

Two Inquiries

by **Richard Kostelanetz** (November 2015)

Part I: SCRUTINIZING BRITANNICA.COM

Soon after discovering in 2000 an entry on myself on Britannica.com, I made for myself an informal list of people also included with individual entries on its website against a second list, further below, of those not included at that time. At the end of 2011, I made a third list of those on the second list who were subsequently included. All this I reprint for others to consider critically:

INCLUDED:

Walter Abish

Renata Adler

Margaret Atwood

Milton Babbitt

Russell Banks

Daniel Bell

Harold Bloom

Kenneth Burke

Robert Coover

Stanley Crouch

Samuel R. Delany

Paul de Man

Rita Dove

Harlan Ellison

Clifton Fadiman

Morton Feldman

Leslie A. Fiedler

Henry Louis Gates

Louise Gluck

Stephen Jay Gould

Jori Graham

Rudolph Giuliani

Spalding Gray

Robert Hass

John Hawkes

Richard Hofstadter

Richard Howard

Irving Howe

Ba Jin

Herman Kahn

Hugh Kenner

Galway Kinnell

Kenneth Koch

Richard Kostelanetz

Stanley Kunitz

James Laughlin

David Mamet

Paule Marshall

Mary McCarthy

Marshall McLuhan

Thomas Merton

L. Moholy-Nagy

Meredith Monk

Thelonious Monk

Andrew Motion

Lewis Mumford

Albert L. Murray

Sharon Olds

Charles Olson

Tillie Olson

George Oppen

Amos Oz

Cynthia Ozick

Nam June Paik

S. J. Perelman

Robert Pinsky

F., T. Prince

Phillip Rahv

Ishmael Reed

Kenneth Rexroth

Max Roach

Henry Roth

Phillip Roth

Thomas Pynchon

David Riesman

Harold Rosenberg

James Schuyler

Delmore Schwartz

Roger Sessions

Karl Shapiro

Sam Shepard

Archie Shepp

Mark Spitz

I.F. Stone

Tom Stoppard

Mark Strand

Cecil Taylor

Virgil Thomson

Melvin Tolson

Lionel Trilling

Harold Varmus

Wendy Wasserstein

Nathaniel West

Thomas Wolfe

Tom Wolfe

Louis Zukofsky

One quality that I think shared by these people is work that will survive their deaths. That I assume is the hidden measure for inclusion in *Britannica*, which is less a who's who than a kind of Who will be Who was Who. By that last criterion I found in 2000 on Britannica.com only two people whom I judged did not merit inclusion on such grounds—the poet Reed Whittemore and the novelist E.L. Doctorow.

WITHOUT AN INDIVIDUAL ENTRY IN 2002, though sometimes acknowledged within other *Britannica* entries:

Dwight Macdonald, Rick Moody, Jeffrey Eugenides, Nathan Glazer, Irving Kristol, Stewart Brand, Cornell West, John Corigliano, Charles Wuorinen, Richard Gilman, Richard Schechner, Erica Jong, Robert Wilson, John Leonard, Joel Connaroe, Ned Rorem, Ron Sukenick, Clement Greenberg, Norman Podhoretz, Lucy R. Lippard, Asa Briggs, Jerome Klinkowitz, Hugh Kenner, Charles Bernstein, Richard Foreman, Peter Gay, Russell Kirk, Bill Viola, David Remnick, Ed Sanders, Stephen Greenblatt, Denis Donoghue, Catharine Stimpson, George Plimpton, Phillip Levine, Thomas Nagel, Kirk Varnadoe, William Baumol, John Hollander, Dick Higgins, John Tytell, David Horowitz, Lyn Lifshin, Helen Vendler, Benjamin De Mott, John Lahr, Rosalind E. Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Michael Walzer, Don de Lillo, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Hilton Kramer, Frances Fitzgerald, George Soros, Clark Coolidge, Richard Sennett, Jerome Rothenberg, Ron Padgett, Hugh Kenner, Ruth Simmons, David Shapiro, Jay Oliva, Norman Cantor, John Brademas, Harvey Shapiro, Dennis H. Wrong, Gordon Lish, Robert Pinsky, Richard Holbrooke, Richard Posner, Joseph Epstein, Peter McWilliams, Marjorie Perloff, Jason Epstein, Eric Foner, Thomas Szasz,

