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## Book Reviews

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## Book Reviews

*American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* by Hyatt H. Waggoner. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968. Pp. xxi + 740. \$8.50.

This is a fighting book, a polemical history of American verse. Its purpose is to reclaim our poetry from the dominance of the Modernist movement organized by Pound and Eliot, which, Mr. Waggoner feels, has, through the influence of its poets and their admiring critics, all but submerged the genuine American tradition based on the philosophy of Emerson. As a result we nowadays don't even read our nineteenth century poets aright, nor do we recognize the real lineage of our best poets.

As one who long has felt that the center of gravity in American poetry is surely Emerson's essay, "The Poet," I'm prepared to go along with that. Yet I find I can't keep Mr. Waggoner's argument company all the way. Hyatt Waggoner, who has written one of the most sensitive and comprehending studies of Hawthorne which that much-maligned author has received, is the author also of an earlier study of modern poets. I confess not to have read *The Heel of Elobim*, but would cite its subtitle as indicative of one of Mr. Waggoner's abiding interests and as a clue to his method of approaching poetry. He calls his earlier book *Science and Values in Modern American Poetry*. Now, relying heavily on W. T. Stace's *Religion and the Modern World*, Mr. Waggoner mounts a counter-attack against the incorporation, as it seems, of scientific assumptions into the methods and attitudes of poetry. Poets nowadays seem guilty of what Emerson deplored in his contemporaries: "Men seem to have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon soul" (an apothegm of RWE's which Mr. Waggoner does not quote). Modern poets who have tried to replace transcendental affirmation with objectivism, imagism, or any other means of dealing with "No ideas but in things" seem to Mr. Waggoner to have traduced poetry from its necessary humanism and to have reduced it to a mechanistic craft.

His own center of certitude leads Mr. Waggoner to provide a full-scale scholarly justification for the recent movements in modern poetry which disavow the Elder Statesmen. It leads him also to revise the usual estimate of priorities and accomplishments in the earlier centuries of the meager annals of American verse. For Mr. Waggoner is so solidly in the transcendentalist camp that he does not view with sympathy the Puritan belief against which Emerson & Co. rebelled. If Ann Bradstreet and Edward Taylor could believe in Puritanism, so much the worse for them. Mr. Waggoner finds Puritan theology inhuman and pathological. Who in his right mind would accept such tenets as infant damnation and the election only of a few chosen aforesometimes by a God too brutal to let us know His will? Analyzing the much-praised metaphysical strain in Taylor's poems, Mr. Waggoner finds our Puritan poet, with his metaphors mixed and self-contradicting, a poor pupil of George Herbert, "hardly worth reading" except as an anticipator of Emerson.

The chapter on the five New England greybeards will not tempt anyone to

delve into Bryant, Holmes or Longfellow (whose sonnets don't rate mention), but Mr. Waggoner makes a case, among Lowell's many prolix and ambitious failures, for "Fitz-Adam's Story," and argues convincingly in favor of Whittier's "Snowbound." He rightly concludes that these once-revered worthies "failed by the tests provided in Emerson's 'The Poet': America was not a poem in *their eyes*."

Emerson's seminal value is found to reside in his "thought," particularly in "The Poet" and in "Circles." By page 94 we come close to the heart, or jugular vein, of Mr. Waggoner's argument:

What are the typical American poems? . . . there would at least be nothing essentially misleading in naming as typical "Uriel," "Song of Myself," Dickinson's "Like Rain it Sounded Till it Curved," "The Man Against the Sky," "Kitty Hawk," "Sunday Morning," and "The Bridge." What they have in common . . . despite their stylistic and formal differences, is that none of them can be understood except in religious terms. They are all eschatological poems.

Mr. Waggoner asserts that the chief difference between American and British poetry is "that American poets have tended to think of poetry as prophecy, not as the practice of an art whose rules were known, and not as a way of thinking about a fixed and known 'reality.'" (p. 85.) This sentiment might surprise Blake or Shelley or Yeats, but they are of course the British founders of the symbolist movement whose prophecies invoke other religions than the Emersonian. Whitman, who thought of *Leaves of Grass* as "essentially a language experiment" (among his other ways of thinking of it) is here discussed as thinker rather than as poet. There are valuable chapters on the Emersonian strains in the poems of Thoreau and Dickinson, but the claims made for Melville's verse by Matthiessen and Parrell (Mr. Waggoner does not mention Robert Penn Warren) seem "a judgment chiefly valuable for the way it illustrates the occasional fallibility of even the finest critics." *This* judgment is substantiated by a few pages on the flatness of *Clarel*; but surely if there were one poem written in the American nineteenth century which speaks with painful clarity of our condition now it is Melville's "The House-Top." Which Mr. Waggoner doesn't mention, nor would he probably agree with either my high evaluation or Melville's pessimistic view of an American city torn by civil strife "In code corroborating Calvin's creed."

If the foregoing summary of Mr. Waggoner's argument has perpetrated no serious distortion of his views, several inferences may be drawn from my account of the first half of his book. First, it will be seen that the center of power in *The American Poets* is Emerson as a religious thinker. Those poets who failed to anticipate or to carry on Emerson's tradition of insight into the spiritual core of life, of which nature is the continuing revelation, are knocked down from the plinths and pedestals to which less transcendental readers have assigned them. Thus I construe the emphasis on the article in *The American Poets*.

