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Book Reviews

Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism by Elizabeth Bruss. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. Pp. 519. \$30.00

This is a learned, moving, beautifully written book. It is somewhat too long, causing the reader a bit of frustration. But it merits the effort of a sustained reading, and by its very length and lushness succeeds in focusing our attention on its proclaimed subject: the pleasure of reading (and writing) literary theory and the "spectacle of discourse" that contemporary theory offers. Bruss's own discourse, even while admirably clear and sensible, displays some of the same self-consciousness, the same "rhetorical cunning" (p. 59) and the same sense of crisis about language and values, whether ethical or aesthetic, that she sees as the hallmarks of contemporary critical writing, and that make contemporary criticism, according to her, tend toward the status of literature.

Bruss starts her book from the following proposition: Contemporary criticism has become a form of literature, blurring the traditional boundaries between "fine writing" (or "primary text") and the ostensibly more pedestrian, "subordinate" commentaries on it. This is not a particularly original idea, nor does Bruss claim that it is. She points out that the current awareness of the intertextuality of all writing makes it "hard to disdain [criticism] as a parasitic text, if [literature] is equally involved in commenting on other texts. . . . This elevates the status of criticism from parasite to partner . . ." (p. 65). What strikes me as most valuable in Bruss's enterprise is not this founding idea—which has become almost too familiar a topos in contemporary critical thought—nor is it her extremely thoughtful account of why and how theory acceded to its current "literary" status over the past twenty years or so (Chapter One: "Theory of Literature Becomes Theory as Literature"); it is not even her detailed attempt to present a systematic approach to the reading of literary theory (Chapter Two: "Entrances to the Theoretical Text"). Rather, the value of her book lies in its own enactment of how (and correlatively, why) one might proceed to read and write theory as literature.

Bruss makes us realize, through her own writing about her reading of certain theoretical and critical texts, that what readers most appreciate—or, as the case may be, react against—in a piece of critical writing is not its "truth" or validity but their "first impression of the power or delicacy of mind that informs the theory" (p. 117). This is not quite the same as saying (as Bruss does earlier) that the multiplicity of today's conflicting theories provokes a tendency in the reader "to defer attempts to test or apply them and to simply contemplate them as conceptual structures" (p. 70). It is not when theory can be contemplated aesthetically, as a quasi-autonomous form independent of usefulness or validity, that it attains the status of literature. Theory becomes literature (is read as literature) when it displays the presence of an active mind to whose power and delicacy (or lack thereof) the reader responds.

Actually, Bruss never makes this claim explicit. She might even object to it, as an out-and-out statement. (It is, after all, a rather "old-fashioned" view:

literature as the display of mind, reading as a meeting of minds). And yet, it is my appreciation precisely of the quality of mind displayed by her prose that has remained with me most after reading her book. Take a sentence like this one: "Indeed, taxonomy might be read as a willed violence practiced on the density of the world as we experience it, an exercise in controlled and strictly parsed responsiveness" (p. 103). The thought it expresses is intelligent, perhaps even profound. But it is above all the felicity of phrasing, the happy choice of words ("strictly parsed responsiveness") that strikes me and makes me wish to continue reading, so as to get to know better the mind responsible for them.

When it comes to Bruss's reading of other critics, one notes the same careful attention to nuances, the same loving lingering over stylistic details, that characterize her own writing. And one notes, too, that what Bruss responds to most strongly, in the work of a critic, is the overall quality and nature of the mind it displays. After the first two general chapters, which I mentioned earlier, the bulk of her book consists of long (they could have been shortened somewhat) individual chapters devoted to William Gass, Susan Sontag, Harold Bloom, and Roland Barthes, all of whom interest her because of the "hybrid" nature of their writing: Gass and Sontag being novelists who are better known (and, according to Bruss, are *aesthetically* more successful) as theorists or essayists, while Bloom's and Barthes's theoretical essays are clearly marked attempts to endow theory with the aesthetic qualities—figural, ambiguity, drama, sensuality—of literature. Although Bruss ranges over all of their work (up to 1980) and is interested in the evolution of their writing and thought, the "narrative" aspect of her discussions is subordinated to a more synchronic or descriptive approach, so that what emerges is more akin to an intellectual/stylistic/psychological "portrait" of the critic than to a "biography" (I'm thinking of Michel Beaujour's useful distinction between *autoportrait* and *autobiography*).

This synchronic/descriptive tendency is especially evident in the chapters on Sontag and Barthes. Certainly Bruss insists on their evolution—in Sontag's case from the purely aestheticizing stance of *Against Interpretation* to the more ethically urgent stance of *On Photography* and *Illness as Metaphor*, in Barthes's case from the "classical" or scientific semiology of his work of the 1960's to what she calls the aestheticized, "excessive" semiology of his later works. In both chapters, however, what we ultimately end up with is a general characterization of the critic's personal style, which is (as Proust put it) not only a matter of language, but of "vision"—or perhaps what I have been calling mind. Thus Bruss writes about Sontag's prose, in what I consider a brilliant characterization, that it eschews tropes other than hyperbole and "ornaments itself by rearranging words—through ellipses, parenthetical clauses, parallelisms, selective repetitions, antitheses, and an occasional chiasmus—in ways that leave the literal meaning intact. . . . The result is a writing with a peculiar quality of naked insistence" (p. 267). About Barthes, she writes, once again using the generalizing present tense: "Barthes's writing . . . strives to make itself vulnerable (to dispute, qualification, remonstrance) rather than 'recuperable' (useful as a weapon in the war of words). Vulnerability is a function of being open to inspection, so that inconsistencies will inevitably be discovered" (p. 458).

Bruss is so fair-minded and sympathetic to all four of her subjects (with the possible exception of Harold Bloom, which I will come to) that one becomes aware only gradually of her personal preferences, which often emerge indirectly by delayed comparisons and juxtapositions. Thus it is only toward the end of the essay on Gass that she remarks, critically: "... it is sometimes difficult to understand where the air of daring-do and embattled discovery, which is everywhere in [his] essays, could be coming from. Most, if not all, of these opinions have enjoyed a long history among academic critics" (p. 186). And it is only in her discussion of Sontag's "substantial" theorizing, as opposed to Gass's more narrowly "formal" claims for literature, that one realizes Bruss's greater sympathy for the former (p. 222). Indeed, one of the things she most admires in Sontag is her daring to take on broad issues, her willingness to make bold pronouncements even at the risk of being wrong, or of writing against herself later: "to work at risk, and to dare and almost invite inconsistency, is part of the economy of Sontag's enterprise. Hers is, after all, a theory . . . that shapes its new positions by opposing its old enthusiasms—and thus prepares itself for its own obsolescence" (p. 242).

The most dramatic juxtaposition Bruss stages, however, is between Bloom and Barthes. She gives a persuasive demonstration of the underlying conservatism and "macho" aggressiveness of Bloom's theory of poetry, which she opposes in the last chapter to Barthes's increasingly fluid, self-questioning, non-assertive mode of thought and writing. With devastating thoroughness and an occasional touch of humor (at one point she calls Bloom "the Norman Mailer of our speculative prose"—p. 312), she shows that Bloom's theory, elaborated in the tetralogy beginning with *The Anxiety of Influence* and ending with *Poetry and Repression*, is based on a browbeating rhetoric, the terroristic strategy of a self too afraid of its own weaknesses to admit any opposition. Bruss writes: "the result [of Bloom's notions of defense and repression] is of a consciousness that is wholly self-serving, cunning in its devotion to a certain saving ignorance, strong to the extent that it can cover all traces of its weakness and aware only to the extent of what it cares to know. Such a self is condemned to a constant, paranoiac whirligig of mastery and slavery" (p. 328). The elegance of her prose does not hide her distaste for a theory founded entirely on the notion of power. Nor does she disguise her lack of sympathy for what she sees as the ideologically conservative cast of Bloom's view of literary history: the canon of "classics" as a closed and decaying system, incapable of real innovation and ultimately subservient to the past ("curiously, in this ostensibly antithetical theory, the ground for our current practices is our ancestors' practice"—p. 359).

