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## Book Reviews

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## Book Reviews

*The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* by Marjorie Perloff. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. xvi + 346. \$20.00.

It is hard not to admire the courage of Marjorie Perloff's work. She sets out to do nothing less than recast the modernist canon, writing with evident pleasure of poets disdained for their incoherence and exclusively cerebral appeal. Drawn forth from obscurity and isolation, these sports of art become themselves a fecund species, a line fully as productive as the Romanticist-Symbolist dynasty to which they are contrasted. Moreover, once identified, this "Other Tradition" begins to encroach on its High Modernist opposite, claiming Pound, Williams, and Beckett as its own, the heirs or coevals of the likes of Rimbaud, Stein, Apollinaire, Ashbery, Cage, and Antin. Anyone compelled by such writers will feel grateful for Perloff's book, which promises to release us from the need to apologize to the guardians of the Great Tradition for our preoccupation with Minimal Minors.

And yet, though one might applaud Perloff's intent and eagerly await the change in literary values her book calls for, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* is not the vehicle to effect this change. Its argument is problematic in almost every respect, threatening a critical indeterminacy that its author does not anticipate. Still, even this indeterminacy is interesting, and in fact instructive about the nature of criticism itself. And so, with sincere respect for Marjorie Perloff's learning, sophistication, and independence of mind, I would like to take issue with her book.

What is an indeterminate text? The answer that Perloff provides varies as the book proceeds. No reference to Heisenberg appears, and Derrida is consigned to a single footnote (of which, more later). Instead, we have Todorov's notion of "undecidability" defined initially on a pragmatic basis: because of the violation of the normal (!) relation between *signifiant and signifié* found in Symbolism, there are no controls on the associations that arise with texts of the Other Tradition. Thus, "it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not. This is the 'undecidability' of the text" (pp. 17-18). To illustrate, Perloff juxtaposes texts of one tradition to those of another, finding the High Modernist ones determinate and the undecidable ones indeterminate.

The manifest danger of such a technique, the critic's admission that she is at an interpretive loss, is not just that it is embarrassing, not just that the perverse reader will inevitably find such texts perfectly clear, but that the very status of criticism would require redefinition if texts were allowed to remain opaque, to have this "ambiguity of literalism." The more normal critical response is not to speak of that whereof one can make no sense. For example, discussing an Ashbery poem similar to one treated by Perloff, Richard Howard

quips: "I should say that was beyond critical dispute, or should be, simply because it is largely inaccessible to critical procedure. Fortunately (for my enterprise) not all of Ashbery's work...resists analysis or even interest so successfully."<sup>1</sup> But Perloff not only wants to allow for opaque poems; she wants to talk about their opacity. And the effect of such talk is to make either the text become intelligible or the critic appear obtuse.

In the first case, time after time Perloff's analyses of indeterminate works culminate in summaries that seem perfectly determinate:

[Stein's "Edith Sitwell"] explores the nature of concord and discord, sameness and difference between two friends. [p. 80]

[And though] poem after poem in [Williams's] *Spring and All* is characterized by...Cubist mobility and indeterminacy [p. 129]. *Spring and All* enacts the difficult process whereby this "hell" is "lit" by flashes of the "dark woman," the Kora who is waiting to be discovered. ...Out of the "messy" and unwieldy prose, out of the disorder of language, the bland crowds and "patches of standing water," "dazed spring approaches." [p. 137]

The critical act is unfortunately one of patching and mending, of reconciling words to systems of value, and thus whenever Perloff lets her guard slip she collapses the opposition between determinate and indeterminate art that she is out to establish.

When she keeps her guard up, on the other hand, she is just as likely to strike the reader as obtuse, willfully blind to a pattern of meaning presented. For me, the most glaring example of this blindness is the treatment of Stein's "Melanctha," one of the most relentlessly plotted and coherently characterized stories in all of literature. Faced with Stein's picture of the self-defeating, contradictory heroine and her contagious effect on her lover, Perloff is stymied: "Melanctha is submissive but wild, graceful but self-destructive, soothing but always getting into trouble, intelligent but never able to get what she wants. A similar indeterminacy is found in the characterization of [her lover] Jeff Campbell" (p. 93).

The idea that realist character is normally without inconsistency is just one of many simplistic tests for indeterminacy applied to literary works. One even suspects at times that Perloff might be talking down to us, enlisting the aid of what she takes to be the naive realist in order to establish the identity of indeterminate art. For example, she assumes that a text that does not directly illustrate its title is indeterminate: "Rimbaud evokes 'cities' [in "Villes"] that are, from the start, impossible to locate in 'real' space. For although the poem unfolds a metonymic network of urban images...these references to a possible city are consistently canceled out by images of wild nature" (p. 50). The logical response to such a state of affairs would be to decide that the poem was *not* about cities in "real" space, but about something else, and that the title was to be taken figuratively. But the first breach between text and title

<sup>1</sup> Richard Howard, *Alone with America*, enlarged ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1980), p. 53.

is enough to establish its indeterminacy for Perloff, regardless of the potential significance in such a breach. The corollary of this attitude is Perloff's irritating habit of comparing poems on the basis of their titles. Thus, we find "city poems" or "lake poems" or "box poems" ranged against each other like the control group and the subject of an experiment, as if to say, "When Eliot writes a poem about a city, he writes a poem about a city—but Rimbaud—now there's an indeterminate writer."

The naïveté of Perloff's stance is sometimes extremely jarring. She calls our attention to a line from Beckett's *How It Is*: "only one thing to do go back or at least only another thrash round where I lie." Then she comments: "Supplying the missing [syntactic] links is...not the reader's main problem; the real puzzle is semantic. Why is the 'only thing to do' to 'go back'? Why is the inertia of 'thrash[ing] round where I lie' 'at least' the 'only other' thing to do? There is no way of deciding" (p. 232). There is none, indeed, if one fails to consider existentialist philosophy, absurdist literature, and most of the mainstream of twentieth-century culture.

This contextual innocence on Perloff's part is all the more surprising in light of the sophisticated critical concepts that she marshals on behalf of her point of view. The problem here unfortunately is that she often invokes them incorrectly. One repeated error is the confusion of the reference to specific existent objects with reference in general—in semiotic terms, denotation versus designation. For example, "Unlike, say, Gertrude Stein or, for that matter, Rimbaud, [Pound] does not call into question the relationship of signifier to signified. We can readily identify the fresco 'at Capuquadri...over the doorway,' Francis Thompson's then modern poem, 'The Hound of Heaven,' or T. E. Lawrence's photographs of 'rock temples in Arabia Petra.'... But these illusionistic, literal images are consistently 'interfering' with one another, so as to remind us that the world of the poem is not, after all, the real world" (p. 196). The relation of signifier to signified does not remain intact just because we can identify the works of art mentioned; that is, denotation does not imply straightforward designation. Moreover, when has one ever assumed that the world of a poem was the "real world"? Even when an artist musters up every gesture and convention of realism, the relation of work to world is always problematic. This careless use of semiotic terms renders Perloff's position tenuous at best.

So much for the pragmatic definition of textual indeterminacy: the presence in a work of conflicting, undecidable interpretations. The possibility that this is more a condition of the reader than the text does not occur to Perloff, but I find it hard to avoid. We are constantly gaining insight into texts that previously seemed indeterminate or incomprehensible, by growing as readers. Moreover, a text's intelligibility and determinacy are also a function of critical and aesthetic history. In the early years of this century, Mallarmé and Eliot were hardly the determinate retrogrades that Perloff paints, nor will her Other Tradition be able to maintain its otherness under the onslaught of critical interpretation—an onslaught, I should add, of which *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* is a part. Yet Perloff clearly holds that indeterminacy is a property of texts, not readers, and of post-Rimbaldian and only post-Rimbaldian texts at that. "I am aware that here I take issue with Derridean theory. 'Indeterminacy,' as

I use that term in this book, is taken to be the quality of particular art works in a particular period of history rather than as the central characteristic of all texts at all times" (p. 17, note). The idea that indeterminacy is a *property* at all seems contradictory, given the pragmatic nature of the term's initial use. Moreover, it is a pity that this interesting dispute with Derrida should run its course in a footnote.

Is it really possible to declare without a blush that *The Waste Land* is determinate whereas the "poetry of Rimbaud and his heirs" defies determinate interpretation? The idea that allows Perloff to do so is the sloppy notion of aesthetic semiosis that was touched on earlier: in the mainstream poem from Romanticism to Symbolism to High Modernism, however difficult the meaning may be to decode, "the relationship of the word to its referents, of signifier to signified, remains essentially intact," whereas this relationship is undermined in the Other Tradition (pp. 17-18). In the Symbolist line, the way to meaning is difficult but possible; in indeterminate art there is no meaning but the surface (pp. 27-28). In the first, words have "specific connotations"; in the second they have, rather, a "compositional value" (p. 23). In the first, metaphor is the predominant semantic mode: "Mr. Eugenides is related, along the axis of metaphor or substitution, to all the other sinister charlatans in the poem, just as every other woman in *The Waste Land* is a version of 'Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks/the Lady of Situations'" (p. 16). In indeterminate poetry, however, metonymy prevails: "in *Kora*, drinking tea may be either good or bad depending on what has just happened or is about to happen. When the poet finds himself at nightfall alone at the inn without the desired woman, he naturally concludes: 'what poor tea it was.' The axis of contiguity thus replaces the axis of substitution" (p. 119). And, we might add, Pop semiotics thus replaces a thorough examination of the subject. Perhaps this imprecise semiotics is the single most disheartening feature of the book: that theoretical concepts as precise and powerful as these can be so imprecisely and inertly used, that conclusions as suggestive and accurate, I think, as those Perloff intuitively could be justified by such fallacious reasoning.

To be specific, what does it mean to say that the signifier-signified relation remains intact? Sometimes Perloff means that terms denote rather than merely designate, as we saw earlier; sometimes that they appear in grammatical sentences; sometimes that they are metaphoric rather than metonymic; sometimes that they are not excessively repeated; sometimes that they are concrete or at least do not appear in indefinite, long sentences. Clearly the terms "signifier" and "signified" are themselves indeterminate here, and the dismissal of fundamental issues such as Derridean slippage begins to look either sinister or unforgivably careless. No matter how troublesome Derrida and the other theoreticians of semiotics, structuralism, and post-structuralism may be, no matter how quickly one wants to get to the poetry at hand, the category of indeterminacy and the placement of certain writers within it will remain utterly meaningless if the issues are not laid out consistently and logically.

Just to give an idea of how a little Jakobson can be a dangerous thing, we might pursue Perloff's use of "metonymy." She claims that Stein rejected realism, producing in *Tender Buttons* purely metonymic texts. Aside from the

fact that she is wrong about Stein's understanding of realism, Jakobson specifically identifies metonymy as a technique of realism.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Jakobson elsewhere<sup>3</sup> reveals how slippery the term "realism" is, establishing meanings for it that would include any work to be found in the Other Tradition. Indeed most of these indeterminate writers would probably justify their unorthodoxy in the name of realism.