Second, this is a one-tradition book, and that tradition is *American*. There's no systematic or extended comparison of our nineteenth-century poets with their Romantic or Victorian contemporaries. A not fully articulated premise is that the internationalism of Pound and Eliot is a negligible contribution to

*The American* tradition which Mr. Waggoner upholds, although it had been predicted by Bryant in 1825, who maintained that American poets, unburdened by the weight of their own national traditions, would freely adopt and adapt the myths, legends, and conventions of the literatures of other lands ("On Poetry in Its Relation to Our Age and Country").

And finally, *The American Poets* is more concerned with *Poets* than with poems, more with their attitude to life than with the ways those attitudes are enacted into poetry. This is a heartily Emersonian bias, regarding the Poet as Seer and Sayer rather than as a Maker. Consequently Mr. Waggoner can find evidence just as useful for his inquiry in poems of slight merit as in masterpieces. Indeed works artistically defective may prove *more* useful to such an investigation, laying bare, as they do, the assumptions on which they are made. Mr. Waggoner, while valuably directing us to read Emerson's rarely reprinted early poems, can compare to Frost's "Sand Dunes" and to Eliot's "Dry Salvages" so banal a poem as Emerson's "Water"—he calls it "interesting and memorable," but I find it hard to take seriously a poem on a serious subject which uses such dull light rhymes as "It wets my foot but prettily, / It chills my life, but wittily," or which mingles conversational verb forms with "decketh," "adorneth, doubleth," and chimes cliché with cliché. The Whitman chapter rests on an exegesis of "To Think of Time," a poem which, Mr. Waggoner admits, "no one else has ever claimed as one of Whitman's best, though it seems to me so, because parts of it put so baldly the rationale of Whitman's celebration of the self, himself and every self, and of life in all its variety and promise" (p. 168). This would be defensible were there no such evidence available in a dozen, a score of other poems such as "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," etc., etc., whose expression is intrinsic with their thought. Mr. Waggoner's critical method would seem to detect little, if any, difference in content between the poem that succeeds and the poem that fails. To critics of another persuasion, however, as to many of the poets whose work is here discussed, form, rhythm, diction, and tone are equally as important as subject and metaphor in determining—indeed, in predicating—any "meaning" which may be paraphrased from the total poetic statement. Such terms as the foregoing, though are not the usual ones in Mr. Waggoner's critical canon; the shot and powder with which he is armed more usually comes from terms like "eschatological vision," "teleology," and "scientificism."

Curiously, I find myself thinking of another critic whose eccentricities of taste Mr. Waggoner rightly deplors. Like Yvor Winters, Hyatt Waggoner is a moralist. Therefore the verse and criticism of those who, like Poe, propose that the poem has no other end than its own perfection, or—less dogmatically—that aesthetic standards must determine the relevance of aesthetic works, seem to him either trivial or mischievous. Although committed to an entirely different aesthetic, *The American Poets* is in its monism comparable also to another earlier study of American writing; like Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought*, the present book excludes currents not deemed to be in the mainstream. Which, as Lionel Trilling made clear about Parrington, leads to claims too large, one-sided, and uncontested. The whole symbolist tradition is missing from Mr. Waggoner's view, although a good case has been made by Charles Feidelson (among others) for Emerson's relevance to that tradition in America. Rejected is not only Poe's aesthetic, which demanded the repudiation of reality in order

to provide in its stead the created reality of the imagination, but also the more humane and inclusive idealism of Santayana (scarcely mentioned), who proposed that all of reality is the material upon which "the significant imagination" performs its work of analytical transformation.

Fully half of this book deals with poetry since 1912. Mr. Waggoner discovers in Imagism the great betrayal of the Transcendentalist-Romantic movement. "Imagism," he says, "grew out of scientific positivism" (p. 336).

The idea of man implicit in such poetic theory is the materialist one that he is like the Pavlovian dog whose mouth waters when a bell rings. Whether we call Imagist-Impersonal poetic theory "Behaviorist" or "mechanist-materialist" or "positivist," it is clear that this earlier poetics of Modernism was not philosophically neutral. . . .

Imagism was the first phase of a literary movement characterized ultimately by themes of alienation, by insistence on denial of responsibility, by the preference for the "anti-hero"—Prufrock, Senlin—and finally, when philosophy and theology, as popularly known, had caught up with Pound's early poetics, by despair and emptiness. Imagism is the poetic equivalent of fictional naturalism. (Pages 339-40.)

"Behaviorist"? "Positivism"? "Naturalism"? Do these pejorations really describe the poetics that produced H. D.'s little poem about the shapes of pears? The true center of Mr. Waggoner's animus against Imagism is not so much these pseudo-scientific asseverations made by some of the Imagists but "themes of alienation . . . denial of responsibility . . . despair and emptiness." Mr. Waggoner repudiates not only the poetics of the Modernist movement but the breaking down in our culture of all the certainties which Emerson proposed a century ago. Yet in proposing them, Emerson found he had to strip away the dead husks, the encrustation of custom by which society kept each man from recognizing the sources of his own manhood. Fighting the old battle of the religious sensibility against the menace of scientific positivism, Mr. Waggoner seems to me to regard as agents of the enemy many of the poets who in fact demonstrate the continuing resilience of Emerson's radical individualism.

