Sallies of the Mind

Francis Fergusson

Edited by
John McCormick
and George Core

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To the memory of
Peggy Kaiser Fergusson, 1913–1995

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Foreword

George Core

Francis Fergusson died in 1986. His last published writing had appeared in the mid-1970s, especially *Trope and Allegory: Themes Common to Dante and Shakespeare* (1977). Mr. Fergusson did not complete his memoir of the physicist Robert Oppenheimer, a lifelong friend. But he still left behind a formidable body of work in print, work that began in 1927 and ran for half a century, work that was superior from beginning to end.

Fergusson's prose demonstrates great range and variety, and it is chiefly, but by no means entirely, critical in nature. Much of it turns on three great figures—Aristotle, Dante, and Shakespeare. The most original dimension of this criticism derives from Fergusson's philosophical and practical meditations upon Aristotle's concept of action; his most enduring scholarship involves the work on Dante and Shakespeare considered both separately and in concert. But Fergusson's essays that focus upon the modern theater are nearly as impressive as his writing on Aristotle, Dante, and Shakespeare, and he is among the most astute critics of Henry James from Percy Lubbock to R.P. Blackmur and Philip Rahv and beyond. Any serious student of James wishes that Fergusson had written more about the dramatic aspects of James's novels.

Francis Fergusson was a man of letters as well as a man of the theater; his work includes poetry and a play derived from the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The King and the Duke* (1939), in addition to his productions of various plays and his own version of Sophocles' *Electra*.

The most original and enduring book that Fergusson wrote is, needless to say, *The Idea of a Theater* (1949), in which he applies his profound understanding of the concept of action to the drama of Sophocles, Ibsen, Chekhov, Pirandello, Eliot, and still other playwrights. *The Idea of a Theater* is one of the most penetrating works created during the

salad days of American criticism when it flourished in the 1940s and 50s. This acute study "is a work comparable in range and depth with Auerbach's *Mimesis*," Allen Tate observed twenty years after its publication. "There is no other work by an American critic of which this can be said," Tate added. That remains true twenty-five years later. New generations of readers should continue to study it, for there is nothing to rival this essay in criticism.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Fergusson's criticism is that it stands comfortably, at ease, with the best work springing from diverse schools of criticism that are sometimes in conflict: I refer to the New Critics, including Tate and Blackmur; the New York intellectuals, especially Rahv, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling; the myth critics, of whom Richard Chase and Northrop Frye are probably the most significant so far as North America is concerned; various distinguished critics of the modern theater, particularly Eric Bentley; and such independent men of letters as Howard Nemerov and Wallace Fowlie (both of whom taught with Fergusson at Bennington, as did the critic Stanley Edgar Hyman). If Fergusson was in many ways allied with the New Critics and with such critical quarterlies as *Hound and Horn* and the *Sewanee Review*, he was also associated with many other distinguished people and organizations of vastly different persuasions, as John McCormick makes plain in his moving tribute that appears in this book. Professor McCormick and I know of no other man of letters in recent times who had a greater range of literary associations, in and out of the academy, than did Fergusson—and who was so greatly respected in so many different quarters.

The criticism of Francis Fergusson endures not only to its originality, depth, and range but to its classically austere clarity of style. Hence his "critical theories and practices," as R.W.B. Lewis observes, "possess a severely beautiful purity."

We think it time to present a new selection of Fergusson's criticism, preserving the best of his essays from the early 1930s to the mid-1970s. Today only *The Idea of a Theater* and *Dante's Drama of the Mind* remain in print, and such magazines as *American Caravan* and *Hound and Horn*, which are long since defunct, are increasingly difficult to locate.

The present selection is drawn from nearly all of Fergusson's books, which themselves are built upon the sturdy foundation of the essay, what Dr. Johnson called a sally of the mind. We are also including work not previously collected by the author, such as "T.S. Eliot and His Imper-

sonal Theory of Art" and "D.H. Lawrence's Sensibility." And here, too, we reprint (for the first time) "The Notion of 'Action,'" a piece written some fifteen years after *The Idea of a Theater* and its appendix on action. This new gathering also incorporates Fergusson's representative criticism on such major authors as Dante, Shakespeare, James, and Eliot; on myth as well as action; on the modern stage; and on the modern novel. The result, we believe, is the best collection of Francis Fergusson's criticism, a taut rigorous book that shows the quick and incisive play of his mind over diverse literary modes and styles—from the criticism of Aristotle to that of Eliot and Maritain, from Dante's poetry to the drama of Shakespeare to the plays of Ibsen and O'Neill, from the fictive art of James to that of Robert Penn Warren.

