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Book Reviews

Is There A Text in This Class? by Stanley Fish. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1980. Pp. viii + 394. \$17.50.

Is There A Text in This Class? is Stanley Fish's critical autobiography, a collection of twelve essays published over the last decade (Chapters 1-12) and four previously unpublished lectures delivered at Kenyon College in 1979 (Chapters 13-16) held together by an introductory outline of the development of his thought and by prefatory notes at the head of each chapter which identify the circumstances of each essay's composition, the shortcomings of its findings, and the position it occupies in the narrative of the formation of the viewpoint the book finally espouses. The hero of this chronicle is interpretation, and its villain is "ordinary language," "a kind of language that 'merely' presents or mirrors facts independently of any consideration of value, interest, perspective, purpose, and so on" (p. 97). "Ordinary language" goes by many names, but it always makes the same claim: the world is objectively knowable, and language, at least at some level, transparently represents that world. "It is not too much to say," Fish remarks, "that everything I write is written against that claim, in all of its consequences and implications" (p. 97). Those consequences and implications are manifold, and their rejection entails a wholesale revision of common conceptions of language, perception, subjectivity, understanding and argumentation which Fish deftly and successfully negotiates in these pages.

Fish argues that perception does not precede interpretation but only takes place through verbal and mental categories which are interpretive since they are conventional and contextual, grounded in the purposes, desires, values and interests of particular communities. To perceive objectively, he reasons, one would have to stand outside all contexts, to perceive from no point of view at all—an option unavailable to human beings. Fish is no solipsist, however. His point is not to deny the existence of the world, merely the existence of a neutral knowledge of it. He seeks to escape the subject/object trap by conceiving of (human) reality as the indissoluble conjunction of the world and conventional modes of organizing it. One *produces* facts rather than receiving them, but one usually produces them through assumptions so deeply held and so much a part of one's situation that they seem to be attributes of reality. To some readers this must smack of the rankest subjectivism, and Fish confesses that he too feared that the abandonment of objective standards of knowledge would authorize interpretive anarchy until he realized that objectivity and subjectivity are two sides of the same coin, both embedded in an epistemology that separates subject and object. If objectivity presupposes perception unconstrained by situation and conventional mental categories, subjectivity presupposes interpretation likewise

unconstrained, that is, interpretation which an individual freely and acontextually imposes at will. But an individual can no more choose an arbitrary interpretation than he can discover an absolute truth, for both he and the world are structured by the cognitive categories he learns and utilizes in his particular situation. The subject is not autonomous; he possesses and is possessed by received notions which construct the world. The apparent stability of reality, which common sense insists is not illusory, proceeds not from an inherent configuration of the world but from the institutions which communities inaugurate and which constitute communities. Within the shared norms, values and interests of a community, individuals may dispute issues, propose arguments and reach conclusions which then may be subjected to verification procedures since they construct the world with, and they are constructed by, the same assumptions inherent in their situation. In other words, they may engage in meaningful debate because they share the same mechanisms for producing the facts under discussion and the same procedures for evaluating them. Thus a certain objectivity prevails within a community, but it is not universal or eternal; instead, it is contextual, and hence subject to change. And since individuals are always members of communities, they are never without standards of judgment. To paraphrase Fish, objectivity always exists, but it is not always the same one.

The consequences of this position for literary criticism are far-reaching. The text can no longer be considered an independent entity which authorizes certain interpretations, but must be seen as the product of an act of reading, as an entity constructed by institutional norms and cognitive categories. Arguments about the meaning of poems, then, are disputes not over interpretations of the verifiable facts of a poem (unless both parties have agreed to the same facts—that is, agreed to produce them in the same way), but over ways of making poems. The resolution of such arguments advances by persuasion rather than demonstration, by one party adopting the other's perspective rather than both parties submitting to the arbitration of factual evidence. To convince another of one's interpretation, one first identifies a common ground of assumptions shared with one's adversary and then argues for the rationality of further assumptions with which one's opponent differs in hopes that he will be persuaded to adopt them. Such a procedure is possible because one always shares some assumptions with members of one's community (including assumptions as to what will count as a reasonable argument) and because all conventions, although subject to change, do not change at the same time. Since interpretive disputes are disputes about the perspectives for construing reality, and since group values and interests are inherent in any perspective, all critical arguments are political. Criticism thus surrenders its claims to disinterested objectivity, but it also regains its vitality as a formative social force.

Besides promoting this general theory of criticism, Fish also performs extensive and rigorous critiques of the assumptions of other theorists. He finds invalid, for instance, the stylisticians' claim to generate interpretations of literary works from objective descriptions of the works' formal features, not simply because the correlation they make between formal descriptions and interpretations is arbitrary, but also because the formal patterns which they "objectively" isolate are themselves products of interpretation which contain the

conclusions that the analysis supposedly generates. Fish also claims that theorists who define literature as a deviation from ordinary language are misguided because they fail to see that literary language is not a stable entity but an open category which is filled by whatever features a particular community deems to be literary. By erecting an opposition between an objective, serious language and a non-serious, but value-laden literary language, they denigrate both the norm and its deviation, for ordinary language in this model is inhuman (because void of value) and literary language is trivial (because unserious). Only by admitting that all language is interested and purposive and that ordinary language is merely one special type of language can literary and non-literary language be restored their proper integrity. Speech-act theorists who seek a formal distinction between fictional and non-fictional discourse likewise err, for they do not recognize that such a distinction is contextual and hence unformalizable. They are similarly mistaken when they claim an objective, absolute difference between direct speech acts, in which sentences have a primary, literal meaning, and indirect speech acts, in which sentences have a secondary, figurative meaning, for the literal meaning of a direct speech act inheres not in the sentence itself, as the speech-act theorists claim, but in the context in which it is customarily delivered and apprehended.

