Los Angeles Times
Book Review

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 1990

'Okies, Indians, blacks and Latinos; ranchers, roughnecks and a few who got education but could never get the dust and oil and tule fog out of their blood—Gerald Haslam lets them all sound off.'
Page 6

Homage to the Great Punks of Our European Heritage

ARROGANCE
by Joanna Scott
(Linden Press/Simon & Schuster: $18.95; 283 pp.; 0-671-69547-9)

Reviewed by Hunter Drohojowska

"Arrogance" is the title and often the subject of Joanna Scott's new novel loosely based on the life of artist Egon Schiele—the Johnny Rotten of his generation.

The Austrian Expressionist was the very model of arrogance when critics attacked his naked self-portraits and erotic drawings during the first decades of the 20th Century. Slashing at the academy and bourgeois hypocrisy, Schiele believed that his art was part of a new language emblematic of the modern era. Today, he would be the target of Jesse Helms, and the religious right. He couldn't get a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Schiele lived only 28 years, much of it embattled, from a sad and abused childhood to his sudden death from Spanish influenza in 1918. Yet, during his brief life, he created images that remain so provocative and memorable that he is considered an indelible figure in the history of Expressionism.

With a suffering, rebellious and flamboyant protagonist, a gripping biography might be expected. There isn't one in print. But this is an impressionistic and fictional sketch of Schiele's life, a selection of vignettes woven together with turn-of-the-century ambience. Scott eschews chronology for a cinematic cross-cutting of incidents, so that Schiele's childhood is braided with accounts of his adult behavior. The picture is complete but fractured and colored, as though

Please Turn to Page 9

Drohojowska, chair of the department of liberal arts and sciences at Otis/Parsons, is writing a biography of Georgia O'Keeffe for Alfred A. Knopf.

Egon Schiele, "Seated Couple," pencil/gouache, 1915. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna.

IN MEMORIAM TO IDENTITY
by Kathy Acker
(Grove Weidenfeld: $19.95; 265 pp.)

Reviewed by Tom Clark

In previous books like "Don Quixote" and "Great Expectations," Kathy Acker has patented an audacious, irreverent, provocatively high-handed method of recycling classic literary texts in a manner variously reminiscent of Dadaist and surrealist procedures, Burroughsian cut-up and the "appropriation" tactics currently in vogue in the visual arts.

Effecting an arresting tacit critique by wrenching original works out of context and re-scaling them to purposes quite distinct from their authors' intentions, these collaged "ready-made" novels also manage to generate a formal modality and impetus all their own. It is a technique uniquely suited to Acker's radical aesthetic strategies, central among which are the subversion and redeployment of language as an instrument of power.

Here, in her ninth novel, Acker explicitly identifies her sources in a candid closing note: "All the preceding has been taken from the poems of Arthur Rimbaud, the novels of William Faulkner, and biographical texts on Arthur Rimbaud and William Faulkner."

Acker's piratical plunderings of the public domain are comparatively less manifest in the case of the latter author—from whom she merely adopts her book's structural template, lifted out of "The Wild Palms," and a major character, Quentin, one of her several, relatively faceless and disposable male protagonists, transplanted out of "The Sound and the Fury" and put to appropriately degener-

Please Turn to Page 8

Clark's most recent book of poetry is "Fractured Karma" (Black Sparrow).

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ROLLER COASTER
The Bank of America and the Future of American Banking
by Moira Johnston
(Ticknor & Fields: $24.95; 406 pp.; 0-89919-955-0)

Reviewed by Ron Chernow

The saga of Bank of America has a natural fascination for business writers. It possesses the beguiling logic of a morality play: The sainted founder, A.P. Giannini, builds his retail empire on the trust of poor Italian immigrants and small depositors, only to have latter-day technocrats betray that tradition. As the story of California's largest bank (and briefly the world's), it encompasses the state's economic growth, from orange groves and Disney films to silicon chips and Napa Valley wines.

Before Giannini, the world of high finance was ruled by top-hatted merchant bankers, such as the Morgans and Rothschilds, who catered to a wholesale clientele of sovereign states, large corporations and rich individuals. Giannini conferred new status on consumer banking, showing the economic power in tapping the savings of the masses.