One could object that Bruss perhaps overstates the case against Bloom—his views may be less monolithic than she claims. My own sense, however, is that within the logic and economy of her book, the case against Bloom makes sense. One cannot, and should not, read a great deal of theory without developing theoretical allegiances and positions of one's own. Bruss's celebration of Barthes *contra* Bloom is a sign of her own preference for an open-ended, delicately nuanced and allusive, rather than an oracular or hortatory kind of writing about (writing as) literature. Mozart rather than Wagner, as it were.

One could see in this preference on Bruss's part a veiled or implicit feminism, which remains unarticulated, perhaps even unconscious. Unfortu-

nately, we will never know the next stage of her thinking. She died at age 37, while completing final revisions of *Beautiful Theories*. The reader, informed of this fact by a prefatory note, cannot help reading the book as a testament, a statement by someone with whom no further dialogue is possible. And yet, the voice and mind remain, displayed on every page.

Harvard University

Susan Rubin Suleiman

Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction by Robert C. Holub. New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984. Pp. xiv + 189. \$18.95, Cloth; \$8.95, Paper.

During the last decade, Anglo-American literary criticism seems to have settled into two distinct camps. Traditional, "tweed-jacket" scholars have embraced the comfortable tenets of old New criticism, arguing that meaning resides in the work, having been located there by the author, and that the critic's task is to recover that original determinate meaning. Fashionably radical scholars, on the other hand, have embraced the less comfortable tenets of poststructuralism, arguing that meaning resides in the reader; therefore, the critics's task is to formulate a meaning based on innumerable semantic and aesthetic "codes." While these synopses are obviously over-simplified, they do reveal the philosophical distance separating the traditional monist critics from the modern pluralist critics. Many scholar-critics are likely to wonder if some middle ground exists on which they may practice a criticism which permits pluralism with constraints, a pluralism which escapes subjectivism.

This middle ground appears with Robert C. Holub's new study, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. This book does not tout a brand-new critical approach; rather, as the title implies, it *critically* introduces to the scholarly community an approach which has been practiced with some variations in Germany and the United States since 1969. The alert scholar-critic might recognize a similarity between "reception theory" and "reader-response theory," a term used in Anglo-American critical circles since the early 1970's. The recognition is justified; with their focus on the reader as the crucial figure in the world-author-work-reader paradigm, both reception theory and reader-response theory attempt to revise the way in which we view reading. However, as Holub deftly demonstrates, reception theory is a more cohesive approach than reader-response theory. Although minor differences exist between the principal reception theorists—Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser—these are mere cavils compared to the differences among such reader-response theorists as Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and Michael Riffaterre. Their evaluation of the reader is commendable, even necessary, but their respective techniques expose them to accusations of subjectivism. While reception theory is not entirely exempt from such accusations, as Holub is quick to point out, it does provide scholar-critics with a platform for practicing criticism which is pluralistic but not subjectivistic.

Holub states his purpose succinctly: "The main purpose of the following study is to introduce reception theory to those who have little or no knowledge of German" (p. xiv). This is a modest claim which needs some amplifi-

cation. Holub does not limit himself to a discussion of the major works of reception theory, most of which are available in English. Instead, he introduces to the reader early essays which have not been translated, thereby giving the reader a sense of reception theory's origins and evolution. Moreover, he examines such important domestic and foreign influences on reception theory as Russian Formalism and Prague structuralism. Finally, he evenhandedly discusses such alternative models and controversies as Marxist reception theory and empirical reception theory, ending with a consideration of problems and perspectives. Thus, while Holub's stated purpose can be accepted at face value, we learn that he means a great deal in proposing to "introduce reception theory."

Holub's historical and evolutionary perspectives are illuminating. His first chapter begins with an account of Jauss's "revolutionary" essay of 1969, "The change in the paradigm of literary scholarship," and he ponders the rapid growth in popularity of reception theory, not only in literary scholarship but also in art criticism. He suggests that reception theory arose, as Jauss intimates, in response to a crisis in literary studies compounded of "exhaustion" of old methods and "discontent" in general (p. 7). Yet Holub avoids confounding symptoms with reasons, and he suggests that reception theory's appeal was due largely to its flexibility in dealing with canonical dilemmas and its ability to accommodate modern literature with its growing appeal to reader response. He acknowledges that "the various aspects of German social life constitute the conditions of possibility for the formulation, acceptance, and popularity" of reception theory, and he concurs with Jauss's observation, "Methods do not fall from the sky, but have their place in history" (p. 12).

That historical position is established in Holub's second chapter, on influences and precursors, which he begins by suggesting that "the entire tradition of rhetoric and its relationship to poetic theory" can be seen as a precursor due to its "focus on the impact of oral and written communication on the listener or reader" (p. 13). Nevertheless, he concentrates on five influences which deserve precursor status because they had a significant impact on theoretical developments during the 1960's, or because they contributed to solving the crisis in literary scholarship by refocusing attention on the text-reader relationship. He cites Russian Formalism because it widened the concept of form to include aesthetic perception, defined the work of art as the sum of its "devices," and directed attention to the process of interpretation itself. He names Roman Ingarden because he drew attention to the literary work as a phenomenon of pure intentionality and perceived reading as a process in which the reader attempts to resolve textual indeterminacies in order to actualize a work's meaning. He includes Prague structuralism because it identified art as a signifying system and because it identified the recipient of the system as a product of social relations. He lists Hans-Georg Gadamer as a precursor for his insistence on the historical nature of understanding and the inescapability of prejudice in the act of understanding. Finally, Holub identifies sociology of literature as an influence due to its interest in the relationship between literature and the public.

Having identified the foundations on which reception theory rests, Holub discusses the major theorists in Chapter 3. His appreciation for Jauss and Iser is apparent, but not uncritical, for he acknowledges that their theories have

flaws. He points out such problems as Jauss's inconsistency in adopting objectivity as a methodological principle while trying to escape the positivist-historicist paradigm (p. 60), and Iser's tendency to remove terms from their usual contexts and force them to function in his "transcendental model" of the act of reading (p. 101). These observations alone would justify Holub's work, but he provides an additional perspective by presenting alternative models and controversies in Chapter 4. He summarizes Jauss's and Iser's current theoretical positions and outlines the objections raised by former disciples as well as Marxist critics. This section is particularly lively; Holub captures the polemical tenor of the east-west debate and suggests that while Jauss and Iser are justified in criticizing the determinism of the GDR model, "the problem of what the text demands and what the reader supplies still remains" (p. 133). Holub concludes this chapter with a discussion of empirical reception theory and its attempts to quantify actual readers' responses to texts, suggesting that although such methods might appear as vestiges of a "superannuated scientism," they may be useful. Holub's fifth chapter, on problems and perspectives, is contentious and stimulating, for he observes that reception theory seems to have stagnated since 1976. Yet he concludes that reception theory has had enormous impact on notions of textual stability and the identity of the reader. Finally, he suggests that reception theory might renew its vitality by entering into a dialogue with French and American critical discourse: "if it can enter into a productive relationship with other modes of contemporary thought, reception theory could again provide . . . a welcome 'provocation' to literary scholarship" (p. 163).

Throughout this book Holub is lucid and lively, perhaps most lucid when he surveys the influences on reception theory and most lively when he describes the social context in which reception theory emerged and the current east-west debate. His thoroughness and clarity suggest that Holub's audience is not restricted to established scholar-critics, but encompasses graduate students as well as advanced undergraduates. Having been "introduced" to reception theory, these readers will appreciate the fecundity of this approach and perhaps initiate the kind of dialogue Holub encourages. Such a dialogue might well infuse new dynamism into literary scholarship, with the added advantage of promoting an approach more accessible to readers, thus enlarging the community which sustains humanistic inquiry.