Who, after all, does belong under Emerson's banner? Suppose we consider Emerson not only as a Seer with an "eschatological vision" but also as a theorist for the Makers. Suppose we place RWE at the center of a somewhat different circle from the one which Mr. Waggoner draws around the body of his beliefs. For in "The Poet" and in the section on language in "Nature," Emerson utters the American counterpart to the call sounded forty years earlier in *The Lyrical Ballads* to rescue the diction and the forms of poetry from mechanism, cliché, stale habit. This is the ongoing renewal of the art which must be made in each generation, by each poet, lest the forms and language of verse become no longer capable of expressing or eliciting the actual responses of men: exactly the condition of poetry around 1910, as it was in Emerson's and Whitman's day.

When Walt admitted that it was Emerson who brought his seethings to a boil, what his turbulent chowder-kettle contained was not only a form of Emerson's philosophy transmogrified into his own, but the sudden imaginative capacity to enact in poems Emerson's philosophy of form. Why it was that Emerson the poet is so little the achiever of what Emerson the Seer predicated

for the poet to do is one of the mysteries at the center of the ever-revolving circles of Emerson's being. Was it the inbred constraint of his Puritan-Unitarian heritage? Or an inescapable fealty to genteel conventions associated with the High Calling of the Seer? Somehow, despite the radical and seminal nature of his thought, in the diction and form of most of his poems Emerson lacked the afflatus to become the *Literatus* which his own philosophy of emancipation from tradition in fact demanded. His disciple is Walt the plebe, the queer, the poseur, "one of the toughs, of Manahatta the son," a nonconformist by birth-right, repudiating America's norms but best expressing her hitherto unsung hopes. What a strange enactment of Emerson's lofty prophecies.

But from Whitman's unconstraint came the radical breakup of form and meter, the true discovery of how to use the vernacular diction in poetry (anticipated by RWE in the first part of "Hamatreya," alas an anomaly among his "wer'ts" and "dosts"). What is more, Whitman discovered too how to reconstitute in organic forms the obsolete kinds of form he repudiated. In his steps I'd place Ezra, who indeed made "A Pact" with Whitman, and the whole experimental tradition of Modernism. The same fire brought their seethings to a boil. I.e.: Cummings, whose attitude to life Mr. Waggoner valuably elucidates as Emersonian, is Emersonian too in his radical linguistic primitivism—his rejection of conventional encrustations of meaning attached to the very forms and meters of verse, the very words of the language—and in his need to reconstitute a language directly in contact with experience.

That need is the essential motive of the entire Modernist movement: the need for emotional honesty, for the proofs of being in direct touch with life, as expressed in diction, forms, rhythms intrinsic with what is experienced; a rejection of that part of the past which like a shell on our backs keeps out the realities we might otherwise feel and say. If Pound and Eliot adopted a mechanistic vocabulary and called for poetry to be as well-written as prose, it was because the poetry of the time was loosely ill-written, and science could be invoked polemically as a call—really, a recall—to accuracy of observation. Williams' slogan, "No ideas but in things," does not mean no ideas at all, as Mr. Waggoner seems to infer, but suggests that things *do* represent ideas. What else could Pound have been thinking of in his famous definition of an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"? "The natural object," Pound added, "is always the adequate symbol. Go in fear of abstractions." If only Pound had done so, in matters historical, economic, and political! As for the Imagism which Pound helped to define, Mr. Waggoner regards as the arch-enemy of idealism a brief movement which was in fact a stage in the development of technique, shared for a few years by poets as disparate as Pound, Eliot, H. D., Williams, Stevens, and Marianne Moore. Mr. Waggoner seems to me to quite misread the true temper of Marianne Moore's poetry, for he parses her one poem "Poetry" and finds her "positivistic and anti-idealistic." Yet who is more Emersonian in her rectitude and emotional honesty? It seems a mistake to deny "any cognitive function to the imagination" in the work of the poet who has given us our most believable and ethically valid modern bestiary, who praised "Spenser's Ireland," "A Carriage Built in Sweden," and wrote "The mind is an enchanting thing." Each of the Imagists learned from Imagism to write economically, to control rhythms freed from formal meters, to organize perceptions without stuffing them into predetermined forms. Isn't

this the organic form of the meter-making argument for which Emerson sounded his noble trumpet eighty years earlier? These lessons learned, each quondam Imagist went his own way. To hold that these poets deprived modern literature of the quest for spiritual meaning seems to me to misconstrue their individual voyages after strange gods as well as back to the familiar.

