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Richard Teleky

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Richard Teleky

STONINGTON REVISITED: ELEANOR PERÉNYI AND GRACE ZARING STONE

Books rarely get a second or third chance, but the reprint of Grace Zaring Stone's novel *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1930), and an upcoming reprint of Eleanor Perényi's memoir *More Was Lost* (1946), will give them a well-deserved lease on life. And, oddly enough, it was Bette Davis who made their connection for me, even pointing the way to Stonington, Connecticut, although I don't know if the born-and-bred Yankee actress ever visited there herself. When I arrived, during a bicentennial that marked the three-day battle of August 1814 in the War of 1812, my visit focused on meeting Peter Perényi, the son of a writer I much admired.

In 1981 Eleanor Perényi published a garden book that seemed destined to become a classic. *Green Thoughts: A Writer in the Garden* took the form of an abecedarian, from "Annuals" to "Woman's Place," and was praised by Anatole Broyard, Brooke Astor, John Hollander, and Mary McCarthy. Perényi told of making her garden outside an old house in Stonington, offering not only practical advice but a rich cultural perspective. The book is still in print, as part of the Modern Library Gardening Series. Soon after reading it, I found Perényi's memoir *More Was Lost*, which attracted me because of my own Hungarian-American background. In 1937, an adventurous young American visiting Budapest with her parents is courted by a dashing, liberal-minded baron twice her age, they marry, and she settles on his family's estate in Ruthenia, once part of an old Hungary whose borders frequently changed during the twentieth century. It's a tale of romance (and gardens, too) but also of terrible loss, and was reviewed in *The*

New Yorker by Edmund Wilson as “always lucid and crisp” and in *Harper’s* as “disarmingly frank...a charming story in spite of its tragic overtones of war.” Reprinted in 2001, it is scheduled to become a New York Review Classic. One title can lead to another, and I next located a used copy of Perényi’s *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (1974), which Richard Howard called “one of the most searching, sophisticated and sensible books” about the romantic hero/composer. As an amateur pianist I devoured every page. Here, apparently, was a writer who could do just about anything.

Now Bette Davis enters, via the Turner Classic Movie channel. One night I tuned into an unfamiliar 1948 film, *Winter Meeting*. During the Second World War, a New England spinster poet (Bette, of course), living in Manhattan, befriends a heroic young soldier; they have a brief affair—frankly sexual for its day—and discover secrets about each other that transform but isolate them. I spotted the name Ethel Vance in the credits, located a copy of her out-of-print novel from 1946, and was won over by an exceptional book that deserves rediscovery. Vance wrote several bestsellers that, along with *Winter Meeting*, were made into movies, including *Escape* (1939, filmed in 1940 with Robert Taylor and Norma Shearer). Advertising for *Escape* claimed that “Ethel Vance” was a pen-name to conceal the author’s identity because she had a daughter who lived in a country falling under Germany’s influence. A Google search increased my curiosity: “Ethel Vance” was the pseudonym of Grace Zaring Stone, author of *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (also made into a movie, in 1933, starring Barbara Stanwyck and directed by Frank Capra), and—more important to me—Stone turned out to be Eleanor Perényi’s mother.

Because I’m drawn to out-of-print books, neglected writers, and reputations that have often faded unfairly with time, Ethel Vance’s books soon formed a pile on my desk that even included a historical novel by her daughter Eleanor, *The Bright Sword* (1955). After a few telephone calls my visit to Stonington followed, almost inevitably.

Peter Perényi has a gift for storytelling—perhaps inherited?—and a striking resemblance to photographs of his father, Baron Zsigmond (or Zsiga), in *More Was Lost*. Peter's distinguished foreign-service career provided wonderful stories of his own. First we talked in the garden his mother had made (adding to earlier plantings by her mother), and later in the kitchen, with its ambience of former days still maintained. The house, officially dated from 1787, sits on a third of an acre just a block from downtown Stonington—not far from the James Merrill House, where the poet lived for several decades (it is now a museum with a writer-in-residence program). Peter's grandmother Grace, as I've come to think of her, bought the house in 1941 with money from book sales to Hollywood, and it's filled with mementoes of family travels from Europe to China and Japan, as well as books and more books. In the dining room an old oil portrait of Peter's great-great-great-great-grandfather, the influential social reformer and utopian writer Robert Owen (who founded the New Harmony community in Indiana) looks out over the mantel.