Rechecking the *Britannica* website some ten years later, at the end of 2011, I

find that from the above second list these people are now included:

John Corigliano

Don de Lillo

Richard Holbrooke

Hugh Kenner

Rosalind E. Krauss

Irving Kristol

John Leonard

Dwight Macdonald

Robert Pinsky

George Plimpton

George Soros

Bill Viola

Robert Wilson

Among those still not included I can identify several people whom I felt have realized work that will survive their passing, first among them the theater genius Richard Foreman, the visual artist Paul Laffoley, and the psychiatric critic Thomas Szasz. Of those once excluded and now not, may I doubt Leonard, Pinsky, and Plimpton, none of whom, in my considered judgment, have produced work that will last.

Most of us have met people who think they deserve an individual entry in Britannica, mostly because of their career success; but by and large, they haven't produced anything very significant—something that would count decades from now—or even tried. Britannica frustrates careerists skilled at kissing butts because its selection judges aren't available, let alone known. (No one has told me before or since.)

As other biographical encyclopedias on line have become more popular, such as Wikipedia and nndb.com (both of which have peculiar entries on me), *Britannica* has lost its popularity and perhaps its authority as a kind of ultimate arbiter of cultural prominence as well. Sad I was to learn that the 2010 book edition would be its last.

While disappointed that *Britannica's* rug was pulled out from under it (and thus me) just after admitting my name, shouldn't we be gratified to know that individual entries are still added, now often credited incidentally to individual writers (with unfamiliar names) who are no doubt expressing their personal enthusiasm. To preserve its historical reputation, *Britannica* must claim an elite level unavailable to the newer biographical sites.

What else can be said about these lists?

Part II: Informants for the FBI & CIA?

Now that exposing government secrets has become a great theme of this decade, let me focus on one kind that needs more light. We know some fifty years later that the American intelligence agencies had informants among us on certain college campuses in the 1960s and then in radical young-adult communities such as New York's East Village; but I don't recall anyone publicly confessing that he was an informant or someone younger researching this subject thoroughly. For now all I can do is share some suspicions.

I've written before about a graduate of Pembroke College (then the women's affiliate of Brown University) applying around 1963 for a secretarial position at the CIA. During the interview she was asked, so she told others, what she was doing at a certain meeting, wholly of students to my recollection, where an adhoc student group arranged to have the film *Operation Abolition* shown on campus. If, as I said, only students were there, then the CIA must have had a student informant. When I first wrote about this revelation a decade ago, I doubted the intelligence of the CIA in trusting an undergraduate who could have used his privileged channel to forward incorrect, prejudicial information about, say, classmates he didn't like.

Plumbing my memory further, I think I erred in characterizing the likely informer, because I now suspect who was he. A philosophy major, a WASP possessed

of good judgment (contrary to my earlier objection), he knew people and was known without being a campus star. He was a diligent student, though not inspired or petty. Though physically tall, he didn't have much physical presence or intellectual presence.

The tipping detail for my suspicions is that his uncle, his mother's brother, incidentally a book author, had been after WWII a station chief for the CIA in Western Europe and later an editor at *The Reporter*, a New York magazine that reportedly received covert support from the CIA. Still alive, having retired from teaching at a prep school, my sometime classmate has defeated all my recent attempts to contact him. If perhaps I'm wrong in my hunch about him, then the CIA must have had another undergraduate informant.