These are but a few of the critical positions Fish dissects in this book, and no bare summary of his conclusions can do justice to the brilliance of his analyses. Rather than pursue further a synopsis of Fish's critical battles, I would like to indicate two areas which he could possibly have explored more fully. Late in the book Fish raises the issue of "what the poststructuralists would term 'the status of my own discourse'" (p. 368), admits that his theory proceeds by way of limited, contextual assumptions, and then dismisses the issue as trivial since the same is true of all other theories. But the questions at stake—the value of metacriticism and the possibility of self-knowledge—deserve a more complete response. If one can objectively determine the rules of baseball, can one similarly determine the rules which constitute social institutions of a less openly artificial nature? Can knowledge of an institution arise from within, or must it be grounded in another contextual frame? Is there a hierarchy of contexts which permits a metacritical stance or merely many competing perspectives which, when conjoined, illuminate one another? If one's community interprets reality in such a way as to oppress other communities, how can one identify one's oppressive assumptions and change them? Fish argues that a change in one's views always comes from without, but cannot change also come from within? I also wish that Fish had indicated more fully his relationship to other theorists who express similar views. Would he find congenial the epistemological assumptions of Gregory Bateson's and Anthony Wilden's ecosystemic conception of mind? How would he appraise the semiotics of Umberto Eco, who defines the referent of any semiotic system as a cultural unit of signification, yet attempts a formal description of such systems? How would he evaluate the claims of deconstructionists to dismantle texts from within by exposing the complicity of meaning-enabling antitheses? Would he assent to a Kuhnian or a Foucaultian view of history?

Of course one cannot do everything in a single book; thus these questions should not be construed as complaints but as requests for answers in Fish's

future. *Is There A Text in This Class?* is a substantial achievement which deserves the serious consideration of all students of literature. Its arguments are cogent, forceful and engaging, its style is witty, personable and unpretentious, and its analyses are just, incisive and economical. Most important, the theory it advocates is provocative, comprehensive and, I believe, true.

RONALD L. BOGUE

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Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity by

Donald R. Howard. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980. Pp. x + 133. \$10.95.

This short study represents a promise well kept. In *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (1976), Professor Howard mentioned the extensive literature of the Jerusalem pilgrimage written between 1100 and 1500, in support of his contention that the pilgrimage was normally treated as a one-day journey with no attention given to the return. At the same time, he predicted a separate discussion of this body of works, which would emphasize what it included as well as what it omitted.

Writers and Pilgrims deftly reviews the characteristics of these works, whether in the form of logs, guides, or (most frequently) narrations: their use of a reportorial "I," their partially-concealed bookishness, their latently ironic contrasting of Infidels and Christians, their occasional mixing of fun and amusement with serious matters. One might add that—while Howard gives a full measure of appreciation to narratives of Felix Fabri and others—his line of argument also tacitly develops a thoughtful context for considering the common ground these narratives share with Chaucer's fictional pilgrimage to Canterbury. He defines this common ground not only by general attention to the characteristics noted above, but also by particular attention to Mandeville's *Travels* as a mid-fourteenth-century realization of the literary possibilities of the genre. He ascribes to Mandeville the consciously artistic deployment within the work of a "'persona' who claims firsthand knowledge of what is reported" (p. 60), an "objective" stance toward often fabulous materials, and an aesthetic "pairing and juxtaposing" (p. 65) of materials for purposes of contrast and contradiction.

While Howard believes that Chaucer knew Mandeville and possibly other pilgrimage narratives, he does not argue this point with his usual verve. He is less interested in these narratives as possible sources for Chaucer, than in their general availability as precedents or analogies which Chaucer in turn "enlarges . . . , vivifies, enhances" (p. 80). We are given brief but stimulating discussions of Chaucer's own extensions of the narrative "I," his earnest and circumstantial reporting of fictions, and his exploitation of ironies implicit in ostensibly literal-minded reporting of potentially contradictory materials. In all cases, he suggests that Chaucer treats these devices with a distinctive self-awareness which includes "questions about the nature and uses of literature itself" (p. 83). While he does not force the argument, he thereby draws an interesting distinction between those narratives which we choose to call "literature" because we

like them, and those of Chaucer (and possibly Mandeville) which are deliberately "literary" in a more complicated sense.

Since *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* is undoubtedly the most richly suggestive book on Chaucer written during the past decade, and since so many of its arguments are still being assimilated into our view of Chaucer's art, any opportunity to return to its contentions with new perspective is welcome. One of the main threads of the earlier work is that Chaucer's tales present us with a distinctive relationship between a reporting stance and an implied audience—between the potentially ironic stance of the narrator who reports direct observations from memory and the relative autonomy of a new kind of reading public which is free to judge for itself or even to turn the leaf and choose another tale. By showing us the existence of an entire genre of writings in "an open-ended form that allowed the reader to believe or doubt as he saw fit" (p. 100), Howard returns us to his earlier argument with a sharpened sense of its context and resonance.

Concluding pages on the relation of this tradition to narratives written since the middle ages are less fully developed, but contain several interesting thoughts. Particularly well-grounded in what has gone before is a comment on the satiric potential of the "returned traveller, reporting with wide-eyed wonder what he has seen" (p. 117), as it bears on works like More's *Utopia* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

This book is in the Quantum series, within which the University of California Press publishes monographs of about one hundred pages in length. The Quantum format is attractive in conception and—from the evidence of this book—in presentation as well.

