

BRUCE BAWER

In Memoriam: Thomas M. Disch (1940–2008)

Tom Disch (who published fiction and criticism as Thomas M. Disch and poetry as Tom Disch) was not only a widely respected, even revered, writer of what he called speculative fiction, but also a first-rate poet and critic. Few writers in our time have managed as successfully as he did to combine being deeply, meaningfully, and darkly serious with being laugh-out-loud hilarious.

As a poet he was outrageously underappreciated, mainly because he swam against the poetic currents of the day. Like Swift and Pope, who aren't exactly role models for many poets today, he was a master of form and an acidly witty observer of humankind's flaws and foibles. And he made it all look effortless—which doubtless helps explain why his poetry is less well known than it should be.

As for his criticism, I've read certain reviews of his again and again just for the sheer pleasure of his prose. There are some individual lines that I savor. Only a few days ago (it may even have been the day he died), I was sitting in my apartment and my eyes fastened on the spine of David Laskin's *Partisans*, a history of the mid-century New York intellectuals. And I immediately recalled Tom's passing reference, in his review of it, to the last surviving member of that crowd as "tontine winner Elizabeth Hardwick."¹ Who else but Tom would have thought to call her that? His reviews were full of such inspired tidbits, which for him were just throwaway lines, but which made his prose a joy to read.

In person Tom was as witty as on paper, with a quick mind and a first-rate delivery. And he was a very sweet guy. A publicity picture for one of his novels, in which he glares demonically down into the camera—formidable, bald, muscular, his powerful

arms crossed—makes him look like the scariest dude in the world: the bouncer from hell, the biker bully from Central Casting. In fact he was the bullies' enemy. His whole body of work is a cry against man's inhumanity to man, against tyrannical orthodoxies and deadening groupthink, against all those who seek to dehumanize or destroy their fellow human beings for the sake of power or a buck or an ego boost. He believed in the individual, and in the individual mind.

And he was a true original—a man who, no matter what he was writing about, and in what genre, invariably had fresh, unpredictable, provocative and perceptive things to say. He always spoke his mind fully, no matter whose feathers might get ruffled. And when you read his work or talked to him, you could tell that he positively exulted in the ability and opportunity to confront the world's tyrants and fools and clowns and deflate them with words. For all his cynicism about human nature, he had immense *joie de vivre* and a superabundance of creative energy; in fact, it wouldn't be too much of an exaggeration to say that he was a regular Auntie Mame, a veritable embodiment of the conviction that life is a banquet and most poor sons of bitches are starving to death—and that he could make you wonder whether you yourself, his fellow writer and critic, were embracing your own role in this absurd cosmos with a sufficient measure of glee. Indeed, when I was first introduced to Tom, his face lit up, quite gloriously, at the sound of my name, because I'd just published a review that he'd agreed with. Everybody who knew Tom knew that look. It was a frequent sight, and it was thoroughly authentic. My point here is that despite his dark literary vision, he was—right up until the last act, anyway—a merry soul. The best tribute any of us could pay to Tom's memory would be to go out and buy one or more of his books. A greater bargain cannot easily be had.