Looking at the present-day critical scene, which is often confused and parlous, as it has been for a generation and more, with strange armies fighting one another and among themselves on the darkling plain, we see but two contemporary critics who manifest Francis Fergusson's intelligence and learning and verve: Frank Kermode and Denis Donoghue. Like Messrs. Kermode and Donoghue, Fergusson is a critic for all seasons. We commend him to you.

Acknowledgments

We are indebted, first and foremost, to the children of Francis Fergusson, Honora and Harvey, his literary executors, for their permission to reprint the essays and reviews included in *Sallies of the Mind* and to the later Peggy Kaiser Fergusson for her help and support and especially for the line drawing of Mr. Fergusson included in this book.

Various items here first appeared in periodicals no longer being published: "Humanism," "Eugene O'Neill," "Exiles and Ibsen's Work," "D. H. Lawrence's Sensibility," and "The Drama in *The Golden Bowl*" were first published in *Hound and Horn* (1927–1934); "T. S. Eliot and His Impersonal Theory of Art," in *American Caravan* (1927–1936); "Two Acts from Dante's Drama of the Mind," in *Thought* (1926–1992); "Three Novels," *Perspectives U.S.A.* (1952–1956); and "The Notion of 'Action,'" *Tulane Drama Review* (1957–1967), revived as the *Drama Review.*

To the *Sewanee Review,* published by the University of the South, we are grateful for permission to reprint "On the Edge of Broadway" and "'Myth' and the Literary Scruple." To the *Hudson Review* and its editors we are indebted for permission to reprint "Two Perspectives in European Literature." To the *Partisan Review* and its editors we extend our thanks for permission to reprint "T. S. Eliot's *Poetry and Drama.*"

To Rutgers University Press, publisher of Francis Fergusson's *Literary Landmarks,* we express our gratitude for its permission to reprint "Oedipus According to Freud, Sophocles, and Cocteau," originally a lecture that was first published in *Literary Landmarks.*

To the Princeton University Press we are indebted for permission to reprint the essay on Hamlet, "The Analogy of Action," first published in the *Hudson Review,* which reappeared in *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1949). We are also grateful for "The Theater of Paul Valéry," which was written as the introduction to *Paul Valéry: Plays,* edited by Jackson Matthews and published by Princeton (copyright 1960 by the Bollingen Foundation).

To the University of Georgia Press, publisher of Professor Fergusson's *Trope and Allegory,* which includes "Human Government" and "Belief and Make-Believe," for permission to reprint those chapters, we record our thanks.

Finally we acknowledge the Library of Congress for permission to reprint "The *Divine Comedy* as a Bridge Across Time," which first appeared in *Dante Alighieri: Three Lectures* (1965).

Introduction

Francis Fergusson, 1904–1986

John McCormick

After his death in December 1986, Francis Fergusson was identified in certain obituaries merely as a professor and literary critic, which is like identifying Thomas Jefferson merely as a gentleman farmer. Fergusson's reticence and unwillingness to thrust himself forward concealed versatility and mastery in several forms. By turns he was student of biology, of philosophy, writer, *régisseur*, occasional actor, director, playwright, poet, critic, university professor (who elected to work in comparative literature), husband, father, and stout friend. He had the good luck to belong to his time and to his country, and to find his time and his country worth belonging to. He was the most American literary figure I have ever known, even though his skepticism and philosophical naturalism prevented him from flag-waving or spiritual cheerleading. Once, after I returned from a year in Europe, I complained to him that our president was illiterate, the Congress a disgrace, and the voters insane. Francis simply replied, "I rather like all that."