PAUL STROHM

Indiana University

John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist by M. C. Bradbrook. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. Pp. xiii + 218. \$17.50.

M. C. Bradbrook is one of our most prolific Renaissance scholars. Six of her books have been issued by Cambridge University Press under the title *A History of Elizabethan Drama*, and this book, published in the United States by Columbia University Press would seem to be a seventh such volume. It shares a similar approach to that of the most recent books in her series, particularly *The Rise of the Common Player*, *Shakespeare the Craftsman*, and *The Living Monument* which also aim at explaining Renaissance drama in terms of the social and theatrical milieu in which the plays were written and performed. Readers familiar with her previous work do not have to be reminded to be wary of accepting uncritically the various literary relationships, social associations, and historical facts that she skillfully weaves together.

This book is divided into two sections of four chapters each. Because so little is known of Webster, the first section is designed to create a sense of the London in which he lived. To that end, each chapter focuses on dif-

ferent historical personages and, in turn, various people with whom they probably associated. Richard Mulcaster and his Merchant Taylor's school occupies much of the first chapter on the Webster family. The sparse facts of Webster's biography are supplemented with a familiar account of the pupils and educational environment that made Merchant Taylor's famous. The second chapter is on the Middle Temple and several representative careers associated with that Inn, particularly those of John Davies and John Marston. The third chapter deals with Penelope Devereux Rich, her family and fortunes. The fourth chapter concerns Antonio Pérez, the Spanish spy, and the court intrigues in which he collaborated. Almost all of the information in these chapters is well known, as the author's notes indicate. Mary Edmond's article in *TLS* (1976) provides what new facts we have concerning Webster's biography. The Krueger-Nemser edition of John Davies' poetry and Philip J. Finklepearl's *John Marston of the Middle Temple* provide much of the material for the accounts of the social and intellectual milieu of the Middle Temple. Although there are several sources for the discussion of Lady Rich, one could argue that Ringler's notes to his edition of Sidney's poems give us a more reliable view of this woman. Ringler, furthermore, rightly cautions us against taking Sidney's love fictions too literally, just as Finklepearl offers a more realistic account of literary activity at the Inns of Court. For that matter, Ungerer's biography provides much of the material for the chapter on Pérez and a complete account of that strange page of history. Since Miss Bradbrook does not claim to be introducing new information, we must ask why these figures were selected for set pieces or "monuments," as she calls them. To be sure, Webster did attend the Merchant Taylor's school, but he was there after Mulcaster had gone. Webster might have attended the Middle Temple, but the very slight evidence we have is itself open to question, and the fact that he may have associated with some Middle Templars later on is no proof that he was at that particular Inn. In any event, even if we grant Webster may have been at the Middle Temple, she does not use that speculation to illuminate his texts. The account of Penelope Devereux Rich Blount and her family has no obvious relation to Webster, except to imply that there were such interesting women in London. Here again the historical facts do not quite support all of the speculations we are offered about her. Nor does a knowledge of her life account for Webster's *Duchess* or his *Vittoria Corombona*. By the same token, while Pérez had contacts with the Essex circle, there is no connection between the spy and Webster nor is this a satisfactory way of accounting for Webster's drama of court life.

The last section of the book consists of a chapter on Webster's early collaborations, a chapter on *The White Devil*, one on *The Duchess of Malfi*, and one on his later writing including brief discussions of *The Devil's Law Case*, *Appius and Virginia* and his contributions to Overbury's *Characters*. Oddly enough, there is no sustained critical or historical discussion in this section, and even the comments on London theatrical life seem less useful in this book than in her previous work. We are told, for instance, that *The Devil's Law Case*, might have been welcomed by the Queen's Men, because they were being sued by the widow of one of the company's major stockholders. From this we may infer relatively little about why Webster might have written this play or why a

Jacobean audience, aside perhaps from some lawyers, might have found it interesting. As to the play itself with its confusing and circuitous plot and its curious tone and style, we are told that we should see these peculiar features as "a vehicle for bravura display of [Richard] Perkins' talents in the leading role." The discussion that follows does not illustrate this assertion, in part because the problems with this play cannot be dealt with in the manner she had employed in *The Rise of the Common Player*. Nor can we account for the differences between Webster's two great pieces and his later work in terms of an artistic falling off. What is needed is some more satisfactory model of the relationship between the writer and his audience that takes into account the social and economic changes affecting that relationship and the manner in which a writer such as Webster responded to them.

LEONARD TENNENHOUSE

Wayne State University

Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry by Louis L. Martz. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980. Pp. x + 356. \$22.50.

For fifteen years, as Louis Martz records in his preface, he had wanted to write a book on Milton—that is, a summative study of all of Milton's poetry. This ambition may well be the post-modern equivalent of Milton's own, nursed over a somewhat longer period of distractions and conflicting responsibilities, to write the definitive English epic. Where Professor Martz kept his design alive along the obstacle course of scholarly eminence by constantly making Milton the subject of public lectures and essays, Milton kept his alive during the Revolution by constantly making himself the real subject of his political pamphlets. In 1654, when he was heading into his late forties, Milton came to feel that he had accumulated enough serious writing on the history and destiny of England to have, in a sense, fulfilled his original ambition. Even if in prose, in installments, he had "delivered [his] testimony" and "heroically celebrated at least one exploit of [his] countrymen." Louis Martz, contemplating his collected essays on Milton, was more candid. Three hundred published pages were not, he knew, a book; so he determined, by addition and coercion, to make them take that ideal shape.