The comparison of indeterminate poetry to Cubist art has the same amateurish quality. Referring continually to one idea by Gombrich—that illusion is suspended in the presence of two conflicting interpretive possibilities—Perloff feels at liberty to pursue the analogy to the visual arts anywhere the inspiration of the moment leads. Thus, one ends up with completely fatuous comparisons: "Just as the 'Cubist' painter recognizes that, in Apollinaire's words, 'You may paint with whatever material you please, with pipes, postage stamps, postcards or playing cards. . .,' so the verbal artist like Gertrude Stein takes words and *unlinks* them 'from their former relationships in the sentence'" (pp. 114-15). What that "so" means here is a real mystery to me. But more importantly, the idea lifted out of Gombrich's extensive and complicated writings is terribly misleading. Though it is true that in Cubism conflicting interpretations interfere with illusionism, this conflict is not the only reason for the defeat of illusionism in Cubism. Moreover, it does not necessarily eliminate illusionism *outside* of Cubism. One thinks of Dali's or Archimbaldo's double images, which are miracles of illusionism. Visual indeterminacy is thus flattened into a single trait, and then it is shifted bodily over to literature. "Image," however, does not mean the same thing with reference to the two arts; the presence of two—even of two conflicting—interpretations does not necessarily interfere with the "illusionism" of a literary work (whatever *that* is). As with the semiotic terms, the art-historical component of Perloff's argument is very weak.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 90-96.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Jakobson, "On Realism," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Kristyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T. Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> I should mention, too, some problems of fact and concept. Perloff claims that Rimbaud is the great source of the indeterminate tradition. Yet Williams frequently denies any French influence in his literature and Stein was directly influenced by the determinate (in Perloff's view) Flaubert. Further, Perloff offers the following potential models for Stein's portraiture: Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), "Yeats's mythologizing portraits of Maud Gonne in *The Green Helmet* (1910), Pound's Browningsque 'Portrait d'une Femme' (1912), or Eliot's 'Prufrock' and 'Portrait of a Lady'" (both 1910-1911). She then goes on to say that these were not models that Stein used. But not only were they not—they *could* not have been. Stein began her portraiture in 1908, and had been developing the theory behind it ever since her days as a psychology student before the turn of the century. Influence is such an ambiguous concept that it hardly seems worth pressing this point, but this chronological imprecision is troublesome. Similarly, on p. 111, Perloff

But even acknowledging all this, one feels that in some sense Perloff is right. There are some texts produced during the past hundred years that take particularly troublesome liberties with language. The critic faced with this fact might be led to ask *why* writers have taken to writing this way, in other words, what the cultural function and value of such art might be. It is just here, however, that Perloff is most irritatingly silent. She insists that some works are simply not open to the kind of interpretive action that critics are so prone to undertake, and then she stops. "The meaning of 'A Substance in a Cushion,' like that of the title *Tender Buttons*, remains latent, impossible to translate into something else [shades of "The Heresy of Paraphrase"?—no, that indeterminacy belongs, according to its propounder, to all art]. And indeed the important thing is not to establish a fixed meaning for any one item here . . . , but to see how carefully Gertrude Stein has structured the whole sequence" (p. 107). We know she was careful, apparently, because it is not easy to create such verbal indeterminacy, and a more careless hand (that of Edith Sitwell is adduced as an example) would have slipped into mere ambiguity. But when Perloff takes the time to describe this structuring, she resorts to the most primitive—and often incorrect—formal analysis. (The treatment of accent on p. 317 is inconsistent with any linguistic or poetic theory that I know; the discovery of consonance on p. 127 equates the /z/ in "ladies" with the /s/ in "socks.") And we are finally left to wonder why Perloff values indeterminacy at all. I know why I value it, and you no doubt have your reasons, but Perloff's case is minimal: such art reacts against an outdated tradition (a question-begging justification), it is interesting (how? why?), it is hard to produce (isn't all art?), and so on. It is not that one would want her to give in and dig out *The Meaning of the Poem* and weigh it in *The Scales of Contemporary Values*. But one is left with a feeling of blank mystery and dogmatic prohibition: "don't try to act like a critic and come to a determinate reading of this text; that would be pure conservative wilfulness, an imposition on what is to be valued as a stream or a concrete shard or any other numinous but indeterminate object." No serious (or humorous) critic can be satisfied with such a demand for passive assent.

Thus, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* seems to be only a first stage in the critical reception of the difficult poets it treats. Still, as such, it is extremely

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writes that "Picasso's painting was considered to be the meeting-ground of these different schools, ranging as it does from the neo-Romanticism of the Blue Period to the severities of Analytic Cubism to Surrealist fantasy. What all these painters [mentioned in Apollinaire's *Les Peintres cubistes*] had in common—and this is Apollinaire's point about 'l'esprit nouveau'—was a rejection of an art that is primarily representational." But Apollinaire's view was enunciated in 1911 when neither Picasso nor anyone else had ventured into "Surrealist fantasy." This imprecision continues in Perloff's failure to distinguish analytic from synthetic Cubism, her treating the two as consistent or identical. And her claim that Williams's symbolism in *Paterson* was a mode that he was uncomfortable with, his earlier indeterminacy being instead his native element, is belied by his vehemently symbolist history, *In the American Grain*, published as early as 1925.

useful in delineating the issues in that reception: the model of the visual arts, the concepts of modernism and postmodernism, the influence of romanticism, the importance of continental, especially French, influences, and the need for (an accurate) semiotics for understanding the complex semantics of such art. Perloff's wonderful sensitivity to French nuance, her command of modern poetry and its criticism, and her style and authority cannot but evoke our admiration. At the same time, they should not blind us to the attitude toward intellectualism implicit in the faults of this book. In an earlier study of Frank O'Hara Perloff commented: "Throughout this book I have tried to keep in mind O'Hara's own strictures on literary criticism, so charmingly put forward in the little poem, 'The Critic.'...I hope that if O'Hara were alive today, he would not consider me 'the assassin of [his] orchards.' I have tried, on the contrary, to respect his wish: 'Do not/frighten me more than you/have to! I must live forever.'" <sup>5</sup> It may very well be, however, that the orchard cannot bloom unless it is first assassinated, nor immortality come to a poet whom criticism has not affrighted. This fearsomeness is not merely a critic's power to say yes or no, but the unleashing on a text of the full force of his or her knowledge and self-awareness. Anything less cheats the text, protects it where it should need no protection, and thus inevitably enfeebles it. To understand the difficult texts that Perloff considers we *need* a poetics of indeterminacy and not a religion of it.

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*The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* by John Block Friedman.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981. Pp. xiii + 268.  
\$20.00.

Chewbacca the Wookiee and his ilk—the Jawas, the Ugnauts and Yoda—have, despite their blandness, become familiar inhabitants of the contemporary imagination, but as with so much of our modernity they too have an ancient genealogy. In the seventh book of his *Natural History* Pliny described a large number of monstrous races: the Cynocephali or Dog-Heads; the Blemmyae (Othello's "men whose heads/Do grow beneath their shoulders"); the Astomi or Apple-Smellers, mouthless men who live by smell and will die of a bad odor; the Sciopods, who shield themselves from the sun with a foot grown to gigantic proportions; and such lesser marvels as Pygmies, Ethiopians and Amazons. In compiling his list Pliny drew, as usual, upon a wide range of sources, and he passed on to his future readers a legacy rich in both imaginative possibilities and

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), pp. xiii-xiv.

intellectual difficulties, an inheritance made all the more interesting for containing a grain (but only a grain) of truth.

It is the project of Friedman's book to explore the medieval *fortuna* of this legacy, and he has produced an account that will remain definitive for many years to come. This is an achievement that is all the more remarkable in view of the problems with which his study was faced. The exoticism of the monstrous races, as well as their essentially textual existence, condemned them to a marginal life in the Middle Ages. They cling precariously not only to the edges of maps, manuscripts and sculptured buildings but also to the intellectual life of the time: there are, on Friedman's evidence, only a very few treatises and not a single work of what we would now call "imaginative literature" devoted specifically to the races. Paradoxically, however, this apparent irrelevance allows them to be ubiquitous throughout more weighty productions, as if their marginality rendered them expendable and therefore irresistible. Moreover, the subject cannot be contained within obvious bibliographical categories but inhabits the interstices of modern taxonomies, shading off first in one direction and then in another. As if this were not enough, medieval people never quite agreed on what they thought about the races. As Friedman mildly says, "Our subject is so broad that it generated many inconsistencies, as do most long-lived issues in cultural history." Nor can these inconsistencies be accounted for chronologically: despite occasional efforts to trace an historical development, especially in manuscript illumination, Friedman is too precise a scholar to force his material onto a procrustean historical grid.

The problems, then, are formidable, and it is perhaps inevitable that they have been only partially overcome. On the positive side, the research behind this book is astonishing in its reach and depth. There are not many scholars with the industry and equipment to move confidently through the vast ranges that this book surveys. Travel literature, Ethiopic manuscripts, Noachid and Macrobian maps, scholastic *summae*, universal chronicles, pastoral manuals, Gothic tympana, Latin lexicography, *Floire et Blanchefleur*—all this (and *Beowulf* too) is grist for Friedman's mill. The citations are a cornucopia of exotica, with the *Niedersächsisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte* sandwiched between the *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* and *Historie, Jyske Samlinger* of Denmark. In this company a reference to *PMLA* seems flighty and one to the *Sunday Times Magazine* of January 13, 1980 positively madcap. But let me not sound ungrateful, for it is hard to imagine a scholar who could not learn much from the sheer mass of material that is here assembled.

But the very process of compilation has its own temptations, and occasionally the book seems more a triumph of the index card than an act of mind. It must be admitted that the pleasures of readership are pretty sparse, and a perhaps unavoidable aridity is not helped by a relentlessly solemn tone. Moreover, the book has some organizational tangles that inhibit easy comprehension. The medieval debate about the human status of the monstrous races, and about their *raison d'être* in the divine scheme of things, is of course basic to the entire subject, but despite previous, fragmentary references, only in the final chapter (number 9) is it treated in any detail. Furthermore, this discussion is itself closely related to the genealogy of the races and to their function as prodigies

and manifestations of the divine will, topics surveyed in the distant chapters 5 and 6. Again: monsters in travel literature are discussed in both chapters 4 and 7, while their moralization is surveyed in both chapters 6 and 7. In sum, the reader needs not merely agile fingers but the mental ability to reconstitute the wholeness of the subject from what seem like dismembered parts. Might it not have been better to have focused on individual works in their entirety, even if the monstrous races figure only partially? Then we would have had both a full account of the place of the races in such texts as Thomas of Cantimpré's *De Naturis Rerum*, Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, *Beowulf*, *Mandeville's Travels* and the Alexander Romances, as well as an analysis of the thematic imperatives that led each of these works toward the attitudes it displays. As it is, we learn what each author thought of the races but not why, a sad incompleteness that prevents us from fully understanding the role these creatures played in the medieval consciousness.