Fergusson's birth and early upbringing shaped his character and the turns of his life to an extraordinary degree. His father, Harvey B. Fergusson, was born in Alabama in 1848; he studied at Washington and Lee University, taught Greek and modern languages there, then became a lawyer. After practicing law in Wheeling, West Virginia, Francis's father went out to Albuquerque, then in the territory of New Mexico, where he staked out a claim to a silver mine. In 1887 he married Clara Hüning (1865–1950), who had been born in Albuquerque but educated partially in Germany before returning to New Mexico. Harvey Fergusson was a delegate to the fifty-fifth Congress in 1897–99, a member of the Democratic National Committee during the Bryan campaign, and a

member of Congress from 1911 to 1915 (New Mexico having entered the Union in 1912).

On June 9, 1915, Harvey Fergusson was found hanging from the cottonwood tree in the courtyard of his Spanish-style residence in Albuquerque. Family accounts vary, but either the eleven-year-old Francis found the body or his mother did. Francis told his son, also named Harvey, that when his father's body was laid out for viewing, as was the custom, his throat had been cut from ear to ear. His father had failed to be reelected to Congress and had been acting unusually, Francis said, just before his death.

One result of that dreadful event was that for a long time Francis lost all appetite, and he subsisted for four years on the edge of starvation. At age fifteen he forced himself to eat a balanced diet, but the long deficiency left him with a slight spinal hump at shoulder level. A less obvious result of his father's death, I suspect, was his laconic cast, his reserve, together with his generosity and thoughtfulness to his own family and to friends. At a further remove, the theatricality of his father's death might seem to suggest his taste for the theater, if not for his ensuing distinction in that activity.

When I first met Francis and his wife, Marion Crowne Fergusson, in the spring of 1957, I knew of him only as the author of *The Idea of a Theater* (1949). After teaching abroad for several years, I needed a year at home and arranged for a stint at Bennington College as a visiting lecturer. We met in the house of the late Paul Feeley, a prominent painter of the New York School, an ex-Marine sergeant, marathon poker player, and fly fisherman. As his fine poem dedicated to Paul Feeley, "The Big Branch: A Memorandum," testifies, Francis, too, fished trout. Having left Bennington in 1947, Francis would return each spring to fish the Big Branch. At our first meeting, Francis volunteered little, but he projected an authoritative if reticent presence. There was none of the customary "Where are you from?" talk that got on my English wife's nerves. (Nor from Stanley Edgar Hyman, also at Bennington, whose very first words to us were, "Finally my belly is bigger than my behind, so now my pants stay up." "How fascinating," my wife said.)

Upon leaving, you might not remember precisely what Francis had said, but you could not forget his pleasant, accentless voice, his full crop of gray hair, or his haunted expression. He resembled a tall William Faulkner. After we became colleagues at Rutgers in 1959, I read and reread his writing, and over many a workday lunch or more leisurely

pre-dinner bourbon, as he described episodes of his experience, I discovered aspects of his temperament that he kept from public view, and I learned to remember his words.

Francis's American quality derived in part from his roots in New Mexico, where as a small boy he learned Spanish and observed the ways of the Hopi Indians. It derived also from his early schooling in New Mexico, in Washington, D.C., when his father was in Congress, in New York City, at Harvard, and at Queen's College, Oxford. It derived, I believe, from his travels and periods of residence abroad, characteristic of his generation of artists. Some two or three years after her husband's death Clara Fergusson moved with Francis to Manhattan, leaving her two daughters and her older son, all of whom were many years older than Francis, to their careers in the West. In New York, Clara Fergusson made "pathetic" (Francis's word) attempts to increase her small income by decorating chinaware.

Francis commuted by subway to the Bronx High School of Science; then for his final preparatory year, 1920–21, he attended the Ethical Culture School in Manhattan (now called Fieldston). There he formed lifelong friendships with the writer Jeannette Mirsky and with Robert Oppenheimer, his exact contemporary, born in 1904. Francis flourished under the tutelage of Herbert Winslow Smith, with whom both he and Oppenheimer continued to correspond long after their graduation. Fergusson and Oppenheimer planned to enroll at Harvard together in 1921, but illness delayed Oppenheimer for one year, while Francis went up to Cambridge alone, after a summer in New Mexico with Paul Horgan, the writer, who had been a boyhood companion in Albuquerque.

