

REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

Reborn in Harvard Yard, Three Pals Disown the Past

Matters of Honor, by Louis Begley.
Alfred A. Knopf, 307 pages,
\$24.95.

The power of Louis Begley's *Matters of Honor* sneaks up on the

reader softly. The story is told with a quiet control that deepens into silence, which is to say that it is as much constructed from suppressions and elisions as from anything actually stated. The sentences never deviate from their subdued precision, no matter whether what's being described is the acquisition of the right dinner jacket, a mother's shameless seductiveness toward her adopted son, or an unloved father's un-mourned death. Nevertheless, notes of barely containable longing and regret penetrate. That such shattering noises can pierce the insulation speaks to the mastery of the novelist.

The plot concerns three men who were—through either the intelligent design of an omniscient, beneficent Harvard administrator or, more likely, through inattentive chance—assigned as one another's roommates as Harvard freshmen in the early 1950's. Do we inhabit a universe arranged with an eye toward our well-being, or is it rather cosmically indifferent to our desires? To suggest that the metaphysical conundrum finds a dim echo in the mystery of dorm assignments is, of course, somewhat ridiculous—though in the context of the novel, not altogether so. The point of view is canted toward the undergraduate, an oddity that, oddly, contributes toward its eventual swell of pathos.

Harvard at midcentury wasn't precisely a model of meritocracy. Inherited privilege dominated the game, with the semiotics of clothes and bearing—all the accoutrements of self—interpreted with pitiless accuracy. Despite the surface differences between the three roommates, there are profound similarities that join them together. None is easy in his skin, and Harvard's clammy clubbiness only exacerbates the condition. Each has, to some extent, disowned his past, at least in the form of his parents. This is particularly true for two of the roommates: Sam Standish, the narrator of *Matters of Honor*, and Henry White, the book's primary focus.

Sam Standish is a novelist who has met with some success, as we come to learn much later in the book, almost as a by-the-by. His homosexuality is also deduced from dropped asides; it's not a subject that the three friends ever address directly. Vagueness and indirection are Standish's preferred modes, especially when it comes to divulging details about himself. The name Standish not only suggests the right sort of upper-crust stuff but also someone standing off—standoffish, as it were. Obliquity as a literary style and outsider status as a theme have prevailed in Mr. Begley's seven previous novels; and at least two of these, *The Man Who Was Late* (1992) and *As Max Saw It* (1994), use the technique of one man telling the story of another without fully grasping it from the inside, as is the case here.

Archie, the third roommate, is a likeable Army brat whose parents are just as distant and ineffectual

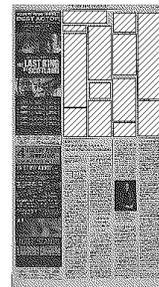
as Standish's, though Archie seems to have internalized their vapidly more effectively. In his tender youth, he's already well on his way to becoming an effective shirker of unpleasant truths, as well as an accomplished drunk. But it's Henry White who is the real point of *Matters of Honor*, delivering it from what might have been a dated tale of mild debauchery, disappointment and decline among the Auchincloss crowd into a moving tale of squandered talents, thwarted dreams and the incalculable toll exacted by bigotry.

That it's Henry White who's the fulcrum of the story is made clear from the stunning opening paragraph. "This is my first memory of

Henry: I stand at the door of one of three bedrooms of the ground floor suite in the college dormitory to which I have been assigned. At the open window, with his back to me, a tall, slender, red-haired boy is leaning out and waving to someone. He has heard my footsteps, turns, and beckons to me saying, Take a look, a beautiful girl is blowing kisses to me. I've never seen her before.

She must be mad." In writing as spare and controlled as this, we can be certain that the first sight of Henry, "with his back to me," is deadly deliberate. Standish, who himself stands with his back to the reader, maneuvers throughout the book to gain full sight of the boy who's staring longingly at that elusive girl.

Henry has arrived at Harvard on the basis of his brains, which are considerable, not his background, which could hardly have been less conducive toward his ending up gazing out a window overlooking Harvard Yard. There's a slight accent lurking behind his careful pronunciation; the roommates learn that he had come from Poland in 1947. Standish says, "whether Henry was a Jew was a question Archie and I had discussed more than once without reaching a definitive conclusion." But then, the two roommates



reason, if he truly were a Polish Jew, how could he have survived the war? He survived, we later learn, because he was hidden, along with his mother, in a sealed room that had been offered to them by his mother's old Latin teacher at the *gimnazjum*. His father was hidden somewhere else, and all three survived the war. "[W]hen the Russians chased the Germans out of Krakow, we staggered into the street like people who had been trapped in a mine."

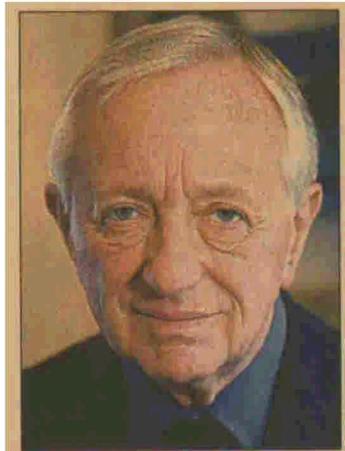
Henry, who majors in classics despite his having so emphatically missed out on the right tutelage, is still imperceptibly staggering when Standish meets him. He staggers for decades, despite his efforts to transform himself by what and whom he encountered at Harvard. Standish is not one to plumb the full depths of what it is that Henry is staggering away from. He can't pierce the nullity to which Henry strives to reduce the past, into which he sacrifices his two desperately dysfunctional parents. There's nothing from that past to which he's heir, and the relationships that Henry enacts with the heirs and heiresses of the world, to which his Harvard connections will lead him, only betray him. Though Mr. Begley doesn't entirely violate his belief in the ultimate mystery of character, we manage to glean enough about what makes and breaks Henry White to move us profoundly.

Mr. Begley's strategic silences can at times frustrate aesthetic demands. So, for example, he lays out a mystery regarding Standish's identity: Although he was adopted, his physical attributes declare him a Standish, as does the trust fund set up for him by his grandfather. But the mystery is simply left dangling; the skeleton in the closet grinningly keeps its secret from the reader. I suppose a conclusion as to the impenetrable opacity of identity can be drawn. Still, can the metaphysical conclusion—justified though it may be—altogether fill the narrative gap?

Toward the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce has Stephen Dedalus declare that his defenses will be silence, exile and cunning. Those three words perfectly sum up the tone, theme and technique of this latest in Louis Begley's powerful *oeuvre*. I would judge, on the basis of his writing, that the author is a man of refined skepticisms, which makes his faith in his readers all the more impressive. His technique demands attention—and richly rewards it.

Rebecca Goldstein is a philosopher and novelist; her most recent book is Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity (Schocken).

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Louis Begley (b. 1933) is the author of seven previous novels, including *Wartime Lies* (1991) and *About Schmidt* (1996).