Book Reviews


Going out from Southampton
they passed the cars by the dozen
who would not have shown weight on a scale
—from Canto 80

With the year 2000 in sight it is clear that The Pisan Cantos will be remembered as one of the great long poems of the century. Not only has the suite given voice to poets as different as Robert Lowell and Charles Olson, but also thirty five years after it was written it seems to capture the shock and stroke of the twentieth century in a way unapproached by the works to which it must inevitably be compared. The Pisan Cantos were completed three years after Four Quartets and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." Neither as well turned nor, in the painterly sense, as "finished" as Eliot's or Stevens' poems, they surpass both in the amplitude and accuracy of their record of the great world and in the intensity and complexity with which that record is registered as felt life. Take even the splendid conclusion to Stevens' "Notes," which combines a feeling of achieved intimacy with the poet's world with an awareness that the intimacy has limits that may never be broached. In a final bit of prestidigitation, Stevens suggests that in an unforeseen moment of rapturous vision even endless difference might cease to matter:

Pat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
How is it I find you in difference, see you there
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Something similar occurs at the climax of The Pisan Cantos, when, at the end of a long elegiac rehearsal of a winter spent with Yeats, Pound's reminiscence is illuminated by a glimpse of the miraculous nature of Yeats's art. In one minute Pound remembers himself and his friend as—in every sense—"aliens in a prohibited area." In the next the alienation has lifted, and in a

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passage that concludes a preparation no less artful than Stevens', the power of imagination to counteract the chaos at the heart of experience has exerted itself and the poet and his world are suddenly as fresh as the dawn. Once more we sense the presence of the moon, with its associations of the Romantic imagination; once more we hear the jaunty inflections of a flushed lover:

A fat moon rises lop-sided over the mountain
The eyes, this time my world,
But pass and look from mine
between my lids
sea, sky, and pool
alternate
pool, sky sea,
morning moon against sunrise
like a bit of the best ancient greek coinage....

In The Pisan Cantos no less than in the "Notes," we intuit what Stevens calls a first idea of the world even as we are aware that the first idea is a construct, "like a bit of the best ancient greek coinage." In The Pisan Cantos, though, that awareness is rooted in the drama of personal and cultural history. And whereas the usually reticent Stevens leaves us with an affirmation of vision transmuted into eternal crystal, Pound, more honest to the fragmented quality of experience, will in a page acknowledge the way epiphanies crumble into sadness and self-mockery:

Down, Derry-down/
Oh let an old man rest.

Compare The Pisan Cantos with Eliot's Four Quartets and the result is again increased admiration for Pound's accomplishment. Each uses the same controlling image to conjure up pattern within the flux of history: in a famous passage in "Little Gidding," the events of the English civil war are summoned and gathered in "the spectre of a Rose." In the conclusion to Canto 80, another rose is invoked amidst a tribute to the stanzas of Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat (I am excerpting):

That would have been Salisbury plain, and I have not thought of
the Lady Anne for this twelve years
Nor of Le Portel
How tiny the panelled room where they stabbed him
In her lap, almost, La Stuarda
Si tuit li dolh el planh el marrimen
for the leopards and broom plants
Tudor indeed is gone and every rose,
Blood-red, blanch-white that in the sunset glows
Cries: "Blood, Blood, Blood!" against the gothic stone
Of England, as the Howard or Boleyn knows.

Nor seeks the carmine petal to infer;
Nor is the white bud Time's inquisitor
Probing to know if its new-gnarled root
Twists from York's head or belly of Lancaster....
The texture of the past, the felt presence of a dramatized speaker, the immense energy required to order the rubbish heaps of memory and history are there in Pound's lines as they are not in Eliot's. Eliot gives us "a symbol perfected in death," which takes its place in his disembodied "pattern of timeless moments." Pound calls up blood spilt in the time of Richard the Lion-Hearted, in de Born's Planh articulates generations of lamentation, in the suggestion of the tiny room makes us feel the impingement of his own situation, and then compels us to feel the waste yielding to bloom as what had been free verse tightens into regular quatrains.

These and other accomplishments of The Pisan Cantos are the subjects of two recent books, one of which has a wider scope. In The Formed Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound, Massimo Bacigalupo tries to put The Pisan Cantos in context and explain why, having written them, Pound left their manner behind. For introduction he offers an inspired analogue to the circumstances of their composition. As in Brecht's version of the story of Lao-tzu and the customs officer, "had not the obscure official insisted that the wise man leave a record of his knowledge behind him before he cross the border and vanish, the Tao-te-ching would not have been written. The officer is a figure of the peremptory claims of history, to which even the ineffable tao owes its existence."

Bacigalupo seems to have been star born to write about Pound in 1980. The "Massimo" of Guy Davenport's vignette about Pound in Da Vinci's Bicycle, he is the son of Pound's physician in post-confinement Rapallo. He is also one of a small group of critics at home with both Pound and the nouvelle critique at a time when it is becoming apparent that the keys provided by that criticism were forged in the same fire as the puzzles of modernist and postmodernist literature. (In his preface, Bacigalupo explains that the "trace" of his title, an allusion to one of Pound's most famous lines, is also a "reference to "the poet's obsession with the (previously) written," an obsession shared by what he rather coyly calls "not a few critics of the newer schools"). Finally, while a graduate student at Columbia, Bacigalupo was given the opportunity of examining the typescript of The Pisan Cantos.

From this privileged platform one expects a sophisticated and intimate account of the relation of the poet to his text. The book at hand, though a work of usefulness, is less extraordinary. Guiding us through the difficulties of the Pisan and later Cantos, Bacigalupo allows his critical sophistication and his close-up knowledge of Pound to be all but overwhelmed by the machinery of traditional source hunting. An immensely learned book, The Formed Trace nevertheless leaves one with the impression that its author has traded his heritage for a bowl of porridge.

Bacigalupo, it is true, provides the rudiments of a Derridean account of Pound's project in the Cantos. But he does so in an extremely bizarre way. In a series of largely unelaborated asides, he characterizes the poem as an écriture both revolutionary and laughably inadvertent. On the one hand the Cantos are said to exhibit postmodernist concreteness: "the page is the sole actuality, Pound's world is all told in his lines, it is all present, explicit, equally lit—though no doubt it will wholly revert to absence as soon as we set the book aside. In other words Pound's poetry is primarily matter: not thought and not even
description or, worse, instruction.” This linguistic radicalism, however, was the result not of conscious effort but of accident. According to Bacigalupo, Pound as a theorist was naive; he “was never even aware that his writing was different, he just did not know any other way to go about his job. For all he consciously knew, he was aiming at the effects of Rossetti and Swinburne. Like Columbus, he was seeking the old and found the new.”

Aside from being patronizing, these remarks fail to illuminate Pound’s text. For the most part they are unabsorbed in the book’s explications. And when they are applied to specifics, they become simply jumping off points for impressionistic description. In relation to Rock-Drill and Threnos, for example, where Pound’s poetry becomes so divorced from speech that it is not always clear how to voice it, Bacigalupo comments, “one can hardly speak of ‘canto’ in connection with this verse which is all the time approaching silence, the unrelated rock splinter… it calls for an atonal delivery quite indifferent to the content conveyed… the ‘mystery’ no longer involves certain words alone, but all discourse, of which an image is the breath or ethereal wind spoken of in RD.” The valuable part of Bacigalupo’s treatment of these Cantos turns out to be not his theoretical sophistication but his canny assessment of how they grew out of Pound’s imprisonment. On the appropriateness of the new way of writing to Pound’s incarceration, Bacigalupo remarks: “in the ‘objective’ world of RD… there is no place for exceptions and qualifications: every statement is desperately peremptory, impermeable to all objections, and as such hopelessly invalid. This obstinacy follows upon, and compensates for, the precarious status (increasingly in evidence through the fifties) of Pound’s discourse, which proceeds warily one step at a time, from one small fact to the next, and cannot admit any hesitation, doubt, or self-irony… the suddenly more pronounced atomization of his ideogramic narrative… is not so much the consequence of an intentional choice of method, as the naked transcription of an arduous and at times arid mental condition.”

