

Person of Letters



Tom Williams

NECESSARY DISTANCE

Clarence Major

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One rarely hears the phrase “man of letters” applied to members of the newest crop of US writers. Partly this could be because of a need to amend the phrase to “person of letters,” but it could be said that those of us under 40 are a generation of literary specialization. Writer X only writes novels, Writer Y creative nonfiction, Writer Z strictly poems. Perhaps this stems from the fear of dilettantism imposed in creative writing programs, where you’re asked at orientation if you’re a poet or a proser, where you’re shunned if, God forbid, you “defect” to the other “side.” Whether this development is positive, negative, or benign, I don’t know. It just seems that as the readerships for literary fiction and poetry shrink, writers might already seem less willing to take risks with the genres they feel safe in, let alone a genre that doesn’t come naturally.

But Clarence Major is not of the generation of which I write. His peers are Sukenick and Morrison, Troupe and Rich, to name but a few. And when one reads his work, one has little doubt of Major’s ability to not simply attempt a number of forms or genres, but to triumph with or transform them. His body of work—in its depth, variety, and consistent quality—is staggering. This is, after all, a writer who turned the novel on its ear with *Reflex and Bone Structure* and others, who was a finalist for the 1999 National Book Award in Poetry,

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and who is a lexicographer without peer, as well as a longtime university professor. *Necessary Distance*, his latest volume, introduces the reader to a neglected aspect of his work, essays and criticism. Perhaps neglected is too strong a word: overlooked might serve better, as the attention attracted by his novels, poetry collections, anthologies, and his absolutely indispensable *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* could overshadow even the finest work. Divided into three sections, titled “Viewing Myself,” “Views,” and “Reviewing,” *Necessary Distance* brings to the forefront a variety of stellar nonfiction from 1968 to the present that will remind all of us under 40 what a career in making literature should resemble.

Collected in the last section of *Necessary Distance*, Major’s book reviews are a model of communication to a wide range of readers. Whether writing for *The Denver Post*, *San Jose Mercury News*, or academic journals, Major doesn’t issue edicts from on high: he shares his evaluations in perceptive and economic prose, reading with an aesthetic, but not an agenda. Enthusiastic when a book succeeds—he claims Isabel Allende’s stories “enchant like fairy tales” and “recall the narrative force of ancient storytelling”—Major never out and out pans a book or personally attacks its author. He seems to display a genuine desire to find something positive about every book. This doesn’t mean he’s uncritical or misses occasional opportunities to use the review as a soapbox. A great example of this occurs in his review of Milorad Pavic’s

Landscape Painted with Tea, where he writes, “Most American readers...seem more willing to accept—and at times are even fascinated by...experimental fiction as long as it comes from Europe or South America.” But his jabs are few and mostly gentle. What consistently impresses, though, is Major’s unmatched authority, whether he’s writing about novels, biographies, or books of slang.

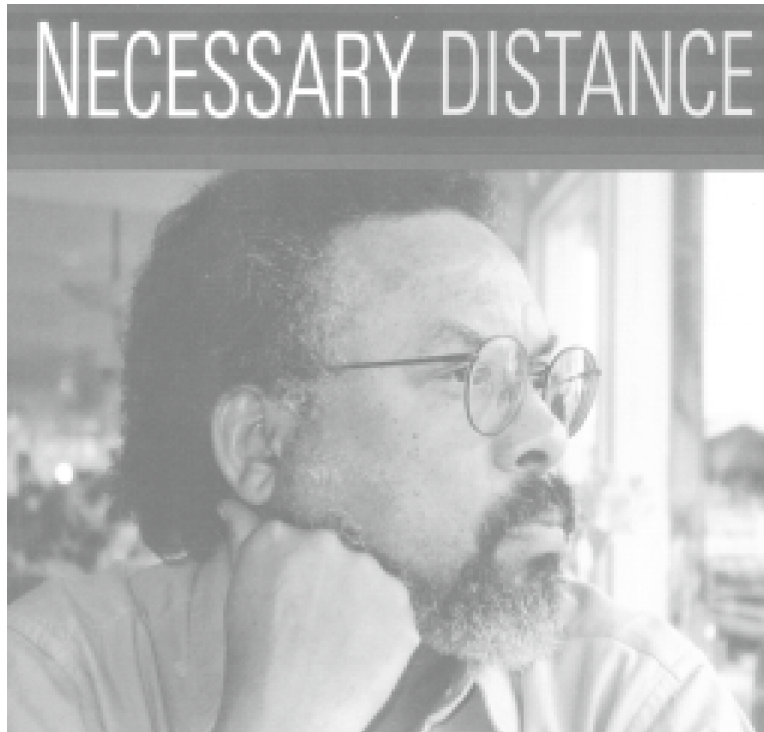
The same can be said of the essays featured in the longest part of *Necessary Distance*, the middle section, “Views.” Again one finds a plethora of subjects, from Faulkner to the Old Testament. And, as in the book reviews, Major’s prose remains precise,

