserves the last word. "What if it were discovered," he says, almost dreamily, "that the poetry of Robert Lowell and the books of Harold Robbins had been written by the same guy? And the plays of James Goldman (*The Lion in Winter*) and the novels of Harold Humes (*Underground City*). That is damn near what I've set out to claim."