University of Florida

Michael Eckert

Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales by V.A. Kolve. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984. pp. 551. \$39.50.

If methods had mottos, the one I'd choose for Kolve's approach to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* might be his own terse dictum, "Context governs." Contexts do govern here, ranging from the local details of narrative surface in individual tales, through the interface of the tales with one another within the larger metaphor of the fictive and figural pilgrimage, to the intellectual milieu of the middle ages that provides

the focal context for this book: the visual arts and the iconographic traditions embedded therein. Kolve's premise is that "a knowledge of the symbolic traditions current in the visual arts of the later Middle Ages can clarify and deepen our response to [Chaucer's] narrative poems," and this book, which takes us through close and often subtle readings of *The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, *The Reeve's Tale*, *The Cook's fragment*, and *The Man of Law's Tale*, is in part a demonstration of that proposition.

Kolve's *entrée* to these tales is through what he calls "narrative images," images that he deems crucial to an understanding of the tale as a whole. Excluded are "the passing metaphor or simile," "imagery as rhetorical decoration," and "local iconographic detail"—images that have a traditional symbolic resonance but do not "become a center of meaning for the entire poem." His concern is with "those larger images created by the narrative action itself, which it invites us to imagine and hold in mind as we experience the poem, and which later serve as memorial centers around which we are able to reconstruct the story and think appropriately about its meaning." The theoretical bases upon which this approach is constructed, limned in Chapters I and II, are medieval faculty psychology, specifically the pride of place it assigned to the visual image, to "seeing as a way of knowing," and "the learned language of visual sign" that conveyed knowledge symbolically. Kolve contends that "even ordinary members of Chaucer's audience would have known a whole repertory of such signs," and one of his goals is to provide a sort of iconographic primer for the modern reader through exploration of the visual and literary contexts for the central images of each tale.

There appears to be a methodological agenda here as well. Although he is too mannerly to say so, what Kolve is offering is a tactful corrective, a revisionist version of iconocentric interpretation. He presents a mode of access, but emphatically not a system. In both theory and application, Kolve seeks to resist the siren call of reductiveness. Key terms are "being like," and "suggestive likeness"; he insists that we recognize the play and interplay of surface and subsurface, the marriage of symbolic significance with "the literal meaning of things," the whole that emerges from the "assimilation of the iconographic to the mimetic."

Kolve's readings are noteworthy for the deftness with which they do manage to account for symbolic traditions while simultaneously respecting the quiddity of each tale. Whether or not we agree with Kolve's interpretations, or even accept as central those images he chooses for foregrounding, his readings provide a valuable model, a sampler, of the varied ways in which the mimetic and the iconographic can relate to one another, of the varied ways in which symbolic traditions can be called into play, and the varied functions they may serve, suggesting that the language of visual signs has a grammar as potentially complex and manipulable as written or spoken language. For example, an image initiated as purely mimetic may modulate in the course of a narrative from the physical to the metaphysical, from local detail to thematic centrality, such as the prison in the *Knight's Tale*, which first appears as the tower where Palamon and Arcite are incarcerated, and gradually accretes figural connotations until it evolves into "this foule prison of this lyf." Or, as in *The Man of Law's Tale*, two individual but intimately related images, dominating the narrative action (here the "rudderless

ship and the sea"), may coalesce into an iconographic compound, forming a nexus of all previous inherited meanings, used in traditional, expected ways, for traditional, didactic purposes, but richly generative. Or a given image may be used to simultaneously call up and pervert its usual meanings, a kind of deliberate iconographic mispronunciation, such as that uttered by the Reeve in his prologue, when he takes the image of wine pouring through the tap of an open cask, traditionally associated with merrymaking, and converts it to a bleak image of impending death ("Deeth drough the tappe of lyf and leet it gon"), thus revealing, Kolve suggests, the Reeve's own bitter pessimism and limited vision. Elsewhere the symbolic potential of an image, or set of images, may be wilfully eschewed. Kolve argues that in the *Miller's Tale*, for example, Chaucer invokes the image of Noah and the Flood, with its inherited baggage of theological significances, in such a way as to deflect iconographic resonance, using it contrastively for comic purposes. Likewise, the series of animal images used to describe the members of the amorous triangle, which might have been expected to function in traditional ways to signal moral states or theological commonplaces, are here used, Kolve feels, in their mimetic sense only, to convey the vitality of the young protagonists. Sometimes a candle is a candle.

Kolve does not demand assent to his readings; indeed, in a winningly Chaucerian disclaimer in his conclusion, he avers that far from attempting to offer a "definitive account of narrative imagery," what he has given is "finally no more than a reading of the *Canterbury Tales*: one reader's account of his experience." This disclaimer is certainly disarming, but perhaps also misleading, for Kolve's undertaking in this book is considerably more ambitious than either the title or the above précis might imply. As he states himself in the Introduction, his readings are "linked by their approach through imagery, but not limited solely to that subject"; and even when imagery is the subject, the traditions are established not only through the visual arts, but through a wide range of medieval literary genres: theology, poetry, history, drama, encyclopedias. But beyond that, this is not just a reading of some *Canterbury Tales*, nor is its sole subject iconographic tradition. A second book, in essence, sprouts from the one already accounted for, different from it in both mode and execution: an argument for the re-visioning of the first unit of the *Canterbury Tales* to include the *Man of Law's Tale* not only as part of, but as the necessary climax to, the first series of stories in the CT.

Kolve wants to see the *Man of Law's Tale* as a "re-beginning" within—and a mirroring of—the larger structure of the CT. The foundation for this argument is laid in Chapter VI, an interesting if less tidy and more provocative chapter than those preceding it, which appropriately marks a kind of re-beginning for this book. After speculating on the possible directions the *Cook's Tale* might have taken had it been completed (Kolve's guess is that it would have been characterized by a "self-conscious appropriation of moral values by a rising, trade-oriented middle class"), Kolve comes to the crux of his argument, which focuses on three areas: evidence for and against assigning the *Man of Law's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale* to a separate unit (Fragment 11/B') on the assumption that it marks the start of the second leg of the pilgrimage; the Host's remarks concerning wasting time in "ydelnesse"; and the puzzling attack by the Sergeant of the Lawe on Chaucer's previous

works. The argument runs something like this: Adducing both MS and textual evidence, Kolve asserts that there is no reason to assume that either Chaucer or the CT scribes conceived of these passages as separated from the previous tales. Thus the Host's remarks, usually perceived as implying dilatoriness in beginning the second day's story-telling, may be recontextualized; the time to which the Host refers is not the clock time of the fictional pilgrimage, but rather the "irrecoverable time" of the soul's pilgrimage through life, and the "ydelnesse" he condemns refers to the triviality, or moral vacuity, or truncated Christian vision, of the tales related thus far: none has "address[ed] in any serious way the Christian truth that made pilgrimage a hallowed institution as well as a central metaphor for man's life on earth." The Man of Law's attack on Chaucer's works, described by Kolve as a "mock palinode" (serving, together with the *MLT*, as "the first in a series of self-corrections" which culminates in the Retraction), reinforces this view by singling out for condemnation only those works with classical/pagan subject matter, i.e. those which perforce exclude Christian experience and Christian vision.