Not Bacigalupo’s theory, but his condescension emerges as the keynote of The Formed Trace. It is Bacigalupo’s pleasure to play tough guy. He is tough on Pound’s achievement, tough on Pound’s intelligence and toughest of all on Pound’s politics. Most of his special knowledge of the Cantos’ Italian provenance, in fact, is put to the rather dubious use of tying passages in the Cantos to obscure and unsavory events in Fascist Italy. Beyond this he is unsparingly critical of the poem’s intellectual and emotional stances and argues that the later sections of the Cantos are redeemed only because the “counterstress of language generously immerses in the shadow of formal doubt Pound’s peremptory statements and corroborates his pathetic offer of love.”

This, it seems to me, is inadequate. What prevents it from vitiating the value of the book is the thoroughness of Bacigalupo’s explications. No student of modern poetry can afford to disregard his discussion of Pound’s notoriously difficult late Cantos. His reading of Canto 91, for instance, though it chooses not to emphasize the poetry’s origin in Pound’s address to Sheri Martinelli, is the best we have of that remarkable poem. And his discussion of “The Works and Days of Pisa,” supported by a knowledge of Pound’s fugitive Italian prose and illuminated by references to the typescript, is indispensable. There his toughness is eclipsed by admiration, and Bacigalupo shows real sensitivity to the
large and small movements of the sequence—to the way, for example, “the exceptional momentum of the Pisan poem is made apparent by the frequent rehandling in the opening of one canto of the themes of the previous close,” or to the way “Pound’s subjective mood… [seeks] correlatives in cultural history, or in an external landscape inhabited by the Neoplatonic shadows of the poem’s archaeological romance.” His summation of the sequence is surprisingly and refreshingly humanistic: In *The Pisan Cantos*, Pound’s fellow prisoners—the last companions of Odysseus—“bring home to the poet (who now shares their experience) the fact that the true tale of the tribe is one of companionship in suffering.” As such the experience represents “a climax to the Education of Ezra Pound.”

To turn from *The Formed Trace* to Anthony Woodward’s *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos* is to change porridge for sparkling wine. There is no question that Woodward’s is a slighter book, but that only throws his successes into sharper relief. Proposing to bring “Pound closer to the educated reader at the level of his greatest achievement,” Woodward advances an argument that he disarmingly admits is contradicted by the poem’s main lines of intention: *The Cantos* strive to be “a great constructive epic,” and “if Pound had not made that effort he would not be the great poet and exemplary figure that he is”; “yet to read *The Cantos* as if Pound’s didactic constructive intentions were the work’s true nerve of feeling is to miss a crucial poetic effect, which is one of ironic parody and disintegration, shot through with nostalgia for a lost beauty and fierce innocence…. *The Pisan Cantos* are the great modern elegy not only of one man over his individual fate but over a whole civilized order for which he had some claim to speak.” Woodward substantiates this argument with a series of exemplary readings which are sensitive, elegant and full of the condensed distillation of prolonged reflection. Hardly a page goes by that does not contain some unacknowledged truth about Pound, his work, or the relation between the two. Throughout, Woodward’s emphasis is on the emotional and poetic life of the text, the pulsating “rhythm of feeling” that is the result of Pound’s mastery of “rhythm and cadence, the qualities of poetry hardest to analyse satisfactorily…. the swift change of register from elevated cadence to colloquial directness, the pared reticence, the sudden startling cri de coeur.”

Perhaps I can illustrate the excellence of *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos* by spotlighting a set piece that aligns itself with the concerns of *The Formed Trace*. Like Bacigalupo, Woodward is aware of the relevance of the Heideggerian dialectic of presence and absence to Pound’s most puzzling strategies. But instead of treating the philosophical presuppositions of Pound’s use of language in discrete asides, Woodward allows his distinctions to arise out of a reading of a post-Romantic text that suggests the long tradition behind Pound’s attitudes. Starting with Heidegger’s assertion of the modernity of *Brot und Wein*, Woodward brings out the continuity between Hölderlin and Pound: “in the light of this Heideggerian digression one can surely feel that all *The Pisan Cantos* show a religious temperament in quest of the Holy; yet… a mood of elegiac distance subtly pervades their grasp of the religious.” It is an awareness of this distance, according to Woodward, that engenders Pound’s self-consciousness about styles and generates the oddly moving effects associated with that self-conscious-
ness. In a lyric passage like the second half of Canto 81, for example, “the calculated artifice of the whole sequence is as marked as the moving quality of the lyric itself.... It is as if the poet is inventing as he goes along certain rituals for the articulation of his religious need, and these personal rituals carry an oblique hint of distance and loss in the estranging formality of their idiom.” It is this control over formality that constitutes Pound’s poetic and spiritual “tact” and makes him strike us as quintessentially modern. To have noticed so much is an achievement of its own. And to have derived it so lucidly from the inflections of a text is the work of a genuine critic.

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Today the enterprise of semiotics is devoted to calling into question conceptions of the natural, by unmasking the naturalizing component inherent in arbitrary cultural codes. Based on the analysis of the *vraisemblable* undertaken by formalism and structuralism of the Russian, Prague, and Parisian varieties, contemporary post-structuralism has developed keen instruments for probing traditional metaphysics of natural law and discovering in it conventions that have arrogated to themselves the status of universal, natural realities. In this perspective, embodied in the semiotics of Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and the Tartu school of Soviet semioticians such as Jurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky, the “natural” is seen from the viewpoint of the conventional, and as such is recuperated (if at all) only to the degree that it is believed that the making of arbitrary, non-natural, and unmotivated conventional systems is itself a “natural” human activity.

Lawrence Manley’s study of convention brings the reader from the classical distinction between nature and convention up to the threshold of the modern view. In this wide-ranging and shrewdly argued survey, the modern view is reversed. Convention is, for the most part, understood within the perspective of natural laws, forms, ethical imperatives, and universal ideas. And within that perspective convention, depending on the writer, his time and his subject, may mean adapting one’s text to the specific beliefs of one’s audience (Horace, Dryden); the gradually formed body of precedents and customs of a nation’s legal code (Hooker); the concept of verisimilitude, i.e., what by convention is believed to be real (Puttenham); human history as the displacement of providential guidance by the dispersion of diverse human customs, beliefs, and practices (Renaissance humanist historiography). All of these areas of human thought are within the pre-modern period similar in that they take cognizance of the diversity and flux of human customs and artifacts. Consequently, the natural/conventional differential Manley studies is governed by the “rule” that says that whatever is fixed, unchanging, abstract, divinely-ordained is “natural,” and whatever is characterized by the opposite of these predicates is conventional. As such,
the conventional is the wholly arbitrary and the changing, and in this we can see that western understanding of convention is still in its pre-semiotic stage. For in the reversal of perspective I mentioned above it has now become apparent that the conventional, insofar as it is codified, is an autonomous system of signs and practices rigidly governed by its own semiotic rules, and this is so precisely because it is arbitrary.

But as long as the conventional is perceived and developed as the negation of the natural, it must appear as only the arbitrary and the "free" as distinct from the rational and the determined. It is the history of this perception and development that Manley writes. It is a history particularly, as Manley says early in the book and demonstrates so ably in the remainder, "of a continuous dialectical relationships between nature and convention, in which each was repeatedly opposed, adjusted, and readjusted in changing configurations with the other" (p. 11). For all of the immense erudition critically examined and synthesized in this book, Manley's single most impressive achievement to my mind is the sustained vision of his vast material announced by this statement. He understands that the notion of the conventional both logically and historically has no meaning except through dialectical interplay with its contrary, the notion of the natural. Consequently, this study stands apart from the mainstream of conservative Anglo-American history of ideas typified by the book that prefigures it, namely Hiram Haydn's *The Counter-Renaissance* (1950), in eschewing the methodological naiveté of a "from-to" model of intellectual history. Haydn, however much he sophisticated the Lovejoy model in refusing to treat multiple texts as merely parts of an undifferentiated cultural super-text, nevertheless envisioned the crucial transformation from Classical-Christian notions of the natural to modern mechanistic, value-free notions of the natural as simply that: a binary oscillation in which the first is relinquished as the second comes to dominate.