uncluttered, and free of academic jargon. Herein are the more familiar essays, adaptations of Major’s introductions to his peerless poetry and fiction anthologies and *Juba to Jive*, but through these and the newer or less familiar essays, one views Major’s nimble mind at work, finding parallels between his fiction and John O’Hara’s, pointing out the brilliance and tragedy of Wallace Thurman, and expounding on the history and influence of the little magazines in America. If he occasionally summarizes a book too much—as he may in his essays on Thurman, Williard Motley, and Claude McKay—it’s because the work in question is, or was at the time of Major’s

writing, new or unknown to the public. His essay, “Reading William Faulkner’s *Light in August*,” may be the prize of this section, as it is the most recent and offers such a fine insight into Joe Christmas that I wanted to reach at once for Faulkner’s novel and any of Major’s fine works. And if all this doesn’t say enough about Major’s ability, the essay on Donald Barthelme, “Don, Here Is My Peppermint Striped Shirt,” will break your heart.

The first section of the book, “Viewing Myself,” is the briefest, and that might disappoint those looking to *Necessary Distance* for strictly autobiographical material. I would maintain, though, that these personal essays are “personal” in the finest sense. They are not examples of, as Eric Miles Williamson once

asserted in *ABR*, the “literary equivalent of the trailer trash confessional”; they once again reveal the intimate workings of a gifted writer engaged with his subjects. One can especially see this in the first essay, “Necessary Distance.” Subtitled “Afterthoughts on Becoming a Writer,” it takes one through the events that led to Major’s choice of vocation (and in case anyone forgot, Major is a talented visual artist, as well), but suggests it is only with the “necessary distance” of time that any order may be discerned. As Major writes, “I, as a writer, could not afford the luxury of a vision of my own experience as sentimental as the one suggested by my



own country (of itself, of me).” The other essays included—on Walt Whitman, traveling to Paris and Yugoslavia, reading poems to high schoolers—are suffused with sparkling wit and insight. And they introduce us further to Major’s complexity, for one sees him, in the whole of “Viewing Myself,” as student, scholar, artist, husband, colleague, American, African American, and role model. While one might not gain the intimacies of a memoir, one is at all times granted exposure to an artist at his most vulnerable: while examining himself and his relation to the worlds around him.

Whatever you want to call him—person of letters, experimental writer of color, postmodernist—Clarence Major has clearly made his case for an enduring place in the literature of the United States. *Necessary Distance*, with its variety of subjects and essay forms, should satisfy any serious reader. Though I am sure many are hungry for a new novel or collection of poems, all the joys of reading Major can be found in this fascinating and necessary book. For, in his own words, Clarence Major has “learn[ed] to see through the superficial, and to touch, in [his] writing, the essence of experience—in all of its possible wonderment, agony, or glory.”

Tom Williams teaches at Arkansas State University. His most recent work has appeared in Connecticut Review, Pleiades, and Raven Chronicles.