In "Breaking the Bank," published in 1988, Gary Hector used Giannini quotes as chapter epigraphs, rebuking those successors who had deviated from the master's wisdom. (I find these supposed gems trite or pious.) In "Roller Coaster: The Bank of America and the Future of American Banking," business writer Moira Johnston also starts with an idealized founder, then turns to the postwar glory days and catastrophic fall. Writing two years after Hector, she includes the bank's recovery in the late 1980s.

The two books cover much the same ground and offer similar diagnoses of the decline. Beginning in the 1960s, Bank of America dropped its stress on California retail banking, promoting corporate lend-

Please Turn to Page 5

Chernow is author of "The House of Morgan" (Atlantic Monthly Press).

William Murray

'Arrogance'

Continued From First Page

but fractured and colored, as though reflected through a stained-glass window.

For example, the first chapter of the book zig-zags back in time as follows: Schiele, at 22, huddles in his jail cell in the village of Neulengbach, on April 15, 1912, unaware that he has been arrested for painting young girls in suggestive poses. Rewind to 1904, when 14-year-old Egon and his younger sister Gerti watch their father die at home.

A still younger Egon shows Gerti a series of self-portraits. She laughs at them, attracting the unwanted attention of their father, Adolph, who seizes the drawings and burns them in the kitchen stove. Flash forward to the adult Schiele in his jail cell dwelling on the memories of an earlier vacation in Trieste with Gerti, thought to be his favorite model.

In the manner of Dos Passos, the book's serpentine narrative is interrupted with Schiele's diary entries, Viennese gossip, news reports and the philosophical or psychological jargon of the day. The result is a collage whereby one gleans the sense of Schiele's grim life.

You quickly realize that his notorious arrogance is a weapon to be used in self-defense. His alcoholic father, the stationmaster of Tulln outside of Vienna, punishes and berates his son sadistically. Schiele's long-suffering mother Marie pleads in vain that her son will apply his considerable talents to engineering. You begin wondering why little Egon's more aberrant interests did not take a more deviant, proto-Fascist turn.

Instead, he enters the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Within a couple of years, he is invited to work with the more innovative *Wiener Werkstätte*, and rebels against the conservative teachings of the academy. In 1909, he helps organize the *Neukunstgruppe* in Vienna. His work is shown at the *Kunstschau*—where Van Gogh also exhibits—and is denounced as perverted caricature by some, though he receives praise and commissions from the influential critic Arthur Roessler. Vienna's preeminent artist of the late 19th Century, Gustav Klimt, champions Schiele, and as a gesture of friendship, passes along his lover and model, Vallie Neuzil.

Vallie and Egon move to Krumau, where Schiele's mother was born, and then to Neulengbach. Schiele uses adolescent village girls as models for his provocative drawings and paintings. It is the erotic nature of this work that leads to his arrest and detention for 27 days.

Joanna Scott

In 1912, the couple move back to Vienna. Schiele meets Edith Harms, the proper daughter of a prosperous family. He abandons his devoted, bohemian mistress Vallie and marries Edith in 1913. Four days later, he is drafted and serves as a military artist.

In 1918, Edith, pregnant, dies of Spanish influenza; a few days later, Schiele succumbs to the same disease. His work is shown in the 1918 exhibition of the Vienna Secession and, ironically, it is the first to bring him international acclaim.

These facts of Schiele's life are never so concisely nor so conventionally chronicled in Scott's novel. Instead, Schiele's life is revealed elliptically. The supporting characters—collectors, friends and family—and the Austrian setting assume an importance equal to that of Schiele himself. This prevents a reader from becoming engrossed in the story; sympathy for Schiele is derailed repeatedly by asides and observations. But this is clearly the author's intention, and those detours become enjoyable in themselves.

For example, Scott describes Vienna at the turn of the century as a beautiful corpse—*Eine schöne Leiche*—a place of decadence and desire, fading imperialism and legendary indulgences. Occasionally, Scott will enhance the mundane through the enthusiastic eyes of a character like the carefree and hedonistic Vallie. The saucy mistress is given voice to become the most apealling character in the book, living in the moment, spending her modest income on the famous Viennese sweets.

Scott delights in describing these excesses, excessively. "She likes to examine the chocolates before she decides what to buy," writes Scott. "Truffles flavored with pineapple, with orange, with apricot, with coconut, miniature marzipan fruits and marzipan potatoes and even marzipan in the shape of mushrooms, a *Haselnuss Wurst* roll, almond chocolates crisscrossed with white icing, chocolate-covered cherries, pretzels, orange rinds, white chocolate with raisins, bitter chocolate with raisins, milk chocolate, nut clusters, chocoiates filied with whiskey, kirsch, gin, and cognac. How to decide?"

