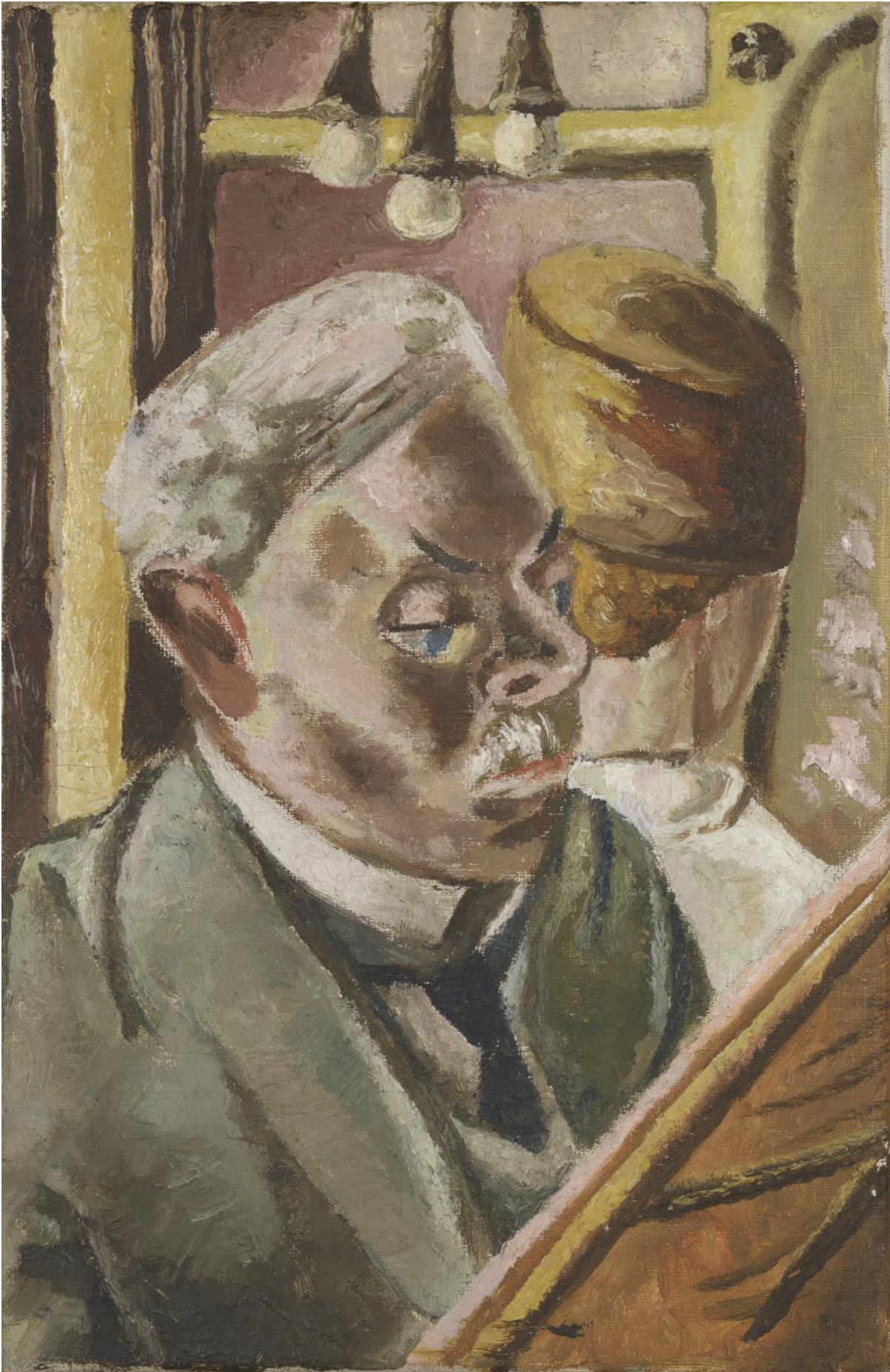


# The Prodigy

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (August 2019)



*People on a Train*, Marie-Louise Von Motesiczky, 1920s

On the train from Buffalo  
To Manhattan years ago,  
Reading Dylan Thomas, and  
Writing with my other hand,  
I became aware of this  
Figure keen to reminisce,  
Sighing with a sweetened woe:

“I got drunk with him, you know.”

“Dylan Thomas? When?” I said.

“Back at Yale, my roommates led  
Dylan ‘round in fifty-four,  
Halfway through the reading tour—  
Basically conducting him  
Bar to bar & whim to whim.  
*Jesus*, a disgusting cad.  
Very sordid. Very sad.”

All his features drained of art,  
Something deep within the heart  
Had begun to sweetly blur  
Through this somber traveler.  
He began to slowly slack  
His imagination back  
When his body's real design  
Like a fiber optic line  
Taut across the midnight's pit  
Proved a perfect conduit:

“Ever since my boyhood, I  
Was a mathematics guy.  
But my friends loved poetry.  
I loved them. And they loved me.  
So, when it came time to fête,  
Let's see...T.S. Eliot,  
Off they went, with me at heel,  
Like a happy spaniel.”

Noticing me noticing  
That what he had thought to bring

On his trip was limited  
To a garment bag (he hid  
Nothing very well), he sighed:

“Yesterday my brother died.  
Funeral’s tomorrow in  
The old hometown, New Berlin,  
Half an hour east of Troy.  
When I was a little boy...”

But this rumination slid  
Really far away. “A *kid*—  
I was just a kid when they  
Sent me all the goddamned way  
Up to Harvard. But they said  
Any callow boy whose head  
Could do math like mine...*insane*.”

Our nearly antique train  
Going at an antique pace  
Through a bleakly antique space  
(Iron lace, a heaven’s face

Quietly immune to grace)  
Jerked a little bit, and slowed  
Where the angry earth was ploughed.

“Damn it, just a callow kid.  
And for all the good it did...”

Under all the current strain,  
The departments of his pain  
Started their reversion to  
Waste & welter that withdrew  
All those years ago to form  
Something like a narrow norm,  
Like a world, a Where to when  
This aríthmetícíán.  
The extended finger of  
Memory delayed above  
Pastry cases of ideal,  
Well-confected & surreal  
Instances of youthful shame  
Sixty years could not disclaim.

“When I was a freshman, I  
Made an idiot of my-  
Self before the girl I *knew*  
Was the very angel who  
Heaven allocated for  
My Beloved Forevermore.  
And,” he closed his eyes to say,  
“I’m afraid I ran away.  
Cleared my throat, and left the dorm,  
Disappeared into the storm  
Like a Mediæval tyke.  
Christ, how very...*poet-like!*”

“What disgrace could *possibly—*”

“Merit that?” preempted he,  
Followed by a stoic sigh.  
“Let me start by saying my  
Memory is like a threat.  
I’m *condemned* to not forget.  
Everything I’m ever told.  
Every plaudit. Every scold.

Every dim historic date.  
Every footnote. My irate  
Memory must be a king.  
I remember everything.  
Every type of fungus gnat.  
Everything. *Except for that.*"

Once a slash of mental sky  
Sudden-cleared, he ventured: "I  
Think I'd bet you that the dame  
Never knew my Christian name."

He condensed, an epigram.  
"It's obscene to be a damn  
Prodigy...but you, I sense,  
Know that from experience."

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