At Harvard, although Fergusson concentrated his studies in biology, partly because of Oppenheimer's influence, he was already reading Dante, writing verse and a novel (which has not survived), and reading philosophy with Raphael Demos. He visited Oppenheimer's parents' home on Riverside Drive during the holidays and returned to New Mexico for the summers. Harvard awarded him a partial scholarship, which he referred to in a letter to Paul Horgan as his "scholarship trap," adding, "Have you read Clive Bell's *Art*? If not do so at once, and let me know what you think of it." At the end of his sophomore year, 1923, Fergusson won a Rhodes Scholarship to Queen's College. His very young man's iconoclasm dominates a letter to Horgan of September 2, 1923, written aboard the Cunarder RMS *Albania*:

> After this journey I shall never be able to have the word *Rhodes Scholar* mentioned in my presence. Eleven days cramped intimately with the greatest philosophers on earth would kill me, but with these morons! Really, they're as easy to find anything in common with as so many dolphins. The Southern delegates spend the whole time at poker, in a haze of cigar smoke.... There is the aesthete from whom I derive a little comfort, though he is pretty busy with "Histoire de l'art." Three men asserted that they wished to write. Two of them, on investigation, proved pretty low. I am avoiding a third in order to maintain, if possible, the illusion.

His first year at Oxford was difficult. Oppenheimer reported that Francis complained of loneliness. During that year he gave up biology, after working with the great Sherrington, believing that he would never have the requisite mathematics. Francis changed to Modern Greats (politics, philosophy, economics) and came to better terms with existence at Oxford. Summer 1924 found him in France, taking part in "Entretiens de Pontigny." Pontigny was a former Cistercian abbey where each summer in three-week sessions wide-ranging discussions took place among such men as Mauriac, Martin du Gard, Malraux, Maurois, Madaule, Gide, Valéry, Schlumberger, Aron, Ramon Fernandez, Lalou, Curtius, and even Lytton Strachey. Fergusson seems to have returned to Pontigny in 1925, too. I think that Pontigny provided him the model for the Princeton seminars in literary criticism, of which he became the first director (1949).

At some point along the Oxford way, Fergusson joined the undergraduate Poetry Society and, in other ways, broke through his sense of isolation. Of his later career at Queen's, Oppenheimer wrote to Herbert Smith, "He knows everyone at Oxford; he goes to tea with Lady Ottoline Morrell, the high priestess of civilized society, & the patroness of Eliot and Berty [Bertrand Russell]...." At Lady Ottoline's, Oppenheimer added, Francis "learned how to treat dukes." In later years, Henry Bamford Parkes said that Francis had changed entirely after Oxford.

Fergusson and Oppenheimer were reunited in England after a two-year separation. "We walked along the cliffs and talked, of course, about everything under the sun, and that was very pleasant. I always enjoyed that sort of thing," Francis wrote to Paul Horgan. And on a hot afternoon in the summer of 1925, Francis told me, he was in Heidelberg, lying on his bed in a hotel room, reading Kant, when his strong-willed mother appeared unannounced and commanded him to travel with her about the Continent.

Oppenheimer was working at Cambridge University in Francis's final year at Oxford. During the Christmas holidays of 1925–26, the two were together in Paris. It is no secret that, for all his exceptional brilliance,

Oppenheimer was given to alarming psychotic episodes. In the course of one of their discussions in Paris, Oppenheimer came up on Francis from behind and, in earnest or in jest, tried to throttle him. After a tussle, Francis emerged unscathed but concerned. Oppenheimer apologized humbly by letter upon his return to Cambridge, and Francis did his best to stand by his friend in later episodes of depression and despair that not even a Harley Street psychiatrist could counter.