Elsewhere, the reader is advised to become a tourist and take in the sights: "Some of you will wander the streets to admire the jewelers' window displays, others will head for the Karntnerstrasse to see, of all things, the coffins—extravagant containers unlike any others, decorated with floral carvings and cherub friezes, inlaid with ivory and tortoise shell."

Scott is sensitive, and not coy, when writing about sexual games—Egon's affair with a mute Gypsy boy; Vallie's liaison with Klimt; or Vallie and Egon together, both naked, dueling with paintbrushes in the studio: "They dueled with colors, they blotched, striped, bruised themselves, until the hues distracted Egon and he grew more interested in the designs than his own desire. He began to study Vallie with a critical appreciative eye, the way he evaluated all his unfinished work. His erection softened and he urged his lover to remain still while he painted gold halos around her nipples, a silver belt around her waist."

This last encounter is witnessed by a 15-year-old girl, a fictional character who models for Schiele. She tells of her worshipful relationship with the artist and, from the first chapter, the story is supposed to be hers. She speaks from the vantage of an adult after finding that Schiele believed she had turned him in to the authorities.

The idea that the narrator of Schiele's life should be one of the adolescent models said to be corrupted by his avant-garde ways is appealing, an opportunity to explore Schiele's motivations, prurient or otherwise. This fictional narrator says that the village girls were subtly changed after posing for Schiele and that they competed for the honor.

But nothing more is revealed. The reader doesn't have a sense of the innocence or malevolence of the enterprise. Not that moral conclusions need to be established, but as it is now, this fictional narrator seems arbitrary and distracting. She pops up here and there like an insistent drunk and shreds the pattern of Scott's otherwise precise prose.

One of the most satisfying aspects of "Arrogance" is the treatment of Schiele's art—which many an art critic might envy. Scott has taken pains to write specifically and lucidly, capturing the bemused outrage of the misunderstood, unappreciated artist. She demonstrates the cause of his arrogance. "In Vienna, art had to create its purpose," she writes. "The haberdashery peddlers, the Spanish riders, the bargemen, the innkeepers—all had their purpose in the city, all labored by rote. But an artist worked without any prescribed function and had to convince the people that there was value in his projects.

"The Secessionists were popular because they delighted in frivolity; even the more inventive artists in the Klimtgruppe were the equivalent of supreme pastry chefs . . . Egon is alone in his determination to offend the people, believing it to be the artist's rightful purpose to deflate the lies of ornament and sentimentality. Every line he draws is like a thrust, a penetration, and each dab of paint an ejaculation . . . Egon has given them his semen to drink, pure, undiluted semen. And to be undiluted in Vienna is to be unwanted, shunned, deliberately ignored."

With this, her third novel, Scott emerges as a writer who should not be ignored. ■

'Bohin Manor'

Continued From Third Page

"burns and devours people alive"—will come to be known in the next century as Adolf Hitler. Stalin, Lenin, Pilsudski, Mickiewicz and Pushkin appear as well in this landscape crowded with historical personages.

Symbolism can enhance a compelling story, bringing further life to it, but symbols alone cannot carry a story that is weak at its core. Part of the reason this fine novelist has floundered is that he never convinces us that he knows enough about everyday life in 19th-Century Lithuania to transport us there. Though he makes frequent references to his grandmother's demanding work, Konwicki never spells out her chores: "Helena began mentally reviewing the day's tasks. There were a lot of them, exactly the same as yesterday's, and tomorrow's, too." Is she churning butter of doing petit point? The reader wants to know.

For anyone familiar with Konwicki, it should come as no surprise when the author pops up in the text, this time as the soulful grandson searching for his lost grandmother. "I am working my way through the back streets of time," he writes, "through the numbness of the imagination, through my own river of pain, and I must make it to that other shore, to my grandmother."

It is sad indeed that Tadeusz Konwicki, who has succeeded so admirably in showing readers around the world the Poland of today, has failed to shed the same light on the exotic, lost world of 19th-Century Lithuania. Perhaps his next work will return him to provinces in which he is more sure-footed. ■

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