In contrast, Manley manages to remain faithful at once to his material and to his dialectical model, by demonstrating how the natural/conventional differential manifests through its historical development its capacity to generate a wide variety of contents for both rubrics out of a limited matrix of a few possible dialectical relationships. Without evoking either Hegelian or structuralist metaphysics, Manley argues convincingly that the history of the nature/convention dialectic unfolds its vast and various history as a series of variations strictly limited to those available to the dialectical logic implicit in the two terms from the beginning.

These variations exhibit a tendency to repeat themselves at different points in history. Thus the relation of mutual exclusion surfaces in the choice offered in classical times between appeals to universal principles of artistic construction (*Plato's Republic* and Aristotle's *Poetics*), and accommodation to customs and norms peculiar to specific audiences argued by the Sophists and Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. The same category of mutual exclusion occurs in the Reformation's critique of custom, funded by Augustinian and Stoic notions of natural law, against Henry VIII's and Erasmus' defense of local religious practices and beliefs. The same relation is argued once again at the end of the Renaissance by Thomas Hobbes, for whom the structures of human thought are governed entirely by will and habit.
Another variation transforms mutual exclusion into mutual implication, and makes available positions that hold that the diversity and change of human conventions through history themselves embody progressively a transcendent norm of natural law. In two of the most brilliant sections of the book Manley demonstrates how Richard Hooker and John Dryden—the first concerned with the coalescence of Christian tradition and divinely ordained natural law, the second with adapting mimesis of universal human nature to changing notions of decorum—both exploited the interpenetration of nature and convention implicit and available in this dialectic. In both cases the argument from established universal consensus, whether legal or aesthetic, transforms the exclusion of the conventional by the natural into its historical embodiment.

This variation in turn gives rise to another. In this avatar the modern semiotic notion of the natural is prefigured by Burne, Bentley, Blackwell, and Dennis, for whom the concept of the natural as universal norm is relegated to the domain of the physical sciences, leaving anthropological reality wholly dominated by convention. And finally, in one last turn of the wheel projected in his book's closing pages, Manley envisions English romanticism's attempts to flee the tyranny of custom by taking refuge in an order of nature now located entirely in the communication between the individual mind and the unchanging forms of physical nature. Here once again, opposites coalesce: the individual sensibility—long the province of the arbitrary, the historical, and the conventional—re-establishes links with convention's perennial dialectical contrary, the world of the transcendent and the natural.

As Manley superbly summarizes the structure of the history he examines, this history is really the continual interplay between two meanings of the word “invention”: invention as finding in nature the models of human endeavor, and invention as making these models out of the materials at hand (p. 330). As one might expect, Manley's attempts to discover this interplay in every component of his material are not uniformly successful. One may find somewhat forced his contention that rhetorical invention founded on substance and accidents respectively replicates the opposition between the natural and the conventional. And it is certainly a mistake to say that Bacon sought relief from the tyranny of custom by finding nature again in his new science. As a matter of fact, Bacon carefully distinguished the realm of natural law from that of conventional prudence, and gave full recognition to the claims of the latter both in his Essays and in his legal writing.

But these are small blemishes on what is otherwise a masterful synthesis of dialectical thesis and widely diverse historical material. As this writer has argued elsewhere and in other connections (*Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature* [1975]), it is inadequate to the complexity of intellectual and literary history to take over uncritically the either/or categories governing the polemics and quarrels that headline a given period's understanding and presentation of itself. The meaning of any concept and of the positions argued in its behalf wholly depends on those both are defined against, since it is only in this dialectic that either possesses any identity of its own. Manley has demonstrated definitively in this direction how the nature/convention dialectic has wielded a tyrannical control over much Western thinking throughout its history. And
he has shown that this tyranny evoked enormous sustained creativity precisely because both concepts were so inextricably locked together as to allow neither total fusion nor total sundering.

Michael McCanles

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Williams' book "attempts to provide the evidence and a context for an approach that takes into account the essential compatibility of Congreve's one novella and five plays with traditional Christian 'explanations' and 'configurations' of human life." By doing so, he challenges some past and most recent studies that have, in his view, overemphasized the secular, Epicurean, or Hobbit nature of Congreve's work while neglecting its "Christian vision of human existence." The first three chapters attempt to show "how strongly" a Christian vision of life was held by both playwrights and playgoers and "how mutually reciprocative were certain images and explanations of life" set forth by preachers, poets, and critics; the fourth discusses the Jeremy Collier controversy; and the last six examine Congreve's novella and five plays in the context of "the prevailing providentialist pattern" Williams discerns in all of Congreve's work.

There is value in Williams' attempt to redress the imbalances in some recent Congreve criticism that, for example, makes too much of the Machiavellian nature of Congreve's protagonists, and he succeeds in demonstrating that some of the values operating in Congreve's work are "compatible" with a "Christian vision" of life. But the corrective is generally worse than the disease it seeks to cure, partly because of the inadequacy of the "evidence" Williams advances to support his thesis and partly because his reading of the plays ultimately gives us a diminished, somber, and sometimes trivial Congreve rather than the imaginative comic dramatist whose best plays continue to please through their wit and brilliance.

In his chapter on the Collier controversy, Williams remarks that "Collier was not the first, nor the last, to confuse art and life." Unfortunately, Williams' study confirms the truth of this statement; he consistently ignores or undervalues artistic/aesthetic considerations in the work of late seventeenth-century dramatists, including Congreve, and frequently adduces certain kinds of "proof" that obscure distinctions between life and art. The problem is most apparent in early chapters on "providential justice" and "poetical justice." Poetic justice clearly plays an important role in many late seventeenth-century works; Williams believes that its use—"in most if not all cases"—is a reflection of a belief in a providential order in which God intervenes daily in the lives of men and of "a specifically religious attitude toward life"—a leap of faith based on specious arguments. For example, Dryden's remark about retaining dramatic probability through carefully plotted cause and effect relationships
that are apparent to an audience only after characters are led through various intrigues is sandwiched between texts of clergymen that comment on God's apparently obscure but ultimately just and ordered intentions. Dryden is of course addressing a question of artistry, not a theological problem; the fact that similar "images," ideas, and language occur in texts addressing different subjects does not confirm that the texts mean the same thing or that poets and preachers were conducting essentially the same business.

But this is the kind of "proof" we are offered throughout the book. To take one instance from his discussion of Congreve's plays: Williams notes that there are many "breeding and birth" images in The Way of the World, relates these to Bishop Wilkins' gloss on Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, associating "time not only with imagery of birth but also with the designs of an overruling Providence," and concludes that the play's plot is designed to reveal "Heaven's justice" despite the lack of references to "Providence's decrees." But back to the first building-block. Images of "breeding and birth" come from such characters as Lady Wishfort, who, frustrated in her overly-eager search for a bedfellow, says "she'll breed no more." Congreve is of course gently ridiculing the foibles of her superannuated ladyship; is her humorous comment really a basis for concluding that Congreve makes a case for providential justice in The Way of the World?

Many of the values operating in Congreve's work are consistent with a "Christian vision of life," others are more broadly humanitarian, and some have nothing to do with specifically Christian beliefs or values. His best work is of course solidly within the tradition of the late seventeenth-century comedy of manners, which has its own conventions and, to some extent, shared values. There is little mention of this in Williams' study, which is unfortunate since occasional distortions of tone and tenor might have been avoided had this context been more continually kept in mind. Despite Williams' assertion that "all of the schemes set forward by this so-called Machiavellian master of convention and society" are "frustrated," Mirabell succeeds because he has foresight and worldly wisdom, including knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of other people. It is true he could not know in advance that controlling Mrs. Fainall's fortune in trust would give him the trump card that wins Lady Wishfort's consent for his marriage to Millamant, but the victory does result from his knowledge of the way of the world. He is also a reasonably decent man who deserves his success, as Williams says, but Williams makes too much of Mirabell's penitence before Lady Wishfort, comparing it to the General Confession in the Anglican order of Holy Communion. What Williams does not say is that at the time of his confession and renunciation of his claim to Millamant, Mirabell has not yet played his trump card; it is easy for him to renounce what he wants when he is relatively certain he will still get it. Ultimately, Mirabell and Millamant are united because they are superior to others in their world and because their love for one another is genuine. The Way of the World is more "moral" than The Man of Mode, but the two plays judge the worthiness of their characters in terms of many of the same values—including such qualities as wit, intelligence, and the ability to dissemble and manipulate.
Such non-Christian values, clearly evident in many late seventeenth-century comic dramatists, tend to get lost in Williams' search for patterns of providential justice and "specifically religious attitudes toward life."