Having taken a second-class honors degree at Oxford, Fergusson returned to the U.S. in the mid- or late summer of 1926. The question of a career had been decided for him by his attendance at a performance by the Old Vic company in 1926. From that point on, Francis told his son, Harvey, he knew that he wanted to spend his life in the theater. He soon settled into a studio apartment on East 58th Street in Manhattan and began four years of work in the American Laboratory Theatre, a stint that taught him the craft and art of the Moscow Art Theatre and introduced him to Marion Crowne, whom he married in 1931. As directors of the Laboratory Theatre, Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya had brought to New York the techniques of their master, Stanislavsky. His approach to theater is famous for incorporating not only age-old techniques of acting and staging, but also full intellectual and physical involvement on the part of an integrated repertory company, to produce a reasoned mix of classical and modern work. Stanislavsky is popularly but incorrectly seen as the progenitor of method acting. Lee Strasberg, Francis noted, was only incidentally and occasionally present at the American Laboratory productions. He adapted certain of Boleslavsky's techniques, but he added a broad rasher of psychological motivation that was not present in the founder's mind or practice. The Laboratory Theatre was thus in the vanguard, but it was spared from much of the silliness of the avant-garde movements of the period between the wars.

As *régisseur* to Boleslavsky, Fergusson was plunged at once into the leading and most enduring tradition of the modern theater movement in Europe and the United States and was forced to learn every large and small aspect of theatrical production. As early as December 20, 1927, Francis had found his first and enduring principle, fidelity to the text. He wrote to Paul Horgan:

> I have been fighting Herr Director and working day and night to prove my point, which was that Much Ado should be left in the Shakespeare scene order. The final result is that I have just put it on in that form, after he put it on in a revised form devised by himself, which made it incomprehensible. Everybody likes my and

> Shakespeare's version better, so I now feel well intrenched [sic].... You know enough about the theater to realize what chaos, what diplomacy, what 24 hour a day labors all this means.

But not all was theater. The letter concludes, "Robert O comes down from time to time—I'm seeing him tonight at dinner. He's always stimulating and full of new books and good poetry.... I'm sending you the Divina Commoedia with English on one page and Italian on the other. Perhaps you will have time to dabble in it and find some nice bits for us to enjoy together when we meet next summer, as we must do. I have the same edition."

The apprentice years matter considerably in Francis Fergusson's career, for while much of his later life was given over to teaching and writing, he remained primarily an artist in his approach to all his mature activity. His range, from the Greeks to Pirandello to *The Great Gatsby* and beyond, was the range of an accomplished actor, but one whose work on the moderns reflected tradition, the terms and disciplines of the past. In reading Francis's work, one is always conscious that he had a base in biology, just as Aristotle was a biologist, as Fergusson noted in his essay on the *Poetics*.

The Laboratory Theatre could not withstand the stock market debacle of 1929, and early in 1930 it, too, failed. Fergusson now scratched a living as drama critic for the *Bookman* from 1930 to 1932. He was an editor and frequent contributor to the *Hound and Horn* from 1930 until its death in 1934; he followed his friend Richard Blackmur as its editor and wrote some of his best early essays for the magazine. From 1932 to 1934 Francis lectured on drama and literature at the New School for Social Research and served as executive secretary as well. It must have been in those difficult Depression years that Francis picked up his expression of comic distress, a Yiddish "oi yoi." Slightly less comic distress brought forth a Spanish "Aiee," or a simple German "Himmel." Genuine distress produced only stoical silence. I never heard him curse and thought him incapable of that recourse, but his daughter assured me that when he had made a wrong turn off a highway he had indeed cursed.

Francis wrote that Molière acquired "his extraordinary mastery of the stage itself, in the only way, the hard way." Francis wrote with authority, for his own knowledge was acquired exactly like that. He and Marion spent thirteen years, from 1934 to 1947, as members of the early faculty

at Bennington College, where he lectured on theater and literature and directed the college theater, while his wife taught acting. The Fergussons were content at Bennington; what the college could not give in respectable salaries it made up for in freedom to its faculty to work out their destinies without traditional academic impediments. Now Francis was able to integrate his various approaches of the past into a theory of what theater should be, of what is or is not possible on stage, and how best to explain to himself, to his students, and to the world a theory of art adapted centrally from Aristotle's *Poetics*, from his work with Boleslavsky, and as theater director at Bennington.

