

# Corrections

by Richard Kostelanetz (May 2015)

## I. Virgil Thomson's "Antisemitism"

In a recent issue of the ultra-Jewish weekly *Forward*, the music writer Benjamin Ivry (b. 1958) thinks that he discovered an unacceptable quality in America's most important writer-composer Virgil Thomson (1896-1989). Initially Ivry focuses upon Thomson's intense love-hate relationship with Aaron Copland, who was a New York Jew just as Thomson was a Kansas City WASP, and so, to no surprise, regarded each other as belonging to those categories. (Both were also homosexual, but that's another matter.)

Thomson exemplifies to me the artist who attains through another activity a prominence unavailable to him through his art alone. Some of these artists wrote strong prose, as Thomson did. Others teach at universities, sometimes earning professorships prefaced by a donor's name or the epithet "distinguished." The greater their extra-artistic prominence, the more likely are such artists to con themselves into thinking that their art deserves more respect from sponsors and audiences. When their work fails in cultural marketplaces, they verbally identify obstacles, often imaginary, in people unlike themselves. So have women artists done men, California artists done New Yorkers and heterosexual artists homosexuals (and vice versa), etc.

One complication in Thomson's relationship with Copland is that both composed tonal music, in contrast to other styles competing in their years; so that while Thomson as a music reviewer felt obliged publicly to support new Copland efforts, he also resented the latter's greater success as a composer. In editing a selection of his writing as *Virgil Thomson: A Reader* (2002), I documented the intensity of Thomson's feeling about Copland by printing in sequence four longer essays written many years apart. Needless to say perhaps, about no other contemporary would Thomson write so much or repeatedly return. Copland, no one else, was Thomson's "Jew."

Not unlike other strong writers, Thomson could publish thoughts and sentiments that other writers censored in themselves. As such expressions become measures of strength, I find exposés of occasionally disagreeable phrasings in him or other writers to reflect an essentially philistine deprecation of critical excellence.

About anti-Semitism, as well as other unfortunate prejudices, I'm more concerned with documenting bias by counting absence. (For exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton universities until the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, read Jerome Karabel's great exposé, *The Chosen* [2005].) If Jews were few where they might be many, as, say, in an educational institution or a literary anthology, that's serious anti-Semitism. Likewise if few black people played professional sports in America prior to the 1950s, that's a far more serious racism than, say, using the "N-word." Since exclusion is impermissible, exposing it becomes necessary because it cannot be disputed, even as the counter is vulgarly discredited, as numbers are numbers.

To illustrate Thomson's alleged anti-Semitism, gumshoe Ivry quotes from my *Reader* this passage about Gertrude Stein: "She held certain Jews in attachment for their family-like warmth, though she felt no solidarity with Jewry. Tristan Tzara—French-language poet from Rumania, Dada pioneer, early surrealist, and battler for the Communist party—she said was 'like a cousin.' Miss Etta and Dr. Claribel Cone, picture buyers and friends from Baltimore days, she handled almost as if they were her sisters. The sculptors Jo Davidson and Jacques Lipschitz, the painter Man Ray she accepted as though they had a second cousin's right to be part of her life. About men or goyim, even about her oldest man friend, Picasso, she could feel unsure; but a woman or a Jew she could size up quickly."

As a Jewish admirer of Stein, I have spent many years trying to discover Jewishness in her life and writings. Judging this passage to be enlightening about that question, I reprinted it before and now quote it again.

What's missing from this Thomson summary is any acknowledgement that Stein's partner for life Alice B. Toklas was also Jewish, as was Stein's previous lover, Mary Bookstaver. Indeed, Ivry notes that Thomson's principal companion for most of his life was the painter Maurice Grosser, a Jew from Alabama. As I wrote before, *trust what they do* (and their taste in closest partners) over whatever they say, especially in passing. (Years ago I advised against throwing the derogatory "anti-Semitism" too easily, especially about cultural figures, because doing so flatters more dangerous anti-Semites, such as, say, the notorious Breckinridge Long [1881-1958], the US State Department official who placed obstacle after obstacle before European Jews trying to immigrate to the USA during WWII. The same critique I'd make of glib "racism.")

Finally, Ivry follows certain other writers, most notably Janet Malcolm, in trying to discredit Stein and Toklas for surviving World War II in Vichy France. While some of the older ladies' peculiar moves and exploitation of special privileges might seem discreditable in isolation, they also exhibited a courageous ingenuity not unlike that of other survivors in

the belly of the Nazi beast. May we wish now that other older Jewish women at that time were so smart?

## II. What's Wrong with *Portside Monitor*?

For a while now, I've been receiving their daily quintuple lefty aggregates from many sources without thinking much about them. The most peculiar bits approvingly report protests within Israel or anti-Israel protests on behalf of Palestinians in Western Europe without noticing that such anti-government protests couldn't possibly happen in neighboring Arab countries because the protesters would be quickly imprisoned, if not killed.

Typically again, *PM* routinely reprints favorable news from Cuba, even when it seems incredible, such as the claim to have eradicated both syphilis and babies born with HIV. While the former would be impossible in any culture with prostitution catering to visitors, the latter really reflects not preventive medicine but the law-enforced absence of psychotropic drugs requiring needles. Consider that the latter restriction reflects in turn law-enforcement that some liberals would regard as infantilizing, if not Draconian and hard starboard.

Just as countries are divided into saints and sinners, so are people without regard to any actual policies. Against the familiar lefty heros are pitted the Koch Brothers, even though one of them generously subsidized American ballet and their libertarian positions include approval of gay marriage, free abortion, legal access to all pharmaceuticals, disapproval of American military activities around the world, etc. *PM* exemplifies to me the "liberal" simple-mindedness of classifying political celebrities on the basis of where they say they plant their feet, rather than what they advocate, and then how they might deviate from others with their feet in the same turf.

Another suspicious sign is *PM's* glib approval of social policies likely to increase American unemployment, which I regard as the major socio-economic problem of our time, their smug publicizing of, say, higher minimum wages reflecting their inability to think something through to its likely consequences, especially about poor peoples who wouldn't read their handouts. Similarly, the *Portside* handouts typically fail to consider the likely unemployment probably resulting from policies purporting to reverse "climate change." Need I continue?

That made me realize the deeper problem with *PM* and probably other publicists of its stripe: *There's little thinking here and certainly no rethinking*, only paternal guidance toward correct positions depending upon certain unexamined "portside" or left biases—less preaching to the converted than massaging them. To no surprise, there are no surprises.

All this measures a thoughtless operation as essentially juvenile, even if it appeals to adults of limited mentality, and is thus exploiting the limitations of its readers. Also people parading correct positions need not worry about the stupidities of their readers or the fates of those less fortunate.

I suppose there exists a "starboard" (or right-wing) aggregator that's comparably simple-minded, but it doesn't send me daily emails.

Nearly five decades ago I edited an anthology of social thought titled *Beyond Left & Right* and have since dismissed as retrograde writers pervading either of these epithets, whether to praise or blame. Still do, alas.

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Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, *NNDB.com*, *Wikipedia.com*, and *Britannica.com*, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are