JAMES S. MALEK

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This is an important book. It examines with patient thoughtfulness and stimulating originality a subject that is too often awarded only casual attention. Henkle has a thesis which he neither forces nor clouds with jargon. He makes good use of theoretical works in various fields (Frye, Kermode, Gombrich, Freud, Kris), but blends their insights with his own. This book is not simply a history of comic writing in nineteenth-century England; it examines the evolution of comedy in a specific cultural setting. The samples chosen, from Bulwer to Beerbohm, are illustrative, not exhaustive. Henkle is interested in concepts, not catalogues.

Henkle's critical assumptions are immediately apparent. In stating that "Comedy causes a culture to look at itself in a new way," he asserts the importance of social context and authorial intent. Henkle is interested in the relationship between comic writing and social control and the fictions by which individuals protect personal freedom against those controls. "Once a social code or a line of conduct ceases to be treated as a fiction and is instead sanctified and taken seriously by a society, or by influential individuals in it, then existence grows oppressive and sterile." Openly or covertly, comedy seeks to prevent this stultification by re-examining these social and personal fictions. In the process, Henkel suggests, comic invention follows the three stages of reduction, elaboration, and closure, a pattern that he traces in individual authors and, to some extent, in the period as a whole. Though this process may not operate in all cases, it is still a useful paradigm. Similarly, Henkle is not always careful to distinguish when humorous writing is comedy and when it is not. He makes an initial distinction between comedy and satire, for example, that seems to get lost on the way past Dickens and Butler to Beerbohm and toward Waugh. Nonetheless, his examples clarify what his theory leaves open to question.

One of Henkle's strong contributions is his attention to the increasingly self-conscious fascination of comic writers with the fiction-making capacity of mankind. Though theorists do not normally view Regency prose with much excitement, Henkle's speculations prove that any literature live enough to be remembered is worth anatomizing. He brilliantly demonstrates the hypothesis that a principal flaw of Bulwer and other Silver Fork novelists was their lack of courage fully to embrace comedy because they failed to perceive a clear demarcation between art and reality. Themselves accepting the importance of the social fictions they wished to attack, they were reined in from the full career
of comedy to a bit-champing wit. Disraeli, on the other hand, more conscious of the difference between social and esthetic fictions, succeeded with The Young Duke because he was not afraid to let his novel revel in its art. "The spirit of art appears to be necessary for comedy," Henkle concludes.

If most comic writers at the beginning of the century failed to distinguish between social and esthetic convictions, those who followed recognized the different allegiances without being able to reconcile them. Henkle explains that the change in comedy during the early and mid-Victorian years is from external action to the expression of internalized concerns. The comic writing of this time manifests a tension between the desire for adventure and personal freedom and the desire for security and bourgeois comfort. Writers such as Peacock, Thackeray, and Jerrold recognized the alienation generated by social transition, but while their savagely reductive attacks upon fashions and follies of the time combined with an elaborative comic perception of the personal and social fictions these follies produced, ultimately each man retreated from the implications of his comic vision to his own version of conservatism in what Henkle calls the comic stage of closure.

Dickens' case is more interesting. He was fascinated by man's capacity to create fictions as defenses against the disturbing influence of rapid social change. The appealing feature of many of his finest characters is their perception of this fictionalizing power. Dickens' career follows the pattern of his time, the change from external to internal concerns occurring with Dombey and Son. As he moved from the exposure of human pretensions and excesses to an examination of social paradoxes, his comedy became not only a serious method for criticizing and evaluating English society, but a means of testing his own character. Like Thackeray's, Dickens' comedy was highly personal, but whereas Thackeray shrank from the implications of his, Dickens not only faced such implications, but risked the elaboration and transformation of his own comic types until this analytical reduction became an intense form of self-analysis. Henkle's observation may give too much credit to characterization and too little to Dickens' increasingly subtle mastery of language itself, but the trajectory he proposes for Dickens' career is nonetheless credible and helpful.

Dickens assaulted his society head-on, but the lighter humor that characterizes the 50's and 60's reflects an attempt by writers such as Hood, Gilbert, and Carroll to evaluate bourgeois society from within. It exhibits a sympathy for the preoccupations and anxieties of the middle class as well as a resignation to the artist's inevitable estrangement, sometimes through nonsense and sometimes through elaborate fancy. Thus, for Henkle, Carroll's Alice books should not be read as closed literary puzzles, but as paradigms of the conflict between social power and independent life patterns in Victorian England. It may seem that all of this speculating overlooks the sheer fun of comic writing. But while anyone can observe the jollity in Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures or The Diary of a Nobody, it is hard to deny that Jerrold and the Grossmiths were narrowing the distance between reader and comic target, making comic self-recognition a means of achieving a balance between acceptance of social convention and preservation of independent vision. The comic figure who is like yet unlike the reader mediates social anxiety.
If some writers were reducing the distance between comic figures and the common man through apparently artless humor, Meredith was promoting a similar identification by different means. His comedy represents the culmination of a restraining tendency apparent in Disraeli and Dickens—the containing of the elaborative comic impulse in a strict esthetic form, thereby creating an effect of intellectual detachment in the treatment of highly volatile subjects. Meredith's comedy was as personal and as self-analytic as Dickens', but it was philosophical as well and depended on the conviction that comedy was identifiable with a high culture appreciated by a refined elite. By putting esthetic values first, Meredith hoped to reconcile self-conscious sensibility with an attitude of open receptivity. Henkle uses the example of Samuel Butler to show how an equally personal form of comic writing does not lead to the same degree of self-awareness but remains wallowing in the very bourgeois values it attacks.

If Meredith aspired to liberate comedy by emphasizing art and Butler failed to free himself by preferring convenience to esthetic form, Wilde, Henkle argues, took a major step beyond both, for he mocked esthetic and social assumptions alike, purposely blurring the distinctions between the two and transvaluing them. He was comedy's guerilla whose principal device was paradox and whose chief method was the elaborative play of personality. Henkle is correct, I believe, in reading *Dorian Gray* as a parody of literary modes, a comic melodrama of "a soul's progress manqué." The same could be said of shorter works such as "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" and "The Canterville Ghost," which also parody conventional forms. Beerbohm was a lesser mole undermining the same bourgeois pretensions and forms. In a way, these two writers bring us full circle to the dandified comedy with which Henkle began. The difference is that with Bulwer and his contemporaries the confusion between social and esthetic codes was in the artist's mind; with Wilde and Beerbohm it is purposely generated in the reader's because the artist knows the difference.

Henkle's contribution is an important one. While it may make too little of the humor which affirmed social conventions by mocking what was new and intellectually or esthetically disturbing, and while it may offer too orderly a picture of the evolution of comedy in England by overlooking some inconvenient figures (What confirmations or reservations might be found in figures such as George Cruikshank, Henry Cokton, Samuel Warren, the Mayhew brothers? Why are scarcely any women writers mentioned and none examined?), it nonetheless asserts the coherent theory that English comedy developed its characteristic manner through the engagement of writers with their social conditions, thus arriving at its characteristic conclusion that "the only way out of bourgeois values is to transpose them."