In 1972, Francis said to an interviewer that at Bennington he continued to use the methods of the Laboratory Theatre "not only in directing plays, but in the analysis of the poetry, fiction and drama which I continued to teach in the literature division. I still use [them], whenever I work on literature; I think the Moscow Art Theatre's notion of 'action' is essentially the same as Aristotle's, and that Aristotle's theory of drama and other arts as 'the imitation of an action' is much the best we have." Throughout his career, he continued to think about, to apply, and to enlarge, I believe, the Aristotelian term from the *Poetics,* a term in that text at once seductive and fraught with ambiguity. Early on, Francis allied the idea of action to a view very like T. S. Eliot's notion of the necessity of an integral community for the production of great drama.

In the introduction to *The Idea of a Theater*, Francis compared the Elizabethan theater, "which had been formed at the center of the culture of its time," with the modern period, in which "human nature seems to us a hopelessly elusive and uncandid entity," creating virtually impossible conditions for the contemporary playwright. Aristotelian action, therefore, became equally elusive. In an early essay, "*Exiles* and Ibsen's Work" (1932), Francis found in Ibsen the purest modern equivalent of Aristotelian action, unlike what occurs in James Joyce's *Exiles*. Ibsen's characters are still representative, they still reflect a unifying thesis deriving from ethical impulse, while Joyce "substitutes for action a motionless picture, and for a thesis a metaphysical vision of a kind of godless monadology or Pluralistic Universe, of a consistency and strictness which William James the liberal never dreamed of." And, in another context, Fergusson compared Henry James and Chekhov, discovering the use of social ceremony in Chekhov akin to that of Henry James, their purpose identical: "to focus attention on an action which all share by analogy,

instead of upon the reasoned purpose of any individual, as Ibsen does in his drama of ethical motivation."

The contemporary theater in New York had sold out, Fergusson believed; he wrote that "each poetic dramatist platonically discerns his own beautiful, consistent, and intelligible dramatic idea while the formless population, looking the other way, is engrossed in the commercially profitable shadows on the cave wall." Fergusson's own power as playwright is evident in *Penelope*, a rendering of Odysseus's return to Ithaca. His opinion of the New York theater was not enhanced by the commercial failure of his musical verse-play, *The King and the Duke* (after the episode in *Huckleberry Finn* and written in the mid- or late thirties), produced at the Circle-in-the-Square in 1953. By 1957 he could be impolite, for him, about it all, referring (in the introduction to *The Human Image in Dramatic Literature* [1957]) to "the schizophrenic Eden of the middlebrows, where everyone is nice *and* rich...."

Thus the artist in Francis Fergusson continued to predominate over the lecturer. The second of his formative ideas that is allied to the idea of action is his use of the term "tragic rhythm." Always generous in acknowledging his sources, he noted that Scott Buchanan had found tragic rhythm to have been taken over by natural science, a statement of Francis's own naturalism, as I read it, and a source of his cheerful pessimism. By moving from biology to theater, Francis had tried in one sense to deny the truth he recognized in the insight of the mathematician Buchanan concerning modern society. The entire attempt suggests the unity of Francis's career, in which a tragic rhythm informs his life and thought. His students were often startled when their instructor asked them to apply to the *Divine Comedy* (or to modern fiction, lyric poetry, or drama) the ancient idea of action, but they soon came to find the procedure more than a pedagogical device when allied, as it always was, to his insistence on fidelity to text and to close reading of text.

Fergusson left Bennington at the end of 1947 to spend two years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, at the invitation of Robert Oppenheimer, its new director. There Francis wrote *The Idea of a Theater*. From 1949 to 1952, he was the first director of the Princeton Seminars in Criticism (renamed the Christian Gauss Seminars in Literary Criticism in 1952), and he also taught in the English division of the modern language department. In 1952–53 he was visiting professor of English at Indiana University, and in 1953 he was named University Professor

at Rutgers, where he remained until his retirement in 1969. Despite Francis's years in the theater, he never confused teaching with entertainment. He never shouted, he was not didactic, yet he held strong opinions. He listened to students, as he did to friends, and he thought before answering a question. The resulting silences were not empty or embarrassing, but fruitful. They set an intellectual pace.