That they did indeed *play* is clear from the many citations that stress the sheer entertainment value of this exotic fauna, and many of the reproductions show these creatures proudly displaying their monstrosity. This is not an aspect of their appeal that much attracts Friedman—he seems almost irritated by such merriment, as if it bespeaks a slighting attitude that would reduce the races to mere baubles of the imagination. He argues that the races' existence is ultimately grounded in historical fact: Ethiopians and Pygmies are of course real African peoples, Amazons "reflect the customs of matriarchal societies," giants "may well describe the Watsui," Cynocephali may be based on baboons or anthropoid apes, and the Blemmyae would seem to have been an Ethiopian tribe who perhaps used shields or bucklers ornamented with a face. Armed with these hypotheses, Friedman then takes medieval commentators to task for their blatant ethnocentrism, a charge that really comes to constitute the book's major argument. But of course this is a point that is too easily scored. Even if we grant the validity of his rationalizing hypotheses (a large admission), we must surely recognize that for all but a very few Europeans the races had *only* a textual life. It was not that observers preferred debasing stereotypes to the true evidence but that they had no evidence at all. So it seems unfair, for instance, that Augustine should be criticized for not approaching the question of the races' genealogy "as a natural scientist would" since a natural scientist would (one hopes) never have asked the question at all. Similarly, Albert the Great is berated for his ethnocentric description of the Pygmies (including his unwillingness to "concern himself with the possible existence of a native Pygmy *ars*") while Peter of Auvergne is praised for being "more empirical." But apparently neither Albert nor Peter had ever seen a single Pygmy, nor a Pygmy artifact, a deficiency that renders the concept of natural science irrelevant. But other, compelling criteria surely *are* relevant, especially those imperatives of the imagination familiar to us from medieval grotesqueries like the *fatrasie*, *fabliaux*, and *sermons joyeux*. Had Friedman turned his attention towards this disreputable line of thought he would doubtless have had trenchant things to say, as his fascinating comments on manuscript illumination testify.

In sum, then, this is a book loaded with information, somewhat confusingly organized and with a central analytic tool (ethnocentrism) that is not up to

its task. But what is perhaps most important is that the book offers not just valuable knowledge about the Middle Ages but sustenance for psyches starved by the bloodless fantasies of the contemporary media.

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*The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* by Jonas Barish. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: The University of California Press, 1981. Pp. x + 499. \$24.50.

A book of paradoxes, which begin with the title: the anti-theatrical prejudice. This describes both interwoven intentions of the book. "Anti-theatricality" is a Lovejovian unit idea, the first to emerge in fresh and clear delineation for a very long time. And it is traced, anatomized, knit into the necessary knots of complication by a philologist whose skill, scope and patience are worthy of the Lovejovian legacy. "Prejudice" is descriptive of an apparently antithetical act of metahistorical explanation: it describes a psychological continuum which merges all of the carefully reasoned or rationalized debates of a millenium or so into the irrationality of a given, ancient fear.

As one would expect from a distinguished historical critic of the drama, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* incorporates, encompasses the concerted attacks upon the staging of plays in ancient Rome, in Medieval England, in the Puritan assaults upon Shakespeare and his fellows, in Collier's war upon their successors, in the Jansenist and Rousseau-inspired forays in France. These oft-told tales of the theater and its enemies are extended to Platonic beginnings and to later echoes. But Barish refocuses them as counters in a bigger game, as inevitable episodes in the history of the idea of anti-theatricality. Let him clarify the distinction in a statement or two from one of his finest sections, that on the *Maximes* and *Reflexions diverses*: "La Rochefoucauld's account is probably the most totally unfavorable one can find anywhere, even from among the enemies of the theater...it diagnoses in implicitly antitheatrical terms a social and psychological malady without reference to the theater at all. La Rochefoucauld is not thinking about the stage, but about the stagey quality of life in urban Paris...of a lasting dilemma, of which the theater cannot in any case be more than a symptom" (219). Well, perhaps a bit more: the history will always return to the stage as its focus. But the socio-psychological interpreter, co-author in a single skin with the dramatic historian, will respond repeatedly that this is owing to the depth at which the prejudice has been established. It is too dangerous often to emerge undisguised, to emerge as something more puritanical in its anxiety than a desire to purge the theaters and their socially disastrous denizens, the actors and the audiences (the latter split between victims from those intellectual provinces governed by a repressive establishment, and the victimizers who would lead them from labor to pleasure, to fantasy fleshed out). A naked instance of the confusion is offered by Barish in a letter published as a pamphlet in 1730 against the opening of a new theater in Good-

man's Fields. The author is a (putative) silk merchant who ticks off items toward the religious and personal degeneration of the laboring class which will ensue. But the conclusion cuts close to home: the country will lose two or three hundred thousand pounds from the distraction, and worse, will lose it because the theater is in the very heartland of London's silk trade: "'Tis . . . in the *Interest of our Country*, that effectual Care be taken, that those concern'd in the making of *Silks* should be *constant* in their Labour . . . should *live as cheap* as conveniently, they can . . . notwithstanding this, shall we carry *Idleness, Debauchery*, and *expensive Diversions* into that *Quarter of the Town* which is concerned in this very Trade!" (pp. 241-42). Here the displacement of guilt upon the theater is merely Marxist, socially severe but historically fleeting. As such, it represents a middle stage (as do so many of Barish's anti-theatrical documents) between attacks upon the theatre in its essence and attacks which evince more perennial prejudice.

Like all grand ideational ventures, this one can be viewed as another footnote to Plato, with whose primitivism and conservative resistance to change it begins. Or, more profitably, as a commentary upon an idea which is commentary or companion to the Great Chain of Being (which Lovejoy, after all, found developed out of the paradoxes inherent in Aristotle's discoveries about Plato). Stability, the state, the immutability of form among the gods—these were major reasons for Plato's walling the poets, with their tales and art of metamorphosis, outside the idealized hierarchy of his state. But with plenitude came temptation. The Romans, with a crazed appetite for the theatre, countered it by casting the actor out of a share in the rights of citizenship with real statutes and abuse unmatched in Plato's societal blueprint for perfection. The middle ages, building out of the Tertullian excesses of the patristic fountainhead, castigated playing in such extreme attacks upon the pleasure principle as the Lollard *treatise of miraculis pleyinge*, yet allowed this rival pulpit to function as an instrument of the church. It was Plato's Florentine advocates and interpreters in the Renaissance who in his name embraced change, Proteus and the chameleon as images of aspiration endorsed change, and as possibility rather than revolt (the actor implicit in Pico's vision of man in the *Oration* becomes the explicit protagonist of Vives' *Fable*). The paradox of Lovejoy's ladder has been transferred by these metaphors to the *theatrum mundi* where we rediscover the end result of Aristotelian plenitude and the early neoplatonic metaphysics of emanation when they are set against primitive Platonism: "In one case we seem to have an ideal of stasis, in the other an ideal of movement, in one case an ideal of rectitude, in the other an ideal of plenitude" (117).

As Barish's exhaustive history moves on, the former ideal becomes motivation for attacks upon the *theater* as place and profession—his best sections are upon Prynne, the Jansenist extremists, Nietzsche's revulsion against Wagner. The latter becomes the ground for the sporadic defenses, the "countercurrents," such as Adam Smith's optimistic positioning of "spectatorhood at the heart of the moral experience," a "view of the moral life as a genteel theater of self-correcting passions" (244, 255). But as one moves with more sophisticated (or, at least, wider-ranging) speculators from the stage proper into the social theater, *change*, the source of Renaissance optimism, turns upon man to cut

through the layers of ego and reveal an empty center the discovery of which is suicidal in its consequences.

What is theatricality? *Mimicry*: being another, deception, valuing the potential for change in material surfaces over the unchanging invisibles which include the soul, the self, one's very "calling" into a place commensurate with God's (and society's) structure of things. Or *exhibitionism*: truth carried to extremes, the seed flaunted into a flower of behavior, costume, diction so artificially over-nurtured that it threatens to break the stalk (155ff.). Pico, supreme exhibitionist in presenting his autobiographical self as metaphor for Man, had defended mimicry as natural to our state, hence no deception. Half a century later this Florentine tradition would be derarefied, scattered to the street bookstalls in the myriad metamorphoses of Gelli's *Circe*. And the phase of glorification for the exhibitionist aspect of man as actor, always a bit of a *poseur* even in his rightful domain, would be codified in *Il cortegiano*, the first seriously probing handbook on self-presentation in everyday life at court.

Others, the anti-materialists, would look harder at mutability. The seventeenth-century Jansenists began seriously questioning the impact of imitation upon the actor's life, and La Rochefoucauld would cap a tradition (Gracián in Spain; Daniel Dyke—*The Mystery of Self-Deceiving*—in England) which extended these explorations to the whole deplorable condition of mankind. We disguise before others disguise the passions until vicious motives appear virtues, disguise so continually that we finally "come to form our own best audience, and are most completely taken in by our own act. Our efforts... amount to a prolonged essay in self-deception.... This is a... radical version of the theatrical theory of personality... since it introduces the idea of *inadvertent* theatricality" (213). From this point Barish's history moves through the optimistic (because melioristic) attacks upon theater in Diderot into the radical theory of Rousseau whose rejection of representation leads him nostalgically to foresee a return to ur-historical mythic, religious events: "total participation, the breaking down of the arbitrary barrier between stage and audience. All the actors now spectators, and all the spectators actors. No one any longer *represents* anyone other than himself" (290). A long century later Nietzsche will imagine that this was the Dionysian world of pre-Socratic, pre-Sophoclean Greek drama (420ff.); Artaud would still later envision this past as future in the theater of cruelty (455).

There is a chapter (ambivalent, less bold with the evidence than most) on Ben Jonson's quarrel with his own profession which epitomizes a recurrent phenomenon which Barish emphasizes: the frequency with which dramatists (Plato, Gosson, Calderón, Racine, Rousseau) come to reject the theater. It is a phenomenon analogous to a basically Romantic movement which Barish shrewdly traces from Lamb's argument that Shakespeare is too potent(ial) for the kinetic reduction of staging (Byron ultimately wrote dramas calculated to make staging impossible) into the heart of the English professor today (represented, in a cruelly just chapter, by Yvor Winters). The theater against itself, as with the ancient Romans. It seduces them, us, with an indispensable window upon the self, upon ourselves, as Protean, chameleon-like, in the end self-deceivers looking for a role as well as an author. So the Roman, the Elizabethan

socially disallow the actor as a scapegoat, even as their persistent need prods the theater to heightened accomplishments. Perhaps, Barish speculates of the great periods of dramatic creation, "the drama was able to do what it did in these epochs because of the intense level of moral awareness in the community at large, which found its direct and unmediated expression in the tracts of the antitheatricalists, its more complex and discriminating expression in the drama itself. A climate of intense moral energy, that is, may have helped nurture both the successes of the theater and the virulence of the campaigns against it" (192).