*Wayne State University*

_John R. Reed_

Tony Tanner's work on American novels, on Bellow and on Conrad has earned him a strong reputation here. Nobody can accuse him of not being clever or up to date. His latest book, the first of two on the subject of Adultery in the Novel, is further evidence that he keeps up with trends and that he is capable of applying them in original ways. There is, for example, a marked tendency to decenter his argument, a reflection no doubt of the deconstructive procedures of Derrida and others. Thus we find him dealing with three texts, two of which, Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloïse and Goethe's Die Wahlverwandtschaften, are only obliquely concerned with the act whose treatment forced Flaubert into the courts. Instead of treating the theme directly in the third text, he approaches it through a discussion of Charles Bovary's injection into the world of learning, of minor figures like Binet and the ironically named Lheureux, of Emma's attempts to avoid her present condition in the period that precedes the ball at la Vaubyessard, or of the anagrammatic puns discovered (by Tanner) throughout Madame Bovary. The result is a valuable, if at times tendentious, contribution that obliges us to examine hitherto neglected aspects both of the texts and of the central theme. Characteristically, even that theme sometimes gets lost in the welter of side-issues generated by its consideration. Divagation is a vice that Tanner knows how to turn into a virtue.

Though Derrida is mentioned only in passing and omitted from the bibliography, his presence seems palpable in the strategy. But it is the more pragmatic and socially oriented Foucault, the historian of mores, who casts the longest shadow, reenforced by his American disciple Edward Said. For a significant portion of this thematic study is given over to discussion of the social conditions that determined the theme's popularity. Tanner's thesis is that the internal harmony of patterns in the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century are shown by such novels to be "all awry" and that novelists discovered that their own "patterns...existed in a very problematical relationship with those" of the dominant society. This should come as no news to most readers, but Tanner goes on from there to explain that the novel comes into being in the struggle, conscious and unconscious, against authoritative models from the past. He argues that adultery tends to destabilize the whole society by breaking the central contact and by violating the decorum of marriage, putting the wrong people together in the wrong bed. It is at this point that his argument becomes very sophisticated indeed, probing the sub-structures of La Nouvelle Héloïse and Die Wahlverwandtschaften to reveal the tangled web of relationships that make those books so engrossing even today. Thus the private revolution at the hearth becomes a public affair in the novels. In his treatment of the only novel in the group that faces and explores the reality of adultery, its physical, psychological and social consequences, he goes much further, showing in great detail how the categories that society strains to keep apart are frequently identified or mélanged to create "the fog in Emma Bovary's head."

The result is a brilliant and frequently exasperating book and the two qualities
are frequently linked. Thus, Tanner, who has a fundamentally lucid style, tends to lard his sentences with lengthy parenthetical asides. The latter, resembling footnotes in many cases, can be extremely interesting, but their presence inhibits reading. Again, Tanner supports his view that adultery is the prime theme of the nineteenth century novel with a discussion of the then popular Tristan and Isolde tale. But he fails to mention competing themes like, for example, the theme of dangerous beauty represented in Salomé, the Mona Lisa and the romantic Belle Dame sans merci. Still, his choice to deal in depth with the implications of adultery, examining its various manifestations overt and implicit, was a good one. We can agree that there is a solitude at the heart of the relationships studied here, that in Goethe, for example, adultery is avoided by leaning toward incest, and we can admire the vigor of the demonstration.

We may also agree with the implication that novelistic texts take much of their power from the presence of covert persuaders, hiding/displaying subtexts that convey meanings often absent from the textual surface. (I would add that such sublimina may also carry some of the emotive force and aesthetic interest.) His investigation of the Flaubertian imagery and his extremely close readings of passages like the opening chapter of Bovary represent a real contribution as does his account of Charles' conditioning as it is exposed through the teacher's behavior and symbolized by his unforgettable hat. We even readily assent to the view that language can create objects that are “visible but not visible” and that this power to create in words what cannot be replicated in experience is very likely “a key part of Emma’s dilemma.” The cap is indeed “an assemblage of the decontextualized quotations,” and we may even stretch it to cover the confusion that generates Charles’ and Emma’s miseries. But from time to time we are exposed to somewhat forced readings of details. For example, the fact that Charles opens a “bouche démesurée” to shout out his famous word “Charbovari” is made to stand for the “problem of satisfying appetites” and in particular for Emma’s fate. In this instance and in numerous others, Tanner seems to be capitulating to the need to say everything possible on every point. The reader is accordingly obliged to sort out the plausible and brilliant from the self-indulgent.

Curiously, what is potentially Tanner’s biggest contribution, the exploration of the subtext for hidden signs nesting in the very words of Flaubert’s discourse, is the most flawed aspect of this study. There is a tendency to be overly ingenious in the analysis of certain words which may indeed significantly affect the reader’s reception of the text. Tanner uses Freud’s views concerning the duplicity of language to support his own, but the reader is often left to decide whether to ascribe the particular play to the author, the unwitting protagonist, or the text, and we are asked all too often to assent to some very selective instances, those that support Tanner’s readings by puns. Thus he finds the wheel to be an insistent image, and relates it to other turning objects that effect Emma’s futile and self-destructive round. As a result, roue contributes to “Rouault (Emma’s maiden name)” and Rouen becomes Roue-n, “the most important wheel in her life, where she turns and turns...eroding herself in an irreversible capitulation to vertigo as a way of being in the world—or getting out of it.” We need not accept the word-play to agree with the general conclusions, but the
argument implies that we have reacted somehow to such a play. Elsewhere, he speaks of the plays on tour and trou, on the name Léon and the word loin, and on the association livres with lèvres (the last two in connection with the early platonic stages in Emma's relationship with that romantic young man). We are told that the sound of Binet's famous lathe is more than the expected humming. "Ronflement can be 'whirring' or 'humming' (it also phonetically echoes the renflements in his shoes), but it also means snoring—of which there is a great deal in this book, a book not so much of 'the dead' as of 'the sleepy.'" It is clear that much of this reading depends on auxiliary meanings, echo effects, and even Freudian slips. Sometimes the result of this discovery of wordplay is unintentionally comical as when Tanner, making much of tour/trou (lathe/hole but also tower/hole), speaks of the "hole transformed into a lathe" without noting the far more obvious sexual implications. What can we say when we read that "Emma cannot fill the various trous in her life with a tour" (as can the industrious Mr. Binet in his with his everwhirring lathe/tower)?

Here as elsewhere, Tanner's procedure is that of the selective close reading and the selective interpretation, both of which invariably include the verbal expansion procedure and imply that the chosen word or passage is a paradigm. The risks are clear. The paradigms, like word-play, may be in the eye of the beholder. There is an argument to be made for Flaubert's witting or unwitting use of echo-morphemes and for their covert impact on the reader's reactions. In fact, certain of Tanner's treatments are quite convincing. For example, he discovers an erotic ("bondage") potential of the radical cou in the following passage:

Comme la salle était fraîche, elle grelottait tout en mangeant, ce qui découvrait un peu ses lèvres charnues, qu'elle avait coutume de mor-diller à ses moments de silence. Son cou sortait d'un col blanc, rabattu.

Elsewhere, in connection with his argument for the "morselization of Emma Bovary," he notes that if, "perhaps somewhat fancifully, we consider the body as a complex word or unit of language, then we could say that the neck operates both as a word and as a syllable in the more complex word of the body...Words using the radical cou would therefore comprise what Saussure called an 'associative series'...." This line of inquiry has considerable merit as a contribution to the study of sublimina, but we are still left with the problem of how far to take it. What about the source of the echoing syllables? Can we really ascribe such series entirely to the conscious manipulation of the author? Does his not justisme support that ascription?

With these caveats in mind we can turn to more positive aspects of this lively and challenging book. Tanner succeeds in reading the minor characters as he would images, finding, for example, that if "Binet is the active spirit of replication, Rodolph is the incarnate force denying and destroying distinctions." Frequently, the explanations offered lead to the coining of new metaphors that extend the vision of the text. Thus, marriage is defined in terms of Homais' mania for decanting and labeling: "What Homais is doing in his Capharnaum is only an extreme form of the processes by which society is maintained (hence his connection with 'étiquette'—in all senses of the word.)." The treatment of
Saint-Preux in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and of the economic blight that is *Bovary's* Lheureux are among the high points.