During his Princeton period, Francis received a red-eyed and apparently weeping student in his office for a scheduled morning conference. Observing the man's condition, he chose not to pry into the cause of the man's distress but to telephone a dean whose job it was to cope with crisis. The student then explained that he had come to his appointment after his required morning laps as a member of the swimming team in water too heavily chlorinated. Here we may see a characteristic Franciscan response: his unwillingness to intrude upon the student's "grief" was greater than his wish to assist.

The course of Francis's life in American universities was not entirely smooth. Lacking the Ph.D. or even the American M.A., he was regarded in some quarters as unqualified to breathe the Castalian air of the tenured professoriat. Although his university professorship meant that he outranked mere full professors, traditional departments at Rutgers refused him hospitality, until the German department offered an office that he called with accuracy, a broom closet. When I arrived at Rutgers in 1959, it was in his broom closet, wryly amused, that I found him, but by 1961 he was my senior and honored colleague in the newly founded graduate department of Comparative Literature, where he occupied a proper office in departmental headquarters. His influence on all of us, faculty and students alike, was subtle and pervasive. His standards, we hoped, became ours, and his bearing affected even the most unkempt bumpkin among his students. He never put on side or pulled rank. He was generous with his time for students, even in periods of leave, taking time, as the novelist and critic Alan Cheuse put it, "to read my awful undergraduate stories, telling me that my language showed 'promise.'" And the poet Robert Pinsky said that, as he was lecturing at Berkeley recently, he heard "Francis *speaking through* him." All the while, Francis indicated doubt about the Ph.D. mills in which he was a miller, a doubt that made for health and candor in our offerings, I like to believe.

That splendid Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg said once, "I write above all, I think, to be understood. That is the driving impulse behind what I

do.... Each word, when I write, each sentence, is chosen extremely carefully to be as simple, as direct as possible. Every sentence must say something and get it across. Every sentence. That is important to me." I am certain that Francis would have agreed with every word, for his prose exemplifies that ideal to the letter. To the Barthes-Foucault-Derrida *école* in this country, who proclaim themselves specialists in theory, Fergusson's work looks old-fashioned; his belief in the existence and necessity of tradition is indeed old-fashioned. But, as the best writing always does, his stands outside and beyond fashion. Historical knowledge married to an artist's sensibility resulted in enduring work. Unlike Richard Blackmur, whose temperament was similar to Fergusson's, Fergusson wrote prose that is limpid and quotable, whereas Blackmur's prose is intentionally obscure and thick with qualification. In an early essay on Joyce, Fergusson wrote, "Nowhere outside *Exiles* will you find human isolation so finely rendered—that obstinate incommensurability of human longings which seems to be the cold little wisdom of our time...." Some thirty-four years later he wrote about criticism that "the critic must learn to spend his little energies where they will do the most good, distinguishing what is essential in literature from what is accidental, peripheral, trivial, or merely temporary." In two words he compressed familiarity and judgment by describing as "complacent provinciality" Voltaire's preference for his version of Oedipus over that of Sophocles. In another vein, Fergusson found Molière's comedy akin "to the modest sweetness of seventeenth-century music."

Fergusson's style is prominently American. It is the American plain style, free of what Allen Tate called "scholarly rubbish." The diction surprises when he used slang and colloquialisms: Molière's theater, he wrote, "has that alert and worldly pep which is properly called the *esprit gaulois*." "Pep," a favorite word of George Babbitt, is thus resuscitated and given pleasing currency. And an American barb lodges in Fergusson's description of Kenneth Burke's style as a "perpetual-motion machine, or jungle gym for exercising and deflating the literary mind."

In 1954, Francis bought a modest frame house and five acres of land on a quiet road on the outskirts of Kingston, New Jersey, and three miles from Princeton. His acreage sloped from the road down to a swamp, and the land had turned into jungle. Patiently he cleared the undergrowth, selectively cut down trees, and over the years created a handsome landscaped garden. There he continued to write until Parkinson's disease prevented him from doing so. Drama continued to preoccupy him. He