This repudiation of what has gone before, in both the immediate context of the CT and the larger context of Chaucer's poetic *oeuvre*, invites "a new beginning," with the Host calling for "a tale that will confirm the ordered ends of human life, the possibility of human virtue, and the human need to use time well, if we would enter into the joy of heaven." The *Man of Law's Tale* responds to that call, by "mov[ing] the pilgrim audience into areas of human experience and Christian affirmation, unexpressed until this moment in the pilgrimage journey." Rejecting the standard view that the portrayal of the Man of Law is intended to be taken as wholly ironic, rejecting also the generic descriptions of the *MLT* as a tale of marvels or sentimental fiction, Kolve asserts that the story of Custance would have been perceived by its earlier audiences as history, not fiction, and thus provides a "sense of pilgrimage rooted in historical time"; its purpose is "to explore the past in ways exemplary to the present." Kolve also sees the tale functioning as a vehicle for exploring the possibilities of poetry itself by showing that poetry "can serve truth directly, without benefit of fiction."

If much of this takes us rather far afield from the ostensible goals of this study, it serves nonetheless as a necessary bridge to Kolve's reading of the *Man of Law's Tale* itself, which, returning to the matter of iconographic tradition, elegantly illustrates his seminal thesis, and unifies the book as a whole by fulfilling a design that only now overtly reveals itself. In retrospect, it becomes apparent that much of the book has been preparing, subtextually at least, for this conclusion: that Kolve's readings of each individual tale (e.g. his contention that the philosophical core of the *Knight's Tale* stops short of a complete Boethian consolation, trapping its pagan protagonists in a non-redemptive deterministic universe) have been governed in part by his perception of the sequentiality of the tales and their larger meaning within the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.

Although Chaucerians will undoubtedly find much to argue with here, and some readers may find Kolve's presentation overscrupulous, this book offers many pleasures, not the least of which is a particularly felicitous conjunction of poet and critic. It's a handsome production, lucidly written, impressively

researched, generous with both information and illustrations (none, alas, in color)—a book to revert to for any number of reasons, a book for owning. More's the pity, then, that the depressing economics of academic publishing will probably relegate most copies to libraries', not scholars' shelves.

Wayne State University

Elizabeth S. Sklar

The Character of Swift's Satire: A Revised Focus, edited by Claude Rawson. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1983. Pp. 343. \$34.50.

Swift's Narrative Satires: Author and Authority by Everett Zimmerman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. Pp. 183. \$19.50

The subtitle of Claude Rawson's collection, *The Character of Swift's Satire: A Revised Focus*, is a more amusing joke before one slaps down the purchase price for the volume. The revision, it turns out, is less "focused" on the character of Swift's satire than on a previous collection edited by Rawson, *Focus: Swift* (London, 1971). Rawson has retired a few essays, retained others, added several, and reissued the whole with another press.

A collection of this sort, with essays printed at various times in various places, is bound to be a bit of a grab bag. Not only are some of the pieces appreciably better than others, but essays that might have once breathed fire in the rage of battle now merely puff smoke. Whatever the unevenness of the volume, the process of reformulating the collection must have been mildly interesting for Rawson. One imagines Swiftians, like veteran ballplayers, waiting for their options to be picked up or despairing as their contracts are dropped. Rawson's reediting is judicious enough. He has kept his own long introductory essay, John Traugott's important piece on *A Tale of A Tub*, an essay of Ian Watt's first read as a Clark Library Paper on irony in 1956, an essay by Irvin Ehrenpreis on Swift's letters, and an essay version of a 1967 tercentenary B. B. C. talk on Swift's Anglo-Irishness by J. C. Beckett.

The essays from the original collection Rawson has chosen to remove seem neither a serious nor conspicuous loss. New essays cover the terrain vacated by the old, and, if these are not remarkably "new" fashioned, they at least display a current awareness of Swift studies, which, I suppose, is one of the reasons Rawson disinterred this project in the first place. To name names without casting aspersions, the following have essays removed: D. W. Jefferson, W. A. Speck, Charles Peake, and John Traugott (who, of course, also has one kept). The following authors have essays added: Pat Rogers on the Swiftian cliché, Richard Feingold on the rhetoric of Swift's poetry, F. P. Lock on the politics of 1701-14, Jenny Mezciems on Renaissance prototypes for the *Travels*, and Ricardo Quintana reviewing recent Swift criticism. Of the new essays, Rogers' and Feingold's strike me as the most spirited. Lock's essay is an oddity in the sense that it reads as prefatory to a case that he never makes, though he does make the case in his book on the politics of *Gulliver's Travels*. This essay (more like an excerpt) treats obvious political material without any discernible reason for doing so.

Among the retained essays two share pride of place, Rawson's own long work on Swift's satiric characteristics, which he revised, and John Traugott's essay on *A Tale of A Tub*, which seems unrevised (the notes cite nothing later than 1963). Of the two, Rawson's ranging piece covers many more works and makes contact in a more calculated way with the actual issues and events that absorbed Swift's attention, though Rawson's central point about the kind of mental earthquake that constituted Swift's shaky stance on matters owes much to Traugott's work on the psycho-historical and sexual strains of imaginative battiness and frenzy in *A Tale of A Tub*. Traugott's Swift is a kind of Rameau's nephew with just enough composure to mime himself into print. The gist of both Rawson's and Traugott's positions (well summarized, by the way, in a note to Richard Feingold's essay in this volume) locates the "mind" of Swift dispersed in variety of prejudices, symptoms, and exuberant tics. The issue for them is not so much what Swift believed about particular things uttered in his works by voices we may or may not trust as it is about the overlaying of rhetoric, psychology, sexuality, public pontification and private physiology, from which it is impossible and undesirable to pinpoint a single, rational, controlled, balanced Swiftian perspective. Rawson and Traugott express this view with glee—they make no brief for a Swiftian apologetics since they link Swift's power to the very things that the apologists would want to apologize for. Yet their arguments, probably because many more Swiftians now agree with them, seem less startling than they were two decades ago. This wouldn't bear mentioning except that Rawson and, to a lesser extent, his contributors are trying to recapitalize an old venture.

On a related matter, it ought to be said that Traugott's essay in particular, as good as it is, is disturbing in its tone. Perhaps its strategies were less objectionable when a younger Traugott, fertile of insight and venomous of expression, felt he had to stalk the likes of such Swiftian compromisers as the now deceased Kathleen Williams. But viciousness doesn't wear well, especially when couched in petulance, and, intelligence alone is no license for this essayist's circling round other commentators as if they were critical carrion.

One expects sustained intelligence from any work of Everett Zimmerman and his compact study, *Swift's Narrative Satires*, provides just that. Zimmerman's book is about two narrative satires, *A Tale of A Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*, although other books by other authors, namely Erasmus, Montaigne, and Sir Thomas More, put in token appearances. While Zimmerman claims that his mission is in part historical—he wishes to place Swift's satires in their hermeneutical and epistemological contexts—the real worth of his project, it seems to me, resides elsewhere. Zimmerman argues that, despite their differences, Swift's major narratives forecast the future obsession in the century (and forever after) with the authority of narrative voice. This was, according to Zimmerman, the almost inevitable result of the generic, epistemological, and hermeneutical pressures generated from both inside and outside Swift's work. What in Swift are a set of incapacitating problems for narrators who write *through* their idiosyncratic desires and perceptions, who are authors of the structures that contain them, become the very conventions that will serve the evolving novel in England later in the century.

Zimmerman does not wish to unbalance his own perspective and he claims

at the onset that the "argument in my book is not, however, designed to redraw the generic lines of novel and satire but to explore the strategic position of Swift's satires in relation to major developments in intellectual history and narrative" (p. 12). But I am not sure exactly how he can do the latter without touching on the former, and, despite his demur, the relation between Swift's narrative satires and the opportunities in the period for later experiments in novelistic authority is very much a part of the hidden agenda of Zimmerman's book. Though Zimmerman rarely mentions the novel form in detail and Swift did not live long enough to read most of the important eighteenth-century English novels other than Defoe's, there is always an implied dialectic in this book between Swift's protean narratives and the destiny that turned out to be the novel's choice.