This suggests an extreme of ambivalence strong and historically persistent enough to be described as a love-hate interaction between man the actor and the theater which stages the drama of his changes; it was not accidental that Aristotle observed peripety at the heart of the matter. Proteus the optimist's god; Circe the fearful materialist's witch. Implicitly (sometimes they surface) adopting the implications of the imagery, Barish embeds the idea of anti-theatricality in the psychology of fear, of "prejudice." And the larger fear is sexual—fear of surrender to, seduction by the otherness of the female. In Prynne's *Histrionastix*, Barish observes, the emphasis is "obsessively on sexuality and effeminacy, as though to underscore the author's fearful aversion to anything—dancing, love-making, hair-curling, elegant attire—that might suggest active or interested sexuality, this being equated with femininity, with weakness, with the yielding to feeling, and consequently with the destruction of all assured props and boundaries" (85). "As plays mean love, so love means women, and women, in turn, mean actresses" (282). Barish is here paraphrasing Rousseau, but one recalls, too, the excitement and disturbance of the Restoration theater when Nell Gwynne and the others escaped tradition and social hierarchy onto the stage, even into the anomalous excitement of breeches roles (Katharine Maus's 1979 essay in *ELH* on "Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress" is an incisive addendum to Barish's argument). The theater as Circe, the seductress, offering to change us into our more sensual potentialities; mimic and exhibitionist offering us a glimpse at another self—which would, of course, undermine any such stable concept as self itself as some center of things. Misogyny, like the theater, then, is—to return to Lovejoy's original paradox—a fear of plenitude as it is found in the fantasy.

A final chapter both narrows and extends this grand example of prejudice by likening the anti-theatrical fundamentalist with the antisemite, manicheans both (on an easier scale than the daily threatened misogynist). This, too, is historically justified: "At the time of the Revolution... in France, when the National Assembly came to address itself to the cause of certain persecuted minorities, it debated the Jewish question and the case of the actors at the same time" (465); "What good actor today is *not*—a Jew? The Jew as a born 'man of letters,' as the true master of the European press, also exercises his power by virtue of his histrionic gifts; for the man of letters is essentially an actor: He plays the 'expert,' the 'specialist.'" So Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (467).

A book of paradoxes. A major dramatic critic's defense of the theater against critics of its existence and essence from Plato to Winters, against self-undermining dramatists such as Peter Handke. A defense, too, against prejudice, prejudice against Jews, woman, pleasure set into historical and structural juxta-

position with the anti-theatrical prejudice. Barish is not immune, of course, to the attitudes he is describing, sometimes becoming the demonstration of his own argument. It is his world, with which he is engaged in often strident argument (the over-heightened moments are frequently punctuated with the adjectives "bizarre" and "lunatic" applied to his cast of polemicists) that can stumble into such self-revelation and perhaps unconscious validation of his thesis as this: "If men are to realize their full potential, then, even within the theater, they must first face up to the demon of theatricality in themselves and find ways of exorcising it. . . . The very nature of the theater brings out the worst in its votaries, and turns its aesthetic triumphs into human defeats" (348). Barish is anatomizing the idea of theatricality he and we have used to skewer all the fringes of social and psychic life which threaten, yet are central to the pre-occupations, nourishment, desire of the western male. Or "man," as he defined himself—a flexible phenomenon whose potential was described in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration*, is embodied in the actor, and has always been feared most by himself when he has rediscovered the theatricality with which it replaces the assumption of self, discovers plenitude flooding the breakwaters of rectitude.

This is finally an engaged book. Pedagogical father to children of the sixties and seventies, Barish is afraid and unafraid of what he sees. He closes with the psychoanalyst Robert Lifton's examination of the radically discontinuous lives of a young Japanese made in the image of Hiroshima's apocalyptic fragments. A dubious source, perhaps, but offering a case history recognizable from a multitude of unfulfilled metamorphoses we could all produce as evidence from the last fifteen years to support what Barish calls "the intrusion into our language of a newly approving view of acting and spectatordom" (472) through which "We have given up rectitude for plenitude, and our deeply lodged antitheatricalism is rising up to reproach us for it" (473). Things have gone awry; and brilliant as Beckett's drama of watchful waiting may be, Barish believes it will be a rhetoric of optimism more rooted in the psyche's long-practiced controls which will dominate the future as we return to an "addiction to story-telling, [the] love of gorgeous spectacle, sumptuous rhetoric, and all the vulgar panoply" (464). An uncertain sermon about the ambivalences theatricality has fostered in the author's own psyche; a description of the disasters it has fostered in the next generation or two. And a promise or prayer for a confused future whose participants have been taught to project themselves into the theatrical possibilities which Pico projected for a more assured culture whose historical rise and fall from innocence to sophistication and back again Barish has traced in this classic extension of the history of our ideas.

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*Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel*  
by D. A. Miller. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. xv + 300.  
\$20.00.

*Closure in the Novel* by Marianna Torgovnick. Princeton: Princeton University  
Press, 1981. Pp. x + 238. \$16.50.

One of the notable features of literary criticism in the past two decades has been its concern with endings. Apocalypse or telos, closure or abyss, bang or whimper, the end of the literary work or process has commanded the attention once paid to the beginning, the middle, or the organic whole. It is a sign of these end times that Princeton University Press has published in the same year two books on "closure" in the novel. One of them is a challenging contribution to the theory of narrative and to the practice of the close reading of prose fiction. The other is a more pragmatic and elementary study of how a variety of novelists bring their novels to more or less successful resolutions.

D. A. Miller's *Narrative and its Discontents* is concerned with a contradiction at the heart of story-telling, a contradiction between the story's drive toward resolution of conflict, mystery, or aberration at its end and its need to cultivate and promote these instabilities if it is to proceed at all. Where other critics have insisted upon the primacy or adequacy of the eventual closure (or, in reaction, have privileged a supposedly modern resistance to closure of any kind), Miller argues that "closure" and "narratability" are essentially incongruous systems in the text. Focussing on three quite different representatives of the nineteenth-century novel, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Stendhal, he demonstrates how "the suspensive and dispersive logic of narrative is such that an effective closure—no matter how organically it emerges from the story—always stands in a discontinuous (or negative) relation to it" (p. 189).

The theoretical basis of Miller's argument is provided by Freud, though Miller is not a psychoanalytic critic in the usual sense of the term. Rather he draws on Freud's insights into the antithetical and ambivalent constructs of human desire to clarify and focus his analysis of the twists and turns of plot, character and narrative point of view. Miller also draws with tact and discrimination on French post-structuralism and narratology, entering into valuable dialogue with critics like Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and René Girard. In some ways, *Narrative and its Discontents*, with its awareness of the self-contradiction of literary texts, participates in the critical enterprise of deconstruction, but the book is more genuinely historical and cross-cultural than most deconstructive analyses. It balances the claims of the "traditional novel" of the nineteenth century against the claims of the modernizing critiques of the twentieth. It also sets up an illuminating exchange between the English moral and the French *immoraliste* sensibilities. Not only are we invited to compare, as versions of closure, Austen's goal of moral propriety and Stendhal's of "erotic bliss," but we are offered a series of brief comparisons and contrasts involving Zola, Flaubert, Balzac, Dickens, and James. In a concluding tour de force, Miller brings together Scott and Sade to illustrate the interlocking contraries of law and desire in the novel.

The theoretical élan of Miller's book is finally less impressive, however, than the discipline and sensitivity of its particular readings. The general problem of closure is an enabling condition for a series of specific and various insights into such novels as *Emma*, *Middlemarch*, and *Le Rouge et le Noir*, into characters, scenes, and authorial discourse on events. It is the kind of argument that invites extensive quotation and resists brief summary. With Austen, Miller treats the major novels synoptically, showing how the "novelistic imagination" of characters like Emma and Mary Crawford intersects with the moral propriety of figures like Knightley and Fanny Price without ever being resolved or contained by the agents or the terms of closure. Miller does not deny that the moral standards of society are finally affirmed, but he shows how the affirmation is dramatized as the creative work of individual characters in the novels. With Eliot, Miller deals with *Middlemarch* alone, but shows that there are markedly different levels in the novel on which noticeably different balances are struck between historical unfolding and ideological arrest. At the level of the community, all uncertainty is immediately and prejudicially laid to rest; at the level of individuals, the "fantasy of foreclosure" (p. 138) is subject to various kinds of reopenings; at the level of the narrative persona, whom Miller insists on treating as masculine and discussing under the rubric "God," the allegiance to continuation all but undoes the possibility of an ending. With Stendhal, most of the discussion focuses on *Le Rouge et le Noir* and the unfinished *Lucien Leuwen*. As Miller sees it, "Stendhalian narrative always constitutes itself as a prolonged act of resisting authority, as an evasion from the incompletely sealed space of its immobilizing domination" (p. 258). Stendhal continually frustrates the consummation of the well-made plot, but can only do so by conjuring up its authority in advance.

Thus if Miller gives us an Austen less firmly and completely in control of her narrative than is usually taken to be the case, he also gives us a Stendhal who is less liberated from the authoritarian controls he seeks to subvert. It is not surprising to find an Eliot selfconscious and self-critical of her narrative authority, but Miller's analysis of the aesthetic and moral equilibrium of her greatest novel is acute and revealing. One might wish for some historical reflection on the "traditional novel," some consideration of where it came from in the longer cavalcade of fiction and what became of it as it passed into the defile or impasse of modernism. But *Narrative and its Discontents* is an important contribution to our understanding of prose fiction in general and our appreciation in particular of some of its most durable practitioners.

Mariana Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* is aimed at a less scholarly, more teacherly audience. It is less informed by critical theory and more concerned with perceptions available to the "ordinary reader," with "the natural empathy that even sophisticated readers can be made to feel for characters as representations of human beings" (p. 207). Where Miller sees narrative caught in an aesthetic and psychological double bind, Torgovnick asserts the potential integrity of an author's moral intentions and the novel's formal realization of them. In effect, in her claims for the "honest," "valid," "healthful," and "successful" endings to be found in many works of nineteenth-century fiction, Torgovnick takes for granted the very ideology of closure in the "traditional novel" that

Miller calls into question in his book. It is unfortunate for the values and methods that Torgovnick is trying to promote that the contest is so unequal.