saw Dante's epic as drama, and through his theories of action and tragic rhythm, he found ways of comparing Dante and Shakespeare. Ibsen and Pirandello regularly appeared on his course lists, while he ranged up and down European and American literature in his memorable course for undergraduates, Sources of Modern Literature. His writing during these years was not voluminous, but it was steady and pungently valuable. *Dante's Drama of the Mind* appeared in 1953, followed by *The Human Image in Dramatic Literature: Essays* in 1957; *Poems 1929–1961* in 1962; *Dante*, 1966; *Shakespeare, The Pattern in His Carpet*, 1970; *Literary Landmarks*, 1975; and *Trope and Allegory*, 1977. His honors accrued as he aged, and with these honors came invitations and extensive travels: to Japan, to Somalia for a visit to his son in the consulate at Mogadishu, to Italy, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, to Spain.

Marion Fergusson died of cancer in 1959. Three years later, following a period of bleak solitude, Francis married Peggy Kaiser, a widowed Englishwoman and friend from his Bennington days. A gifted painter and a gardener, Peggy devoted herself to Francis and made their house and garden a delight to visit in all seasons. Francis was never more content than when sitting in his garden in summer, or at his kitchen window in winter at dusk, to see deer browsing on the land, or rabbits, and, more than once, a vixen and her cubs at play.

After Francis's retirement, his friends, particularly Joseph Frank and I, urged him to write his autobiography, or at least an extended memoir about his early days in New Mexico. He liked to remember an idyllic trip by raft on the Rio Grande with his elder brother, Harvey, and their adventure of concealing themselves to watch a secret Hopi Indian ritual. I well knew that Francis was too self-effacing to write about himself. He proposed instead to write about his friends, a project that involved long research and hundreds of pages of notes about Robert Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer's misadventures in Washington elicited Francis's loyalty and the resolution to put right what he believed to be others' inadequate efforts to present his friend to a wide public. At the same time, he saw a good deal of other eminent friends, not because they were eminent, but because they were friends: Richard Blackmur, Roger Sessions, Allen Tate. Francis and Peggy were visiting the Oppenheimers by chance on the night of Robert's death in February 1967.

Francis's work on the projected portrait of Oppenheimer came to an end, gradually but inevitably, as Parkinson's disease invaded his body.

Never a man to complain, he seemed to become serene and even cheerful as the disease became crippling. His legs failed him, but even when it was agony for a visitor to see him walk, he would insist on pulling up a chair for a woman and would himself prepare the visitor's drink. During his final five years, he not only became immobile, but his ability to swallow was diminished and he could speak only slowly and with difficulty. Yet on one occasion when my wife briefly relieved Peggy from her nursing cares, Francis failed to begin his lunch, and when questioned, replied, "I was waiting for you to begin." In dreadful periods in the hospital, when he was frail and gaunt, he became a favorite of the nurses, always finding strength to ask how *they* were feeling.

Years before, when I had read his book on Dante, I asked Francis whether he had been exposed to any sort of religious training, because I found his grasp of Dante's theology to be that not only of a scholar, but of a scholar-believer. "Oh, no," he answered. "I've always been an atheist." He added that his father before him had been an atheist, as was his mother and her father. That conversation came to mind when Peggy told me that during his final stay in hospital, a clergyman turned up in his room, asking, "Have you thought about God?" Francis, who had not spoken for hours or even days, replied nevertheless, "I don't believe in God." "But God believes in you," the clergyman insisted, at which Francis rolled his eyes upward in Peggy's direction, and the clergyman, blessedly, departed.

I also remember Francis in the hospital, sitting in a wheelchair and looking out on the public street, believing that he was in his kitchen, seeing the deer. With that memory came to mind the beautiful short story of J. F. Powers, "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," which I had read when it first appeared in 1951. It concerns an aged Franciscan priest, Father Didymus, who in winter, like Francis Fergusson at this time, is near death. A lay brother, Titus, is devoted to him, and to pass the time reads to him from the lives of the saints, particularly those who had been accused of heresy, Didymus's favorites. As death approaches, he asks Titus to read "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does," a title that he has invented, just as Francis invented the deer in Witherspoon Street, Princeton.

At Francis's death in the week before Christmas, I remembered his lovely poem, "A Suite for Winter," in which he seemed to have anticipated, and, by anticipating, to have transcended, his own death. The final stanza reads: