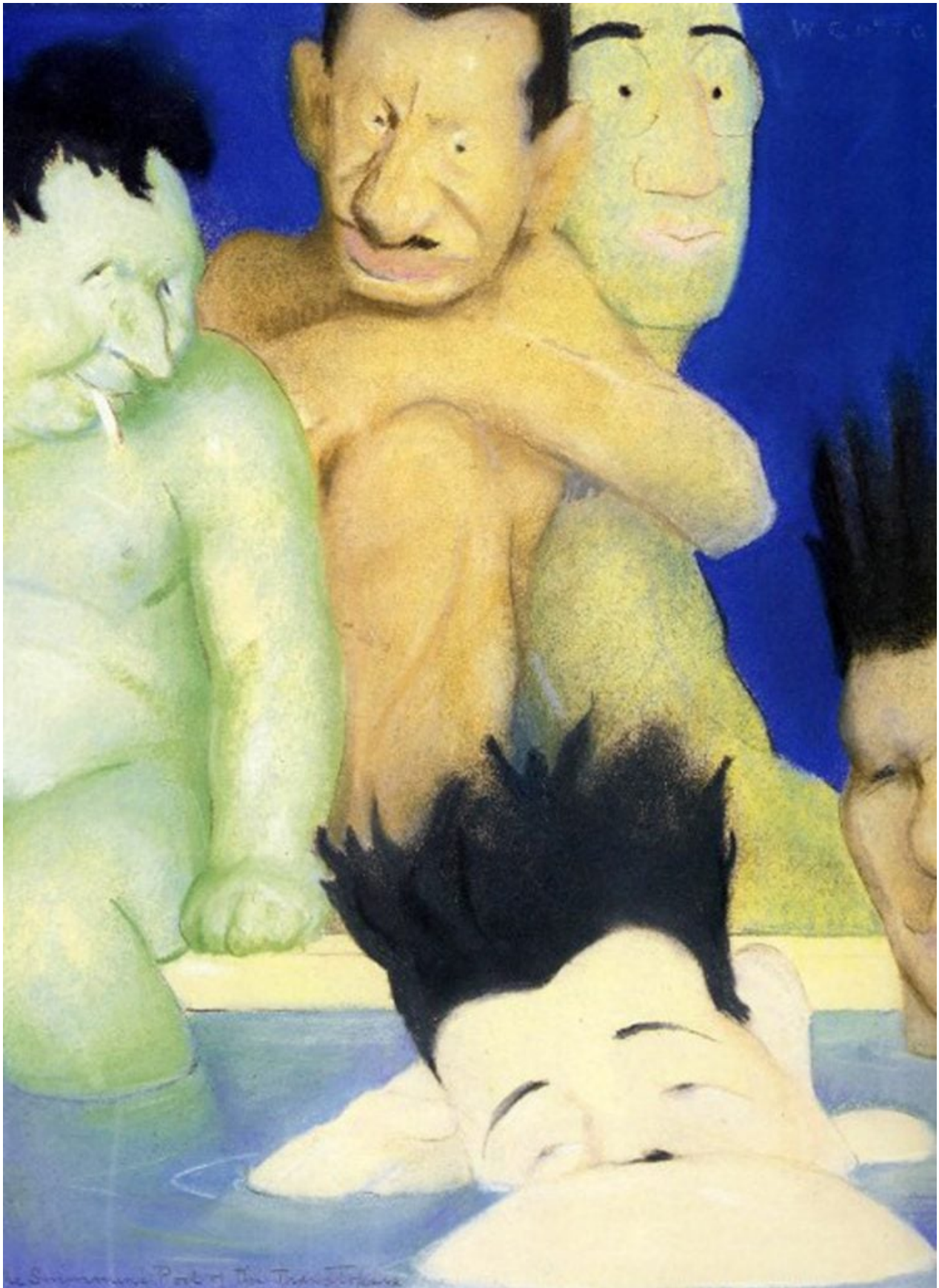


Table Talk

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (May 2024)



Swimming Pool of the Thanatopsis Club –William Henry Cotton, 20th C

Table Talk

I think that poetry is fundamentally frivolity. I do it because I like it. –W. H. Auden, March 19, 1947

In Latin, *frivolous* means trifling, silly—the verb’s *friare*, rub away, or crumble,* our “frig” ‡ and “friction,” are conceivably cognate, but not “fumble.”

Like Henry James “a great and talkative man,” ‡ Maitre Wystan in his *Table Talk* was never humble. Asking Hannah Arendt’s hand in marriage, she begged to decline:

“He ponged like a *clochard*!”§

Later, he was heard to grumble:

“Women should drink port with lemon”

(i.e., not sauce in bars minus rejected bard).

Fending off the Noonday Demon,

compensating hoi polloi’s lack of regard,

it’s with frivolity poets wear stone away.

*Schöngeistig*** though sometimes the great master’s card,

I like it, too—for RIP has all too long a stay!

Epigraph: The Table Talk of W. H. Auden by Alan Ansen (Princeton, NJ: Ontario Review Press, 1990), 37, 39, 99.

[*] “French *frivolité*, from Old French *frivole* “frivolous.” ... From Latin *frivolous* ‘silly, empty, trifling, worthless,’ diminutive of **frivos* ‘broken, crumbled,’ from *friare* ‘break, rub away, crumble’ ...”
(<https://www.etymonline.com/word/frivolity>).

[†] A synonym for “fuck,” from Middle English *fryggen*, to wriggle.

[‡] Auden, “At the Grave of Henry James.”

[§] “Ponged like a *clochard*” = stank like homeless Parisian drunk.

[**] *Schöngeistig* = esthetic, high-minded, affected ... perhaps now even “woke”? A pet put-down of Auden’s (especially with reference to Rilke).

Just Practicing

In memoriam Alan Ansen

... most delicate hippopotamus of poets. –Allen Ginsberg

In a frail-care home (Yannis e-mails me),
“Alan reads Agatha Christie and the *Trib*
but can barely hold a pencil, far less write.”
Far less write. “He says he wants to die
but insists on his flu shot, his glass of red
wine, and ice cream!! When I found him
napping at 10.00 a.m. yesterday, he
told me that he was ‘just practicing.’”

Jack Kerouac dubbed him “Rollo Greb,”
“Austin Bromberg,” “Irwin Swenson.”
–silly names in books. That’s over.
Over too the Aegina Art Centre lectures
on “The Poetry of Pound, Eliot, Yeats,
Auden and Ansen” that he once gave.
Over our dispute about diffidence—
I pro, needless to say, he contra.

I had an old house there once, not far away,
with a view of the Parthenon from my front window
and a pomegranate tree in the courtyard, from among
whose roots I dug up a brass pestle
long separated from its mortar,
buried perhaps by some forgotten kid.
They tore it down, my house.
A small block of flats stands there today.

Envoi: Alan Ansen, who served as W. H. Auden's secretary in Manhattan in the late 1940s, died on November 12, 2006, and is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Athens.

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Peter Richard Dreyer is a South African American writer. He is the author of *A Beast in View* (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), *A Gardener Touched with Genius: The Life of Luther Burbank* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan; rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press; new, expanded ed., Santa Rosa, CA: Luther Burbank Home & Gardens), *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).

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