Remember that by 1962 Brown University had already established itself as a channel for CIA employment. Among the alumni was E. Howard Hunt (who incidentally under a pseudonym wrote slick novels set on the Brown campus). Indeed, Brown's president during my years there, Barnaby Keeney, confessed to be a CIA operative for many years. Well after an off-campus magazine that I co-edited was banned from the campus, he told my co-editor that the reason was not a masturbation story that appeared in its pages, as he claimed at the time of the banning, but a glowing report about Fidel Castro's Cuba. A few years after I graduated from Brown, Lyman Kirkpatrick, a CIA veteran, became a full professor there, tenured, even though he lacked the normal prerequisite of a doctorate.

II

When I lived in the high East Village from 1966 to 1974, the likely FBI informant founded and co-owned the East Side Bookstore on St. Marks Place between Second and Third Avenue, the convening center for radicals and hippies at the time. From the afternoons into the evenings they made that street their conference room. As the store stocked radical magazines and books, people hung out there, especially when the weather was foul, apparently with the proprietor's consent.

Its founder had graduated not only from Notre Dame University but from the Buffalo high school owned by the same, relatively small Catholic order. Studying for a doctorate in English literature at New York University, he also taught, probably as an adjunct, at Pace University, also in lower Manhattan. Identifying

him as an informant reminds me of a joke popular at the time. The FBI was guys from Catholic schools chasing after Ivy Leaguers. He fit that profile.

I doubt if the East Side Bookstore made money. (With other owners it became the St. Marks Bookstore and moved around the corner onto Third Avenue.) He liked to say that he supported it with his income from teaching, but since he was an adjunct in the late 1960s those sums weren't much. For his bookstore, there must have been an angel.

I knew Jim, as I'll call him, found him literate and amiable and regretted hearing of his early death (which might have been faked). Intellectually, the most interesting thing about him around 1969 was that he knew the current whereabouts of the St. Marks celebrities. Ask him, where's Abbie (Hoffman)? Jerry (Rubin)? He knew exactly. My hunch then and now (that I'm remembering his interest) is that he was keeping track of them for someone else, probably the FBI.

Two more telling details I recall are that he dated young women radicals, including one who's now a Marxist sociology professor at Columbia University, and that he rented an apartment directly under the New York editor of the Wisconsin-based magazine *Studies in the Left*. Right above him was a couple, Roz and Lee Baxandall, who entertained SDS radicals among others (including myself).

When Paul Buhle reminded me that the CIA in particular liked to have its wards publish intellectual magazines, I recalled that Jim asked me to contribute to his projected publication that would have "the best minds, as opposed to heads" in our neighborhood. As "heads" was at the time a euphemism for someone dependent upon drugs, which I wasn't, this was a joke not forgotten, even if the magazine didn't happen.

III

When I lived in the East Village, I was only six blocks south of the elementary school I had attended from 1947 to 1951. Called Downtown Community School, it was a "progressive" institution that believed learning should be fun. Among my classmates were the children of American Communists, some of whom had jailed fathers. While I doubt if any of the preteens were informants reporting, say, what Pete Seeger sang with us, I recall my classmate Eugene Dennis, Jr., claiming in a documentary about his father that FBI agents were hanging around

our school. That claim surprised me, as they must have looked like sore thumbs among us scruffy kids, though I wouldn't be surprised to learn now that at least one adult on the DCS staff was also an FBI informant.

That's as far as I can go now. I write this now less to expose my own experience than to inspire others my age to recall similar figures in their own past, perhaps bookstore proprietors in university towns.

Apparently neither the CIA nor the FBI cared about me, even though I published many things worth their clipping and filing, beginning with a critique of the FBI as early as my freshman year at college (1959), because both replied, when I asked for files with my name citing the FOIA, that they had none. (These were, so I've written, the most deflating "rejection letters" ever addressed to me.) That claim of nothing may or may not be true. Documents with my name might be stored in other places, beginning, say, with the files devoted to the *Brown Daily Herald*.

May I also invite younger scholars to examine dispassionately how the US intelligence agencies' infiltrated our lives, as indeed they did. This is history that should not be forgotten—history that, when fleshed out, I for one would like to read.

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 [here](#).

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