The weakness in Torgovnick's analysis stems from her divided allegiance between a Jamesian concern with the formal shape of a novel and a neo-Aristotelian concern with the author's persuasive intentions. It is not that such concerns are incapable of integration at some level, but in Torgovnick's expression of them there is a noticeable gap between formal description of a novel and evaluation of the thematic content of an author's ideas. On the one hand, Torgovnick provides a rudimentary poetics of novelistic closure, arranging four sets of terms under the controlling opposition of "epilogue" and "scene." On the other hand, she refers both to the novels and to other sources for a relatively independent assessment of what meanings or attitudes the author wants to convey. "Since an ending is the single place where an author most pressingly desires to make his points, . . . extratextual information and statements of intention are often extremely helpful," she argues (p. 19). As a result of these divergent interests, Torgovnick uses her own formal terms in a half-hearted and apologetic fashion at the same time that she engages in a thematic criticism of an elementary sort, uncomplicated by the aesthetic mediation of philosophical purpose. The tension between these criteria is dramatized in statements like the following on the ending of *Middlemarch*: "though Eliot begins with what looks like the conventional after-history, she invests the form with at least some aesthetic value, and with considerable philosophic value" (p. 34). The assessments of an author's general ideology are often sound, but they too quickly abandon the more hesitant discussion of specific structures of closure. Furthermore, as in this quotation, positive aesthetic value is often established merely by contrasting it to "cheap romantic fiction" and "purely conventional novels" (p. 37).

Torgovnick does deal more specifically and literally than Miller with the concluding pages of the novels she treats, but she also tries to cover a great deal of ground. She discusses some seventeen novels by nine different authors, running chronologically from *Vanity Fair* to *Light in August*. James receives the most attention, a synoptic chapter on the endings of his novels up through *The Ambassadors* and a separate chapter on *The Golden Bowl*, and it is with James' own finely wrought fabric of aesthetic and moral values that Torgovnick achieves her most persuasive interpretative results. She clearly appreciates his scenic form of closure most highly, and her discussion of the enigmatic "gestural code" (p. 148) of *The Golden Bowl* is revealing. Her discussion of the evasive conclusions of *Vanity Fair* and *L'Education sentimentale* is also clear-headed, although she is decidedly out of sympathy with such a sense of an ending. "These endings are the product of bitter men, who suppress the kind of warmth and fellow feeling that Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy, and even Hawthorne display toward their characters," Torgovnick writes in a sentence that reveals a good deal about her book (p. 118). But with the less clearly defined endings of novels like *Middlemarch*, *War and Peace*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Waves*, and *Light in August*, she repeatedly displaces considerations of narrative form with considerations of ideological intent. Only in the case of *Bleak House* ("Dickens' . . . philosophy is not very subtly nuanced and is not always clearly

reflected in his novels" [p. 58]) does the ideological arrow seem to miss the narrative mark.

It may be that there is an undivided sense of story somewhere in our literary tradition, where beginning, middle and end live happily ever after. But Torgovnick's common-sense assurance that it can be found in the great novels of nineteenth-century tradition is much less compelling than Miller's contrary diagnosis of the *hamartia* at the heart of such splendid fabulation.

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*The Life in the Fiction of Ford M. Ford* by Thomas C. Moser. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. Pp. xix + 349. \$22.50, cloth; \$8.50, paper.

Assuming that biography is a valid entry into a writer's work, one could scarcely imagine a better subject than he who, as a little boy, woke in the middle of the night to find himself "sucking the end of a burnt match." Ford Madox Ford (born Hueffer) would supposedly remember this event all his life and still be haunted by this and related images until he was an old man. This is the kind of detail that Thomas C. Moser has intelligently brought up of the morass of trivia that comprises anybody's life, and he returns to it periodically to demonstrate its broadening significance.

Ford was an unhappy, anxiety-ridden child, preoccupied with feelings of intellectual and physical inferiority with respect to his brother. Moser demonstrates convincingly how the troubled child grows into the ill-confident man, who pushes every important male friendship to the breaking point and doubts the love both given and received between him and his female friends. Certainly Ford's most crucial relationship for the history of literature is that with Joseph Conrad. I found Moser's treatment of this excellent. I was moved by the genuine tenderness that grew up between these two workhorses and the sweet intimacy with which they watched one another work. The break is admirably recounted. Moser is successful in suggesting that the combination of inferiority and jealousy that led to Ford's break with Conrad set a pattern that Ford would follow throughout his life.

The question I cannot help raising now, however, is the one I set aside at the beginning. How much stock can we put in literary biographies? The genre seems to rest upon a tacit assumption that anything written or said or done by the man who wrote these great works will have a definite relevance to these works and their interpretation. Now, modern criticism has taught us that the subject speaking in the writing of a novel is not the same as the historical author's subject as he lives and works. Art takes place precisely in the discrepancy between the historical subject and the subject of the writing.

As I have said, my reservations were gladly put aside in this case, as I thought that Ford would be one literary personage who warranted biographical treatment. But I must confess here that, despite some fine qualities of Moser's

book, Ford's life becomes dull and repetitious, and the relevance of his life to his work appears thinner and thinner as we go along. *The Good Soldier* is too great and complex a book to be subjected to total biographical determinism, as in this statement: "Ford's inability to accept his own sexuality and his resultant guilt and unhappiness are, of course, what make Ashburnham's story so sad and *The Good Soldier* so great" (p. 226). I find that "of course" particularly vexing since through much of the book Moser does not insist on the determinism. Instead, one imagines a very genial guided tour through Fordian memorabilia. Here and there a reflection between life and work. But whenever he starts a search for the "sources" of this character or that in Ford's life, I take up my defenses. After all, given a few basic variations, any fictional character can seem to have been inspired from nearly any historical personage. Moser's efforts to draw precise parallels appear, by the end of the book, simply ludicrous.

Within the admittedly hallowed tradition of the literary biography, I also find certain weaknesses in Moser's generally sound treatment. First of all, the book is too chronological for my taste. Ford's life is, from the vantage point of the fiction, simply too tedious before *The Good Soldier*. A biography of the master of the "time shift" would certainly warrant, it seems to me, a bit of dabbling with chronology.

For the same reason, the amount of detail is excessive. I found myself wanting more when Moser gave us the account of Ford's writing of *The Good Soldier* and less when we learned of the writing of, say, *The Simple Life Limited*. The irony of the method is that, as I will elaborate below, once he arrives at the masterpiece, the biographical parallels don't seem to make much difference. There's too much to say about the art.

It is laudable that Mr. Moser allows himself to speculate on Ford's unconscious. He presents with deftness the idea that Conrad and Arthur Marwood are each for Ford father-figures, and that Ford's idolization of them at different points was a displacement of his frustrated love for the father who never tired of calling Ford a "stupid little donkey." Moser never ventures, however, to take stock of larger chunks of the life in Freudian terms. And with a man who had at least two major nervous breakdowns, such an overview would surely seem justified.

The pity with a book so firmly grounded in biographical determinism is that Moser is a critic with genuine sensitivity to the nuances of Ford's craft. The best part of the book is Chapter IV, in which Moser treats *The Good Soldier* in detail, textually. Here he chooses only the most general parallels between life and work—and ones which prove truly revelatory. Moser tells us, for instance, of Ford's quest at the time of *The Good Soldier* for tranquillity. His personal life had made him feel that social relations are just the monumental mystery they appear to be to John Dowell, the narrator of his novel. Along with tranquillity, it is oblivion that crops up again and again in his letters at this time—oblivion most of all of his experiences leading to mental illness. Mr. Moser suggests helpfully that tranquillity and oblivion become the conditions that carry over from the life to the work. And *The Good Soldier* is certainly a story about Dowell's frustrated quest for tranquillity and his ultimate desire to get it all down on paper so he can erase it from his mind.

Even more significant, Moser contributes an important chapter in that "history of literary impressionism (which) remains to be written." He shows how tightly woven are theory and practice when it comes to *The Good Soldier*. He clarifies through concrete examples what Ford meant by such things as "interest," "exaggeration" and the "right word." The treatment of impressionism in *The Good Soldier* is critically so interesting that it really lifts the book out of its self-declared genre. It occurs to me that Moser has more valuable observations to offer us along the lines of practical criticism and that perhaps he ought to write an extended, even book-length, analysis of *The Good Soldier*.

Of particular interest in this light is the analysis of Ford's use of bright colors in his major works. Although critics have associated the use of colors by writers like Crane with the impressionist painters' divisionist brushstrokes, very little has been written on Ford's color sense. Moser makes a fine case for color as being one of the major and more subtle means of signification within Ford's works.

What, then, is the value in reading the life to discover how it is reflected in the works? I suppose no one would argue that there is any value in it beyond that of acquiring broad, detailed biographical data on Ford. The parallels do not illuminate the works. Yet the book provides some excellent insights, in spite of the biography, into Ford's craftsmanship.

One could imagine a "critical biography" of Ford that would accomplish a more ambitious task—namely, that of demonstrating the development of the writer's mind as reflected in the succession of his works. Joseph Frank has set a magnificent example of this sort of approach to the writer and life in his series on Dostoyevsky. I can well imagine a more penetrating treatment of Ford, one that could show us the relation between the mind that viewed passion as the sole experience to be striven for in life and that which saw itself repeatedly abandoned "naked beneath the pitiless stars," and how this mental continuity is connected to Ford's great novels.

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*Virginia Woolf's Quarrel with Grieving* by Mark Spilka. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. Pp. xii + 142. \$13.50.

"[N]othing is more fascinating," Virginia Woolf once wrote, "than to be shown the truth which lies behind these immense facades of fiction—if life is indeed true, and if fiction is indeed fictitious." She was commenting on her strategy of composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, but the remark also seems to justify the enormous amount of information about her private life which has become available in recent years—not only Quentin Bell's biography, but five volumes of letters, a complete set of diaries, several autobiographical essays, and memoirs by Leslie Stephen and others. As a result of all this material, a shy, emotionally

restrained, tragically suicidal author has become one of the most fascinating personalities in contemporary culture, and criticism of her work is likely to have a psychological slant for some time to come. Few of the psychological studies, however, are likely to surpass Mark Spilka's brief, trenchantly written new book, which looks behind the rather gloomy late-Victorian facade of Woolf's family and offers a "truthful" narrative to compare with her fiction.

Spilka concentrates his literary analysis on *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, but he ranges over the author's entire career and biography, constructing an argument which has some of the power of a good novel. He shows that Woolf's writing, like that of all the great romantics, provided therapy and consolation for her emotional crises; but he also contends that the therapy did not go far enough, and that even the best of Woolf's fictions failed to confront or understand their personal sources. His point is not that Woolf lacked honesty—on the contrary, he demonstrates quite clearly the courage and tenacity of her psychological struggles. He is also not saying that Woolf should have been a more autobiographical writer. He merely points out certain weaknesses of the fiction as fiction, certain emotional evasions which are probably the result of the way autobiographical material has been woven into defensive fantasy. By this means his book accomplishes what all psychological criticism hopes to achieve but seldom does: it gives a persuasive rationale for the strengths and weaknesses of an author's work, and an insight into the way literature can relate to an elemental human problem. Moreover, Spilka suggests that the evasiveness, the "prudery and reticence" which sometimes mar Virginia Woolf's novels, is characteristic of our age. Despite our apparent liberation from various kinds of Victorian repression, we are no better than she was at expressing our grief over death.