Zimmerman defines his interests early: the materials or stuff of narration by which a narrator establishes the self's relation with the world; the transformations of literary forms to accommodate the individual characteristics of the narrator; the relation of narrative form and narrative voice to the way information is taken in (epistemology) and the way it is meant to be dished out (hermeneutics). Whatever else Zimmerman examines as influencing, pressuring, or infuriating Swift, he is never far from analyzing the issue of narrative voice and its potential to unsettle the stability of generic forms. The dislocations of intellect and genre in Swift's works produce instances in which ego confuses polemic or madness disrupts travel. The way Swift's narrators are, in a way, misinformed by the new means of assessing information and the new circuits along which information travels in the later seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries is always a matter for Swiftian derision: "epistemology represented in Swift's satires is negative" (p. 108).

What unity Swift's satire achieves is through the categoric disunity of the ideologies and forms it imitates: "Swift's critique of the intellectual movements of his time is conducted through his transmutations of inherited literary forms" (p. 14). And it is the emphases and suppressions of particular narrators that "activate the unstable elements" (p. 114) along and across generic borders. Swift's generic marauding makes any conventional definition of his satire futile. The neoaristotelian position that satire must have an external referent and cannot take as its subject things like narrative voice, or the moral position that satirists must operate from an assured perspective are treated with politeness by Zimmerman, but he believes neither view and gives neither any quarter. *Tant mieux.*

Zimmerman has another project in mind for his book: distinguishing the narrative qualities that differentiate *A Tale of A Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Easy summary is not possible here because the argument is carried by long exposition, but essentially Zimmerman sees in the *Tale* a narrative strategy ego maniacal in dimension and a narrator with "a raw and inexorable demand for gratification" (p. 56). *Gulliver*, on the other hand, not only grows into his dementia, but has to remember what his relative sanity must have been like in order to record his more restrained and conventional earlier travelling self. Hence the initial problem for the *Tale* is to identify its voice; the initial problem for the *Travels* is not to be tricked by its imitation of objective adventure. Zimmerman is epigrammatic: "*A Tale of A Tub* parodies the text that accretes authority from a prior text, the *Travels* the text that ac-

quires authority from its literal rendering of nature. The *Tale* mimes an attempt to subsume all other claims to authority, the *Travels* an attempt to supplant all other claims to authority" (p. 23)

Zimmerman's chapters on the *Tale* and the *Travels* come in matched sets, though he shifts their order. The first two chapters on the *Tale* are: "Hermeneutics of Self" and "Subduing a Literary Form." For the *Travels* the chapters reverse: "Subduing a Literary Form" and "The Language of Self." Interpretation is prior in the *Tale* because the narrator imitates only the endless idea of the text; interpretation is secondary in the *Travels* because we *think* we know what we are getting. The author's *bona fides* in the *Tale* are precisely his disintegrated intellectual capacities; in the *Travels* Gulliver goes haywire piecemeal as part of the remarkable forbearance that allows him to pretend for the purposes of writing the earlier books that he was not as distracted as he was at the time he dropped the manuscript off at his publisher's. (The same would still be the case even if the whole of the *Travels* were a figment of Gulliver's madness.) All of this is mirrored in the arrangement of Zimmerman's chapters where self precedes genre for the *Tale* and genre precedes self for the *Travels*. The "mad" author of the *Travels* has to get just enough hold on himself to get the sequence right; the narrator of *A Tale of A Tub* has the sole task of being himself.

The last set of chapters is identical for the *Tale* and for the *Travels*: "Epistemological Foundations." It is as if foundations, at least for Swift's narrative satires, can come last. Zimmerman in these chapters performs as literary historian, and though his work is sound it is not as generative as elsewhere. The authors treated here have been thoroughly worked over before in relation to Swift—Lucretius, Erasmus, More, Montaigne, Hobbes, Locke, transactors of the Royal Society—and Zimmerman adds little really new. There is the further risk in argument by analogue that parallel interests turn into definitive influences. Sometimes they do, but sometimes they don't. And in the rush to get all the old information, as well as the new, on the table for this last set of chapters, we witness a kind of Mechanical Operation of the Scholar. I cite the following on Swift's view of history not because it is demonstrably untrue but because, true or not, it strikes me as "Tale" chasing. "The problem of ascertaining Swift's views is further complicated by the fact that neither Swift nor Temple held the belief in the earth's decline that Wotton attributed to Temple. Swift's views must be disentangled not only from Temple's views but also from Wotton's version of Temple if we are not to fall into the trap of regarding him as opposed to all recent knowledge," (p. 105).

But it is not fair to Zimmerman to end with him caught in a vicious Swiftian circle. For the most part, he is a critic capable of saying things that do not sound foolish or petulant about Swift's most difficult works, and saying these things with enough tact to see their implications for narrative beyond the scope of Swift's satires and beyond the scope of this book that portrays the nature of Swift's narrative satires so well.

William Godwin, by Peter H. Marshall. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. Pp. xi + 497. \$30.00

Peter Marshall concludes his excellent study of the life and work of William Godwin with the judgment that Godwin is "a rare example of a man who excelled in both philosophy and literature," and "stands forth as an authentic human being, a truly creative writer, and one of the great humanists of the Western tradition." In this well-written and extensively researched book, Marshall presents abundant evidence on behalf of these conclusions. In the process he has written the most comprehensive and richly detailed work yet to appear on Godwin as thinker, writer, and person.

The strongest point in this study is the many-sided approach that it takes in the depiction of its subject. On the one hand, Godwin is presented as a major social and moral philosopher who is significant for his contributions to libertarian political theory, utilitarian ethics, socialist economics, and progressive education. On the other hand, he is shown to be important as a literary and cultural figure who embodies the difficulties of the transition from the rationalism of the Enlightenment to the romanticism of the 19th century. Moreover, Godwin's ideas are consistently treated within the context of historical developments. Indeed, the book is highly recommended for its lively and detailed depiction of the social, literary, and intellectual currents of the time.

The author's scholarship is exemplary. Marshall has an extensive knowledge of both primary and secondary works, and he makes excellent use of Godwin's notes and diaries. He demonstrates that Godwin is important for an entire corpus of works, not merely (as is sometimes thought) for one great philosophical treatise (the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*) and one excellent novel (*Caleb Williams*). He defends convincingly the importance of such theoretical works as *The Enquirer* and *Thoughts on Man*, novels like *St. Leon* and *Fleetwood*, historical studies such as the *Life of Chaucer* and the *History of the Commonwealth*, the essay on population, and even some of Godwin's children's books. In short, Godwin is shown to be an author of considerable talent and scope.

Marshall delineates the many dimensions of Godwin's life and thought in a clear, unobtrusive style. He tends to avoid critique in the broad sense, and refuses to confront directly the widely-debated theoretical issues raised by such global perspectives as structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. For this reason his analysis creates the appearance of being a common-sense approach, and philosophical presuppositions are left quietly in the background. Yet they are certainly there. For example, there is an enlightening discussion of the relation between ideas and material conditions which could have been usefully formulated as an alternative to some varieties of Marxian interpretation. Similarly, there is a wise abjurance of simplistic psychohistory, coupled with a sensitivity to the centrality of the psychological dimension. Marshall's discussions consistently maintain a subtlety of explanation and a recognition of the complexity of influences. The result leaves at times something to be desired at the level of theoretical analysis, but is always highly satisfying as an example of careful, discriminating scholarship.

One of the most successful aspects of Marshall's analysis is his treatment

of the evolution of Godwin's ideas over a quite lengthy career. The chronological approach which is taken allows the author to interweave a variety of determining factors, both personal and social, in explaining the development of Godwin's character and opinions. Thus, a richly elaborated account is presented of the influence of Godwin's family, his friends and acquaintances, his educational experiences, his extensive reading, and his reaction to social conditions and evolving historical tendencies.