The analogy is not frivolous. It points to the predicament of those who today practice Milton's kind of intellectualism in the world of public scholarship and criticism, where the big book on the indisputably great writer is still regarded as the final test of intellectual maturity. Given the finitude both of discoverable fact and insight, this demand must inevitably show decreasing returns. This was equally true of the neo-Virgilian aspirations that were outmoded in Milton's day, having already produced reams of unmemorable neo-Latin epic. Milton was lucky. In him ambition was so towering that it drove him past the banalities of theory, over the edge of cultural exhaustion, in a state of pure reactionary vision to which his style was answerable.

It is probably fair to say that *Poet of Exile* is not an epic achievement, though it has many other values more appropriate to its own historical moment and likely audience. It is, to begin with, a clearly useful book. It provides an account of Milton's poetic career, not from a biographical perspective, but with the emphasis on the meaning of career, on the big moments. An important chapter on the 1645 *Poems* reminds us of the difference between a biographical approach, where the governing principles are chronology and causation, and an approach which allows a writer to continue to manipulate his own self-image, by retaining or recovering the original effect of his publications. It is a principle we have learned to respect for the Romantics, where the idea of "the volume" has a salutary force. Professor Martz's focus on Milton's own system of ordering his poems, on his titles and subdivisions, on the implications of his title-page and of the accompanying portrait, does more than illuminate the poetic texts or persuade us of the thematic unity of the volume. It suggests, as well, a methodological corrective for seventeenth-century studies, where the concept of "the book" as a historical event needs to be recovered. The superiority of "modern" editions for every purpose is no longer unquestioned.

On the major poems Professor Martz is less innovative, but still helpful. His method, a running commentary on the text, with substantial quotation from it and cognizance taken of the major critical controversies, creates a certain calm neutrality of tone. There are no worries over chronology or theology, no major revisions or re-evaluations, though a defensive posture is taken on the quality of Milton's writing in the last two books of *Paradise Lost* and in *Paradise Regained*. Less witty and less with it than Edward Taylor's *Milton's Poetry*, last year's book with similar aims, *Poets of Exile* will, I suspect, find a surer place on undergraduate and graduate reading lists.

Between usefulness and greatness, we recognize the category of importance. To my mind, *Poet of Exile* lays claim to that by virtue of its author's classicism, a reactionary impulse that has recently become, like Milton's own return to beginnings, a source of originality. Particularly in his detailed recall of the texts of classical pastoral, Professor Martz has hold of a powerful interpretive tool for Milton's studies. Less persuasive and presented apologetically in an appendix, is a comparison between *Paradise Regained* and Virgil's *Georgics*. Perhaps most suggestive, perhaps too merely suggestive, is an analogy between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Paradise Lost*. In Chapter 12, Figurations of Ovid, we need an *explanation* of the multiple connections between Milton's poem and Ovid's. By the time it is offered in the following chapter (the allusions warn of the imminence of change in *Paradise*), it has become obvious.

Also, what is never established formally is the link between this theme and the book's title, itself an allusion, not to a classical text but to the poetry of St. John Perse. Perse's 1940's ambition was to write "un grand poème délébile," that is, erasable, unstable. Professor Martz's fine gloss on "délébile" is as follows:

the poet's sense of the precarious nature of all great literary undertakings . . . the constantly shifting, evasive, and elusive nature of the human experience that underlies all efforts to set down words, along with the doubt whether, after all the effort, the work can survive "the great erosions of language."

For Perse, the ideal category of "princes of exile" includes both those who write the great poems, and those who, like Professor Martz, combat the erosions of language by philological and critical means. It is important to be reminded of the latinist pun inhering in "pontifical"; but the conceptual bridge-building between Ovid's *instabilis* and Perse's *délébile* (between which hangs Milton) requires a still larger imaginative span. Is it an indication of this book's procedural modesty that the reader is left to make this construction himself?

ANNABEL M. PATTERSON

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Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering by James H. Averill. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980. Pp. 291. \$15.00.

After more than two decades of flamboyant, frequently brilliant revisionism, studies in Wordsworth and in Romanticism generally have been marked by a growing historicism—a reflection not only of the ascension of the Romantics to the rank of "difficult" poets through numerous critical readings, but also of the suspicion that this difficulty, like that of the metaphysical poets, is less mysterious, less congenial to the fashions of literary history and theory, than the revisionists have been at pains to show. For the most part this shift toward a more scholarly approach has been good for the Romantics because it demands, as Averill's study shows, a sensitivity to the poetry almost as fine as that earlier displayed by such noted Wordsworthians as David Ferry, John Jones and Geoffrey Hartman. But there are problems too, partly with the method itself, which calls for a more comprehensive knowledge of both literature and history than a young scholar like Averill can possibly put to use without sounding thoroughly bookish, and more generally, with the failure of the method as a whole to take proper measure of Wordsworth's originality as a writer. It is no accident, I think, that students less visibly learned than Averill have said more provocative things about Wordsworth, even if in this the credit has gone largely to Wordsworth himself. Averill, by contrast, is determined to put Wordsworth in his place, effectively testing his abilities as a scholar against Wordsworth's as a poet. All of which makes *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* noteworthy indeed.