The problem of impacted grief may seem an odd thing to discuss in relation to Virginia Woolf, because critics have long agreed that her novels are essentially elegiac. Her work could be described as an extended grieving, although Spilka convincingly maintains that she left much grieving undone, and hence was disabled as a person and as a writer. His case is all the more persuasive because the psychological theory he uses in support of his argument derives from no particular school, and is refreshingly free of clinical jargon; he simply believes, like any practically-oriented psychological social worker, that neurosis or psychosis can result from blocked emotion, and he offers plenty of evidence from Woolf's biography and novels to show that she suffered from just such a problem.

The primary unrieved event in Woolf's life was the death of her mother, Julia Duckworth Stephen. When Virginia Woolf was thirteen years old, she was led into a family bedroom to view the dead mother's body. She broke into compulsive laughter and hid her face behind her hands. Her reaction was troubling enough to be recalled in her diary almost thirty years later, and ultimately she wrote about it in an autobiographical essay (recently published in the collection entitled *Moments of Being*). "[W]as afraid I was not feeling enough," she said in her diary, and when she thought about the event later she explained it as a reaction against the morbid ceremoniousness of Victorian death, or as the sign of a detached artistic temperament which made her analyze

rather than feel. The novels, however, indicate a quite opposite temperament; as Spilka points out, they are marked by a "compulsive need to cope with death," despite the fact that their elegiac tone is muted, as if she were afraid to express her mourning directly.

There were several other funereal occasions in Woolf's life (so many that Henry James once described the Stephen family as a "house of all the Deaths"), but the first was surely the most traumatic, and was complicated by her psychological relationship to both her parents. On the one hand her mother had spent years grieving inwardly over the loss of her first husband, Herbert Duckworth, and would sometimes lie prostrate on his grave at Orchardleigh. To the children, Duckworth seemed the perfect romantic lover, and Spilka points out that Virginia sometimes had fantasies about him. On the other hand Leslie Stephen's first wife had also died; this fact, plus his deep philosophical pessimism, made him the perfect companion for Julia Duckworth's sorrow, and bequeathed to Virginia at least a sad legacy—what Spilka calls "an undercurrent of romantic melancholy and a latent expectation of sudden loss."

Woolf's mother died at exactly the moment when the girl was entering adolescence, and the death had been preceded by a number of anxious moments which Virginia never revealed to her parents: her half brother Gerald Duckworth had sexually molested her, and her half sister Laura Stephen was a constant reminder of a strain of madness in the family. Spilka is able to link the repressed horror, shame, guilt, and anger in the young Virginia to her lack of feeling when the mother died. Even more interestingly, he believes she must have thought unconsciously that her mother was deserting her in order to join a long dead lover. It seems that Virginia imagined, in the midst of the slightly hallucinatory, melodramatic ceremony of household grieving over Julia Stephen, that she could see a man sitting on the edge of her mother's deathbed. Spilka boldly suggests that this figure was none other than Herbert Duckworth, a "robber in the bedroom," who had stolen a mother's love from her daughter. The "patient ghostly lover," he writes, "became the model for the passion Virginia too withheld from all living men, and gave only fleetingly to living women. . . . Thus her lifelong inability to love—to achieve anything like richly passionate fulfillment—seems to have been particularly intertwined with her lifelong inability to grieve; and the neglected Duckworth legend—along with the now famous triflings of Duckworth's surviving sons—goes a long way toward explaining that apparent entanglement."

Whether Spilka's idea about the "robber" is correct or not, it also helps explain certain peculiarities of Woolf's fiction. In her first novel, for example, the character of Helen Ambrose is clearly modded on Julia Stephen, but she plays a role her real-life counterpart never lived to enact—the nurturing, maternal advisor to a sheltered young girl who is fearful and ignorant of sex. In this case it is the girl who dies, improbably contracting a jungle fever on the eve of her marriage and thus serving as a scapegoat for Woolf herself, who suffered considerable anxiety over her own impending marriage, and who attempted suicide shortly after the publication of the novel. For many years afterward Virginia Woolf's mother was to appear regularly in the novels, exerting a powerful hold on her daughter's imagination. There are elements of her in Mrs.

Hillbery, in Mrs. Flanders, in Mrs. Dalloway, and of course most of all in Mrs. Ramsey, who represents Woolf's most direct attempt to deal with unresolved grief. Although Virginia Woolf once wrote that she began *To the Lighthouse* in order to express a vision of her father, it is obviously the mother's death that preoccupies her and gives the novel its emotional power. In fact Woolf admits in *Moments of Being* that until she wrote *To the Lighthouse* she had been obsessed by her mother, and that "I suppose I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion."

Even so, I think Spilka is correct in maintaining that Woolf evades some of her most important concerns, presenting Mrs. Ramsey's death indirectly in the "Time Passes" section of the novel, and dramatizing grief through the belated feelings of a daughter once removed, Lily Brisco, rather than through the actual daughter in the fiction, Cam Ramsey. He shows clearly how the novel incorporates obsessive material from real life and at the same time acts as a defense against that material. Certain painful elements are deferred, withheld, or suppressed by the fictional structure, which in turn becomes incomplete or unsatisfactory on its own terms. This phenomenon is most evident in the "Time Passes" section, which Spilka rightly singles out as a major flaw, a "precious and pretentious" device that conveys little more than florid mysticism.

There are two plausible reasons for Woolf's indirect, "poetic" style in the middle section of the novel, and they both fuel Spilka's argument about inhibited or postponed grief. One of the reasons is social: throughout the composition of the novel Virginia Woolf worried that critics would accuse her of being "sentimental" or "soft"; like some Hemingwayesque tough guy (or like her father), she said that she wanted to write a "hard, muscular book." The paradox, as Spilka points out, is that by avoiding emotional dangers, by reacting against the Victorian gush that surrounded funerals in her childhood, she drifted into a genteel, evasive, rather kitschy prose that seems quite Victorian indeed. The other reason why she was not more direct in rendering a fictional death was of course her own personal grief, which at many points she was able to meet courageously (after all, the novel remains one of the most effective modern elegies), but which she also strategically muffled. At a personal level, the partial exorcism of her mother's ghost seems to have left her free enough to experience a lesbian flirtation with Vita Sackville-West, and it seems also to have opened the way to the more public themes of her later novels; but as Spilka notes she remained a "married spinster" who was prone to madness and suicide, and the late work never completely forsakes her childhood traumas.

I have tried to summarize Spilka's argument at length, but I may not have done justice to its subtlety and force—in fact I have not even touched on what it reveals about *Mrs. Dalloway*. My only adverse criticism of the book is that Spilka's thesis makes him neglect Woolf's late fiction (he has many cogent things to say about *The Years*, but I think he undervalues the novel), and I hope he will one day do more to fill in the social background towards which he often gestures. (Apparently this book is the prelude to a longer study, tentatively called *New Literary Quarrels with Tenderness*.) Otherwise he has written a small masterpiece of Holmesian induction and critical sensitivity. Perhaps the greatest compliment I can pay him is to say that *Virginia Woolf's*

*Quarrel with Grieving* joins a very small number of critical books—among them Paul Fussell's more ambitious *The Great War and Modern Memory*—which I have found both enlightening and emotionally moving.

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*Dickinson, The Modern Idiom* by David Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1981. Pp. ix + 316. \$20.00.

David Porter's aim in this book is basically threefold: 1) to characterize without sentimentality or disdain, his chosen poet's essential oddity as a literary figure; 2) to place, critically, her imaginative project in the context of those of her time (especially Emerson's and Whitman's); and 3) to make a compelling case for her crucial significance as a major precursor of one strain in Modernist and postmodern poetry. Relying on an array of critical approaches, including textual analysis of manuscripts, close reading, literary biography and history, phenomenological and existential speculation, and (discreetly) contemporary linguistic deconstruction, Porter works to identify what, exactly, is the structure, function, and extent of Emily Dickinson's influence in American literary culture of the last century or so. Given such an ambitious undertaking and such radically diverse methods of operation, some readers might begin this study with serious misgivings, only at its completion, I am sure, to smile.

There is no denying Emily Dickinson's radical "otherness." She withdrew from society in her twenties and rarely ventured outside her father's house after that. What visitors she received she usually entertained through a closed door. When she did meet people face to face, her appearance was so unusual, her conversation and manner so hectic and bizarre, all that her guests could remember afterwards was the strain of the meeting on them. The poetry of this maniacally ironic angel is equally "different." It possesses "only three or four basic tonal focuses" (p. 15), and these are "moments of exquisite pleasure, most often in nature; fleeting visitations that brush only in an oblique and momentary way the willful strangeness of existence; terrifying assaults that freeze the nerves; and, finally, visitations merely wierd, vaguely premonitory, suggestive of vaster opacities" (p. 15). These subjects Dickinson embodies in a verse also strange. Her modification of the Protestant hymn stanza leaves her poetry full of "disparate lexical references," "freakishly precise images," "made-up and willfully grammatical comparatives" (p. 15). In place of reference to the common world and of narrative continuity, she gives the reader what appears to be defective syntax and grammatical nightmares: "unreasonable transpositions, extreme ellipsis and lost connections" (p. 38). No poetic identity could emerge in such lines, despite the striking poetic voice. What the reader gets, even Dickinson realizes, is at best "'a supposed person,'" "'the Representative of the Verse'" (p. 129). Even more oddly, given the fact that she lived to see the Civil War, the opening of the West, and the gilded age of the robber

barons, there is no recognizable history, no social conscience, in her poetry. Her poetry simply accumulates her impenetrable aperçus over the years, in poems without titles, personal rankings, or deeply philosophical credos. And yet, despite her alienation from, apparently, everything, Dickinson has provided us with some of the finest poems in the language dealing with extreme states of mind: "Dissenting, disjunctive, it is language, one begins to sense, covering hysteria . . . it is language ready to collapse into chaos. Trembling with nervousness and need, it performs manically on the brink of the final modernity, silence" (p. 29). In short, a reader discovers in her poetry classics of the modern, hyper-word-conscious sensibility: "spectacular word displays with hysteria beneath the surface" (p. 251).