Marshall is quite illuminating on the sources of Godwin's ideas and the development of his thought before the writing of *Political Justice*, a subject often neglected in previous expositions. One interesting result of his examination of the genesis of Godwin's ideas is the view that his thought should be situated primarily in the tradition of English Dissent, and only secondarily in the Enlightenment. Recognizing that in the case of a voracious reader and careful student like Godwin an attempt to place him simply in any tradition is futile, Marshall avoids overstatement of his case and upholds the complexity of his subject. A good example of his careful analysis of formative influences is his assessment of the place of the Sandemanian sect of Calvinists in Godwin's intellectual development. Among the principles of this sect, in which Godwin was for a time a minister, were the centrality of the understanding in the attainment of truth, the superiority of morality to human law, the subordination of individual property to the claims of common need, the equality of all members of the community, the desirability of decision-making by consensus, and reliance on the force of opinion to promote virtue. Marshall shows that each of these tenets is transformed into a fundamental principle of Godwin's developed philosophical anarchism and utilitarian ethics.

The detailed analysis of Godwin's evolving thought includes a judicious assessment of areas of both continuity and change. For example, the discussion of his revisions of his greatest work, *Political Justice*, is thorough and convincing. Marshall carefully traces the modifications of important concepts, yet he skillfully defends the view that there is a basic consistency in outlook. He demonstrates that Godwin's emendations represent the logical development of fundamental ideas, and the elimination of principles and language at variance with his utilitarianism, anarchism, and determinism. It is shown that by the third edition of the work Godwin has moved closer to immaterialism, he holds a more Humean view of necessity, he emphasizes the feelings more, he has come to admit some innate differences between human beings, his hedonistic utilitarianism is made more consistent, he has weakened his opposition to marriage, and he shows more willingness to accept some aspects of government as a necessary evil. Nevertheless, these changes are made within the context of a fundamental theoretical consistency. In fact, Marshall impressively defends the thesis that there is an essential continuity in Godwin's views from the first edition of *Political Justice* in 1793 through the late work *Thoughts on Man*, which appeared in 1831. This effectively demolishes Don Locke's contention in *A Fantasy of Reason* that one finds in Godwin's later career "a repudiation of the principles of a lifetime."

Marshall also presents a careful analysis of the evolution of Godwin's literary productions. He takes these writings seriously as works of art, and also uses them to shed light on the development of the author's social, political,

moral, and metaphysical concepts. The detailed analysis of Godwin's fiction illustrates clearly the evolution of his sensibilities, particularly in regard to the growth of his romantic tendencies. One discovers an increasing emphasis on the emotions and feelings, nature becomes a more significant reality, themes like isolation and alienation become more predominant, and more highly imaginative plots and characterizations appear.

These changes are correlated well with the development of Godwin's philosophy, and both are carefully connected to the events of his personal life. For example, there is an illuminating treatment of the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft, the great pioneering feminist, who was Godwin's first wife. Marshall shows that the brief period of his life that Godwin shared with Wollstonecraft had a profound effect, leading to a radicalization of some of his social views, and to an increased valuation of the feelings. What is shown equally well is how much of Godwin's later life, which was largely filled with disappointment, agonizing personal relationships, and financial hardship, caused a reversal of some of his attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. A key aspect of this somber side of Godwin's life, his relation to his daughter Mary, to her husband Percy Shelley, and to others in the "Shelley Circle," is admirably detailed. In particular, the tragic relationship of Godwin to Shelley, which combined intellectual affinity, mutual respect, and painful personal alienation, is well portrayed.

Of all the dimensions of Godwin's life and thought, it is undoubtedly his work as a moral and social philosopher that deserves most to be remembered. Despite the high quality of his philosophical writings, he has never been widely accorded the recognition due to him as a founder of utilitarian ethics and as one of the foremost theorists of libertarian political thought. But as Marshall notes, Godwin "provides better arguments than Bentham and anticipates the best of John Stuart Mill." He correctly identifies Godwin as a "thoroughgoing utilitarian," who created one of the most highly developed and clearly articulated theories in the history of that tradition. The impressive consistency of Godwin's utilitarian system is often overlooked by commentators who attend more to his rather striking conclusions concerning social institutions and moral practices than to the underlying theoretical foundations. Marshall accurately explains Godwin's position to be a form of act-utilitarianism, and shows that at this very early stage in the history of modern ethical theory Godwin confronted fundamental issues (like the status of moral rules) which are still the topic of lively debate.

While Marshall presents a strong case for the significance of Godwin's moral philosophy, he sometimes exaggerates its merits. This is implied, for example, in his comparison of Godwin's ideal of a society seeking to maximize general utility to "the Greek notion of individual self-fulfillment." Yet the Greek ideal of self-realization, as expressed, for example, in Aristotle's conception of the Good Life, or *eudaimonia*, is a much richer image of human development than that offered by Godwin. He certainly took hedonistic utilitarianism to impressive heights, yet he is bound by the limits of that perspective, which is committed to a narrowly rationalistic and excessively individualistic view of human nature.

Marshall's discussion of Godwin's social thought also illustrates the merits of his outlook. The comparison of Godwin to figures like Hobbes, Locke,

Rousseau, and Mill might seem to exaggerate the former's stature. But the text contains a powerful defense of the thesis that Godwin is indeed a major figure in Western political and social thought. Marshall refutes Don Locke's seriously defective judgment that Godwin is "unquestionably dead" as a political theorist by citing many of his provocative and well-reasoned arguments. While Godwin is neither, as Marshall suggests, "the first great exponent of society without government," nor "the Marx of anarchism," he is certainly a towering figure in libertarian thought, and presents arguments that have never been convincingly dealt with by advocates of the state and authoritarian social institutions. Marshall also shows that Godwin, the great believer in the force of persuasion and education, is a more significant figure in the tradition of progressive education than is even the oft-cited Rousseau. He demonstrates that Godwin is much more consistent in advocating such libertarian principles as the "need for respect, honesty and toleration in dealing with children."

But despite the brilliance of much of Godwin's reasoning, Marshall is not ultimately convincing in his efforts to minimize the problems resulting from Godwin's extreme individualism. He admits that in Godwin's view "society is essentially atomistic, nothing more than an 'aggregation of individuals,'" and argues that this view is coupled with a belief that "man is a social being." But Godwin never truly reconciles individualism with the social and communal dimension. In the end, his thought is one-sided, with an abstract, inadequately social concept of the individual predominating. He has no conception of dialectical interaction or organic totality, without which a valid grasp of the complex mutual interaction between the human personality, society, and nature is impossible. Contrary to Marshall, the theme of "communal solidarity" is never developed in Godwin's thought. True, he writes of our obligations to others and of the inescapable demands of political justice; yet, he remains on the level of individual acts of benevolence dictated by calculations of social utility. While the context is shifted to secular rationalism we still confront a form of the Protestant vision of the individual believer standing before a just God. It is also difficult to ignore the disquieting similarity between the calculating rationality of the altruistic Godwinian socialist and that of the most egoistic Benthamite capitalist. Godwin exhibits little apprehension of the meaning of community, and no grasp of the grounding of value in the social imaginary.

There are some areas in which Marshall does not hesitate to subject Godwin's ideas to searching criticism. For example, he pointedly questions their adequacy on the issue of the nature of social change. He notes that while Godwin contends that change is the product of the interaction between developing ideas and evolving material reality, he places too much importance on the transformation of opinion, and never comes to terms with the need for the simultaneous reconstruction of social institutions and power relationships. Thus, while he was a theoretical revolutionary, his reformist politics were in direct contradiction to the requirements for breaking out of this circle of mutual determination.