The title of the study is quite apt. It is not human suffering as a distinct Wordsworthian preoccupation that concerns Averill, but rather suffering as a late eighteenth-century literary phenomenon to which Wordsworth was exposed and which he in turn incorporated into his art. Thus, despite numerous, one almost feels obligatory, concessions to Wordsworth's originality in his treatment of pathetic materials, in his development of a poetry that focussed on both tragedy as well as "the response to it" (p. 13), Averill's Wordsworth is emphatically "a man of his time" (p. 11). The trouble, of course, is that if Wordsworth were a man of his time in the way that Averill contends, if in his

manipulation of the pathetic he ranged beyond the age of sensibility simply by modifying some of its notions, he would not be Wordsworth as we have come to recognize him, the poet in English whom critics of every possible persuasion regard as the most original in the nineteenth century. This last, Averill might argue, has really nothing to do with the poetry of human suffering—and he is probably right, save that in his hands the poetry of suffering becomes a way to dissociate Wordsworth from the Romantic movement without apology or explanation, to rewrite history by sleight of hand. And no historicism, however specialized, can be allowed *that*.

Concentrating principally on Wordsworth's earlier efforts from the schoolboy sonnet "On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep" to *The Ruined Cottage* (the book's central text), Averill shows how the "complex, involuted structure[s]" of these poems and others such as *Salisbury Plain* and "The Thorn" owe their existences to "Wordsworth's early relationship to contemporary popular literature... a literature fascinated by emotional response" (p. 34). The possibility, then, that the pathetic in these poems may have a more discrete source, and their concern with response a more public purpose, that Wordsworth may be trying, however fitfully, to be a man speaking to men, is beyond the scope of the study. The expressive poet, the poet of sincerity and the apocalyptic poet all defer in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* to the artist-aesthete whose treatment of the tragic is more a reflection of certain eighteenth-century assumptions about vision and response than a demonstration of the experience of life. In *The Ruined Cottage*, for instance, Averill argues that the apparently unearned tranquillity at the poem's close is there actually to "dramatiz[e] a psychological process equivalent to Aristotelian *katharsis*" (p. 61). "Time and again," he urges, "human misery [in Wordsworth's poetry] provides the psychic energy necessary to purge life of its petty irritations and to make accessible the cathartic calm" (p. 61). His readings of *The Ruined Cottage*, *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* certainly show this to be so.

In like manner, Averill correctly disabuses the "mis- and over-reading[s]" (p. 96) of "apparently transcendental" (p. 83) moments in Wordsworth's other poetry, where the dynamic juxtaposition of suffering and calm—or in these instances excitement and tranquillity—exposes a kind of "psychological sublime," never more revealingly, in fact, than in "Crossing the Alps" in Book VI of *The Prelude*. Rejecting altogether the autonomy and inscrutability commonly ascribed to this particular episode, Averill reminds us that it does not end with a vision of "the great Apocalypse," but continues down the River Tusa to Locarno and Como, reflecting the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful, "the mind's ebb from sublimity to tranquillity" (p. 101). Similar movements in "A Night-Piece" and *Salisbury Plain* reaffirm that here, as in other treatments of the sublime, the pathetic and ultimately the tragic, Wordsworth "follows the current of his age" (p. 114).

This is especially obvious in *The Ruined Cottage*, which serves as a veritable catalogue-*cum*-critique of eighteenth-century views on the pleasures of tragedy. Returning once again to the poem's close, this time with an assist from manuscript materials only recently available, Averill details how the Pedlar's justifications of his interest in fictional suffering range in the various versions of the poem from a sensationalist advocacy of the beneficent effects of emotional

agitation, to the "sentimental commonplace that the tale of suffering engenders moral improvement," to the "Lucretian 'return' upon the self," to "a secularized mutation of the Christian explanation of suffering" (p. 122), before settling on a vision of natural calm with its intimations of sympathy and One Life. But what Averill does not emphasize is the extent to which the writing of *The Ruined Cottage* may have also removed Wordsworth into quite literally "his time." Not only, as Averill shows, does the poet systematically reject a number of eighteenth-century stays against the possibly dangerous prevalence of imagination, but, more importantly, he identifies himself with another character in the poem, whose primacy Averill conveniently ignores. This character is the speaker-listener who, in the midst of the Pedlar's exhortations, quietly identifies himself with the poem's tragic subject, blessing her "with a brother's love . . . in the impotence of grief." Wordsworth creates an alternative brotherhood in *The Ruined Cottage*, which links Margaret, the speaker and the reader while excluding the Pedlar, his rationalism and his purportedly sympathetic spear-grass.

Against such troubling intersubjectivism, Averill erects a restraining wall: poet and reader one on a side, with the former manipulating the latter in the best contemporary way—as in the recourse in *Lyrical Ballads* to Darwin's *Zoonomia* in an effort to turn reading into "a kind of litmus test in matters of psychology" (p. 160). This thesis, like that involving *The Ruined Cottage*, is as demonstrable as it is refutable. Certain works like "Simon Lee" obviously use pathos to engage the reader in "experimental play." Others such as "The Thorn," profitably likened here to *The Ruined Cottage*, throw the reader back upon himself through a calculated ingenuousness rather than, as Averill contends, through the stimulation of fictive suffering. More questionable still is the reading of the dramatic poem "The Brothers," where the "complicated structure of narrator, audience, and victim" (p. 231) is arguably a vision of life imitating bad art.

For all its clarity and sharpness of focus, then, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering* is blurred around the edges, failing to distinguish—as the title intimates it should—between tradition and the individual talent.

WILLIAM GALPERIN

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English Romantic Irony by Anne K. Mellor. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1980. Pp. ix + 219. \$15.00.