Dickinson's art is one of "willful genius," "the mind explosive with signifying power but disinherited from transcendent knowledge" (p. 15). Living in a state of perpetual "afterward," that state of formal feeling after great pain, Dickinson tries in her poetry to capture "the visible world" just disappearing, "disengaging itself from our sensory receptors." (One thinks of how she catches the hummingbird in "A Route of Evanescence.") Since Dickinson's subject is the sublimity of language freed from all necessities to refer, her subject is "*an absence felt as a presence*" (p. 32). Hence her images are, characteristically, abstract, virtually non-figurative, her rhetoric disjunctive, her imaginative stance—one foot over the "Dome of the Abyss" (*Poems*, # 291). As Porter aptly notes, the reader, confronted by such lines is forced either to drop the book in despair or, in Dickinson's words, to "fulfill the pantomime contained in the words" (p. 61). Dickinson possesses such a powerful linguistic instrument, the "Loaded Gun" of a now famous poem, that she can imagine successfully (*pace* Yvor Winters) the state immediately after death. Style precedes meaning in Dickinson (cf. p. 62) in ways eccentrically American.

Yet this "freedom" is as much privation as power. As I have discussed at length elsewhere, Dickinson, lacking a "Monarch" in her life, could not "rule" herself: "When I try to organize—my little Force explodes—and leaves me bare and charred" (*Selected Letters*, p. 178). As Porter lucidly describes the situation, "The interstice between the self-regarding language and the lived-in world is a space of estrangement which produces excitement and a heightened sense of both anxiety and observation" (p. 75). The net effect of this situation on Dickinson's poetry is that it ends up giving the reader the impression that in it "*language is speaking itself*" (p. 121). The disjunctive, differential, linguistic unconscious of the tribe achieves a sublime measure of articulation in Dickinson's little stitched-together packets of poetry (cf. p. 121), and so accomplishes the almost total "ironicalization of experience" (p. 233). Dickinson's poetic power is that of "a language instrument without a conceptual frame, the power of a hyperconsciousness and scorching words without a redeeming vision of the world or the self" (p. 260). "To fill a Gap/Insert the Thing that caused it—/Block it up/With Other—and 'twill yawn the more—/You cannot solder an Abyss/With Air" (*Poems*, # 546).

Dickinson's significance for a contemporary audience is, in Porter's view, understandably considerable. Underneath the silence of the recluse, the myths of the Belle of Amherst, the editorial "corrections" of her texts, the nine-

teenth-century conventions of the hymn form and the Sunday School topics, as well as underneath the modernist invention of a self-consciously ironic rival to John Donne, Emily Dickinson's "poetic identity begins to take form in a network of avoidances" (p. 137). Neither a traditionalist nor a Romantic schismatic, Dickinson is the medium, the idiom, of her language, and that idiom is the precursor of a "terminal modernism" that now calls itself "post-modern"—an idiom "artistically pathogenic, deconstructive, hyper-conscious" (p. 238).

In this respect, Porter's argument for Emily Dickinson's prefigurative status, her unconscious anticipation of much in modern and contemporary poetry and criticism, has something in common with Sharon Cameron's recently acclaimed study *Lyric Time*. But where Porter and Cameron differ is over the role that this American Sibyl characteristically plays. Cameron, stressing the latent feminist as well as deconstructive features of her poetry, argues that Dickinson discovers a special kind of time in her lyrics of rage and radically subversive proto-feminist protest. Porter takes a different, broader perspective, seeing in Dickinson's poetry the dilemma facing modern poetry as a whole in the century. As Wallace Stevens puts that dilemma perfectly in "The American Sublime," it is the dilemma of modern poetry's essential poverty of subject matter:

But how does one feel?  
 One grows used to the weather,  
 The landscape and that;  
 And the sublime comes down  
 To the spirit itself,  
 The spirit and space,  
 The empty spirit  
 In vacant space.

Not Emerson's heroically "transparent eyeball" stalking the bare commons, not Whitman's autochthonic poet-comrade embracing multitudes, but Dickinson's "Pale Reporter from the awful Doors" is the most fitting emblem of "post-modern" American culture (p. 238). If Cameron's study sides too strongly with that aspect of Dickinson that compellingly expresses a woman's imaginative rage, Porter's, echoing Eliot's "Hollow Men" at times, also sees a poetry in which there is too much "fear without understanding, force without purpose, act without redemptive intention" (261). As such, Porter's book is a necessary antidote to Cameron's work.

Yet Porter recognizes that Dickinson's poetry did activate "a new intelligence" still reverberating creatively "in the poetry of our own day" (p. 270). And he recognizes, too, sensibly enough, that Dickinson is not so much a direct influence on today's mind as a paradigmatic case prophetic of our time, a convenient, ready-made precursor, as it were. Her language "mirrored a reality not born. It was a sort of x-ray vision that had scanned the future and, to the extent it made centerlessness visible, even familiar, it helped to bring that future about" (p. 276). In short, Dickinson's "*spontaneity*" of hyper-word-consciousness, "*self-assaulting and self-doubting, is the destructive strain in American modernism*" (p. 294).

*Dickinson, The Modern Idiom* is neither an indictment of, nor a polemic for, Emily Dickinson's poetry. David Porter's study is that rare thing, an excitingly written, carefully thought-out critical judgment of Dickinson's strengths and disabilities that manages at the same time to discover her still unsettling presence in our time.

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*The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* by Michael Davitt Bell. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980. Pp. xiv + 291. \$22.50.

*The Ethics of Intensity in American Fiction* by Anthony Channell Hilfer. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. xiii + 208. \$19.95.

Taken together these two very different studies assert once again a "broken circuit" in the tradition of the American novel that forces apart such elements as fact and fiction, imagination and perception, experience and moral evaluation and creates two separate and distinct lines of development, one dominant in the nineteenth century, the other in the twentieth. On the one hand there are the great romancers of the American Renaissance who self-consciously forge a form uniquely American and on the other realists of the early twentieth century who seem to ignore their American precursors and look to Europe for their sources of inspiration.

Michael D. Bell's book is an impressive and complex study, the dimensions of which are hard to describe in a short review. His approach combines the perspectives of the cultural historian and literary critic. While he is interested in the theory and practice of Brown, Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, he is equally concerned with the relations of that theory and practice to their experience as writers in nineteenth century America. Some of his most interesting analyses focus on the relation between certain formal problems of narrative and related problems of nineteenth century American culture. Bell quite rightly insists that we not take for granted or ignore the fact that these men chose to become writers. Each of the authors he discusses begins with a sense of alienation from the society whose problems his fiction will mirror, and his career as a writer develops in dialectical relation to that society. Inherited conventions, public pressures, private needs: these are the issues that entangle the relations between the writer as a human being, the writer as a romancer and the writer as social critic; and Bell unravels and describes these knots of relations in a suggestive and provocative way.

The starting point for his study is a distinction between two definitions of romance, the first, articulated by Hawthorne in the Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, is conservative and emphasizes the blending of the realms of the imaginative and the actual; the second, best described by Henry James in his

Preface to the New York edition of *The American*, is more subversive and defines the form in terms of a radical lack of integration between the actual and imaginary. For James romance does not have the high seriousness of moral fiction. Indeed its essence is to be found in its moral irresponsibility, its indulgence in the pleasures of pure fantasy. It is the James model, Bell argues, rather than the Hawthorne one that comes closer to the meaning that the word "romance" had in British and American discourse before the Civil War where it was associated with the excesses and dangers of unrealities and delusions that were so widely condemned by orthodox American opinion and was regarded as "fiction" opposed to "fact."

When Brown, Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville turn to romance they do so in a climate in which fiction is the object of suspicions and fear. Hence it is not surprising that the idea of romance as pure and dangerous fantasy should play an important part in their thinking about their chosen mode. Their decisions, then, to sacrifice the relation between fiction and reality are both expressions of particular ways of being related to the world and testimonies to the difficulties they face as writers.

Brown turns from the pursuit of legal studies to champion the "writer's eloquence and imaginative power in an age and a land intensely suspicious of both" (42). This "turn," however, is not a sign that he is free of the suspicions of his contemporaries. It simply indicates his willingness to face the power of fiction directly rather than to displace it by attributing to it a moral or historical function. The result is the creation of the figure of the artist as imposter whose activities unsettle the balance of his mind as well as that of his reader. In this sense Brown's novels contain the seeds of their author's conversion to "pragmatic Federalism" and his eventual "renunciation of the ravishing power of fiction" (43).

Like Brown, Irving as a writer is preoccupied with the opposition between fiction and reality and his exploration of the implications of this opposition leads him finally away from fiction toward history and biography. But his starting point is a sense of alienation generated by the recognition that his society regards the writer as a deviant, and his fictions explore his uncertainties about the nature and purpose of his career. Bell's readings of the fictions in this context are entirely convincing and rank with those of William L. Hedges as the best criticism we have of Irving as a literary artist.

Writing for Poe, as for Brown and Irving, is a strategy for dealing with the personal and cultural situation in which he finds himself, and Bell's description of Poe's deviant career is the best thing in his fine book. In many ways Poe is the central figure in his study since he is a writer who aggressively embraces his career as deviant and then proceeds in his own personal life to bear out his society's expectations and assumptions regarding the life completely devoted to the imagination. It is within this context that Bell offers his brilliant reading of the relation between Poe's theory and practice.

Like Coleridge to whom he is indebted, Poe sought the spiritual by way of the imaginative, but, as Bell perceptively observes, his works seldom move beyond the grave. For, Poe, "the word—like the 'spiritual' vampire—is the corpse of its origin" (121), and he devotes his career to enacting in work after work the

failure of literary expression. The purity of the work of art finally is that of the fossil that is no more than a record of the absence of the "noumenal energy that produces it" (125).

Hawthorne and Melville, like Poe, begin their careers with a feeling of alienation, and they share with him a sense of the "disrelation" between the imagination and the language of romance; but they differ from him as well as from Brown and Irving in that they not only reflect the divisions of their culture, they self-consciously examine them in their fiction. Hawthorne's work focuses on the freedom of the romancer to return imaginative life to petrified forms and on the impossibility of using that freedom to achieve social or historical renewal. Within the realm of romance the ideal and actual may come together and "each imbue itself with the nature of the other," but within nineteenth century American society an "inevitable historical process" (192) has resulted in the transformation of the original spirit of America into an empty formalism. The power of *The Scarlet Letter* derives equally from Hawthorne's recognition of the parallels between the "course of romance and the course of history" and from his "careful separation of these two congruent realms" (191). And when in the later fiction he seeks to bridge the gap between the realms of art and society his fiction loses its power and takes on the duplicity of the society that it mirrors.

Melville's career resembles those of the other important nineteenth century romancers but his perspective is a more self-consciously revolutionary one. Like Hawthorne he senses the relation between the originating impulses of romance and those of revolutionary America, and he celebrates this connection in the early novels and in *Moby Dick*. But the full story of his career is the story of his progressive disenchantment with both romance and America. Bell traces the stages of Melville's growing disillusionment and concludes with a reading of *The Confidence Man* as an example of the "sacrifice of relation... fully and fatally realized" (245).

