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## Book Reviews

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## Book Reviews

*Modern Latin American Literature* by D. P. Gallagher. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1973. Pp. 197. \$7.50.

Until the twentieth century, few critics outside the Hispanic world took any notice whatsoever of the literature of Latin America, even though it possesses indigenous roots extending as far back as the sixteenth century. One of the many indications of the high esteem in which this literature is now held throughout all parts of the world is this attempt by D. P. Gallagher, a University Lecturer at Oxford, to furnish his countrymen with a critical guide to its major contributions. Although his interpretations do not differ fundamentally from those of Spanish and Latin-American critics, he pursues a vigorous, independent course. Few native Hispanists, moreover, have chosen to combine as he does the conventional biographical-historical approach with the technique of intrinsic analysis of esthetically-rewarding work nor have they been as successful in analyzing intellectual trends. It is all to the English critic's credit that he is able to synthesize the many cross-currents and unique characteristics of a literature which has hitherto been given little attention by his countrymen.

In an introductory chapter concerning the nineteenth century, Gallagher observes that no great works or great writers existed in this period except for Machado de Assis, whom he unfortunately does not consider in detail. Previous critics have indicated that writers in both the romantic and realistic traditions were prevented by an ossified language and an excessively didactic tone from giving vent to their dissatisfactions with the world surrounding them. Gallagher has taken this principle a step further by revealing that the same social dissatisfaction exists among contemporary writers, but that unlike their predecessors they have rejected linguistic conventionalism in favor of vernacular idioms, raw vocabulary and experimental form.

The author quite properly attributes to poets the initiative in this development, but unlike other literary historians discounts the claims of the *modernismo* movement by showing that the language used by its adherents was highly imitative. Their social dissatisfaction did not reveal itself in concern for the underprivileged Indian, for example, but in a contrary dedication to exotic subjects such as classical French architecture, the Nordic landscape, or oriental settings. It is not the poetry in this *modernismo* vein which makes the Peruvian César Vallejo original, but rather his later work which conveys images based on authentic experience. In similar fashion the contribution of the Chilean Nobel Prize winner, Pablo Neruda in his *Odas elementales* does not consist in meter, but in a new vision of the world. His famous *Canto general* represents an effort to counter the Establishment view of Latin-American history by a vigorous assertion of indigenous, and telluric qualities. Gallagher acutely observes that both Vallejo and Neruda were unable to adjust to metropolitan and industrial surroundings. Both men were Communists, but the ideology of the movement had

little effect upon Vallejo's hermetic world vision; whereas it permeated the universe of Neruda, particularly in his choice of concrete objects as subject matter.

The third and most contemporary of the trio of poets, the Mexican Octavio Paz, is portrayed as equally disenchanted with the world as it is, but his dissatisfaction is shown to arise not from neuroticism, but from a healthy spirit of adventure or discovery. For Paz, the writing of a poem is converted into an Adamic enterprise of renaming the world, the poetic function consisting of creation, not merely description.

The author assigns a separate chapter to each of his trio of poets, and there are no valid grounds for questioning the eminence of at least two of them. Expert opinion would not unanimously sanction, however, his choice of the four prose writers singled out for similar distinction, Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante. The preeminence of Borges is assured, but the other three would face strong competition from Julio Cortázar, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Carlos Fuentes. The author unfortunately fails to state the criteria for his choices.

Gallagher sees in prose fiction the same element of rebellion which exists in poetry, but he has considerable difficulty in tracing its presence in the work of Borges. Perhaps the Argentinian author's dissatisfaction with the contemporary world is reflected in the suggestion that the idea of copulation is abominable in the way that mirrors (a favorite symbol) are abominable, for both multiply the species. But this is about as close as we ever come to social criticism. Gallagher admits, moreover, that if one abstracts the ideas of Borges from his works one ends up with "a string of perhaps not too startling propositions about the human condition." Paradoxically Borges established a trend toward the fantastic and the imaginative and "liberated fiction from the duty to document 'reality,'" but at the same time he developed a technique of documenting his intellectual sources, an illusionist trick though it may be. One would not be far wrong in considering a labyrinth with arcane signposts as a symbol of the universe of Borges.

Mario Vargas Llosa is the best example Gallagher offers to prove that the literature of protest can attain excellence in Latin America. In a sense, the novelist's entire production consists of an exposé of existing social evils, particularly in his native Perú. Gallagher defends the structural complexities of Vargas Llosa's major novel, *Conversación en la catedral*, revealing that its essential framework is that of a dialogue which presents to the reader the same problems which the characters confront in trying to grasp reality. The novel's formal presentation "is, itself, a sort of language."

One can clearly trace the influence of Borges's release of the imagination in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, one of the most popular novels in Latin America even though it is in a sense a parody of the history of author's native Colombia. Its broad appeal is probably based upon the antics of its comic characters. Although the novel is an exercise of original creativeness, Gallagher is right in affirming that many of its passages could have been written by Borges, Rulfo, or Carpentier, striking evidence of the high degree of homogeneity which exists in the so-called Latin American "new novel,"

Márquez reveals that one's notions of fantasy and reality are totally dependent upon one's own cultural experience. Some of his characters assume that reality is something that can be manufactured at will, and many of his absurd situations are nothing but "logical exaggerations of real situations."

A strong element of humor is also united with linguistic experiment in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's novel *Tres tristes tigres*, which is crammed with clever word-play. Like *Cien años de soledad*, it may be read on several levels, ranging from a sardonic depiction of life in pre-Castro Havana to a serious portrayal of the theme of oblivion. In Gallagher's scheme, the work of Cabrera Infante serves to point ahead to the future development of Latin American fiction.

By and large this is a useful and illuminating, if not comprehensive, guide to some of the most stimulating work in contemporary literature. Regrettably it is flawed by several typographical errors in both Spanish and English.

ADRIANA GARCÍA DE ALDRIDGE

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The City University of New York*

*George Bancroft* by Robert H. Canary. Twayne's United States Authors Series.  
New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974. Pp. xii + 142. \$5.50.