One of the most original and convincing contributions is the discussion of fetishism in *Bovary*. Tanner always brings to his definitions an account of the term's source in modern thought. Thus fetishism is defined in Freudian terms before it is applied with rare felicity to Flaubert's practice. As an example of "degenerative displacement" he alludes to the treatment of book plates in romances Emma read as a girl: "Thus she starts to experience what amounts to an erotic thrill just by handling the books and watching the tissue paper float over the plates. 'She thrilled as she blew back the tissue paper over the prints. It rose in a half-fold and sank gently on the opposite page.'" As Tanner notes, though perhaps not in sufficient detail, this sort of imagery prefigures and characterizes the erotic in the rest of the book. His analysis is so good at this point that one wonders if Flaubert was reflecting on or participating in fetishism. It seems clear that for over a century his readers have been doing the latter but not the former. Why, then, one may wonder, does Tanner make so little of fetishization in his very suggestive Saussuran treatment of the "Morselization" of Emma Bovary? The process plays, after all, an enormous part in the presentation of the bits and pieces of Emma. It may even contribute to the word play emphasized in that section.

A final, mildly sour note should be sounded. The Johns Hopkins Press deserves praise for publishing this frequently brilliant book. But can we excuse its many typos, some of which are embarrassing, some hilarious, all unnecessary? On the other hand, could the following from a citation from George Bataille's *L'Erotisme* be a typesetter's wry commentary on Tanner's pun-love?: "Nous pouvons même aller jusqu'à la proposition absurde: l'interdit est là pour être voilé." What better commentary on a treatment of veiled violation that is at once possible and necessary? I recommend Tanner's book to the discriminating reader.

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The materials and methods of Wayne Franklin's superb *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers* are important for reconceiving the subtexts of the histories, narratives, fictions, and visualizations (particularly paintings, maps, and prints) of the trans-Mississippi West, if only because the social/geographic and semantic/graphic isolation of America's earliest travellers and explorers undergoes a kind of duplication by their nineteenth-century far Western fellow travellers and victims (including, as Franklin states, the isolating moves of Blacks and Native Americans). Franklin's strategy is to divide pre-1700 narratives into three paradigms, each corresponding to a historical phase of land appropriation and embodying as
a consequence a set of crises over self-and other-representation. Diaries, chronicles, histories, and visual records are connected less by imposed generic criteria and more by a generic immanence based on writing and representation as historical (and therefore material) forces.

The "diligence" of early American commentators and westward movers— including Columbus, John Underhill, John Bartram, sixteenth-century British promoters, Penn, Byrd, Bradford—is their effort to correlate "language and event in America," self-consciously and inadvertently, as a frequently ironic means to bridge the many gulfs between description and experience, their New World surroundings, and their accelerating alienation from fellow white Europeans and cultural categories. To grasp the persistence of these dilemmas one has only to recall the dismissal as crazies of those last mountain men going on about the geysers, colors, and bubbling pools of Yellowstone until the "official" (i.e. printed, graphic) geological survey of the 1870s documented and transformed putative manias and incredulities into "facts." Indeed, the Hayden Survey of the Yellowstone, with its prosaic listings, classifying regimes, and its stunning, probing, but still aestheticized photographs by W. H. Jackson, shares some features Franklin finds in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exploratory narratives: the explorers' language and observations offer "a scheme for founding (or imagining) a human world on the basis of a natural one" (p. 70), or the desire to own produces an "additive" text, a "catalog of future commodities" (p. 90).

Exploratory narratives, as displays of a will-to-master (through sight and language), are extensions of that same drive in antecedent discovery narratives, which have inscribed within themselves the silence of their loss for words, the fissures of acknowledged descriptive inadequacy, or a general biosociopolitical isolation before the "wonder" of the origin, the primal land. Franklin states the larger problematic this way:

The discoverer's most typical deed, the application of word to thing, becomes a means of covert plantation. If that deed often leads into a confession of the discoverer's inadequacy, the failure of mind to encompass American reality, the confession itself is further testimony to the unnamed but beneficient abundance of New World life. Silence is a form of contemplative hush in which words are wanting for the size and detail of American objects, but not for their evident European meaning. Imported vocabularies (or even native adaptations) fail to embrace the variety of sights and sounds because they are themselves the product of a narrower world or a mind unused to such expansive awe. (p. 45)

Such an emptiness in scene and beholder must irresistibly give way to the multiple sign systems and codes which eventuate its overdetermination as something written about and filled up: America as object in either event, a prelude to its status as a commodity producing other commodities and ideologies compatible with the reification of everything, including language. Thus after 1493 America "became a collection of words.... For all that Columbus did not know in 1493, those to whom he wrote knew even less. If one can see in his first act of expression, and in those which followed, a growing realization of what he had done and what had been done to him, one sees in the reception of his documents (and the thousands of similar reports which were to follow from
other hands) the constitution of America in European minds as a verbal construct, an artifact” (p. xi).

It is apt that Franklin's many-layered rhetorical analysis of geocultural “possession” (or mastery: of land or event through language) allows for scrutinizing the terms' metaphorical and thematic uses in the structures of settlement narratives. The issue of ownership of land (and concomitantly, the ownership or the authoritative writing of histories) is both “legal” and “moral;” it creates both winners and losers, and finally on a global scale the issue pits New against Old World. And the foreign devil theory—the paranoid style in politics so effectively interpreted by Hofstadter—emerges. Some settlement narratives, in the palimpsest of their writing and reading, show this larger movement in American history (which will script—although Franklin does not make this point specifically—the Civil War and jingoism); as Franklin argues, in some settlement records the loser's fate is put to uses which are more obviously political. Whoever controls public language in any human situation...has a vast advantage over the silent and the silenced. In the New World this basic fact of political life was enhanced by that “great distance” which...severed the realm of action from that of final authority. Each report sent back to Europe was at least potentially a play for power in the American scene, and the “facts” which it stated often were arranged so as to increase the expected grant of power. In time, this pattern entered even those texts which were aimed at memorializing New World events within a New World context rather than reporting on American affairs to some “home” official. (p. 149)

Those construed as being internal or external threats to a settlement—“malcontents and competing visionaries, slaves, foreign powers, the American natives”—were subject to rhetorical reduction within a narrative's system of representation. A related pattern on the problem of ownership is found in Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation, whose textual filters are Biblical typologies and the historical reality of secular (i.e. commercial proto-capitalist) “growth,” a linear development in which the Pilgrims, the antitypical Israelites or Chosen People, displaced their “timeless ideals” and theology into an (historical) ideology of material expansion. Franklin's analysis of Bradford's final entries in his history is acute in its presentation of a chiasmus or doubled and hidden discourse within the ostensible one:

Describing the Hebrew tongue as a promised land, Bradford thought of his new studies as a means of discovering by inward discipline quite a different New World from that in which he pursued them. It was to be an America of the mind and heart, his return to the original language of revelation a way of getting back, much as was his Pilgrim catalog at the end of the history, to a time when ideals were articulate and whole. Hence the historical design, formulated in words, pointed him back to words once again. Never having stated the sentence toward which the Pilgrims aimed their fate, the sentence of arrival and success, Bradford turned toward the field of language itself. In doing so, he recognized the fallacies of an exploratory prose, the wrong assumption that a word either was an event in its own right, or could plot out in advance a chain of contingent realities. (p. 177)
Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers, a generous book, closes with a generous epilogue which is a bibliographic mapping of travelogues, libraries, several important narrative collections, and some small reprint presses (it is gratifying Franklin mentions them, but greater stress on others printing Americana is desirable; for starters one could consult the annual International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses, a piece of Americana itself). Thirty plates—"spatial ideograms"—ranging from period maps, engravings, and town plans to naturalist drawings and Romantic oil paintings, are included with sophisticated face-en-face art historical explication. Rather than merely reduce images, for example, to highly coded iconographical equations (themselves the products of prior textual encodings anyhow), Franklin typically and subtly shows how a perspectival system in a white depiction of an aboriginal village betrays innocently the ideologies, hierarchical categories, and utopian wishes of the colonial observer. But subtlety, a precisely reflective style, and a hard-hitting recognition of the power of language and (pace Bercovitch) cultural pluralism make this a remarkably significant, flexible, and pioneering work. It is an important contribution to American Studies and to the understanding of the emergence of the American "West" (a signifier which was never "there" but still "came to be"), charting new relationships among the humanities, research, language and mediations, ideology and the distribution of power. That Franklin has contributed to this set of conjunctions—or possible confrontations—is implicit in his assessment of his work on these kinds of narratives: "we may hope to construct, finally, a literary model which reflects the abundance of centers in New World experience and art, both public and private, rather than any old scheme of cultural dominance" (p. 181). To which he immediately adds: "This new model will point us into the very heart of early New World prose. We must start with a simple premise of multiplicity that makes us skeptical of the tales which survive and respectful of those which do not; for we must recognize the great extent to which American narrative art has been a deeply political endeavor from the beginning, and has used language to enforce a given settlement over others. That black slaves largely were denied access to the means of public statement is an extreme proof of this point."