Like many figures who inherited much of the spirit of the Enlightenment, Godwin was a firm believer in the myth of progress. In Marshall's opinion, "Godwin's idea of progress combines a primitivist vision with a respect for

the achievements of civilization." While this statement recognizes the complexity of the Godwinian conception of progress, it is ironic that Godwin should in any way be linked to the primitive, for his sensibilities and his idea of reason are in fact at the opposite pole. He always remains fully committed to the civilized, and stays entirely within its bounds, even when he presents ideas which challenge the dominant institutions of society (the state, patriarchy, and private property). His anarchist critique is often impressive, but is inadequately anarchistic. He never comprehends the radical sense in which realities like the primitive, the feminine, nature, and instinct place in question the entire history and rationality of civilization, and, consequently, his own vision of progress. His elaboration of themes like decentralized community, individual rights, distribution according to need, and political justice are ultimately (for all their brilliance) divested of a certain critical force because of his inadequate, liberal individualist conceptions of self, society, mind, and nature.

But although Marshall might have said more about these fundamental philosophical issues, what is of greater significance is his success in the task which he chose to undertake in the book. He demonstrates that he has an excellent grasp of Godwin as a complex thinker and personality, showing him to be a man of paradox, and, at times, indeed, of blatant, unreconciled contradiction. Not only was he the rationalist who struggled uneasily to come to terms with romanticism, but also the theorist who often strove vainly to put his ideals into practice in his own life. He was a writer of great power, creativity, and accomplishment who was capable of unfortunate lapses in aesthetic sensitivity. Finally, he was a thinker of enormous imagination and analytical ability, who could at times succumb to uncritical, one-sided abstraction.

For the reader who wishes to comprehend the many sides of this intriguing figure, and to understand his considerable historical significance, this work will be an invaluable source of illumination.

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Introspection and Contemporary Poetry by Alan Williamson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. Pp. 207. \$17.50

Robert Bly: An Introduction to the Poetry by Howard Nelson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. 261. \$

In his thoughtful and precise book, Alan Williamson negotiates among three terms for the sort of poetry he explores. He rejects "confessional" as too limited a term, tied to a specific and historically limited group or style, and, despite his title, he talks little if at all about "introspective" poetry. Instead he concentrates on what he names "personal" poetry, an individualistic poetry marked by "its willingness to set values of universality at risk, in favor of the authenticity of specific autobiography, or of the momentary and the immediate, or of the deeper levels of the psyche." And though he is alert

to the problematic nature of the self, even citing the paradox that as internal states are made more describable there is increased doubt about "the concept of an essential self," nevertheless he makes "personal poetry" into something like a stable, necessary, and traditional mode. Williamson writes criticism, I believe, more out of his personal responses than out of any intellectual or historical program or ideology. As such, he is perceptive and sensitive, and my only reservations have to do with questions of judgement and the willingness to see stylistic limitations as not only necessary but willed virtues.

But first, let us consider his virtues. His chapter on Plath is perhaps the best criticism we have of this poet, and easily the best part of this book. By arguing towards the "disturbingly universalized philosophical plane which is the true ground of *Ariel*," he makes Plath a poet capable of turning amoral psychic currents into something like a moral drama. Regarding Plath's language as a "reaction to, an absorption of, the shocks of reality" allows Williamson to connect the psychological and metaphysical points of view about her poetry. Plath's fear of objectification (in Laingian terms) by others paradoxically turns her into a manipulative, objectifying subject in her own right, and the ensuing struggle centers all of her poems. By wanting simultaneously to exalt the self and to escape its burdensome presence, Plath becomes the paradigmatic "personal" poet. Williamson's discussion of Plath overshadows that of Lowell (whom he has already treated at length in *Pity the Monsters*) and Berryman and Sexton as well, the latter of whom he correctly sees as less successful than Plath.

From the chapter on Plath Williamson moves to consider the "middle generation" of poets such as Snyder, Wright, Kinnell, and Bly. These poets, in his view, mistrust language and attempt to create an anti-personal self, a mythic construct that seeks to escape a selfhood that is experienced as "internalized" history. The love of primitivism that so enraptures these poets can be understood as an attempt to escape the autobiographical self and replace it with simple but passionate "experiences of unlearning." Further along this historical line are the surrealist poets, who write a conventionalized, period-style sort of poem that is increasingly "anti-epiphanic"; here the key figures are Simic, Strand, James Tate, William Matthews, and Gregory Orr. Williamson is largely judicious here, though I think he overvalues a poet like Orr by finding his subject of "traumatic repetition" the perfect focus for the surrealist style, rather than the numbed and narrow range of verbal simplicities I take it to be. But separating the truly archetypal insight from the spurious and stereotypical formula continues to be a major problem for critics of contemporary poetry. Williamson realizes that "sheer mental doodling, guided by *idées reçues*, can be equated with primitive thought, simply because both are different from civilized intellectual planning." Here the limitations of a term like "personal poetry" begin to show, since many can argue that the self is as likely to be clearly revealed by its doodles as by its intellectual constructs.

Williamson continues with an excellent chapter on Ashbery, marred only by several overly respectful references to Harold Bloom (Williamson's clarity owes nothing to Bloom and profits not at all by defining itself against Bloom's overheated attempts to enshroud Ashbery with canonical status).

Ashbery is for Williamson both epiphanic and anti-epiphanic, clearly a personal poet, but also one who "identifies the state of imaginative ecstasy with the point at which the object goes out of focus, multiplies, and dissolves." This makes Ashbery especially problematic for those who read his work as the "continuation either of Romantic faith in the imagination or of Symbolist *alchimie du verbe*." The book's final chapter discusses several poets, chiefly Bidart, Pinsky, McMichael, Glück, and Wakoski, as working out of a dissatisfaction with the surrealistically colored period-style of those poets mentioned above. Here the grouping has two parts: those who go deeper or who go shallower when approaching the "mysteries" of the self, and yet both groups are humble in the face of the self that the "confessional" poets treated so brashly and relentlessly. Though most of these poets are still in mid-career, Williamson treats them with a marvellous comprehension of their projects, alert to nuances of development and shades of dramatic qualification. (Williamson's skill as a reviewer stands him in good stead as he responds to contemporaneity without losing his sense of depth and scale.) Again, I think he occasionally turns limitations into virtues rather too generously, as when he argues that Louise Glück remakes her style with "a delicate complexity of feeling" in order to write an "absolute" poem (one stripped of all autobiographical reference) that is at the same time a distinguished "personal" poem. Here the terminology is overshadowed by personal response.

For many readers this is a commendable trait, not a failing. And I agree, by and large. But what finally makes me trust and value Williamson as a critic, despite my sometimes divergent judgements, is what I would call his overall literacy. He knows when to approach a difficult subject in a slant way, essaying through it with an impressive command of language, without falling into obscurity or evasiveness. And he proceeds with a healthy portion of self-consciousness, for though he asserts that "We also live with and through the self, as long as we live," he acknowledges that the "truly mature mind lives turned outward, in love and work, toward the world of others." This is a book by a critic who addresses ethical issues in the context of aesthetic achievements, without slumping into a moralistic stance or a merely formalistic retreat. He is unafraid to make judgements in the clear light of exposition, and he is willing to engage the intricacies of the self even while admitting the enigmatic nature of the concept. His literacy consists in using words like "personal" and "anti-epiphanic" with care and yet without a blinding commitment to his own terminological invention. Our personal poets have found a most personable critic.

The problems arising from the critic's personal response overwhelming his or her language or intellectual framework are perhaps especially acute in dealing with contemporary poetry, where the safety of canonical status is not available as a haven against errancy in taste or estimation. The one abiding threat is that the critic will come so under the sway of the artist that what we get is discipleship, or even worse, echolalia. This does not happen with Howard Nelson writing about Robert Bly, but I often felt it impending. Here is Nelson at his least effective: "Among the other poems in this section are a powerful rendering of depression . . . ; a fine poem on the necessity of facing the fact of death straightforwardly . . . ; and a masterful quiet poem of human grief and vulnerability. . . ."

