



who has achieved financial and social success after many years of struggle and self-sacrifice. As the novel begins, she is on a luxurious Caribbean cruise with two black girl friends and a ship filled with whites. Avey has just decided to jump ship, leaving the cruise at the next stopping point of Grenada, without even knowing why she is compelled to leave. As the novel develops, it becomes clear that her unconscious mind is directing her actions and there is even a hint of divine intervention—she is certainly listening to her inner voice as she departs. Dreams play the role of rituals of purification in this novel in the sense that it is through them that Avey is put in touch with her deepest fears and longings.

The richness and power of Avey's past are revealed from the first pages. The descriptions of events like her family's summer excursion up the Hudson river with lots of friends, her childhood visits to her great-aunt Cuney in Tatem, South Carolina, the religious ceremony of the Ring Shout in Tatem, the minister's oration on a hot Easter Sunday in Harlem, deepen the texture of the novel while they teach us more about Avey. By the time Avey participates in the ancestral celebration of life on the island of Carriacou, the reader has learned all there is to know about her early life and her passionate, difficult marriage. The portrayal of the modern black man's struggle becomes part of the tale about Avey in spite of the fact that the focus of the book is on roots and spiritual renewal, because the reality is that such struggle exists and is part and parcel of those roots.

This is a remarkable novel not only because the psychological journey is presented astutely but also because it is artistic. Marshall weaves countless threads of repeated images, dreams, flashbacks, mother-daughter conversations, ethnic poetry and religious experiences into her narrative so that the reader is constantly being reminded of yet another aspect of the story. This artistic quality is reminiscent of Marshall's earlier novels (see, for instance, L. Lee Talbert, "The Poetics of Prophecy in Paule Marshall's *Clap Hands and Sing*," *MELUS*, 5 No. 1 (1978), 49-56, and Marcia Keisz, "Themes and Style in the Works of Paule Marshall," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 9 No. 3 (1975), 71-76).

By the end of the novel it is clear that Avey has completed the process of psychological reintegration. She has found a new spiritual power and she finds herself "moving suddenly with a vigor and passion she hadn't felt in years, and with something of the stylishness and sass she had once been known for" (p. 249). Embodied in this description is the notion that we are each possessed with a unique spirit, something that is ours alone, a quality which may seem to vanish at some points during our lives but which in fact never disappears and can be rediscovered. *Praisesong for the Widow* is every bit as much Marshall's praisesong as it is Avey's. The novel embodies a continuation of the path toward self-identity which Marshall began in 1959 with *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, and we leave it with the feeling that Marshall has herself reached the end of an important journey. Indeed, she has said that one must come to terms with everything one is, before she is free to become her true self. We can only anticipate with great interest this author's next offering.

Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper
A COMPANION TO UNDER THE VOLCANO
 Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press,
 1984. Pp. 492. \$45.00
 Reviewed by R. T. Chapman

Ulysses had Stuart Gilbert, *Lolita* had Alfred Appel, now *Under the Volcano* has found its scrupulous exegetes—Chris Ackerley and Lawrence J. Clipper. With a coincidence that would have appealed to Lowry, both scholars—unaware of each other's work—submitted their manuscripts to the same publisher in the same month. This "Companion" is a combination of their independent studies. Like Joyce's ideal reader, Lowry's too should suffer from an ideal insomnia. His fiction teems with allusions—mundane and arcane—which function on both mimetic and symbolic levels. Ackerley and Clipper tease these out in some 1,700 notes (with page references to Penguin and Cape editions) in a manner more useful to magus than to neophyte. Anyone encountering *Under the Volcano* for the first time could be confused by the Stakhanovite detail in these notes. There are better ways into the dark wood of Lowry's fiction.

However, this volume does not seek to present a reassessment or even a reading of the novel: the format precludes that. Rather it seeks to explore the central points of difficulty as they occur, page by page, chapter by chapter. As such, the notes are lucid, well documented, and amazingly erudite. Ranging from the Upanishads to Tin Pan Alley, from Marcel Proust to *Peter Rabbit*, they plumb the depths of the trivial and often of the quadrivial. It is difficult to tell how far much of this is related to a genuine reading experience of the novel (how many children had *Lady Macbeth*?), but the scholarship is impressive.

Occasionally, the insistence upon symbolic depths takes the eye from the other-worldly reality of Mexico, the tones, colors, moods, and poetry of place. Early in Chapter II of the novel there is an evocative image of an old woman playing dominoes in the early-morning shadows as a chicken pecks about the table. "Clearly a figure of fate" write Ackerley and Clipper. "The word 'domino,' originally signifying a cloak or half-mask, suggests the black death-mask invariably worn by Mixcoatl, the Aztec god of death, and by various Mayan deities whose presence boded ill . . . while the chicken, pecking among the dominoes, suggests the Roman *tripudium* or the art of divination according to the way the food fell from the mouths of the sacred chickens." Well, perhaps. But the imagery functions more suggestively and more significantly in less precisely etymological terms. The old woman is part of the Consul's world, she inhabits those Dantesque regions in which he dwells with his familiars. She is part of the iconography of his despair—and his hope—but by exploring so exclusively the symbolism, the poetry of the surface is forgotten.

The Cabbala is an exegete's arcanum; all manner of wonders are hidden therein. Ackerley and Clipper unravel the mysteries with half an eye on the fact that the Cabbalistic details were added at a late stage and may not be as central as some critics assert. As a reference book, *A Companion to Under the Volcano* will be welcomed by academics and by those readers who return to the novel after an initial reading, searching for further meanings in Lowry's masterpiece. Still, chickens is chickens.

Ronald Sukenick

IN FORM: DIGRESSIONS ON THE ACT OF FICTION

Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985. Pp. xxii + 247. \$16.95

Reviewed by Jerry A. Varsava

In Form is a motley compilation of "digressions," critical essays, book reviews, and interviews that have, for the most part, appeared elsewhere over the last fifteen years. However, the common thematic thrust of the material (old and new) and Sukenick's importance as an experimental fictionist justify the collection. Sukenick wears many hats here—those of critic, cultural historian, apologist for the American avant-garde, and, after a fashion, aesthetician—though not that of the literary theorist. In his introduction, Sukenick makes a pitch for authorial vision and intention as privileged criteria in interpreting literary works, though the general implications of genetic criticism go unexamined. In his view, we should think about art "based on the way it is composed rather than on the way it is interpreted" (p. xix). Until the former strategy is realized, the artist, "who knows the most about his work," will always be viewed by the "analytic interpreter" as a poor expositor of his own work (pp. xix-xx). Though implying the novelty of genetic criticism, Sukenick pleads here for a return to a long entrenched critical position—the Romantic cult of genius. The point seems to be that interpretive truth will come to the reader who attends long enough to the author, who carefully culls the latter's letters, memoirs, and essays. In confirmation of his *traditional* romantic leanings, Sukenick appeals to the views of Emerson and Wallace Stevens on artistic genius and literary composition. Predictably enough, the author is presented as the moral superior of an oracle to the rest of the race (pp. xviii-xxi).

The claim that authors "know the most" about their work is no more valid than Dilthey's that interpreters do. Authors and interpreters know different things, when they know at all. This is borne out in Sukenick's lengthy essay on Stevens in which he points out, very perceptively, that inconsistencies exist in Stevens's poetry and essays that the author does not