Our talks naturally began with *More Was Lost*, which closes on an open note—"So perhaps the story has not ended after all"—with Eleanor, pregnant, returning to the United States, and Zsiga remaining in Europe, where he eventually joined an underground group. Were his parents reunited after the war? The moving full story is Peter's to write, but a 1947 divorce ended the marriage, although Peter got to know his father years later (they never discussed *More Was Lost*, but Zsiga did own a copy of it, and the book was finally translated into Hungarian in 2003). Eleanor once said that she wrote her memoir because she "didn't want to forget." When Peter visited the ancestral estate in 2002 and brought back pictures of its Soviet transformation, she looked at them and said they reminded her of "the photo of a friend's corpse propped up."

It's a long way from Hungary to Connecticut. Stonington in the 1940s drew writers and artists from Manhattan who traveled there

conveniently by train, and the town claimed a range of talented residents—some part-time, some full—including the Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Francis Henry Taylor. The poet Stephen Vincent Benét had a house there, Merrill moved to Stonington in 1954, and numerous New Yorkers stopped by—Truman Capote came for the summer of 1956, complained that Medaglia d’Oro coffee was unavailable in the village, and called it “creepyville”; later literary residents included the novelist Peter Benchley of *Jaws* fame and the poet and librettist J.D. McClatchy. Grace settled in full time after 1956 and the death of her husband, a naval captain, with Eleanor following around 1962. (*Winter Meeting* includes a visit to a small New England seaport clearly patterned on Stonington, which is located three miles from the more touristy Mystic.) Merrill became close to both women, dedicating *Water Street* (1962) to them, and he wrote several poems for Grace, including “1939” from *Nights and Days* (1966) and “Grace,” about the aging writer, from *The Inner Room* (1988).

In his memoir *A Different Person* (1993), Merrill noted that “Grace was the most cosmopolitan of our Stonington neighbors,” and recalled her “exhaling smoke and taking on the aspect of the famous novelist she had once been.” (Peter said his grandmother and mother both “smoked like chimneys,” though Eleanor eventually had to stop because of emphysema.) Their circle came to include Merrill’s long-time companion David Jackson and Robert Morse, a painter and poet who lived across the street from Grace (his oil portrait hangs in her old bedroom). At our second meeting, Peter and I visited the Stonington cemetery, where Grace and Eleanor are buried beside each other, a stone’s throw from Merrill’s grave. This part of the cemetery is known as “the poet’s corner” (the drama critic John Mason Brown’s grave is also nearby) and Eleanor once remarked that “the cemetery would make the most amusing cocktail party in Stonington.”

But what about two writers, mother and daughter, living in the same house? Each had a studio on the top floor, on opposite ends, but Peter has no recollection of their discussing works in progress, or sitting

together and working on something. Eleanor, “a perfectionist,” likely kept her writing to herself. According to Peter, mother and daughter “saw eye to eye on an awful lot. They were a social unit, accustomed to each other’s company from living close by if not together.” And both enjoyed gardening; Grace was especially interested in the idea of the garden. Their Stonington land had been planned as a series of outdoor rooms, including Grace’s rose beds and Eleanor’s vegetable plot. Grace sometimes liked to write under the grape arbor.

As a child Eleanor had been told that the most important thing was to have an interesting life, and she took this to heart. Both women loved travel and its adventures, and found a way to be intensely independent. Yet as writers with a deep emotional and blood connection, they must have learned to accommodate each other. In an evocative short memoir of the writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten, a friend who took handsome photographs of mother and son, Eleanor recalled meeting him at a dinner party in the 1940s: “I was much the youngest and least important person present—an appendage, really, of my mother...” That status didn’t last. It is, however, interesting that the possibilities of literary work were divided between the two women, with Grace devoting her time to fiction and Eleanor, with one exception, to non-fiction; they had split the prose world in half. As well, the subject of mother-daughter relations seems to have been off-limits. The bond between mothers and sons has a significant role in Grace’s fiction (*Escape*, *The Grotto*), but her books with young women as central figures focus on motherless women (*Reprisal*, *Winter Meeting*, *The Secret Thread*). Grace’s own mother had died in childbirth, a psychic wound any writer might be expected to address, but she treats the subject only in passing.