Now words like "powerful," "fine," and "masterful" seem to me more than a little shopworn, and especially weak when used to describe poems about subjects so overwhelmingly ponderous as those mentioned here. But I don't mean to suggest that Nelson does nothing but praise Bly in standardized terms. However, even when he dislikes Bly's work—as in the one main exception, *This Body is Made of Camphor and Gopherwood*—he does so in terms that are hard to take as other than those of personal taste. Partly this is due to Nelson not being especially interested in, or adept at, sharpened argument. For example, he mentions an extremely negative review of Bly, that by Eliot Weinberger in *The Nation*, and one expects that this will be thoroughly paraphrased and examined to reveal not only something about the case against Bly, but also about the distinctive nature of Bly's poetic. This doesn't happen, and we are left with a rather vague sense that many people have firm suppositions that keep them from responding to Bly's poetry, but these suppositions are not fully set out and evaluated.

The shape of the argument is weak in other places as well. In the chapter dealing with *The Light Around the Body*, Bly's most famous book, Nelson suddenly breaks off to discuss Bly's translations. True, Bly's work as a translator is important. And furthermore Nelson later makes a very good and intelligent case that Bly's Kabir translations had a strong effect on a later volume of his poems. But the effect of the sudden break in the argument about *The Light* is to weaken the force of the claim for it as the most significant volume, in terms of public response and experimental fervor, in Bly's canon. Where Nelson is at his best, I think, is when he discusses Bly's latest book, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, and the main virtue here is that Nelson supplies a lot of the background and allusions to poems that have not been that fully discussed by others. It is ironic that Nelson's strength shows best as a critic who is informative, since I think he clearly wants to be a critic who insinuates, who draws the reader into the feeling centers of the poet's work, never questioning too rigorously his ideas or challenging his deepest beliefs. Those who dislike Bly might take a bit of *schadenfreude* in the claim that poets get the sort of critics they deserve. But I believe that an intelligent critical case can be made for Bly's work, though it means not relying too exclusively on formalistic or technical questions, and also not accepting too readily Bly's structure of ideas. There is also the possibility that Bly's work can be used as an occasion to discuss the course of postwar American poetry, or the very nature of the lyric impulse, and there are times when Nelson seems to be undertaking just this sort of larger argument. But finally I think where Nelson limits his effectiveness most is where he fails to see Bly's work—especially his polemical criticism—in a sufficiently informed historical context. Polemic must be read dialogically, since it is always a calculated response to some previous, usually entrenched, position where an aesthetic has taken on the force of common sense or natural law. What is then needed is an examination of both the entrenched position as well as the mechanics of the calculation behind the opposing polemic. Bly is a poet of deep feeling, but he also has a sense, partly rationally constructed, partly intuitive, of how to go about preserving his feelings against the current state of expressive habits. Nelson, to my mind, does not see the calculation for what it is, and tends instead to read it as pure feeling; furthermore, he slights the entrenched position, not in estimating its worth, but in taking too lightly its historical force.

Contemporary poetry is often criticized by people who have some stake in canon-formation, but who cannot address that issue directly. Thus there are many indirect appeals to historical schemes, common sense, taste, influence and so on. When criticism deals with canonical authors all these things also occur, but they have a different feel, they proceed with the texture of calm mastery, as Cary Nelson once put it. It might be possible and even instructive to follow the course of criticism on certain authors as they slowly become canonized and thereby trace the development of criticism's self-assurance. But without such a definitive master plan to follow, the criticism of contemporary poetry must proceed with some of the same pluck, nervousness, fog, and illumination that probably accompanies the writing of most poems.

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Victorian and Modern Poetics by Carol T. Christ. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Pp. 178. \$16.

Recent studies by Frank Kermode, Robert Langbaum, Harold Bloom, and George Bornstein have called attention to the continuities between Romantic and Modernist poetics. Now Carol T. Christ's brief but important book gives Victorian poetics its rightful place in the historical argument set forth by her predecessors. "Victorian and Modernist poetics do indeed define themselves within a Romantic tradition which modern criticism has admirably described," Christ agrees. "But in emphasizing the Romantic premises at the base of modern poetic thought, much literary history ignores the specific character of the Victorian poetic heritage" (p. 2). By articulating "the continuities between Victorian and modern poetics" (p. 12) Christ fills a troubling gap in recent accounts of post-Romantic literature in English.

According to Christ, Victorian and modern poetics have in common a distrust of Romantic inwardness and a desire to ground self-expression in the world outside the poet's mind. "Even while they write within a Romantic tradition, each of the major Victorian and Modernist poets reacts against the subjectivity which he associates with Romanticism by attempting to objectify the materials of poetry" (pp. 2-3). This objectifying impulse manifests itself in three principal areas of theory and practice: conceptions of the dramatic monologue, mask, and persona; theories of image and symbol; and constructs of myth and history devised to sustain long poems. Following an introduction, three chapters treat these topics, and a conclusion attempts to account for the anti-Victorian rhetoric of Modernism. Christ refers to many poets and critics, but concentrates upon six major figures: Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold in the nineteenth century and Yeats, Pound, and Eliot in the twentieth.

By using *dramatis personae* and masks, the poet "at one and the same time expresses and evades the problem of Romantic subjectivity," Christ argues (p. 23). Tennyson, for example, "uses the dramatic monologue to control and objectify the potential solipsism of personal vision" (p. 26), whereas Pound uses masks "to objectify [a self] in face of the flux and multiplicity of experi-

ence" (p. 44). In linking her poets, Christ does not lose sight of the important differences between them. She distinguishes the aims of Browning and Pound from those of Tennyson and Eliot, and acknowledges that Yeats's theory of the anti-self is atypical of Modernist poetics in its Romantic emphasis upon unified personality and agentive imagination. (Christ pursues further distinctions of this sort in *Victorian Poetry* for Summer 1984.) Having made apt discriminations, however, the critic returns to her basic point: the "evolution of poetic forms that separate the speaker of the poem from its writer" shows both Victorian and modern poets torn "between a conviction that the poem is inevitably a personal utterance and a desire to give it the status of an object" (p. 17).

The same tension exists in post-Romantic conceptions of the poetic image, Christ argues. "Both Victorian and Modernist poetics contain theories of the image which claim objective validation for the connection between image and emotion" (p. 54). Arthur Hallam's essay on Tennyson was important to Yeats in part because it posits "a poetry of images, without discourse, that unites sensation and emotion in an aesthetic complex that has objective validation" (p. 62). That there is an "objectivist strain" (p. 54) in Victorian poetics Christ has already demonstrated in *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (1975). Now she relates that "aesthetic of particularity" to Eliot's conception of the objective correlative and Pound's doctrine of the Image, drawing some especially striking parallels between Pound's imagism and Ruskin's.

In her perceptive chapter on "Myth, History, and the Structure of the Long Poem," Christ examines the internal tensions and contradictions in Victorian and Modernist attempts to incorporate history into poetry. The poet honors empiricism yet seeks in history a mythical design that can sustain the structure of a long poem; he desires both "the illusion of an unmediated presence of history" and "a teleology that gives value and direction to past and present" (pp. 124, 101). In *Memoriam A.H.H.*, *Idylls of the King*, *Sordello*, *the Ring and the Book*, *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *A Vision* all attempt to represent "at once a historical process and an ahistorical pattern" (p. 108). Because the subjectively intuited pattern needs objective validation, these ambitious works marshal empirical fragments into increasingly discontinuous formal arrangements. Christ shrewdly notes the problems and paradoxes inherent in such an endeavor.

The elegant economy with which Christ presents these important arguments is one of the most impressive features of her book. In slightly more than one hundred and fifty pages she summarizes theoretical issues of considerable complexity and provides illustrative quotations from a goodly array of primary and secondary sources. Her exposition is spare but not oversimplified, deft but not superficial, selective but not meager. In this respect as in others, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* is an exemplary study.