In his preface Mr. Waggoner disarmingly confesses that as his book programmed itself it required that he relinquish the chance to comment on some of his favorite poets—among whom I am glad indeed to find my own name mentioned. Yet some of the omissions are surprising. Of all contemporary poets the one whose work would seem best to demonstrate the Emersonian position, with all its risks and strengths, is Richard Eberhart; yet he too is among the regretted exclusions. In fact as the historical survey comes down to our own time, the tradition here seems spotty and idiosyncratic. The last chapter, "After Modernism," briefly discusses Roethke (very perceptively), Lowell, Shapiro, and Wilbur—the masters of the middle generation; and still briefer comment on James Dickey, Howard Nemerov, Robert Kelley (in two contexts), Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley. In a work of over 700 pages, which gives space to Sara Teasdale, Elinore Wylie, James Gould Fletcher and Amy Lowell, there is no mention made of such significant contemporaries as John Berryman, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, W. S. Merwin, Anthony Hecht.

"The price I have paid for trying to illuminate the main lines of the development of American poetry by concentrating on lengthy treatment of 'representative poets,' Mr. Waggoner writes, "is in not being able to talk about some of the poetry that means most to me personally. But perhaps another time, another book." Let's hope so. For Hyatt Waggoner, however much I have differed with his emphasis and approach, is a concerned advocate of our literature who writes with vigor and passion out of his own convictions. I am grateful for a book which so energetically arraigns the acceptance of the Modernist masters and so sternly argues for virtues long out of fashion. Whether we agree with Mr. Waggoner or not, *The American Poets* compels us thoughtfully to reconsider our poetic heritage. This is a considerable accomplishment.

DANIEL HOFFMAN

*University of Pennsylvania*

*Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Poet as Victorian* by Wendell Stacy Johnson.  
Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968. Pp. xii + 178. \$6.95.

Although the dates of his birth and death—1844-1889—fall within the Victorian period, the predominant attitude of critics toward Hopkins after the first edition of his poems in 1918 was that he was almost completely non-Victorian. They tended to see Hopkins either as one of their own contemporaries in the forefront of modern poetry or as a throwback to some pre-Chaucerian era.

It was not until the centenary of his birth in 1944 that Arthur Mizener contributed to the Kenyon symposium an essay entitled "Victorian Hopkins," and that Austin Warren suggested his roots in nineteenth century England. W. H.

Gardner's two-volume study, written about the same time, attempted to find a balance which is suggested by its subtitle, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Study of Poetic Idiosyncrasy in Relation to Poetic Tradition*.

Some recent criticism has emphasized nineteenth century aspects of Hopkins. Todd K. Bender in his *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Classical Background and Critical Reception of His Work* (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966) has contended that many of Hopkins' methods had their origin in his training as a 19th century classical scholar. And Elisabeth Schneider in an article in PMLA (1965), recently revised as a chapter in her *The Dragon in the Gate: Studies in the Poetry of G. M. Hopkins* (University of California Press, 1968), has related his sprung rhythm to Victorian prosodic and metrical experiments.

However, Wendell Stacy Johnson, convinced that one of the most significant contexts of Hopkins' art is Victorian, has contributed an entirely new and fresh approach to the examination of Hopkins as a poet of his time.

This he does by attempting a new definition or description of the very term "Victorian." Rejecting previous formulations as relatively superficial (*i. e.* imperialism, hypocrisy, optimism, etc.) he seeks to find the essence of Victorianism as differentiated both from Romanticism and from the spirit of the twentieth century.

The paradoxical unity of Victorianism, he holds, lies fundamentally in a feeling of intense self-consciousness, of almost simultaneous self-probing and self-masking, and in a newly ambivalent relationship of that self-consciousness to nature, a new relation of ego and image or of self and nature embodied in the writer's imagery. Within the Victorian intelligence and sensibility there is implied an uneasy duality, irony, and doubt, an anxious mood of introspection and uncertainty, a condition characterized by Arnold as the "dialogue of the mind with itself." A result is an alienation of the artist not only from society but from himself.

This Victorian self-consciousness is different, Johnson suggests, from that of the Romantics who attained an harmonious interaction with nature and from that of the moderns who, instead of trying to discover themselves, try "to create themselves."

Hopkins' emphasis on inscape, then, is his effort to come to terms with this self-consciousness by controlling doubleness and ambiguity. From this point of view Hopkins is preoccupied with the post-Romantic problems which haunt Victorian writers as he probes the relation—or alienation—of self and external nature.

After this prelude, the balance of the book is devoted to examining the imagery of four (though many others are treated incidentally) centrally important poems by Hopkins that explore the relation of self to nature.

"The Wreck of the Deutschland," combining introspective manner with dramatic matter, is seen as opposing active nature to self. At the center is an ambivalent response in which the sea of death is the sea of life and death is a means to a fuller life.

"The Windhover" develops a parallel between active nature and self. Inviting ambivalent responses, the arch-pattern of self is revealed through self-sacrifice.

The third poem treated is "Spring and Fall" where the parallel is between passive nature and self and where Johnson also deals with the Victorian con-



sconsciousness of time, a subject recently explored by Jerome H. Buckley (*The Triumph of Time*, Cambridge, Mass., 1966). In "Spring and Fall" the child of the Romantics has become more victim than visionary.

Finally, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire," opposing passive nature to transfiguration, asserts human immortality by shifting from a natural imagery of brilliant light to a metaphorical imagery of transcendent light. The poem is the climax of the dappled imagery of light and darkness or the simultaneous perception of night and day ubiquitous in Hopkins.