Franklin's tripartite declension of early written and visual accounts of the New World—meeting with it, probing it, settling within it, making it—offers a rare integrity of close readings of estranging materials (in the double sense that we see more clearly our present moment through the spectral residues of ancien-régime traces). Such an integrity may be manifest only by its own example, that is, in its joint presentation of a thorough job of reading and an equally probing writing about writing. Franklin's own narrative, in its recording of multiple readings of strange, isolated, but unavoidably culturally sedimented texts, makes us trust its claims to link language and event in its own rendering of a self-transparent and self-critical criticism. Those who enjoy criticism and scholarship as experience—and who, like Stanley Cavell on this particular issue, refuse any distinction between theory and practice—will find Franklin's interrogatory alignment of history and writing quietly provocative.

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JOHN ROBERT LEO

One always knows where one stands with Kingsley Widmer, whose past work (on the literary rebel, and other subjects) is distinguished by its honest contentiousness. Describing himself in the preface to this monograph as a "malcontent," Widmer examines several Modernist writers, including Conrad, Lawrence, Faulkner, Richard Wright, and others, as representative Modernists-in-opposition. Widmer's Modernism is the one that is temporarily out-of-fashion in the era of Gerald Graff: it is negative when not nihilistic, and is revolutionary and utopian. Though he calls his work "ideological criticism," its ideology functions in order to understand the text as an antagonist to a moribund or mystified culture; its spiritual avatar is thus Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground.

Widmer wisely avoids "readings" of these often-read texts but instead raises pertinent questions: about the nihilistic credo of "simple ideas" in Conrad, the utopian overreaching in Lawrence, the function of insane fury (of character and author) in Faulkner's Light in August. In these chapters, Widmer has a knack of going efficiently to the vexed ideological core of a narrative. He does not try to act as advocate; in his best chapter, on Lawrence's Lady Chatterley, he indicates precisely where Lawrence's ideas fracture the narrative sense. His monograph gives one the bracing impression that these novels are being thought about for the first time, reinvested with their original insidious potential.

But they are not, of course, being read for the first time, and Widmer's essays are largely an effort to retrieve the shock of texts that through institutionalization may have gone stale. Widmer addresses this problem in his last chapter and argues that antagonistic Modernism has never been "in" and is now going further "out" in the wake of the "American pathology of positive thinking," Graff's included. This is hugely arguable. Though he discusses "inappropriate institutionalization" of these literary works, Widmer knows that as an academic he cannot escape institutionalization himself, nor does he deny that these works have been practically de-historicized and co-opted. How does one restore an ideology when that ideology is found in the reading lists of high culture literary texts in every English department graduate program? Perhaps this is a problem for another book, but one still has a duty to ask an ideological critic how he can save his ideology from indifference fostered by fifty years of benign professorial acceptance.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Destructive Poetics: Heidegger and Modern American Poetry by Paul A. Bové.


Using philosophy to orient literary criticism is often a perilous undertaking, and yet contemporary critics seem bent on doing so more and more. Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein lend themselves to this borrowing, not only because they directly discuss aesthetic issues, but because their orientation in philosophy is conducive to speculation about those large issues of self, language, and stances towards reality that much literature, especially of the last two centuries, engages. Other philosophers—and here Heidegger is a prime example—are so involved with their own projects as they address the history of philosophy that their special vocabularies make adaptation for other purposes especially perilous. Heidegger's concerns, if we could separate them from his language, are related to modern literature. And Paul Bové is right to bring a figure like Olson into a Heideggerean context. But the fact remains: to call a poem, or a poetics, "destructive" is to challenge too abrasively the traditional critical vocabulary. Granted, Bové's main concern is to challenge, indeed to smash traditional literary orders of meaning. Still, some traditional orders are less susceptible to frontal attacks, and criticism must still win its way rhetorically, working with what its own language will allow.

Bové's book is deeply polemical. For him, autotelic theories of art, and the critical theories used to defend them, such as the formalist New Criticism, are betrayals of human experience. The "New Critical and structural attempts to impose upon them [the "open" forms of poetry] the teleological, ironic, atemporal, distancing structures of the reifying West" must be resisted at all costs, the first cost being the task of identifying the hegemony, as well as the false saviors who hide out in the fringes of postmodernism. Bové opens with a chapter on the nature of this hegemony, and the figures of Bate, Bloom, and de Man who unsuccessfully oppose it. There follows an exposition of the "correct" antidote, Heidegger's attack on the ontological encrustations of Western thought. Just to clarify matters, another chapter attacks Cleanth Brooks as the typical New Critical epitome of all the confluent errors of irony, contextualism, organicism, and aestheticism. Then three chapters complete the work: one each on Whitman, Stevens, and Olson, replete with harsh correctives to the critical orthodoxies, or in Olson's case the critical neglect, surrounding these poets.

Bové's polemic is, to my mind, excessive because it assumes the New Critical orthodoxy is still in need of unremitting attack, and many passages read as if the butterfly were being broken on the wheel. In its early stages this study was a thesis at Columbia, and perhaps there the news has been slow arriving. But elsewhere the New Criticism Bové presents as such an ogre is either dead and buried, or safely (and often healthily) assumed into more comprehensive methodologies. After all, who's afraid of Cleanth Brooks? The sense of Hartman going "beyond formalism," or the elegant and penetrating analysis of Lentricchia in After the New Criticism, are much more convincing and seemly ways of dealing with this chapter in the history of literary criticism.

As an expositor of Heidegger's philosophy, Bové gets barely passing marks. The chapter on the German philosopher leaves much to be desired, especially
any sense that Heidegger works in a semi-mystical vein of nostaliga that
hardly supports the sort of forceful innovation Bové seems to desire. Throughout
the book Bové has to resort to inverted commas to try and give ordinary words
some extra twist of meaning and so carry over into English at least the spirit
of the Heideggerean method. (Of course, anyone who can accept the privileged
meaning of the word within inverted commas already is predisposed to accept
Heidegger's formulations.) But all the problems of such a philosophy for
English readers, and especially Anglo-American critics, will almost certainly
remain. For in applying Heidegger to questions of literary history and inter­
pretation, what we are left with are enormous and energetic claims which are
hard to prove or disprove, without resorting to some other scheme of judgement:

“... The openness of the future” is the central human fact of this sort
of literary history (i.e., one built on Heidegger's sense of historicity). Within
the hermeneutical situation the poet can destroy the history of
literary interpretations, of literary texts as such, as well as the habitual­
critical interpretations of those texts. This means he can reclaim for
human possibility those potential problems and issues which are lost in the
systematization of Dasein's disclosures in past language.