The relation between a writer’s life and work is easily over-simplified, yet the connection here merits attention. Grace lived a peripatetic childhood, moving from relative to relative. She spent time in New Harmony and later lived with an actress-relation, even working as a child actor. For the jacket of *The Secret Thread* (1948) she wrote: “In New

York we lived in an actors' boarding house like the one described in my book. Also, because the family so disapproved of the whole thing, I was given a stage name. An old colored woman in the boarding house picked it out from some book or play she enjoyed. It was Ethel Vance." After studying at the Sacred Heart Convent in New York and Paris, Grace traveled in Europe, even acted in Australia (Peter also remembers stories of horse-back riding in New Mexico). During her marriage to Ellis Spencer Stone they were stationed for a time in the Virgin Islands, where she began to write. Her second novel, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, brought the success many writers dream of, with praise in *The Nation* ("extraordinarily effective") and a film adaptation that opened the Radio City Music Hall. It was followed by a historical novel, *The Cold Journey* (1934), about an Indian massacre in Puritan New England, which Carl Van Doren called "a novel of concentrated power and sensitive beauty." Next came *Escape* (1939). In *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920–1960* (2009), Gordon Hutner calls Grace's pseudonymous work "the first best-selling book about Nazis and one of the most popular novels of 1939," adding that "It was rumored to have been written by almost every woman writer but Stone." Her identity was revealed by the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1942.

A pattern had been set. Matters of captivity, escape, and rescue—usually within a clash of cultures—are at the core of Stone's fiction. In her earliest books, extreme situations dominate: a New England missionary woman is held captive by a refined Chinese warlord in *Bitter Tea*, and, in a reversal that hints at miscegenation, he becomes captive to his feelings for her; French and Indian raiders forcibly take Massachusetts settlers into Canada in *Cold Journey*; a son rescues his actress/mother from a Nazi concentration camp in *Escape*; and an entire French village is threatened because of anti-Nazi activity in *Reprisal* (1942). Although the threat is external, in each novel the victim has to examine the self because of his or her plight. Later, after the Second World War, captivity takes on a deeper psychological

dimension. In *The Secret Thread* a university president has a nervous breakdown after witnessing end-of-war horrors, and must confront his past; in *Winter Meeting*, two almost-lovers face debilitating personal confusions; and in *The Grotto* (1951, published in England as *My Son Is Mortal*), a mother tries to understand her son's homosexuality in one of the first novels to approach the subject.

Grace's long friendship with the Charleston novelist Josephine Pinckney, discussed by Barbara L. Bellows in her biography of Pinckney, *A Talent for Living* (2006), illustrates the obstacles women writers faced in the years before World War II. It's no surprise they sometimes used feminine charm to survive in a publishing environment where successful writers such as Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst mainly claimed the field of popular fiction. Yet Grace enjoyed the role of the "femme fatale," according to Bellows, with quips like this: "What the American businessman can't stand, his wife can!" Her books, however, bear no relation to the romantic novels of the era. Her male characters are not erotic projections but rather believable beings often preoccupied with internal conflicts, and her female characters have strong, subtle minds. Grace's interest in ideas and philosophy enlarges her fiction, and her books often explore ethical matters and religious belief. Peter aptly described his grandmother's vision to me as "a dark one," yet his portrait of her suggested a warm-hearted woman of deep understanding, which the rich characterizations in her fiction confirm. That she also had a mischievous side made sense. "She liked to say she was a witch," he remarked, acknowledging the mystical aspect of her Celtic heritage. She must have been a powerful role model.