Modern criticism, tooled especially for poetry, novels, and short stories, for genres governed by form, image, symbol, and irony, slights other branches of verbal culture like history and philosophy. The man of letters, who could move freely if impressionistically between history, ideas, and aesthetic response, who might ennoble poetry but consider any form of verbal communication within his critical demesne, gave way to the specialized, professional scholar-critic. As other disciplines, moreover, became specialized and analytical, they too dropped important literature. Contemporary philosophers, analytical rather than historical in bias, pay tribute to, but utilize only scattered writings of, such Americans as Santayana, William James, and Royce. Historians for good reasons are only at some remove concerned with the artifacts of Bancroft, Parkman, and Adams: their work has been superseded. Intellectual historians—the rise of the field itself being both a manifestation of specialization and a defense against the transfer of history from the humanities to the social sciences—study their ideas as phenomena. But the reading of such works for enjoyment, for any aesthetic value therein, has decreased, even as new literary scholars have rediscovered second-rate novelists and poets and given them a place in our literary pantheon. More recently these scholars have begun to apply the tools of modern criticism to non-fiction prose, partly upon the recognition that almost any verbal artifact can be treated as a "fiction," as something made, as an attempt to bring order and coherence to human experience. They may distort such "fictions" if they fail to remember that, similarities notwithstanding, work in history, sociology, or philosophy is governed also by quite different standards; but basically the development is healthy. The writings of at least Adams,

Santayana, and William James are more significant not just in American intellectual history but also in American letters between 1880 and 1910 than the fiction or poetry of anyone except Henry James and perhaps Twain. And if in the American Renaissance one is to study more than the very great figures, he must then read Parkman and Prescott and, Robert Canary argues in his new book, George Bancroft. Bancroft's ability to describe and narrate the scenic episode and his skill in weaving a romantic narrative out of historical materials make him comparable to such novelists as Scott and Cooper; and more importantly he provided America with a seminal myth at least as influential as Natty Bumppo.

Students of Bancroft necessarily begin with Russell Nye's critical biography, now thirty years old but thorough and intelligent. Wisely, Canary has not attempted to rewrite the life, and although he makes use of primary sources, especially the Bancroft letters, he must draw on Nye's and earlier biographies for most of his background material. Instead he proposes to "illuminate the literary dimensions" of Bancroft's achievement. Bancroft's success and importance resting largely on the strength of his narrative elements, Canary's study also emphasizes the nature of narrative itself. To this end he first writes two introductory chapters on the philosophical and political contexts of Bancroft's work, such as German thought, Romanticism, the ideal of progress and Jacksonian democracy. Then his three central chapters are on respectively "plot" and narrative unity in Bancroft's *History*; the shaping of individual episodes to fit the narrative pattern; and revisions for the author's final edition in the 1880's. At the end he covers later biographical matters, Bancroft's minor writings, and his importance as man, historian, and author. A volume in Twayne's United States Authors Series, *George Bancroft* was subject to a specified length and format; and in fact the real contribution of that series has been its short introductions to and surveys of minor writers, like Bancroft, rather than its volumes on major authors.

"Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism." Thus Emerson opened *Nature* in 1836, two years after Bancroft published the first volume of his *History of the United States from the Discovery of the Continent*. The statement, largely a rhetorical device to prepare his audience for an individualistic, present-oriented reflection on man's relationship to his world, was at the time an exaggeration. Bancroft's work was one of the very first serious pieces of American history. It did have truth, of course, within a larger framework—Puritan history and lives written to memorialize or instruct; but there was as much linking as separating Emerson and Bancroft. It is more than sheer coincidence that the first major works of these two writers came out about the same time, during the Jacksonian period, and even more or less simultaneous with the early tales of Poe and Hawthorne, America's first major contribution to fiction. Between themselves, Bancroft and Emerson articulated, sixty years after Independence, the two main credos of American democracy—Emerson "the infinitude of the private man," American individualism or egocentrism, Bancroft the messianic destiny of America to promote universal freedom, the optimistic belief in social progress based on democracy. The values had long American traditions, and they have lasted. Both have also been used perniciously—Emerson's individualism

to justify materialistic personal aggrandizement at the expense of the community and other individuals, Bancroft's national myth to justify imperialism and expansion to save the world for democracy. Bancroft's *History*, moreover, has been especially important in the perpetuation of American myths, since it was the basis for the textbooks of American history served up to several generations of primary and secondary school students. Quite likely at least half the readers of this review had social studies texts in their early years derived in part from Bancroft's *History*. Not only is it unwise, however, to deplore wholesale the influences of Bancroft and Emerson; but also the very people who repudiate the ethics of acquisitive commercialism and rampant expansionism themselves have been and are inspired by the rebellious individualism of Emerson or democratic values from the high school civics courses that go back to Bancroft.

What remains important are first the seminal influence of each man on the American mind—by studying them we understand ourselves—and second the literary value of their work, two active minds intelligently shaping responses to the world around them, though here Emerson is much the more valuable. Canary, to his credit, never overestimates his subject's merit. Regrettably, however, after setting up in his opening chapters such contexts as Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the ideal of progress, he forgets them when he focuses on the *History* itself. He describes quite well the "plot" of Bancroft's narrative, the story of a free people uniting to win national independence, the emphasis not on characters but on the nation as hero or protagonist. The reader then waits for a more incisive analysis of that pattern in relation to those intellectual contexts. If this is Transcendentalist history it is not so quite in the Emersonian sense, where progress would be in terms of the individual's moral and spiritual growth rather than the development of society, which moves like a wave. Bancroft had assimilated his Transcendentalism in Germany years before Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* appeared in America (1829) with the influential introduction by James Marsh. Those German writers and thinkers like Herder, Heeren, and Hegel, among others from whom Bancroft had learned, plus the whole impulse towards Nationalism that thrived as part of Romanticism, fused with peculiarly American factors to influence Bancroft's grand "fiction" of America. Some sense of what underlies the plot of the book is missing from Canary's account.

The chapter on Bancroft's construction of episodes, his revisions to bring them into line with the movement of his narrative or to sway the emotions of his readers, is solid. Here Canary points out that Bancroft is more effective when he can establish a dualistic conflict (colonies *vs.* England, North *vs.* South, small states *vs.* large states) than when he must deal with a multiplicity of interests and values as in certain aspects of the Constitutional Convention. In the fifth chapter, on stylistic detail and the author's final revisions, Canary shows that, despite Nye's argument that Bancroft made significant changes in his approach to the American story, the alterations really were not fundamental and that his vision was basically consistent over half a century. The discussion, however, is too long for what it provides; Bancroft is not a good enough writer for his stylistic revisions to interest us for long. Canary could have cut back here to allow more thorough analysis of the book's structure. Similarly the final

chapters, out of a need to cover the rest of his life and his minor writings, may slight the more important comparison to be drawn between Bancroft's *History*, revised and republished in the eighties, and those being written by the new disciples of Ranke, the young "scientific" historians. They graciously elected Bancroft President of the American Historical Association, the event with which Canary opens his book, as they were replacing his "history as moral philosophy" with their "history as science." Yet their basic assumptions were more valid only within a limited framework: they were as contained and restricted by the early notions of scientific method as Bancroft had been by his own Puritan-Hegelian framework, the divine drama of American democracy.