By showing that the English Romantics can profitably be analyzed in terms of the concept of irony, Anne Mellor has filled an important gap in criticism. Critics have tended to neglect irony in the English Romantics, or at least to view it as peripheral to their central achievement. Lack of irony has even been seen as the distinguishing characteristic of English as opposed to German Romanticism. In 1963, René Wellek wrote: "Romantic irony is completely absent from the English romantic writers, even when they laugh or joke or parody . . . No Englishman—with the possible exception of Byron—has the

sense of art as play, of life as Nothingness, of the artist as outsider in the way the German Romantics have."¹ Mellor has convincingly refuted Wellek's claim, and thereby broadened and deepened our understanding of English Romanticism.

Mellor's book is an impressive reminder of the continuing need to study English Romanticism in its larger European context. Like M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism, English Romantic Irony* shows how being aware of the new currents of thought in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German can alert us to what is novel and distinctive in English Romantic writing. In her opening chapter, Mellor gives a lucid exposition of Friedrich Schlegel's conception of irony, which she then uses as her paradigm for analyzing English Romantic literature.

In many ways, Mellor goes beyond Abrams in using concepts derived from German thought to rethink the nature of English Romanticism. The status of Byron in their books is a good indication of their differences. Though *Natural Supernaturalism* is one of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive studies of Romanticism ever attempted, Abrams deliberately excludes Byron from his survey, and precisely because of his ironic stance: "Byron I omit altogether, not because I think him a lesser poet than the others but because in his greatest work he speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries."² By excluding Byron's "ironic counter-voice" from the dialogue of the English Romantics, Abrams gives a one-sided quality to his otherwise judicious interpretation of the period. He is too eager to single out what is affirmative in the Romantics' vision, in part because he wishes to assimilate them to their predecessors in literary and philosophical tradition, to show that, for all their revolutionary fervor, the Romantics did not want to break with "the great positives of the Western past."³

In Mellor's book, Byron regains his justifiable front-and-center position as the most European of the English Romantics, and the one who most clearly reveals the place of Romanticism in modern literature. In Byron's work, most notably of course *Don Juan*, Mellor sees the duality of Romantic vision, the idealistic yearnings and heaven-storming aspirations, coupled with the cynical doubts and tendency to nihilistic despair. "Byron carefully balances a romantic enthusiasm against a skeptical conviction of human finitude" (p. 42). Mellor documents how this duality of attitude informs the structure and texture of Byron's poetry. She sees Byron constantly engaged in building up and tearing down his visionary ideas, only to build them up again. For Mellor, this is the heart of Romantic irony: "Through love and the imagination, man engages in romantic irony's constant process of creation and de-creation, of commitment and detachment, of self-projection and self-criticism" (p. 49).

Mellor's use of the term *de-creation* rather than the more fashionable *deconstruction* helps to define more precisely what is distinctive about her critical

¹ "German and English Romanticism: A Confrontation," *Studies in Romanticism*, IV (1963-64), 48.

² *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 13.

³ Abrams, p. 430.

stance. Though she does not follow Abrams in assimilating the Romantics to their predecessors, she avoids the opposite extreme of assimilating them to their twentieth-century successors. From the beginning, Mellor takes pains to distinguish her position from that of critics like Paul de Man, who tend to deny the affirmative side of Romanticism entirely:

Modern deconstructionists chose to perform only one half of the romantic-ironic operation, that of skeptical analysis and determination of the limits of human language and consciousness. But the authentic romantic ironist is as filled with enthusiasm as with skepticism. He is as much a romantic as an ironist. Having ironically acknowledged the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience, he romantically engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths (p. 5).

This passage epitomizes the central virtue of *English Romantic Irony*: the sanity and balance of Mellor's understanding of Romanticism. Charting a middle course between the critical stances represented by Abrams and de Man, Mellor has a firm grasp of the historical position of the Romantics, delicately poised between traditional and modern literature, trying to reground the faith of the former, but not beginning to face the problem of nihilism of the latter.

Mellor's approach pays unexpected dividends when she gets to Keats, a writer not normally thought of as ironic. But Mellor shows that Keats's odes can in fact be regarded as examples of Romantic irony: "Keats first empathically, enthusiastically seizes a thing of beauty, a symbol of an ideal perfection, explores it, comprehends it. He then skeptically poses this symbol against the equally fully greeted reality of human mutability, of loss, pain and death. The value and utility of the symbol are thus challenged, qualified, and finally rejected and reaffirmed" (p. 81). Mellor's discussions of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia* are particularly insightful. Like Ronald Sharp's recent book, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty*, *English Romantic Irony* shows the importance of taking into account the negative elements in Keats's vision in any full assessment of his poetry.

After a chapter on Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* as "self-consuming artifact" (p. 131), which covers more familiar territory, Mellor turns in the second part of her book to two writers who help to define "The Perimeters of Romantic Irony" by failing to move as easily between the positive and negative visions of Romanticism. The chapter on Coleridge is particularly valuable for Mellor's discussion of the significance of his revisions of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Her novel thesis that the running gloss in the final version is "a dramatic monologue or interpretation provided by a distinctly individuated persona" (p. 145) is intriguing, though it is likely to prove controversial.