Eleanor, born in 1918, traveled widely with her parents as a child, and later remembered being taken to China at the age of nine, where, during the civil war, she had counted human corpses on the Yangtze River (the details of her mother's novel about China came from first-hand experience). After doing time in an English boarding school, which she hated, Eleanor attended the National Cathedral School for Girls in Washington, which she was asked to leave, without graduat-

ing, for smoking on the roof. A passionate autodidact, she intended to become a painter and studied at the Phillips Gallery, but after returning from Hungary in 1940 (first to Washington, D.C., where her son was born), she settled in New York and worked for several years at the notable Julien Levy Gallery, bringing Arshile Gorky's paintings to the attention of Levy, as Hayden Herrera acknowledges in *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (2003).

With *More Was Lost* Eleanor discovered her flair for writing. Dedicated to her son, the book was brought out by Grace's Boston publisher (Little, Brown and Company) in the same year as *Winter Meeting*. The memoir's title evokes an old Hungarian saying: "More was lost at Mohács" ("Több veszett el Mohácsnál"); the phrase encourages a philosophical shrug at life's tragedies by referring to the Battle of Mohács of 1526, when the small Hungarian army was defeated by the Turks, leaving much of the country subject to a century-and-a-half of Ottoman rule. The baronial way of life that Eleanor recorded has the historical detail of Patrick Leigh Fermor's much-praised account of his 1933 travels through Hungary and Romania, *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), yet there is none of the traveler's distance in her writing since she intended to put down roots. That her youth, beauty, and intelligence charmed her husband's family and acquaintances almost goes without saying, and her hard work on the 700-acre estate surely impressed everyone. But history—in the guise of the Nazis—intervened. (Lauding the memoir's 2001 reprint in *The New York Review of Books*, Gore Vidal, who regarded Eleanor as a friend, compared her to Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*, and then, regarding her escape from Hungary and its aftermath, added, "So an Ethel Vance story becomes Henry James. At the end each *knows*. Each escapes—accepts—forgets even though nothing will ever be the same again.")

The publication of *More Was Lost* must have convinced Eleanor to devote her energies to writing, and she developed her craft with light essays on travel and fashion, as well as book reviews. Like many autodidacts, Eleanor appears to have had great self-confidence, writing

about the things that interested her, some closer to her own life than others. A few examples: her time at the Julien Levy Gallery became a smart 1947 satire called “Art’s Sake” for *Town & Country*; she appeared in *Harper’s* with “Dear Louisa” (1955), an appreciation of Louisa May Alcott (“One is not surprised to learn that she did, indeed, die of over-work, at the age of fifty-six, and in the same year as her father, who did so much, in his simple-hearted way, to kill her off”); again in *Harper’s*, in 1960, “After Hours” was a witty account—based on personal experience—of the travails of a magazine editor flooded with proposals for fashion and cooking articles; and “A Thoroughly Highbrow Cruise,” a dry-eyed 1962 travelogue about Mediterranean culture seekers, with a cameo appearance by the classicist Sir Maurice Bowra, that is wickedly funny. Versatile writers like Eleanor resist simple categorization. With the passing years she went on to write thoughtful essay-length reviews on a wide range of subjects for *The New York Review of Books* (from 1984, “The Bloom Is Off” refreshingly punctures Bloomsbury’s snobbism). A collection of Eleanor’s occasional prose deserves publication: apart from the intrinsic merits of her essays, they belong to a moment of cultural/literary history and help illuminate it.

Introduced to the New York literary world by her mother, Eleanor had earned her own place there through her talent and sophistication. Among her friends she counted Mamaine Koestler, Arthur Koestler’s second wife and one of the twin sisters who visited the Perényi estate in 1937, a visit noted in *More Was Lost*. Mamaine characterized Eleanor in a letter to her sister on January 18, 1951: “It was awfully nice seeing her because she is really intelligent and owing to her European background easy to get on with...it was so nice to be with an old friend and somebody who knows Europe and likes talking about it.” But New York couldn’t hold Eleanor then. To work on her novel *The Bright Sword* (1955), she settled for a year in Mexico, and Peter accompanied her. Although in hindsight he didn’t think much writing got done because of the lively artistic and ex-pat community, eventually she did produce a rich historical novel about General Sam Hood and the Civil War

battle at Chickamauga, dedicating it “To My Father and Mother”—to a military man and to a writer, both aspects of her psychic heritage. However, she was deeply sympathetic to the growing civil rights struggle, and chose not to list the novel—with a southern general as its hero—on her subsequent book jackets.