Such comparisons need not have been a major concern of Canary, but some discussion of the topic might have been more instructive than his present conclusion. Canary's essay, nevertheless, is a sound and useful introduction to Bancroft as man of letters, one that complements Nye's biographical study. If some of his choices of emphasis are questionable, what he does choose to cover he covers clearly and intelligently.

JOHN BASSETT

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*Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance toward Nature* by James McIntosh. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974. Pp. 302. \$12.50.

James McIntosh's study is a valuable contribution to Thoreau scholarship, but it promises more than it provides. The undertaking is commendable for its attempt to discern continuity in the midst of acknowledged conflict and apparent inconsistency. McIntosh's thesis is that Thoreau maximizes "his inconsistencies, conflicts, and uncertainties" by refusing to reconcile them artistically, and, as a result, he "underscores the steadiness of his commitment to the romantic idea of nature." (p. 9)

McIntosh pursues Thoreau's "programmed inconsistencies" (p. 11) at great length but with uneven result. The value of the effort should not be underestimated; the method, however, might be re-examined. The paradox of Thoreau's shifting stance takes its direction from the paradox of nature's shifting yet ordered chaos. McIntosh rightly establishes Thoreau's stance at the outset: "The nature which Thoreau found around him was chaotic, various and ever changing, but was nevertheless also a single organic world, ever the same. In order to love it accurately, he learned to perceive its changes by adopting continually different stances toward it; he worked in his writing to express his shifting response to a single, yet mutable reality." (p. 17) In short, Thoreau adopts his "shifting stance" in order to achieve a non-reductive relationship to natural multiplicity.

While this is a useful view of a perplexing method, the dichotomizing of romantic and naturalistic consciousness is not. McIntosh maintains that "The basic conflicts in Thoreau, between the desire for a separated self and the desire for nature, between the aspiration for a higher law and the aspiration to live naturally

in his own body, appear as formal elements, patterns of consciousness in his work." (p. 22) I find it distressing that we expect in our artists clear conflicts and consistencies which we rarely experience ourselves. Even McIntosh, who tries consciously to capture a multitudinous variety, fails in individual sentences, paragraphs and subsections. He is daring: "In *Walden*, when he speaks of the purity of the pond or the peacefulness in the eye of a partridge, he is not just happening on casual metaphors but recording true symbols of his own inner possibilities." (p. 29) But Thoreau himself goes beyond this to make an external record of internal fact; he uses the "objective" to verify the "subjective." Considered in terms of their facticity, nature and naturalism are no different from imagination and romanticism. Thoreau is never, as McIntosh would have us believe, caught in a dilemma between fact and value. They are inseparable. Thoreau makes simplicity in art and life out of the complex chaos of experience, and he does it in such a way that the complexity is neither reduced nor eliminated. Instead, it is made simple—apprehensible and still significant—through magnanimity of intellect and artistry. As McIntosh so aptly remarks, Thoreau's works are "grand, diverse meditations." (p. 45)

The book makes its most significant contribution in the chapter, "Thoreau and Romanticism," where the writer presents aspects of Thoreau's kinship with Goethe. McIntosh explains this in terms of their dual views of nature as growth, or *physis*, and nature as structure, or *kosmos*. The exploration of their psychic, scientific and aesthetic similarities is outstanding and long overdue.

The most bothersome feature of the book, evidenced primarily in the later chapters which attend to single and collected works, is the method of advancing the argument. I find no evidence, for example, to suggest that Thoreau felt his attraction to fact and imagination incompatible, as McIntosh says of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: "The chief organizing polarity in the book is between the poet's desire for imaginative scope and his hardly compatible insistence on concrete, natural particularity." (p. 139) The fact that these simultaneous urges are not only compatible but inevitable gives Thoreau's work its uniqueness. On the one hand, I believe that McIntosh knows this. Isn't it his thesis? On the other hand, he seems for the moment to forget, perhaps out of concern for the development of his own dialectic. As he remarks at a later point in his discussion, "Nature is thus a word for the unbroken continuum between material and spiritual; things and human intimations of the divine belong together in a great organic Whole." (p. 173) Nature and imagination are and are not aspects of a whole world; they are and are not polarized. Thoreau cultivates the extremes of all polarities, thereby making the reconciliation more astonishing. For this reason, I see no validity to such binary thinking as McIntosh evidences in comments like this: "Either one regards nature as an impersonal chaos not bound to be kind to man or one accepts nature as a generous source, but a romantic naturalist cannot compromise." (pp. 213-14). In the next breath, McIntosh has to compromise his own closed system by saying, "Thoreau's solution to this quandry is to be a romantic naturalist most of the time and a man disillusioned with nature on special occasions." (p. 214)

Without doubt, Thoreau's habit of mind is disconcerting to the critic who is



attempting a cogent and comprehensive analysis. McIntosh's primary virtue is that he confronts all of the major issues raised by such a "divided vision." He asks the most pertinent of questions—"How can a man who is conscious of his separation from wild nature approach it and preserve himself?" (p. 108)—and then he fails to answer them. Although it is not necessary to answer all that we might wish to ask, it is necessary to discuss these questions with direction rather than indirection. McIntosh appears to have adopted his own shifting stance—dividing his discussion into eight chapters and those chapters into as many as eight subsections in one instance—I would surmise, in an admirable attempt to capture the nuances of his subject. While the book is certainly useful and I am fully sympathetic with the attempt, I am not persuaded that the absence of focus is desirable in a critical work of this kind, or that we can say of McIntosh as he does of Thoreau: "The net effect of all his polarities is to display Thoreau's meditative and critical intelligence continually at work." (p. 259)

ELIZABETH A. MEESE

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*Bruce Jay Friedman* by Max F. Schulz. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974.  
pp. 164. \$5.50.

"It is called 'Black Humor,'" wrote Bruce Jay Friedman in 1965, "and I think I would have more luck defining an elbow or a corned-beef sandwich." Problems of definition, however, did not prevent Friedman from editing an anthology of contemporary comic fiction titled *Black Humor* (Bantam, 1965) in which he lumped together excerpts from the novels of, among others, Thomas Pynchon, Joseph Heller, and John Barth. Friedman's introductory essay subsequently became at least as well known as his earlier successful novels, *Stern* (1962) and *A Mother's Kisses* (1964), and he found himself considered a kind of spokesman for the contemporary literary phenomenon of Black Humor. Rarely considered in the same class with Pynchon, Barth, or John Hawkes, Friedman nevertheless received reviews of high praise, his commentators coming up with references to Nathanael West, Hieronymus Bosch, and Chagall in an effort to describe his novels. Yet for all of the acclaim, Friedman's work failed to receive detailed scholarly analysis until the publication of Max F. Schulz's book. Students of contemporary American fiction will welcome this informed introduction to one of our best younger writers.

Unlike many books in the Twayne's United States Authors Series, this study does not fill in biographical particulars. A one page chronology is provided, but on the whole Professor Schulz avoids a detailed discussion of what he terms "the biographical influences" in order to stress "the spirit of the times," a "sketching-in of the civil, intellectual, and literary ferment that provides the ambience of his fiction." This seems to me to be a wise decision, for biographical information often reveals very little about the writing of an author as young as Friedman.

Accordingly, Schulz uses his first chapter to define Black Humor and to

determine Friedman's association with other Black Humorists like Barth and Pynchon. Those familiar with the literary criticism of contemporary American fiction will find most of this opening chapter old hat, for Schulz originally published his discussions of Black Humor in a 1968 issue of *College English* and in a 1973 issue of *Southern Review*. These essays were then gathered to form the critical center of his book *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973). Thus, some readers of this study of Friedman are to be excused for muttering *déjà vu*, for Schulz has now called upon the same sentence (and paragraph!) to begin one essay and two books: "Conrad Knickerbocker is the theoretician of Black Humor; Bruce Jay Friedman, the field commander." If nothing else, the reader learns how one critic gets mileage with an introductory sentence. The remainder of the chapter titled "Friedman as Black Humorist" is a reworking of these earlier publications. Those in touch with the various attempts to define Black Humor will skip this chapter and go on to Schulz's evaluations of Friedman's fictional and dramatic writings; those coming upon Schulz's definition for the first time will find a knowledgeable discussion of the various theories of Black Humor (by Robert Scholes and Conrad Knickerbocker, for example), an appreciation for the complexities associated with this disturbingly vague but important term, and an analysis of the problems involved when an author is labeled a Black Humorist.

Briefly, Schulz argues that this kind of comedy is a phenomenon of the last fifteen years or so, a reaction to the "nuclear-powered, war-saturated, chemically oriented world," and that Bruce Jay Friedman's writing is representative of authors who use harsh comedy to expose the terror and who feel no urge to resolve the contradictions which make up their fractured world. Black Humor is not existential, writes Schulz, because it refuses to treat alienation as an ethical situation. And unlike the characters in the novels of, say, Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, Friedman's Stern finds that accommodation with society is no longer possible. The central question affecting the "esthetic strategies" of Black Humor is, "How to order and orient experience, without denying its inherent disorientation?" Schulz offers six possible answers which, when taken together, illustrate the primary concerns which he finds in this comic fiction.

Turning to detailed evaluations of Friedman's published work, Schulz argues that Friedman's strongest connection with Black Humor is his concern with "the savage divisiveness of individuals in our society. . . ." And he is correct, of course, for Friedman is at his best describing in comic terms the nameless terrors and at his best describing in comic terms the nameless terrors and traps which confront the everyday American, say a man called Stern who wants only to live in the suburbs without worms attacking his shrubs or the "kike man" insulting his wife. Schulz is surely right when he suggests Friedman's gentle handling of the bumbling Stern. Stern makes us laugh, but as Schulz notes, the laughter is comic and tender rather than satiric and sharp. In his thwarted moves toward social accommodation, Stern finds himself longing to identify with the kike man, the very personification of his suburban enemy who displays developed muscles and the American flag. The reader's frustrated laughter at Stern's aspiration to become an authoritative neighborhood WASP and yet retain his Jewishness does not undercut sympathy for this harried man, and the combination of

reader repulsion and sympathy suggests the complex tone which Friedman successfully creates. Aware of Judaic history, Schulz is especially good when he shows how Stern's masochism reflects the historical Jewish role of submissiveness.

The analyses of Friedman's other two novels, *A Mother's Kisses* and *The Dick*, focus on Schulz's discussion of Friedman's inability to prevent the characterization of Meg from degenerating into farce, and on a description of Le Peters as conformist hero. These comments are helpful enough, and Schulz does not shirk from pointing out flaws in fictions which he generally admires. Still, the discussions of Friedman's three novels, especially those of *A Mother's Kisses* and *The Dick*, will appeal especially to readers approaching Friedman's work for the first time. Those more thoroughly versed in the complexities of contemporary American literature will find the chapters on Friedman's lesser known stories, plays, and journalism to be the most beneficial. (The selected bibliography of these writings is especially welcome.) Schulz traces Friedman's success from his earliest tale, "The Man They Threw Out of Jets," through regular publication in *The New Yorker*, to the first serious break-through with *Stern*. His discussions of the short fiction are limited primarily to summations of plots and to brief comments on themes and characters which are later developed in the novels.

Occasionally Schulz is guilty of overpraise. His understandable admiration of Friedman's masterful characterization of Stern's parents leads him somehow to link Mrs. Stern to Falstaff and Don Quixote: "She is a Jewish heir of Falstaff's outrageousness and Don Quixote's audaciousness." Considering her minor role, I can only disagree with this comparison. Similarly, I question Schulz's assertion that Stern "must be the most frightened figure in American fiction." And he seems overly-enthusiastic when he compares the recognition scene in a minor short story, "The Subversive," with the revelation of the demented wife in *Jane Eyre*, claiming that Friedman "secures the greater psychological advantage."

Professor Schulz also reveals a fondness for showing off his command of languages. The reader is treated to a liberal sprinkling of italicized words and phrases: *rapprochement*, *poète maudit*, *Hic reductio ad absurdum*, *Regressus in infinitum*, *non sequitur*, *post hoc, ergo*, and *propter hoc* are all to be found in the first chapter alone. And when he brands Friedman with the term "Sociopsychological Realist," or describes Friedman's prose as responsive to "both the stereophonic-stroboscopic scene and to the dark totemic surges of our blood," one can only wonder what the author of *Stern*, the skillful contriver of the effects of artlessness and offhandedness in fiction, would say.

DONALD J. GREINER

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*The Fall of Camelot: A Study of Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"* by John D. Rosenberg. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973. Pp. viii + 182. \$6.95

...most men capable of any thought must have learnt that, in dealing with Mr. Tennyson, they were dealing with a many-sided mind, each one of whose works...bore a certain organic relationship to the others,—tended to develop a new portion of the life's labour of a deep-thinking, deep-feeling man...we shall probably do wisely if we let (the *Idylls of the King*) teach us after their own fashion, in their own time.

J. M. Ludlow, reviewing the *Idylls* in 1859.

"Their own time" has turned out to be a long time, but it seems fair to say that Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* are finally receiving the kind of reading they deserve. While in 1953 S. C. Burchell could pretty fairly argue that the *Idylls* was one of those "...poems known to all but read by none," the subsequent twenty years has seen a flowering of study on Tennyson's Arthuriad which has culminated in John Rosenberg's *The Fall of Camelot*.

It is important to insist upon the term "culminated" because Rosenberg's own survey of the critical terrain is not quite fair. His first chapter, self-consciously titled "Dispelling the Mists," outlines a history of *Idylls* criticism dominated by the attacks of T. S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis earlier in this century, the kind of criticism Birchell complained about. But since 1953 a great deal has happened, which Rosenberg's first chapter really ignores. In his Preface he acknowledges the influence of his own mentor, J. H. Buckley, and of his graduate students, but it is only in his bibliography that Rosenberg even mentions essays and monographs by critics such as Gerhard Joseph, Boyd Litzinger, Lawrence Poston III, John R. Reed, and Stanley Solomon. Yet much of what he says has already, sometimes in more fragmentary and sometimes in more extended form, been said by other readers of Tennyson. Take Clyde de L. Ryals. Rosenberg refers to his *From the Great Deep* twice in his footnotes. Both references are to peripheral issues, one is slighting. Yet it is Ryals who developed the argument which Rosenberg echoes that the *Idylls* is a dark obverse to *In Memoriam* (Rosenberg p. 9, Ryals p. 73) and whose major argument is that, in Rosenberg's words, "Arthur's 'crime' is his noble delusion that he can remake the fallen, intractable world" (Rosenberg p. 132, Ryals pp. 73 ff.).

Now certainly one critic may come upon insights into a work independently, only later to discover them in the earlier criticism of another. And there is no reason for not repeating a good idea in the context of an on-going reading of a text. But there is something vaguely wrong about first implying that little has been done with a work, and then repeating the observations of many other critics without adequate acknowledgement.

And actually, it is the cumulative nature of Rosenberg's study which gives it much of its force. For quite some time critics have been considering the *Idylls*

as a complex work of art, and have been exploring its nature, but never has a critic so thoroughly probed those complexities. Take, for instance, the question of form. Ever since the 1859 publication of the first four *Idylls*, with their curious generic label and their self-evident abstention from epic pretensions, readers have been puzzling over the formal nature of what Tennyson was doing. Here is Rosenberg's explanation:

Building on the techniques of the classical idyll, with its intensification of mood, its highly allusive texture, its startling juxtapositions, flash backs, and deliberate discontinuities, Tennyson creates an inclusive psychological landscape in which all the separate consciousnesses in the poem participate and in which each action is bound to all others through symbol, prophecy, or retrospect. (p. 27)

Now, much of this is not new, but it is by far the closest any critic has come to identifying the peculiar complexities Tennyson creates through his refusal to write anything like simple, chronological narrative. Moving from this initial observation Rosenberg is able to articulate the endless relationships between the many elements of the poem. "...any part of the poem," as he correctly observes, "implies all the other parts." (p. 31)

Reading the poem in this way Rosenberg arrives at enormously subtle and far-reaching conclusions. For instance, he considers the complex problem of time in the *Idylls* and concludes "that only the experience of the poem can convey (the sense that) nothing ever happens only once and everything that happens, happens simultaneously with its opposite." (p. 64) He sees the intimate connection between character and setting, arguing that "character is as much an extension of landscape as landscape is of character." (p. 67) He correctly insists that the ethical struggle the poem explores is not "the clash of right versus wrong but of right versus right" (p. 24) and upon the built-in ambiguity of Tennyson's vision of the world.

The rightness of Rosenberg's broad arguments is matched by the sensitivity of his particular observations. He is acutely aware of pace, for instance, and shows how the last four poems in the cycle accelerate as the destruction of the kingdom begins. He reads even the most minor elements of the story with care, and the result is a consistently enlightening exploration of the text. Take, as an example, the delightful but fabulous picture of the early days of the realm which the Little Nun in *Guinevere* paints for the fallen Queen. "...divinity has already shaded off into superstition" (pp. 63-4) observes Rosenberg, and the passage takes on new weight, new significance.

But with all these felicities the book is still imperfect, being really only half-written. Organization is the great problem. Rosenberg subdivides his essay into six fairly long chapters, each of which is given a vague, suggestive title. For instance, Ch. IV, "Landscape," is presumably to explore the inter-relationship between character, event, and their settings. But, and this is typical of the book, Rosenberg makes no effort to develop a full-blown analysis

of the different ways Tennyson manipulates landscape. Rather, and again this is typical, within this chapter Rosenberg pursues many fascinating and exciting ideas which have little or no relationship to his topic. So, thirteen pages into his chapter he effects a subtle and complex analysis of the repressed sexual desires of Balin and Pelleas. Terrific criticism, but imperfect organization.

And a further problem in the development of the book arises from the fact that some of Rosenberg's more general assertions are not fully thought out, and at times this results in the awkward business of a critic contradicting himself. Taking up the question of Tennyson's blank verse style on p. 10, Rosenberg agrees that the verse is, as previous attacks had insisted, continuously "fair" (i. e. that no matter what the subject, the verse reads prettily), but he then goes on to assert that this is a trick of the poet, mimicking a world in which the false seems fair. Yet by pp. 97-8 he is enlarging on the many different kinds of blank verse Tennyson writes and that their differences arise from the subject matter they describe. Another example of this confusion and self-contradiction appears in Rosenberg's discussion of what he calls "the apocalyptic mode of vision." (p. 16) He is certainly right in tracing the theme of the end of all things through Tennyson's work—it's there, from the earliest poems on—but Rosenberg then tries to define what he calls "apocalyptic time—in which all times are simultaneously present." . . . (p. 30) Conceptually this is difficult to take, particularly since he never really explains what he means. But he is soon insisting (p. 37) that this kind of time is appropriate for King Arthur, though by pp. 39-42 he must also concede that Arthur's life, like that of Christ and the solar deity, is cyclic. The concept of apocalyptic time is itself confused and suspect, but clearly Arthur, who "passes," cannot be at "all times" "simultaneously present."

In general, one wishes that such a fine critic and writer as the author of *The Darkening Glass* had taken a little more time and a little more care with this book. It already is the best single volume on the subject. And yet it could have so easily surpassed its own achievement.

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*Into the Demon Universe* by Christopher S. Nassaar. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. Pp. xiii+191. \$9.75

"Wickedness is a myth," Wilde once wrote, "invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others." Christopher S. Nassaar's books, one of the few full-length studies of Wilde's art to date, attempts to correct the prevalent view that Wilde was merely a titillating minor Victorian whose only claim to fame was a talent for spinning paradoxes from plagiarized ideas, and proposes to establish him as "the last of the great Victorians," deserving of a "place in literature like those accorded to Tennyson, Arnold, Dickens, Pater, George Eliot, and others." It is an entirely proper goal, but, unfortunately, one which Nassaar never quite fulfills, largely because in many ways his book falls prey to the same concern for "wickedness" which first

inspired Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) and which has colored our view of Wilde and the *fin de siècle* ever since, preventing us from dealing with the Decadence as a serious literary and cultural phenomenon. While Nassaar's is a serious (if overly dogmatic) study, sympathetic to Wilde, it reveals an imperfect understanding of the nineties' preoccupation with evil and on the whole comes off as yet another commentary on naughty Oscar Wilde. Nassaar views Wilde as having gone "beyond Pater" who "regarded modern human nature as mostly evil" to present "human nature—modern and ancient—as entirely evil"; he "elevated the demonic to the status of a religion and tried to terminate the nineteenth century with a religion of evil, an unholy worship of evil beauty." These evaluations of Pater and Wilde, as one suspects they might agree, are at best questionable, but they can be attributed to the larger failing of Nassaar's book—the attempt to deal with the demonic element in Wilde's work while for the most part ignoring the carefully wrought aesthetic doctrines which underlie and are inextricably linked to it. In so doing the book reduces the complexities of Wilde's art to a kind of inverted morality play, and, ironically, ends up making him less, rather than more, formidable a figure than he actually was.

From Nassaar's discussions, the "demonic universe" appears as a vaguely defined, rather Manichean force of evil and suffering which crops up periodically to spoil innocence and pose itself as an alternative to human love and fellowship. But it was precisely the experience of the Decadence that evil is not so easily identifiable a phenomenon and, in fact, is frequently found to be strangely linked to a greater good. We recall how Pater's adolescent heroes become more diseased even as they become more "pure" and that their aestheticizing process always ends ultimately in death. Wilde's works do in fact stand, as Richard Le Gallienne once noted, as almost an emblem of the *fin de siècle*, but an emblem representing something quite different from what Nassaar's study would suggest; they record over a period of twenty years and in an astonishing variety of genres and formats a strenuous attempt to resolve what ultimately became the primary metaphysical and ontological dilemma of the "tragic generation"—the dialectic not between the forces of good and evil, but between two paradoxical "goods," the competing and often mutually destructive claims of ethics and aesthetics.

As scores of sunflowered buttonholes, velvet suits, flowing capes, and altarlike work areas attested, the artists and writers of the late nineteenth century made a concerted effort to burn with "a hard, gem-like flame" and to turn life into a ritual in the overriding belief that "everything to be true must become a religion." And that religion was a religion of Art. Born into an age which in its decline felt increasingly deprived of spiritual meaning and the old stable values, these heirs of Pater sought to resanctify the world by enshrining Art itself as the ultimate source of meaning and value, the sacred *logos* of life. Thus freed from discredited and constricting ethical and social categories, one's duty became merely to develop one's personality to the most complete degree; salvation was achieved by a perfect aestheticization of life, by living one's life in such a manner that it came to resemble the unity, harmony, and beauty of a work of art. The witty, colorfully dressed dandy who could sum up the world in an epigram became the culture-hero of the age.

Yet, admiration for the epigram, which often violently joins two contraries,

also reflected a more disturbing underside of the Decadent "religion of Art," the uneasy paradox G. K. Chesterton saw symbolized in Pater's famous description of *La Gioconda* as "at once a mystery of good and a mystery of evil." That is, many of the nineties' aesthetes were all too aware of a sinister element resting at the core of their aesthetic sensibility, a truth understood long ago by more primitive priests who periodically sacrificed virgins to their gods—the realization that "sacredness" is inextricably linked to "erotic" violation of the taboos which define it; that the divine evokes a thrilling fascination precisely because it represents what is unattainable by common human experience; that, in short, all religions have in their basic structure (however repressed or inverted) desire and taboo, a desire and worship for precisely what is dangerous and forbidden. That much of the Decadent "religion of Art" was what Wilde called this "feasting with panthers" can hardly be denied, yet what is also intriguing is the extent to which these writers rejected publicly what they sensed to be true privately—that their aestheticism had an unhealthy link with evil. Far from advocating a "religion of evil," as Nassaar's book asserts, Wilde, Symons, and company repeatedly denied any ethical dimension to the "evil" in their work; in fact, the demonic received its justification purely on aesthetic grounds. Wilde praises sin in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," not for its own sake but because it is a tool of cultural progress, a manifestation of imaginative development. "Bad people," he notes elsewhere, are often the preferred subjects of art because they are "fascinating studies" which represent "colour, variety, and strangeness" and thus "stir one's imagination." Evil becomes good by a kind of aesthetic grace, as we discover that while Wilde has ironically reversed the Ruskinian relationship between art and morality, the basic theologic structure remains: beauty is the good, demonstrating "divine economy" and "rightness of principles," all working towards maximum freedom, harmony, and wholeness. Indeed, the persistent attempts on the part of the Decadents to provide an aesthetic justification for the demonic elements in their works would seem to indicate at least a subconscious recognition that what was at stake in this controversy was the very structure of meaning as they saw it; for to acknowledge that evil had a significant value apart from "evil beauty"—or that it could not be "sanctified" by that beauty—would be to deny that Art was the sacred "center" of life and in effect deny their own *raison d'être*. So it is that in "The Critic As Artist" Wilde contemplates relativity only under the auspices of a logocentric world of Art, and that Lord Henry Wotton excuses sin (though he does not practice it) because in a world so stifled by Philistine society sin has become "the only colour-element left in modern life," one of the few remaining means by which we can "multiply our personalities."

It would thus seem hardly likely that Wilde and the other nineties' artists were, as Nassaar suggests, "perfectly satisfied" either to revel in a "religion of evil" or to propose that the human soul was "entirely evil." On the contrary, as the ethical dimension of their art kept refusing to be refined away and they were made increasingly aware that all sins are not victimless, it became more and more difficult for many of the Decadents to keep wholeheartedly their own aesthetic faith. Dorian Gray was not the only protagonist who reflected the painful recognition among *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes that the



aestheticized life, which was to bring harmony and unity to the world, also upon occasion violated the age-old bonds of love and human kindness. It was with ever greater dismay that Symons realized his sanctifying dancers were also devouring witches; nor was Wilde alone in fulfilling Pater's fears that *The Renaissance*, that "holy writ of beauty," was touched not a little by a dangerous seductive element.

But for Nassaar, Wilde's entire career indeed begins and finds its motivation in this seductive element, as in 1886 he is introduced to homosexuality by Robert Ross and made aware "of a demonic impulse within himself." Wilde's early work is dismissed out of hand as "clearly second-rate" and "revealing a chameleon-like quality in him, but no more." Nassaar goes on to deny that the early poems can even be regarded as the initial phase of Wilde's career: "they are an inseparable part of the old Wilde—the boyish, carefree plagiarizer who suddenly disappeared from the scene late in 1886, yielding to the sin-conscious homosexual." (Although one rather expects it, there is no attempt to show that poems like "The Harlot's House," "The Sphinx," and "Hélas!" were written after 1886.) Having quickly disposed of Wilde's poems, Nassaar begins his study with an analysis of the fairy tales, carefully tracing through them a Blakean structure of innocence-experience-higher innocence which will in fact form the primary construct for the book. The child is plunged from his world of innocence into "the demonic universe" and can only achieve a "higher innocence" by facing and solving the problem of evil, usually by incorporating it into a larger vision of love. Evil is never quite allowed to get the upper hand and thus these stories stand "as Wilde's *Songs of Innocence*" to be shattered by the experience of *Dorian Gray*. The second chapter, probably the weakest in the book, brings the demonic to center-stage as Dorian "seeks fully to translate inner evil into action," and at the same time attempts to demonstrate that "the novel is chiefly a study of various Victorian art movements corresponding to different stages in the development of Victorian human nature." Chapter three reveals *Lady Windermere's Fan* to be a comic *Picture of Dorian Gray* (and a prelude to *Salomé*), proving once again that "modern human beings are no longer innocent but have a large measure of badness in them." *Salomé* becomes Wilde's *tour de force* statement of his "religion of evil": "the demonic vision is entirely confirmed, the angelic vision entirely refuted." And just as *Lady Windermere's Fan* duplicates *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, so *A Woman of No Importance* becomes a comic restatement of *Salomé*. Chapter four shows Wilde retreating in *An Ideal Husband* to the pattern of the fairy tales, attempting to win a higher innocence by fusing "all opposites within a framework of love and absolute purity." *The Importance of Being Earnest* is considered to be "absolutely devoid of serious content" and primarily Wilde's systematic attempt to make fun of the themes of all his writing up to that point. The book concludes by proving how *De Profundis* was Wilde's last attempt—and, like so many *fin-de-siècle* confessions, a failed one—to fuse those opposites and strike some equilibrium. But unable to achieve that higher innocence, he resigned himself in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" to the realization that the "demonic universe" is the natural sphere of human existence and that "every man, sometime during his life, commits an act so vile that he isolates himself forever from 'God's sweet world' and damns himself to a hell from which there is no escape."

On its face the view that Wilde's art grew out of his initiation into homosexuality would seem somewhat exaggerated, if not dangerous, and it would, moreover, appear to contradict Wilde's own cherished belief that man's past is not deterministic of his future. Wilde proclaims at the conclusion of *De Profundis*: "Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you it is irrevocable, do not believe them. . . . Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of thought. The Imagination can transcend them, and move in a sphere of ideal existences. Things . . . are in their essence what we choose to make them." And it is one of the basic themes of "The Critic As Artist" and "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" that, the only authentic self-development being aesthetic development, the true critic-artist recreates his own life daily out of the well-springs of his imagination. Indeed, if there is any one overriding theme in Wilde's social comedies, it is that man must never become trapped into one perspective, but must remain ever flexible, continuing to develop his personality and preserving his potentiality of being, in order to be able to deal with the complex paradoxes of human existence. One of the virtues of an aestheticized life, after all, is that time can be abolished, and in "gathering the whole" and being able to live in all ages at once, one need never fear a past which can always be recreated. Art alone bestows on the world its meaning and value, serving for Wilde as the ultimate sanctifier of history. It can hardly be coincidence that so many of Wilde's protagonists are literally or figuratively orphaned heroes (and thus ontologically incomplete) whose mysterious pasts are "redeemed" at the end of their tales by being fictionalized—aesthetically "recreated," as it were—by a play of the mind; these purifying "reincarnations" stand, in some sense, as Wilde's effort not only to reverse one or another "flawed" history but to reconcile and harmonize the world of reality with the world of dreams. Interestingly, even Wilde's "fall" into homosexuality is explained in *De Profundis* as an attempt to aestheticize life.

Yet, on the other hand, it is hard to disregard Wilde's own repeated assertion that all art is actually autobiography; and the very fact that his work so persistently presents pasts which need to be redeemed would seem to support Richard Ellmann's original suggestion (though not, I think, Nassaar's revision of it) that Wilde's own "double life" exerted a great influence on the aesthetic positions his art took—that, in short, Wilde's aesthetic doctrine may have grown as much out of desperation as conviction. Indeed, in many ways his works reflect a life-long effort to cope with an underlying fear that there may really be no absolute truths, that Art may not be the redeemer of history after all, and that, as "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" would ultimately confess, man may in the end be held ethically accountable for his aesthetic choices. In spite of his constant efforts to bring Life under the healing auspices of Art, we discover in Wilde's work that these two realms are only reconciled by *deus ex machina* endings; except in a world where Jack was Ernest and beggars were kings all along, "completion" is simply never achieved. Time and again Wilde's orphaned heroes seek to heal the split, to quest for a unity, a lost purity, or some stable standard of value, yet whether they be human heroes seeking to live aestheticized lives or art-like heroes seeking to live among men, in each case they learn, like Dorian Gray, that the attempt to achieve a unity of being ends only in death.

Moreover, interwoven with this element is a still more profoundly disturbing one—the recurrent linking of what Nassaar calls the “demonic universe” either to the world of Art itself or to the fragmentation of being caused by it. It is perhaps the ultimate paradox of Wilde’s paradoxical art—and one crucial to the understanding of it—that the force which is presumed to sanctify is so often presented as precisely the force which corrupts and destroys. Wilde’s “star-child,” the embodiment of beauty and physical perfection, is transformed into a monster at the point when he asserts the superiority of his beautiful nature and rejects his true origins in the figure of his aged and ugly mother. The aesthetic “young king” discovers that his life (and childhood exile) stemmed from his princess-mother’s seduction by a foreign artist; moreover, he finds that his beautiful coronation robe and crown have been created at the cost of brutality and human suffering. Lord Arthur Savile can only “come of age” and be worthy of art-like Sibyl by committing a crime against humanity—murder—and he is only able to commit that crime when he ceases momentarily his agonized moralizing and kills Podgers for the pure pleasure of it—that is, amorally, for its own sake. Wilde’s young fisherman, likewise, is allowed entry into the beautiful world of the singing mermaid only if he will give up his ethical component, his soul; interestingly, evil does not enter the tale until the fisherman, seduced by a longing for a human dancer, reenters the world of ethics and is contaminated by it; later, when he expresses a willingness to take back his soul, the beautiful mermaid dies. Death is also the fate of the costumed dwarf of “The Birthday of the Infanta,” who, like so many *fin-de-siècle* pierrots, discovers that the beautiful world of Art is self-enclosed and heedless of human misery. He is able to dance with glee and dream happily of love only until a palace mirror reflects back to him the horrifying truth of his deformity; he thereupon dies of a broken heart, the art-like Infanta remarking that in the future those who wish to play with her should have no hearts. “The Happy Prince” and “The Nightingale and the Rose” attest to the reciprocity of that alienation: the statue-prince and the singing bird both give their art (and their lives) for the alleviation of human misery, but in each case their sacrifice is ultimately unappreciated by their beneficiaries.

Nassaar’s study fails in the end because it does not perceive that for Wilde the “demonic universe” is not defined according to the conventional categories of good and evil, but reflects the metaphysical double-bind at the core of human existence; it is, in large part, a function of what Wilde saw as the fundamental alienation of aesthetic purity and ethical experience, of absolute beauty and human contingencies. The Decadents sought in their quest for purity to establish an absolute standard of value—Art—but it is the testimony of Wilde’s works that absolutes, being by definition extra-human, cannot be merged with life without destroying the integrity either of the absolute or of humanity. Ethics and human love may be the salvation of Life, but the co-mingling and compromise they demand can only mar the purity, perfect wholeness, and static perfection of Art; conversely, Art’s beauty and perfection may stand at the pinnacle of sanctifying value, but the self-sufficient and isolated nature of that beauty denies in its very premises the need for human communion. However much he wished to fuse them, Wilde ultimately perceived the worlds of Life and

Art to be two separate, tragically irreconcilable systems of value; to embrace the one, as his young fisherman learns, is to destroy the other.

Yet, it was not a verdict Wilde could easily accept, and even after his final "fall" he continued to try to reconcile the two worlds. In many ways *De Profundis* reflects above all else Wilde's last desperate attempt to join aesthetics and love; in it the creative imagination itself is transformed into a function of love: "the imagination is simply a manifestation of Love, and it is love, and the capacity for it, that distinguishes one human being from another." The strength of one's love having become the measure of one's aesthetic development, Christ (with whom Wilde identifies himself) is seen as the world's greatest artist and individualist, and Alfred Lord Douglas becomes an example of arrested development: "Your terrible lack of imagination, the one really fatal defect of your character, was entirely the result of the Hate that lived in you. . . . The faculty in you which love would have fostered, Hate poisoned and paralysed." But, of course, upon his release from the sequestered confines of Reading Gaol, Wilde discovered that balance was not unity and that one could not ultimately aestheticize life's ethical dimension—if anything, the very need to interlink aesthetics and ethics only confirmed once again the suspicion that Art was finally incapable of redeeming Life. We remember, after all, that Wilde's poet was both attracted and repelled by the Sphinx, and Wilde feared to the end of his life that behind its inscrutable mask there may indeed be no secret. *La Sainte Courtisane* (c. 1897), in its blurring of the distinctions between good and evil, only reaffirms what *Salomé* had indicated six years earlier—that the sacred and the erotic are not contradictions, but twin sides of life's irresolvable double-bind. "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" proposes that life is characterized neither by unity nor any sanctifying absolutes, but only by the horrifying paradox that man kills (and is killed by) the thing he loves, and, as Freud was later to suggest, that the only "connection" possible between men lies in their fundamental guilt. The final message conveyed by Wilde's life and art, and by the Decadence in general, is that the attempt to heal the split between man's dreams of innocence and his fact of guilt is ultimately fatal, the quest for wholeness self-destructive. It is perhaps not a surprising fact of the *fin-de-siècle* that a group of writers so possessed of a "schizoid consciousness" should take as one of their emblems that divided being, the androgyne—nor that they should eventually reverse the traditional iconography and come to see that figure as representative not so much of a "completing" union of opposites as of disease, sterility, and death. It was Wilde's unending dilemma that he could never bring himself to forsake either purity or humanity, and thus was forced into the ontological position of the androgyne, trapped between two worlds and unable to live comfortably in either.

Nassaar's book does a good job of demonstrating the value Wilde placed on basic human love, and in spite of its distorted and occasionally moralizing approach, some sections of his study are quite good, especially parts of his discussions of the fairy tales, *A Woman of No Importance*, *De Profundis*, and "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." But even here the reader must be discerning, for Nassaar shows a disturbing predisposition to be reductionist in his judgements and analogies as well as in his initial premises. The Decadent writers are continually

characterized as primarily interested in exploring "spiritual and moral perversity" and the "evil nature" of their souls. Moreover, there are persistent attempts to draw rather strained analogies between Wilde's works and the works of earlier authors, or to speculate on specific parodies (for instance, *Salomé* is proposed as a counterpoint to Keats' "Endymion"). While some of this "source hunting" is fruitful and worthwhile (as in the pairing of *A Woman of No Importance* with *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Ballad of Reading Goal" with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"), for the most part Nassaar seems too eager to make questionable judgements on slender (and often unprovided) evidence. But what is especially troublesome about this tendency is that it comes to characterize a great many of his larger critical judgements, and on the whole, his book continually reduces the complex metaphysical problems to simple moral equations. This is fatal, for the works of Decadence in general and Wilde in particular draw much of their integrity and interest precisely from the complexity of the tensions and paradoxes they embody.

Many critics have observed that the *fin-de-siècle* "religion of Art" was a church of paradox, whose symbol or "romantic image" found its first expression, as Frank Kermode suggests, in Keats' *Moneta*, who is immortal and yet whose face "is the emblem of the cost as well as the benefits of knowledge and immortality": "The face is alive only in a chill and inhuman way. The knowledge it represents is not malign, but it is unrelated to 'external things'; the eyes express nothing, looking inward to the 'high tragedy/In the dark secret chambers of the skull.'" (*Romantic Image*, pp. 9-10) It is the strain of that paradox, the cost of that knowledge, the "high tragedy" of that isolating vision which were all attested to by the scores of aesthetic questers whose shipwrecked lives seemed to pile up around the end of the century. Wilde's was in many ways the most emblematic of them. It was perhaps, at least in part, of this self-proclaimed priest of Decadence that Yeats was thinking when he wrote: "Why are these strange souls born everywhere today? with hearts that Christianity, as shaped by history, cannot satisfy? . . . Is it true that our air is disturbed, as Mallarmé said, by 'the trembling of the veil of the temple,' or 'that our whole age is seeking to bring forth a sacred book'? Some of us thought that book near towards the end of last century, but the tide sank again."

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