The last chapter of *English Romantic Irony* is largely devoted to Lewis Carroll and is the only one which I found disappointing. The discussion of Carroll is in itself interesting, but I question its placement within the book as a whole. The *Alice* books may well merit this serious treatment, but Mellor has taken a risk in allowing her whole argument to seem to culminate in a discussion of what are, when all is said and done, first and foremost children's books. The problem is compounded by the fact that Mellor uses Carroll in order to make

a transition from Romanticism to Existentialism: "In the same decade in which Carroll wrote his *Alice* books, the first of the great existentialist thinkers, Søren Kierkegaard, directly attacked the affirmation of becoming and an abundant chaos that is inherent in romantic irony" (p. 180). Speeding from Romanticism to Existentialism via Wonderland, I for one feel a jolt as I read this sentence. And in general I have a sense of anticlimax in seeing a book move from Byron to Keats to Carlyle to Coleridge to Lewis Carroll.

My one other major criticism of *English Romantic Irony* is that when Mellor discusses philosophy, she sometimes seems to be out of her depth. On the whole, her first chapter handles well the complex philosophical background her topic requires. But her knowledge of Kant seems to be second-hand, especially when she uses a Gestalt psychologist to make the point she wants about Kantian epistemology (p. 25). Her attempt to discuss Kant in psychological or even biological terms misses the whole point of his transcendental deduction. Mellor's discussion of Existentialism is even more superficial and inaccurate. She could not possibly have read—or at least understood—Heidegger and make the claim that he values "being over becoming" (p. 183). She misunderstands what Heidegger means by *Dasein*, a concept which he goes to great lengths to distinguish from the traditional philosophic concept of Being. Indeed Heidegger's conception of Being is closer to what previous philosophers thought of as Becoming, as shown by Heidegger's insistence on conjoining Being and Time. Mellor completely misinterprets the existentialist slogan, "existence precedes essence," by identifying the notion of the authentic self with a notion of essence, which is precisely what Heidegger and Sartre were trying to avoid.

These criticisms aside, *English Romantic Irony* is an excellent treatment of an important subject. It is fluently written, convincingly argued, and except for Chapter 6, well-planned as a whole. It clearly is a book with which all students of Romanticism will want to become familiar and come to terms.

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A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955 by Richard H. King. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980. Pp. xi + 350. \$15.95.

Any complex story is pluralistically determined, polysemous in meaning, and open to a variety of individual acts of reception. It is increasingly recognized that accounts of history, likewise, are acts of interpretive reception, anchored in experience, ideologically shaped, organized according to selected narrative conventions, and pointing the way to specific versions of redeeming the past for the benefit of contemporary needs and concerns. Accounts of the history of the Southern United States, for example, have run the gamut of representations from the racist images of a gracious South falling victim to rape by Northern zealots, through the Agrarian drama of an aesthetic life savaged by the inexorable forces of centralizing, industrial monopolies, to the civil rights movement's depiction

of a corrupt, villainous South, red in tooth and claw. Meanwhile, a number of intellectual disciplines that grew to prominence in the twentieth century have converged to provide a central place in their interpretive accounts for one particular configuration (in all its dimensions and ramifications): the family. In anthropology, in the incest taboo and the kinship system as the keys to sociability and the exchange relations of civilization; in sociology, in problems of generation conflict, everyday life, and the relations between sexuality, social control and freedom; in economics, in the reproduction of labor power; in literary theory, in the framework of the private sphere that comes to constitute the universe of the novel and to whose evolving fate in the world at large the evolution of the novel is bound; and in psychoanalysis, in the Oedipal story and in the metapsychological narrative of the psychic foundations of domination in the cycles of rebellion against the father and restoration of the father—in all these areas, the family is regarded as a potential source of illumination.

Professor King's book is written within this constellation of family-centric paradigms and historiographic pluralism and in the immediate context of a new flurry of historiographic activity as a part of intellectual reconstruction in a modernizing South. It is designed to give a historical and philosophical account of a period of over two decades of flowering in the literary arts (e. g. William Faulkner, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren) and, as he takes care to insist, in other intellectual discourses such as history, sociology, political analysis, autobiography and innovative journalism (e. g. C. Vann Woodward, W. J. Cash, Lillian Smith, Howard Odum, James Agee). The argument is that under the pressures of the modern world, in a tense dialogue with the Southern past, and in the framework of the dissolution of the social and cultural contexts that nurtured the predominant patriarchal traditions in the region, this literary and intellectual resurgence represented an evolutionary effort in the regional culture to reassess and re-appropriate its heritage in forms suitable for a viable future. Two currents, in particular, are contrasted as important responses: 1. Agrarian conservatives, hostile to Northern oppression and Southern inefficacy, who idealized and pressed for the institutionalization of phantasmagoric representations of heroic moments from the patriarchal traditions; 2. Social-scientific liberals, ranging from the Chapel Hill Regionalists and modernizers to Cash and Smith, and the more sophisticated historical and political analysts like Woodward and V. O. Key, who achieved a certain critical distance from the unreality of the traditions and prepared the possibility for pointing the South in new directions.

These two poles of attitudes to inherited values (and the literature which confronts, intermixes, or transcends them) are studied, in turn, with respect to a central narrative that is concerned with ways of perceiving the heritage, that is with progress in self-consciousness. The Southern Renaissance is described as a movement in thought through three stages, from a monumentalist historical consciousness (that identifies with the past mimetically) to a critical historical consciousness (that rejects the past) to, finally, an ironic historical consciousness that, having worked its way through the first two stages, knows that it can choose its past and reconstitute its traditions (although this superior knowledge may not be accompanied by corresponding capabilities of action). It is from the vantage point of ironic contemplation that this account is provided, and though it docu-

ments the shortcomings of the liberal Southern tradition which it endeavours to establish, it attributes its own vantage point to the success of those earlier critical efforts. In sum, Professor King's book is expressly liberal historiography; it has "little use for Southern conservatism" and sees its own world-view falling into the line of "this tradition of Southern intellectual liberalism."