Once her novel appeared, Eleanor settled back in New York City and for nearly a decade pursued editorial work for magazines, with jobs at *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Charm*, and *Mademoiselle*; her own essays appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, *Harper’s*, *Town & Country*, and *Saturday Review*. Now part of the Manhattan literary milieu, she wrote the first feature article about Edmund Wilson for *Esquire* in 1963 and, like her 1988 memoir of Carl Van Vechten for *The Yale Review*, it’s worth reading today. In *The Tastemaker: Carl Van Vechten and the Birth of Modern America* (2014), Edward White pays short shrift to his subject’s last decades, but Eleanor’s essay (not mentioned) offers one corrective. She concluded with an anecdote about photographs that Van Vechten—affectionately known as Carlo—had taken of her son when he was six years old:

Prints were sent to the boy’s Hungarian grandfather in Budapest, who because of the war had never seen him, and as it turned out never would. The old man died within a few months of receiving them, but we heard later that he had asked for them to be buried with him. Carlo wasn’t strong on family feeling. He had no children and was, as he put it, “wildly against childbirth. People will be starving in the streets.” But when I told him this story he had tears in his eyes—the only time I ever saw that happen.

Eleanor enjoyed having her say. When Jeffrey Meyers interviewed her in 1993 for his biography *Edmund Wilson*, she commented that Wilson, who claimed to be fluent in Hungarian, couldn’t speak the language “and was unfamiliar with nuances of usage,” while of her friend Mary McCarthy—Wilson’s second wife—she said, “Nobody could make Mary do what she didn’t want to do.” In his youthful travels with his

mother, Peter encountered many of the famed writers of the era, and he remembered one weekend visit at Mary McCarthy's when Hannah Arendt dropped by and the three women debated the best way to load a dishwasher.

Eleanor's Liszt biography came next. While the Stonington house no longer has the baby grand that had taken up space in the living-room, classical music mattered to both mother and daughter (James Merrill recalled that "a tattered score of *Manon*" was kept on the piano). *Liszt* is a group portrait, not simply a musical biography, and as such a contribution to studies on the Romantic sensibility. From the first page Eleanor's sympathy and reservations are clear:

The Romantic ego is insufferable and Liszt is of all Romantics the most insufferable. He had to be. He had somehow to keep afloat in the era that replaced the diligence with the steam engine, invented the telegraph and the universal press. He was a witness at the birth of the philistine. The pit-falls are familiar now that we know about mass taste and the maw of fame that devours all but the most resistant of culture heroes, the blowing up of a personality until it bursts. He had no such examples to go by.

Reviewing *Liszt* for *High Fidelity*, the editor Patrick J. Smith wrote that Perényi, though not a trained musicologist, "has succeeded in stripping away all of the myths about Liszt and the figures around him and has evaluated each of them and the times in which they lived more thoroughly than ever before." If there's a caveat, he handled it gracefully: "While some may object to Mrs. Perényi's frequent use of the first person in the expression of opinions, these opinions generally show so much insight that the objection quickly fades." After all, the root word of amateur is *amour*. In 1979 she returned to the subject of classical music with a 23-page booklet called "Great Men of Music: Shostakovitch and his Music" that accompanied an RCA set of four records devoted to the composer. Peter remembered Grace asking, "Who does Grandmother love?" and rather than giving the expected

answer “Peter,” his impish reply was “Beethoven and Mozart.” Eleanor might have added Liszt and Shostakovitch.

A gardener’s work is never finished because the idea and reality of a garden are bound to daily life, and inhabit flux. Eleanor understood this conundrum and wrote accordingly. *Green Thoughts* is a masterwork that sits comfortably on any shelf beside the best of Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West, and Katharine S. White. The title—taken from Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Garden” (circa. 1680)—suits the task Eleanor set for herself. And a daunting one it was, for she admitted that she was not a horticulturalist: “All I can claim is some thirty years of amateur experience, which is to say that I know something about a lot of things and not enough to call myself a specialist in any.” But she was a writer, and, as her Foreword concludes, “a writer who gardens is sooner or later going to write a book about the subject—I take that as inevitable.” In meditations that range from the pleasures of a summer garden’s night scents to reflections on the 17th-century tulipmania in Holland to the challenges of managing an asparagus bed, she bridges the world of the enthusiast with that of the specialist (including local nurserymen and famed gardeners), as well as discussing matters of history and literature that touch on her subject—whatever strikes her fancy. Yet the seriousness of her study never overwhelms her wry sense of humor and enthusiasm for the quotidian. In one brief essay called “Reward” she quotes a passage from Merrill’s poem “From the Cupola”:

Finally I reach a garden where I am to uproot
the last parsnips for my sister’s dinner
Not parsnips mastodons ...

and Eleanor exclaims, “Those parsnips, you see, were mine. I planted them, then went away that winter, commending the vegetables to his care...The parsnips have made it into literature.” The crisp, elegant style that grounds Eleanor’s sharpest insights makes her book essential reading for anyone interested in what good prose can be. And her style—with its clarity, balance, and harmony—shows a debt to Grace’s.

While Eleanor's non-fiction has stood the test of decades, if not a larger span of time, what about Grace's novels? Popular fiction from the past has often been dismissed since Virginia Woolf offered her critique of "middlebrow" writing in *The Death of the Moth* (1942), and Dwight Macdonald followed in 1960 with an influential essay "Masscult and Midcult," later included in his collection of that name (and reprinted as a New York Review Classic). More recently, books such as Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Franco Moretti's *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (2013), have taken the subject for academic study. I raise this issue because writers like Grace can too easily be lumped under the heading of "past bestsellers" and set aside. That does justice to no one—not to the writers and their books, not to the past, nor to contemporary readers. Too often "popular" and "middlebrow" are seen as the opposites of "modernist" or "avant-garde," which may reveal a critical bias against realism. And we may still be too close to the 1930s and 40s to appreciate their ambiguities.

Grace's fiction is not experimental, and her prose is spare and fluid rather than self-consciously literary. In an interview for *The New York Times* in 1942, she said: "I know that my stories don't resemble in the least the books of Virginia Woolf. I don't try to imitate genius—naturally. Why should I? I work terribly hard to tell a story effectively, and do a good tight construction job, because I can do that much. I can be a craftsman." Her lapidary style suits her record of the dilemmas and contingencies of trying to live humanely. While she doesn't avoid situations that might tip a less skillful writer into melodrama, Grace's plot-turns emerge from her characters' temperaments and are not imposed on them for the satisfactions of a page-turner. And she has a keen sense of irony that never falls into smugness. Anyone who has admired Alan Furst's engaging espionage novels would do well to pick up *Escape* for its war-time plot, strong characterization, and palpable intrigue, and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*—a more nuanced version of the East-West cultural clash than anything by Pearl Buck (and published two years before *The Good Earth*)—is as historically smart as recent fiction

by Amy Tan and Lisa See. Arguably her most intense and original novel, *Winter Meeting* is a psychologically probing account of desire that rejects the conventions of its day. The struggle of its characters to reveal themselves through loving has few counterparts in American fiction by women writers of the forties. *Winter Meeting* evokes the best of Elizabeth Bowen, and prefigures subsequent work by novelists such as Mary McCarthy in the 1950s. Like Grace's other novels, it doesn't offer easy certainties or the "middlebrow" reassurance that life is always worth living.

The two women aged together. Grace lived to see one hundred, and died in a Connecticut nursing home in 1991; her last novel was published when she was seventy-seven. Eleanor's final book appeared when she was a young sixty-three. Caring for her mother, and surviving various debilitating illnesses of her own (including legal blindness), kept her occupied until she died in 2009 at ninety-one, with Peter by her bedside. During our visit to the Stonington cemetery Peter wondered aloud if he should clean the lichen from Grace's gravestone. I said that I liked it, somehow the mossy growth seemed right. What matters now is that two writers left us some very fine books, and we owe them both a debt of gratitude. It can only be repaid by reading these books.