Hopkins' response in the body of his work to questions about man and nature makes him Victorian. In spite of paradoxical complexities and ambiguities, Johnson finds him more coherent and consistent than other Victorians. The range of his experience and thought may be limited but Johnson concludes that "his art is as intense as it is narrow or concentrated."

It always seems niggling for a reviewer to collect proof errors, and such oversights in the book as that of referring to the windhover who "makes an are" are not disturbing. One is more perturbed when slips appear in supporting quotations from Hopkins as when "my taste was me" becomes "my taste [be] rue," or when "shipwreck" in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" becomes "shipwreck," or when "havens" in "Heaven-Haven" becomes "heavens." And one doubts whether the rhythm and sense are improved by dropping Hopkins' markings in "Márgarét" in "Spring and Fall" and by deleting the diacritical mark in "hoürs" in one of the Dublin sonnets.

As one looks back over the book one realizes that Johnson will be subject to attack on two major fronts.

Many a scholar will challenge his definition of Victorianism as either too broad or too narrow. If it is too broad it is because it can be manipulated to include many writers or works that no one has ever thought—or even would think of—as Victorian. On the other hand, if it is too narrow it excludes many characteristics that differentiate Victorian writers from those of other periods.

Eventually the only way it can be tested is by careful application to all the works of all the Victorians, and this would take a whole generation of scholars.

Certainly with Hopkins it works much better with some poems than with others, and one cannot help admiring Johnson for choosing not to take the easy way out by concentrating on the Dublin sonnets which are probably the best illustration of his thesis. With the poems which he does treat he handles his definition with sophistication and—in spite of some straining—with a great deal of wide-ranging flexibility. As I interpret him, he does not mean to deny that in Hopkins there are other (though he would say more superficial) Victorian elements nor that there are aspects in which Hopkins is something other than a Victorian. What he has found in Hopkins is at least one dimension that is undoubtedly present at the center of his work and that helps to relate him to at least some of the major problems confronting his age.

JOHN PICK

*Marquette University*

*Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* by Robert Bechtold Heilman.  
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968. Pp. xiii + 326. \$8.95.

R. B. Heilman's handsome new volume, obviously the product of many years of study and deliberation, may well be among the most important contributions to the critical theory of dramatic literature to appear in our time; it is certainly one which future writers in this field will find it impossible to ignore. The author is exceedingly modest. He calls his work an "essay," an attempt simply to explore ideas rather than to enunciate principles. Actually, he has set out to define more precisely than ever before the genres of tragedy and melodrama. He has not, however, limited himself to literature, for he is concerned with defining the tragic and melodramatic perspectives as two complementary and ever present ways in which human beings always have examined the experience of life, whether they be dramatists or not.

Tragedy as a literary genre Heilman would separate with finality from the ordinary use of the term as a description of human disaster; melodrama he would re-establish as a critical concept without derogatory implications, describing a wide range of non-tragic literature, including the literature of disaster which has often been confused with tragedy, capable of expressing triumph as well as despair, and offering a vehicle for the highest kind of artistic expression. Tragedy and melodrama he sees as each fulfilling basic human needs, each with a validity distinctly its own, and he would oppose the critical tendency to confuse the properties of the two, for "if the former [tragedy] has been cheapened by being applied where the latter [melodrama] is fitting, both have been debased by being used for much less exacting experiences than those which they properly denote and for which we lack other terms" (p. 286).

To demonstrate the many facets of each of these genres Heilman ranges over all of the world's dramatic literature, and he draws upon the novel as well. It is impossible in a brief review to do justice to the range and complexity of his arguments; but, in brief, Heilman sees the essential difference between tragedy and melodrama in the nature of their protagonists. Tragedy is marked by "division" in the character of the hero, and melodrama by "wholeness." Whether melodrama end in triumph or in death, its essential structure calls for a self-sufficient, unified force pitted against some kind of obstacle which it may overcome or by which it may be destroyed. Man may struggle against nature, society, evil political institutions, other evil men, or even against elements within himself. One of the highest achievements of melodrama Heilman sees as Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, which he describes as a play about a force of pure innocence, without inner conflict, destroyed by pure malignancy—a play of unmitigated disaster, but not a tragedy because the Duchess has had no share in her own destruction.

Melodrama involves no difficult choices for the hero, and it need not reveal suffering as accompanied by growth in knowledge or understanding. Tragedy, on the other hand, must have an intelligent hero who is forced to choose between alternative commitments, but no choice that he is capable of making can at the same time both resolve his problems and insure his moral fullness as a human being; he cannot achieve felicity without losing some element of his manhood, although that choice is always open to him: Hamlet might have decided to forget about his father and accept the good life under Claudius, or Cordelia

might have chosen to sacrifice her own integrity so as to humor her foolish father. The destruction of such a tragic hero is accompanied by his acquisition of **new insight into his own nature as a human being and into the universal human condition.** "Every tragic choice," writes Heilman, "is both an affirmation of self and a suicide" (p. 15), and the human condition can never be a subject for despair. Tragedy is essentially optimistic because "in tragedy, life may or may not be cut off, but death, if it comes, is a lesser event than the new growth of the hero" (p. 154).

In making this crucial point Heilman has performed an especially valuable service at this time, for the tendency to equate tragedy with a despairing view of mankind has been a growing feature of recent dramatic criticism, especially of Shakespeare. *King Lear*, for instance, has been seen as a play about impotent humanity suffering at the hands of brutal and capricious forces in a universe without reason or order. For Heilman the play is a much more complex experience in which, while we pity Lear in his suffering and are profoundly moved by the horror which can so afflict a fellow human being, "we do not forget that Lear, under the dominion of the dark side of his being, has created the storm himself. Profound pity for Lear as victim, yes, but also acknowledgment of the paradoxical presence of justice, and sense of irony—all are present in a disturbing polypathic experience" (p. 89). Any play which depicts man as the victim of incomprehensible external forces—and notably the "naturalistic tragedy" of recent times—Heilman would call melodrama and not tragedy at all. "Tragedy," he writes, "implies a kind of recovery. Tragedy is the idiom of an imperfect humanity that remains capable of moral recuperation; tragedy implies a durable order of life, in which failure is always possible, but in which it is understood, not mistaken for a final blow, the road to nothing. In tragedy there is spiritual survival" (p. 154).

Heilman argues that when an artist faced with a story of human suffering treats it from the viewpoint of the doer of evil he writes tragedy, but when he treats it from the viewpoint of the victim of evil he writes melodrama. The tragic perspective is thus a difficult and painful one, for it forces us to look for the sources of evil within ourselves, and it calls for the exercise of all of our powers of self analysis. The melodramatic perspective is easier and more natural, for it allows us to assert our entire beings in opposition to external forces. It is a complementary kind of experience to the tragic, and both must be experienced by the full man.

Heilman thus establishes the crucial importance of melodrama in all human experience, and he extends its range far beyond what most of us have habitually understood by the term. He makes the dramatic genre include such plays as Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, virtually all drama of social, economic, or political protest, and what many of us have long considered to be among the greatest of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies: *Edward II*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Bussy D'Ambois*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The White Devil*, *The Changeling*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, although he admits that some of these contain elements which border closely upon the tragic. It is here that the strongest objection may be taken by some readers, for in this extension of melodrama there is a diminishing of the possibilities of tragedy which may be disturbing.

Even on the basis of Heilman's own criteria, it is possible to argue that *The*

*Duchess of Malfi*, for instance, is not melodrama but tragedy. The Duchess is faced with a choice between her natural human love for Antonio and the moral and social imperative that she not marry beneath her social station. This is a division not essentially different from that of a Hamlet torn by the human impulse to avenge his father in opposition to the divine injunction against such conduct, or that of a Faustus whose human need to pursue forbidden knowledge runs counter to the threat of damnation. The social context of the Duchess' defiance of her brothers—a major issue in the play's source—is not considered by Heilman so fully as it is by other critics (M. C. Bradbrook, for instance), who see her as a less innocent figure. If she, like Lear, brings evil upon herself by her own choice, she also grows in the same manner under the pressure of disaster, and she attains a kind of victory in spite of death which affirms the greatness of the human spirit and thus rescues the play from despair. If the tragic experience leads to a heightened awareness of the potentialities of mankind, this is certainly achieved in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In the heroine's choice of suffering and death rather than renunciation of her full humanity there is a heroic quality which is also an ingredient of tragedy, and to which Heilman pays too little attention.

Heilman's generic distinctions are highly speculative, and they will doubtless be the subject of considerable debate (nor is it likely that he would expect or wish the situation to be otherwise). Tragedy has meant different things to different people in different ages, and to different individuals within the same historical period. Heilman is not concerned with historical development, although he does devote one large chapter to measuring his definitions within the historical context of English Renaissance drama. But in determining what tragedy is, can we ignore what tragedy has been? Heilman calls Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* "a political melodrama without a touch of the tragic" (p. 192), but Jonson himself defended the play as precisely what his contemporary critics would define as tragedy, and we cannot merely dismiss Jonson with the thought that his conception of literary genres was less valid than our own. *The Persians* of Æschylus, whose tragic power Heilman denies, was in fact an important classical model for tragedy among Renaissance theorists who regarded its historical subject matter as a crucial ingredient of tragedy not present in the *Oresteia*.

As an exploration of man's relation to the evils of the world and those within himself, tragedy has always depended upon the assumptions about the world and about human nature held in the specific eras of its creation. The supreme tragedies were for many centuries considered to have been the fall of Lucifer and the crucifixion of Christ, and the tragic power of literary works could be measured by the extent to which they might be analogous to these cataclysmic disasters. Neither could be considered a tragedy in Heilman's frame of reference; since they involve protagonists totally evil or totally good, they must be classed as melodrama. It may well be that the kind of tragedy which emerged in ancient Greece could not be created either in the Christian Renaissance or in our own age of skepticism and spiritual malaise. A truly satisfying conception of the genre may have to find room for all of its historical variations.

Many will object that Heilman confines tragedy too narrowly within individual character, more a nineteenth century concern than it had been in earlier times, when the individual was considered worth examination only as a symbol of the universal state of mankind. There is a long tradition of tragic writing,

stemming from the medieval morality play and *de casibus* narrative which must be viewed in these terms. A criterion for tragedy based entirely upon character which finds *The Maid's Tragedy* and *A Woman Killed With Kindness* more truly tragic in structure than *The Duchess of Malfi* or *The White Devil* (although imperfect as tragedies because of other limitations) may be entirely too narrow for our needs. A limiting of tragedy to struggle within the soul of individual man may do little justice to the crucial political dimensions of plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* (neither of which Heilman sees as fully tragic), and it does cause Heilman to slight the tragic power of *Richard II*, where Richard's suffering is not merely aroused by the injuries he has sustained but springs also from a tragic awareness of his own violation of the responsibility placed upon a king by God.

What Heilman defines as tragedy will be accepted as such by most intelligent readers. They may regard it, however, as merely one kind of tragedy. They may argue that *Hamlet* may be a tragedy about a victim of evil who learns to overcome evil, just as *Macbeth* may be a tragedy about a doer of evil who is destroyed by what he has created, and that it is the final effect upon the audience, rather than the extent of the protagonist's guilt, which finally determines whether a work may be called a tragedy. The innocent no less than the guilty may be subject to moral conflict and impossible choice. If the effect of tragedy is a heightened awareness and understanding of the general human condition and an insight into the infinite complexity and contradiction of human life, many readers will argue that these ends have been achieved by works other than those that Heilman would describe as tragedy, including many which he would call melodrama. He might well reply that the line of separation between these two "versions of experience" must finally be drawn by each man for himself.

IRVING RIBNER

State University of New York  
at Stony Brook.

*The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* by Josiah Thompson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967. Pp. 242. \$8.50.

Following his own lead, most of Kierkegaard's commentators have sought the single "point of view" from which his works might be understood and evaluated. Josiah Thompson's new book continues this tradition.

*The Lonely Labyrinth* elaborates the suggestion that "Kierkegaard was a profoundly sick man, and that the character of his sickness established a privileged perspective for the understanding of his work." In the light of this thesis, his "works turn out to be, not abstruse theologico-philosophical treatises or mysterious aesthetic essays, but successive moves in a complicated dialectic of therapy." (p. xiii) They are "efforts . . . to find not *truth* but health." (p. 16) Part One of Thompson's book sketches the biographical, psychological, philosophical, and literary background of Kierkegaard's authorship. Part Two—the major division of the book—offers more or less detailed readings of the pseudonymous works from *Either/Or* through *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Thompson's thesis has its virtues (of which more in a moment), but it also raises a number of questions. A nation's concern with its own health presumably justifies another painstaking reconstruction of six fatal seconds in Dallas. But if Kierkegaard was a sick man who wrote books to cure *himself*, why should I—or anyone—be interested in the diagnosis or the treatment? Thompson's answer seems to be that Kierkegaard's disease is endemic to all of us. He suffered from consciousness itself, more specifically from the "fissure between self and world which consciousness requires." (p. 46)

It is by no means obvious that the subject-object distinction is or engenders a universal human affliction. It may be only a modern fad, the "existential" sickness, just as consumption used to be the "romantic" way to die. There have been generations of men who did not literally suffer their consciousness. Even Kierkegaard allows that there is a *healthy* condition of consciousness and (*pace* Thompson's etymology, p. 13) a *happy* passion of reason, the condition and the passion of faith.<sup>1</sup>

But let that pass. Suppose consciousness *is* a universal disease. Thompson insists that "Kierkegaard is finally uninterested in the formal characteristics of any dialectic that might be extracted from his authorship. . . . He is no verbal architect constructing an edifice of language to encapsulate the real, but a suffering human being searching desperately for health." (p. 208) If this was his purpose, why did he write, polish, and publish a whole shelf of books? He did in fact go out of his way to construct a "verbal edifice" built in accordance with a meticulously thought-out literary dialectic. Yet if his only object was therapy, surely the informal journals would have sufficed. Thompson's thesis makes irrelevant Kierkegaard's life-long preoccupation with the dialectics of communication, his labors over the production of his books, and his careful attention to the details of their publication.

My criticism is not directed against Thompson's thesis in particular. His approach to Kierkegaard is a welcome relief from the usual clerical exegeses that try to put Kierkegaard into one or another religious camp (radical Protestant, covert Catholic, or—most recently<sup>2</sup>—a sneaky kind of Dunker). It permits him, for example, to discern the essential perversity in Kierkegaard's late writings, where most theological interpreters are committed to finding the soul of Christian piety. And within the limits of his thesis he has done some of the most original and sensitive readings of the pseudonymous works to date. He is alert to the symbolic and archetypal values of Kierkegaard's books as few Kierkegaardians have been. Many of his interpretations depend, often successfully (though occasionally less so because of inattention to context), on minute analysis of linguistic and stylistic features of the works. At his best he *reads* the works, whereas most commentators read *at* them. For its treatment of individual works and passages, and quite apart from its overall thesis, Thompson's book (the cliché is inevitable) deserves to be read by every serious student of Kierkegaard.

Yet the thesis does limit Thompson's openness to Kierkegaard. It obliges him, for example, to confound the pseudonyms with each other and with the author

<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (New York, 1954), pp. 147, 262; *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, 1962), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Vernard Eller, *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

of the *Edifying Discourses* (cf. pp. 110, 112, 116), and to undervalue the literary and philosophical plenitude of the pseudonymous works (cf. pp. 73, 150, 151). *Ex hypothesi* the pseudonyms are projections of Kierkegaard, and the works, for all their apparent variety, are so many tactics in a single strategy of self-treatment. There is one author, one problem, and one book written many times in diverse manners. (pp. 19, 164)

The inseparability of form and content, a commonplace of modern criticism, was a matter to which Kierkegaard gave much thought. He saw himself as a philosopher *and* a poet, a philosopher only *insofar* as he was a poet; in all his writings he strove to make the form "reduplicate" the content.<sup>3</sup> How it is possible to rewrite "the same book in different ways" (p. 164) is no clearer to me than it was to Kierkegaard. But the point is essential to Thompson's argument; as his book progresses we get more schematism (works appear from Kierkegaard's pen to illustrate and confirm Thompson's thesis) and less reading of the works themselves. Kierkegaard may have been a sick man. But he was also a more-than-usually self-conscious literary artist. His artistry deserves to be honored for itself, not merely as an incident in his therapy.

The issue, I repeat, is not Thompson's thesis in particular. As theses go, it is as good as many and better than most. My criticism is more general: Thompson's book gives us a new point of view on Kierkegaard, but what is needed in Kierkegaard literature is precisely *not* another point of view, new or old. If you come to Kierkegaard's works with a point of view, you inevitably read not the works but the reflection in them of your own determinations. Kierkegaard called himself "a peculiar kind of poet and thinker."<sup>4</sup> Anyone who will read his works aright must read them thoughtfully and poetically. The student of Kierkegaard must endeavor to understand with imaginative impartiality *all* the points of view expressed by *all* the Kierkegaardian pseudonyms and by Kierkegaard himself *in propria persona*, each in its own right and for its own sake. Each is one perspective (a bias, in fact) on the many-faceted whole of human life; none is the simple and entire truth. Not even the optimum statement of his views, which Kierkegaard gave directly and without guile in the *Edifying Discourses*, exhausts the possibilities for human self-understanding or offers the reader a decision ready-made for his case. The works are possibilities which the reader must appropriate imaginatively in order to come at last and passionately to his own personal actuality. That is part of what Kierkegaard meant when he said that he had no opinions of his own, no advice to tender, and no relationship to his own works save that of a reader.

Kierkegaard was a poet because he was a man of almost unlimited negative capability, so much so that (Thompson is right about this) it nearly drove him mad. He demands of his reader, not the infallible point of view, but the capacity to cultivate multiple perspectives, a capacity that poetry requires and which in turn the study of poetry can help to develop. There may be, as Thompson says, "no deep secret concerning Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms" (p. 73),

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, 1941), pp. 67-74, 312-322.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, "A First and Last Declaration," (unpaged = p. 554); also Kierkegaard, Preface to "Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays" in *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves!* (Princeton, 1944), p. 5.

but there is an important literary and philosophical truth behind it. Kierkegaard understood that angelic objectivity is not available to finite minds. Every human being is more than a little prejudiced, and no man can hope to disarm all his presuppositions. In such a predicament, the closest approximation to objectivity is poetry. By enlarging his imaginative sympathies, by cultivating as many perspectives as he can, a man is less likely to be the victim of his own idiosyncratic bias. We cannot tell it like it is, we can only tell the many ways it might be. The profusion of metaphor is the best we get this side of the Beatific Vision. That was the point in Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms. Truth is bigger than any or all of our lopsided little truths. Best, therefore, not to chase some will-o-the-wisp of literal objectivity; better exploit all the options than be the slave of one. That kind of subjectivity *is* truth.

Fashions in criticism come and go, but no student of literature believes that he must decide "for," say, Donne, and "against," say, Keats. Both the metaphysical and the romantic are viable and valuable modes of imagining. Yet philosophers have, at least since Descartes, been hung on the over-simple dichotomy of True and False. If you are with Kant, you must be against Aquinas. Kierkegaard's gift to philosophy was the recognition that philosophical thought is not the firming up of Absolute Truth, but the imaginative exploration of the possible toward the enrichment of human self-understanding and the enabling of human decision. In other words, poetry. His own works demand to be read as a peculiar kind of dramatic poetry, of which the ultimate author has created not only the characters but the very poets. To read them from a new point of view, however cleverly devised and heavily documented (Kierkegaard like the Bible can be quoted on behalf of any interpretation), will of course turn up new aspects of their meaning. But it will also, by depreciating the medium, deface the message. To read them without a point of view, or (which is the same thing) from all the points of view they themselves suggest, is, like the criticism of literature, an unending task. But that was exactly what their author had in mind, whose declared intent was not to propose a new system of philosophy nor to contrive new techniques for self-therapy, but "to read solo the original text of the individual human existence-relationship, the old text, well known, handed down from the fathers—to read it through yet once more, if possible in a more heartfelt way."<sup>5</sup>

LOUIS H. MACKAY

*The University of Texas at Austin*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*