Within this frame, then, the author sees his work as "a form of cultural anthropology in the broadest sense," investigating transformations in the symbol and image systems of Southern culture. This methodological strategy is psychoanalytic, not in the sense of reducing individual biographical trajectories to psychoanalytic motives, but in drawing illumination from Freudian themes and therapeutic practices, and in taking Freud's theory of therapy—"the movement of memory in repetition, recollection, and working through"—as a normative model for assessing narrative representations of the past. Insofar as the essential figures in the patriarchal tradition were the father and the grandfather and the essential structure was the literal and symbolic family, the contention is that the Renaissance writers sought to come to terms with the tradition of the "Southern family romance," with all its Oedipal variations and its implications for male supremacy, white supremacy, and political hierarchy. Put differently, the family romance, with the father-son relationship as the archetype of domination at its center and an array of fantasy mechanisms at its disposal, is considered a pathology; the Southern Renaissance is viewed as the history of a therapy, proceeding through regressive repetition (identity), recollection (difference, estrangement), and working through (autonomy). In the course of this growing awareness, according to Professor King, the Southern family romance and its cultural articulation are brought to awareness, demystified, and rejected. Faulkner's work in particular, which is analyzed over three chapters, is shown as embodying all the stages of dis-membering and re-membering in this cleansing of perception.

Such a schematic account, of course, can barely begin to touch on the virtues of the book. The text is a tapestry of names drawn, as they comment on each other, into knots of meaning. Indeed, the multiplicity of names lends support to the pervasive theme of identity (sameness and difference), and the fact that many of the names, readily assimilated as they appear, are names of theorists—names like Bateson, Bloom, Derrida, Hegel, Lévi-Strauss, Nietzsche, Ricoeur, Weber, and Hayden White—testifies to a promising and welcome broadening of the Southern intellectual tradition. The text is self-consciously (and congenially) theoretical, on the grounds that American intellectual history suffers from a poverty of theory and that Southern historiography requires a distancing device in order to make sense of the cultural context. It is to Professor King's credit that the text remains accessible while erudite, intellectually clear while thorough in detail, and generally lucid, at times elegant, in its prose.

On the whole, the organizing image of family relations works reasonably well, too, as the text produces its fair share of insights. Yet, it is perhaps fair to say, it may also produce a cumulative sense of unease. Curiously, there is a certain ahistorical or dehistoricized character to this theoretical articulation of intellectual history. Partly, it may be that the Oedipal story, insofar as it permeates the formation of personality in patriarchal culture, comes to be represented in a wide variety of practical motives, with the result that it becomes difficult to

assess with confidence the particular transformations that Professor King maps with such thoroughness in the Southern Renaissance, without some comparative account of the variations in the family image in the history of 18th, 19th, and 20th century narrative traditions. The texture of human ancestral connections is far too dense to be comprehensively analysed in art or scientific discourse; at the same time, the family as a specific institution in modern society is by no means a true or complete microcosm of the society at large—certainly not as a political collectivity and less and less so given its accelerating decomposition since the inter-war period. In other words, a fuller engagement with a larger history, and some reduction in the scope of psychoanalytic explanation, would seem to be desirable for seeing in perspective the Southern experience.

Indeed, two of the sections in the book, on John Crowe Ransom and on James Agee, appear to be weakened by methodological shortcomings, even to the point of occasionally egregious writing. Were it not for a historiographic impatience, liberal and rationalist in spirit, with the logic of non-liberal problematics, it might be possible to see further dimensions to the changing dilemmas of the cultural intellectual in the context of new forms of domination. In a detailed account of the movement in Ransom's thinking, in *The Critical Twilight* I have argued that the absorption of conservative opposition into the cultural frame of corporate liberalism—Ransom's journey of ideological transition whose paradoxes of development appear here as mere "confusion," "recantation," and "drift"—could provide clues to a new process of cultural transformation and rationalization unfolding simultaneously and in exchange with the Southern Renaissance. So, too, could James Agee's modernist realism, here punctured with Derridean skepticism: his search for a redemptive appropriation of the holy particulars of human life, his preoccupation with the methods of intellectual work, with the violence that the instrumental concept does to the integrity of the living human subject. In Freudian terms, Herbert Marcuse has suggested that the continuing metapsychological cycle of repressive civilization has been finding new extra-familial versions of the restoration of paternal authority, of the reconstitution of domination, that reduce the authority of the family and the importance of the rebellion against the fathers. In other words, the historical account of a particular pathology and its therapeutic resolution would seem to need completion by opening to a broader history and new categories of pathology and therapy.

Professor King, at the end of his text, arrives from the logic of his own argument to the political question. Therapeutic success has brought Southern culture to the point of an ironic historical consciousness that has settled the scores with exhausted traditions and prepared the way for the ingression of the new, but Southern culture now, like the rest of modern society, "lacks any compelling... positive vision of action or community." Something ought to develop. Here the text stops. It may be that ironic consciousness will be revealed as itself an aspect of a deeper pathology, what Georg Lukacs calls a kind of "negative mysticism" built on the certainty that the ultimate has been encountered in the skepticism of self-limitation. In any case, there would appear to be a place here for further elucidation of the cultural situation and an opportunity for cultural agendas.

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