To paraphrase Shakespeare, I can call spirits from the deep, but will they come?
Can any poet “destroy” at will, and only by will? Or does he or she need the
entire apparatus of literary meaning, which perforce means literary traditions
as well, in order to destroy or save anything? Bové's scheme credits the poet
with a genius and energy that would make even a full fledged Romantic blush.
The future is open, but only at one end. What Bové leaves out, or obscures
with his polemic, is how literature must have a social dimension; it must be
subject to at least some of the pressures of what the sociologists call the “extensive
manifold.” Literature is, in other words, not made only by poets. (Indeed,
where are the novelists and essayists in Bové's scheme? Their absence says
much about the literary tradition in which he works, often without full self­
consciousness.) Kermode's recent essay on the institutional control of interpre­
tation would help in this regard, but as long as Bové creates a strawman out of
New Criticism, he won’t be able to see how the available schemes of literary
history and critical method are the results of a long and complex struggle for
interpretative power.

The chapter on Stevens betrays some of Bové's limitations as well. Here
he concentrates on two poems, “The Comedian as the Letter C” and “The
Snow Man.” His claims for the latter are excessive, while his reading of the
former is not that different from the consensus understanding of the poem.
Of “The Snow Man,” he says that “It presents itself as an already deconstructed
fiction. It not only acknowledges that nothingness as 'center' is the ‘source'
of all poetry, but that it is also the ‘origin’ of all allegorical interpretation as
well.” But of course the poem says nothing about “all poetry”; only the
interpreter can read this single poem as a universal poetic. As for “The
Comedian,” for Bové it is structured like a Romantic quest poem, but it destroys
the Romantic view of structure and shows “that you cannot go home again,
because there is no home to go to.” Such a banal summation is where Heideg­
gerean metaphysics can easily lead. In the Olson and Whitman chapters, Bové
offers little that has not already been given in the criticism of these figures, and the important work of Roy Harvey Pearce is criticized as of only limited value. (Bové mentions the several recent studies of Olson, which would seem to belie his strong sense of that poet's neglect, but he doesn't really come to terms with what it means that Olson has become rather quickly accepted by academic criticism.) And Bové never clearly distinguishes among such terms as deconstruction, destruction, and retrieve. The use of Kierkegaard in the chapter on Cleanth Brooks is productive, and the distinction between absolute and authentic freedom is put to good effect. Perhaps Bové would have been more convincing if he had used Kierkegaard in place of Heidegger.

A final speculation. I'm convinced a reading of Frost's "Fire and Ice" or "Design" could be used to illustrate every point that Bové makes by using Stevens' "Snow Man." Yet Stevens is hallowed among those who want to explore and define post-modern modes of thought, whereas Frost is passé. This demonstrates the limitation of such "new" critical methodologies. Until they can be applied to a broader range of writers, including those who are (apparently) antipathetic to their philosophical assumptions, such methodologies will only serve as disguised forms of redrawing the canon. And this raises a further question: how does criticism decide to treat writers rather than writings? Bové sees literary history as the story of certain singular men struggling against a largely undifferentiated mass of opinion. It will be a long time before such a scheme is unattractive to historians of literary development. But it will, I think, be even longer before readers of literature will readily accept a phrase as prickly as "destructive poetics."

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An excessively grandiose title, even for a work of apocalyptic prophecy, which this is not. *Ipsi facto*, it is a title that promises more than it can possibly deliver; nor is the subtitle, though more indicative of the book's intent, much more accurate than the rather overwrought and declamatory leader. Valency includes chapters on Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, Pirandello, Giraudoux, Artaud, Ionesco, and Beckett, as well as an introductory chapter on "Realism and Symbolism" and a concluding one that recapitulates the book's title. Hardly an "introduction to contemporary drama," a phrase that causes such names as Shaw, Dürrenmatt, Frisch, Genet, and Brecht—to say nothing of the obvious precursors Ibsen and Strindberg—to course through the mind of even the most casual student. Truth to tell, Valency, although he has written a very good and immensely learned book, has not written an introduction to contemporary drama nor has he demonstrated—except in the obvious case of Beckett—that the modern drama bears witness for us to the death rattle of humanity. Curiously, the very
first sentence of Valency’s book leads one to believe that he is about to put his finger on the central thematic problem of the modern drama—indeed of all modern art and philosophic thought: “The erosion of the cosmic fantasy which for some twenty centuries shaped the culture of the West was attended by social cataclysms which left no part of its structure untouched.” “The erosion of the cosmic fantasy” is one of those marvellously felicitous phrases (quite a few are scattered throughout this genially written book) that epitomizes a whole trend of thought, but unfortunately the Scientific Revolution, which is the real intellectual precursor of the modern drama, is never even animadverted at again.

What Valency has in fact written is something far less than an introduction to contemporary drama, which would involve a thorough treatment of the omitted authors aforementioned as well as a discussion of the principal philosophic themes of the modern drama and their origins. What he has written is the definitive study of the influence on the modern drama of late 19th century French poetic symbolism.

Valency’s scholarship is impeccable, and his book is as thorough a study of the subject as we have any right to expect. Taken on its own terms, no exception can be taken to it. It is in its terms that give one pause. Does modern dramatic symbolism really owe more to Mallarmé than to Ibsen? Is more of it really traceable to Mallarmé’s deliberate obscurantism than to Peer Gynt’s onion? Mallarmé, indeed, has become a sort of shibboleth, a name that it is obligatory to intone when speaking of the roots of modern poetry. And it is on poetry and not on drama that Mallarmé has had his influence—if, indeed, he can be said to have had any influence. One who, as Valency says, “labored to make his utterance obscure,” who pursued “what should have been the truth” and admired the pursuer of “a mystery which he knows does not exist” is closer to the desperate mysticism of Tertullian’s Credo quia absurdum est than to the clarity and precision required of successful stage writing. When MacLeish (like Tertullian, quoted by Valency) asserted that a poem must not mean but be, he was certainly influenced by Mallarmé; and it is certainly true to say that the theatre of Beckett and Ionesco, for example, is in the same sense as the Mallarmé-influenced poem, but, unlike it, the play transmits through its being—as opposed to the specific denotation of its speeches—a very precisely perceptible and apprehendable intellectual meaning. For Mallarmé, according to Valency, “to understand a work of art was, accordingly, to misapprehend it; for whatever in it was truly art could not be touched by reason. The critic’s task was, in consequence, enormously simplified. To explain was to kill.” That sounds more as if Mallarmé influenced modern structuralist and semiotic critics than modern dramatists. If Mallarmé can be said to have influenced any playwright that playwright was Maurice Maeterlinck. But Maeterlinck is not merely old-fashioned now, he is not merely archaic or obsolete, he is not merely diluvian, antediluvian and prehistoric: he is extinct. Fossils in paleozoic strata are not more out of the mainstream of modern life than Maurice Maeterlinck. And yet somehow Valency can bring himself to inform us that Western drama was never the same after Pelléas et Mélisande and that Maeterlinck did more than Einstein to shake man’s faith in reality!
Valency devotes over one hundred pages each to Pirandello and Giraudoux. One can understand this in the case of Giraudoux, whom he has done so much to bring to English-speaking audiences and readers. As long as Giraudoux’s plays are interpreted—as they are by Valency—as poetic metaphors and not either as vehicles for ideas or viable stage plays (there are exceptions, as Valency correctly notes), this exhaustive analysis is justified and instructive. With Pirandello it is another matter. Valency disagrees with the view that Pirandello was a relativist for whom appearance was reality, an interpretation whose origin he traces to the critic Adriano Tilgher. He sees Pirandello as a defender of traditional Christian values untroubled by either cynicism or doubt. An interesting point of view, which may deserve further study, though personally I incline to the view that Pirandello’s “avant-gardism” was only superficial and that he belonged squarely in the Italian theatrical tradition, which is to say that he was a librettist rather than a playwright.

Valency’s treatment of Artaud, Ionesco, and Beckett is comparatively slight (it occupies less than 30% of the book), which is a pity since, if any playwrights have taken up the problem of symbolic stage representations of the end of the world (or of society as we know it in the case of Ionesco), these three are certainly the outstanding examples. Artaud’s Le Jet de Sang, for instance, is not even mentioned. But, then, neither is Dürrenmatt’s Die Physiker.

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