Another and quite different strain in the American Novel is the focus of Anthony C. Hilfer's *The Ethics of Intensity in American Fiction*. He is interested in the realistic tradition in American fiction and in the parallels between the assumptions of literary realism and pragmatic philosophy. His focus is on character or, more specifically, on the displacement of ethos by pathos as the principle of characterization in the writings of Whitman, Howells, James, Dreiser and Stein. The works of these writers "reveal a shift from the self defined primarily in terms of a preformulated ethical code and judged adversely if it departs from that code to the self, defined in terms of its emotional intensity and judged adversely for any failure of nerve. In the first mode character is seen as the sum of the individual's ethical choices; in the second, character is seen as the process of an individual's longing" (xi). Hilfer's book, then, is the "study of a turn, in the American novel, toward pathos, process and self-realization" (xi). However, this is not a "turn" from the romance tradition described by Bell. Hilfer sees his writers in the context of the Victorian novel, and his first chapter is a description of the ethical viewpoint encoded in Victorian fiction that the American writers revise. Indeed, with the exception of three brief remarks about Hawthorne and a single reference each to Poe and Melville, Hilfer ignores the nineteenth century American novel.

The American "nineteenth century self" (41) is present in Hilfer's book but in the form of a poet rather than a novelist. He devotes a chapter to the image of the self in Whitman's "Song of Myself," but he provides no more explanation for Whitman's presence than he does for the absence of Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. And to be fair, Hilfer's practice here more than compensates for the absence of a theoretical foundation. The reading that he offers of "Song of Myself" is brilliantly done. By focusing on the kinesthetic rather than on the visual images in the poem, he is able to use the techniques of close reading on a poetry that in the past has seemed stubbornly to resist such analysis. For Whitman, Hilfer argues, the self is the product of the rhythms of desire and he substitutes for usual social relationships one in which a "highly sensitized self interacts with an imagined reader" (31). Whitman in his epic without society "speaks not to the self as social actor but to the core of loneliness in each person" and as such prepares the "ground for such classic American studies of pathos and of the subliminal rhythms of the self as Stein's 'Melanctha' and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*" (47).

Following the brilliant Whitman chapter Hilfer goes on to explore the dialectical relations between ethical and instinctive or emotional conceptions of character in *A Modern Instance*, "The Beast in the Jungle," *The Wings of the Dove*, *Sister Carrie*, *An American Tragedy*, and "Melanctha," and in the process traces a development that moves from Howells' unsuccessful search for an ethical base for character, to James' attempt to socialize desire by developing an ethics of passion, to Dreiser's vision of desire as the "very engine of life" (164) and, finally, to Stein's attempt to incorporate passion into an ethical structure. As in the case of Hilfer's discussion of "Song of Myself" his readings of individual texts are convincing and illuminating, the analyses of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* especially so.

My only reservations concerning Hilfer's study are theoretical ones. He associates his book with Tanner's *The Reign of Wonder*, Poirier's *A World Elsewhere*, and Taylor's *Pathos of Thought*, but the critical-historical paradigm that he offers us is a partially unexamined one in that he silently ignores a major tradition in the American novel. Moreover, as Hilfer's final paragraphs make clear, his paradigm is an evaluative as well as a descriptive one. For him the "qualified, indeterminate resolutions of the tension between ethos and pathos" (164) that he finds in his writers gives their work a power that seems to him missing in later American fiction where even the category of character itself is called into question. It is possible, however, that these later writers are best understood and appreciated in the context of a genealogy that includes Hawthorne and Melville, for these writers offer us a conception of selfhood that suggests a tradition different from the one Hilfer describes. Both are aware of the extent to which identity is a dramatically enacted thing and their sense of literary character reflects that awareness. In the Preface to *The Blithedale Romance*, Hawthorne writes of the "strange enchantment" that is necessary to give his "imaginary progeny" a "propriety of their own," and Melville in *The Confidence Man* further entangles the problems genealogy and representation by putting into question the notion of an orderly, predictable movement between origin and image, a thing or self and its representation.

Writers such as Barth, Barthelme, and Pynchon, whose fictions appear to Hilfer "light and thin" (165) seem less idiosyncratic and unrestrained when they are viewed in this tradition. The story of the modern and contemporary American novel may well be one of the return of the romance.

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*Early Auden* by Edward Mendelson. New York: The Viking Press, 1981. Pp. xxiii + 407. \$20.00.

In August 1927 W. H. Auden wrote:

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed  
 On the wet road between the chafing grass  
 Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,  
 Snatches of tramline running to the wood,  
 An industry already comatose,  
 Yet sparsely living.

The earliest poem he was ever to reprint, "The Watershed" renders what were to be Auden's characteristic properties—his frontier, his mine country, his haunting psychological landscapes—in a manner if not Eliotic then impossible without Eliot. Not so fine as *The Hollow Men* poems, like them it presents internal division in dream-like externals. (Is the crux—we are unable to answer—a crossroads or a dilemma?) Here was a modernist talent of the first order, amazing in a youth of twenty-one, and destined to sustain the movement beyond its founding generation. It is therefore shocking to read a poem of forty one years later in which Auden rehearses his signature themes not in an Eliot-like psychic drama but in Horatian stanzas and traditional urbanity:

Martini-time: time to draw the curtains and  
 choose a composer we should like to hear from,  
 before coming to table for one of your  
 savory messes.

Time crumbles all ramparts, brachypod Nemesis  
 catches up sooner or later with hare-swift  
 Achilles, but personal song and language  
 somehow mizzle them.

Thanks to which it's possible for the breathing  
 still to break bread with the dead, whose brotherhood  
 gives us confidence to wend the trivial  
 thrust of the Present,

so self-righteous in its assumptions and so  
 certain that none dare out-face it. We, Chester,

and the choir we sort with have been assigned to  
garrison stations.

—from "The Garrison"

The story of what happened between these two poems is not only the story of Auden's career but also the story of what happened to modernist poetry, starting in the thirties. The example of Auden presages, though it does not predict, Olson and Ashbery. And if Edward Mendelson's explanation of what happened (it is also Auden's explanation) is not always satisfying, it is greatly to his credit that he recognizes explanation was in order. A definitive study of the poet's origins, *Early Auden* is also an essay on a larger subject of considerable interest—the passing of modernist poetry, which now towers over us like an immense bear in a glass cage, still growling and certainly intimidating, but part of another world.

About the thoroughness of Mendelson's sleuthing there can be no question. Take, for instance, the matter of Auden's first contacts with Eliot. Through unpublished letters and Bloomsbury records we learn how, in June 1927 and at Sacheverell Sitwell's urgings, Auden sent some poems to the literary arbiter of Faber and Gwyer only to be told, "I do not feel that any of the enclosed is quite right, but I should be interested to follow your work." Eliot did follow Auden's work, was genuinely interested, and three years later accepted a manuscript that would probably have been impossible without his initial rebuke. By 1932 Eliot was feeling downright avuncular, and when Auden worried that *The Orators* might be obscure enough to require a prefatory note, Eliot, "who had experience in such matters advised Auden not to apologize . . . the preface was dropped."

But this kind of thing is trivial compared with the book's real contribution to literary history, which is a wealth of hitherto unpublished commentary by Auden concerning what he was about when he wrote, augmented by manuscript evidence discovered in the poet's notebooks. We learn that *The Orators*, for example, grew out of an anthropology paper written by Auden's friend John Layard, and that its symbols are rooted in Trobriander shaman myths. Auden enlarged this ritual schema with schoolboy memories, analyses of contemporary rhetoric, a memorial of Lawrence and a good deal of self-portraiture. The result, as the poet recognized immediately and as readers have long confirmed, was a brilliant work crippled by ambivalence. Three months after its publication, Auden wrote to a friend (the letter is now in the university library at Buffalo) how "dissatisfied" he was: "The conception was alright but I didn't take enough trouble over it, and the result is far too obscure and equivocal. It is meant to be a critique of the fascist outlook, but from its reception among some of my contemporaries, and on rereading it myself, I see that it can, most of it, be interpreted as a favourable exposition."

From a lifetime's worth of such self-criticism, Mendelson derives the contours of a career, and then goes on to characterize Auden's development as the century's paradigmatic turn away from modernist (that is to say, post-romantic) assumptions. Auden, according to Mendelson, "was the first English writer who absorbed all the lessons of modernism, but also understood its limits, and chose to

turn elsewhere." Beginning with modernism's central conception of poems as "visionary autonomous objects," with its concomitant belief that language can never be more than an incomplete bridge over the gulf of silence, in later years Auden devoted himself to writing a public poetry meant to be judged not only for its art but its truth and committed to establishing a "community of meaning." He held that "an artist must convey knowledge that is not exclusively his own, that he and others can put to use," and he wrote that "the self must first learn to be indifferent; as Lenin said, 'to go hungry, work illegally and be anonymous.'" He became, as Mendelson tells it, the revitalizer of a "civil tradition of poetry" that extends back to Chaucer and thus "the most inclusive poet of the twentieth century, its most technically skilled, and its most truthful."

This, it seems to me, is out of line. Mendelson's sympathy with his subject is commendable, and his grasp of modernism's romantic roots and its connections to poststructuralist theories of language is impressive, but his assertion that Auden is the theorist and forerunner of a new era of poetry leaves something to be desired. For one thing, Mendelson is a bit too sanguine about the possibility of leaving the conundrums of twentieth century authenticity behind. It is well and good to say that "the poets of modernism felt they could bring tradition into the present only as battered ironic fragments, or by heroic efforts to make it new; for Auden it had never grown old." But after the truths of the modern condition enunciated by Nietzsche, Freud and nineteenth century historiography, it is a little naive to decide on one's own that the structures of the past do not decay, and to take up old forms as if unchanged. In that light, the rhetorical practices of Auden's later verse, founded on little more than the realization of having reached a dead end, seem a little like the actions of a man who has decided that modern physics is decadent and starts mapping his course with an astrolabe.

The most serious problem with Mendelson's thesis, however, is that it fails to account for parallel trends in the figures he says Auden left behind, and so distorts our understanding of modernist literature. Auden was hardly the only twentieth century writer to decry the prison house he was forced to inhabit, or to search for techniques to escape it. In holding that the poet must convey knowledge that is not exclusively his own, for example, or that the frontier between private perception and public fact must be challenged, Auden was not so different from Ezra Pound—a man much maligned in this volume but one who spent most of his maturity trying to write "the tale of the tribe." More significantly, in affirming that "no egotist can become a mature writer until he has learnt to recognize and to accept his egotism," that "love makes possible a union of isolated individual perspectives in a coherent work of art, one broader and larger than any single point of view could allow," and further that "the first, second and third thing in any art is subject," Auden inescapably calls up Eliot, whose later career his own mirrors uncannily. Eliot too spent the years of his middle age searching for a rhetoric that would allow him to transcend the bounds of self, and his "Lancelot Andrewes" echoes Auden by praising work that struggles with the literary consequences of egotism. The Andrewes of the sermons, Eliot wrote, was "wholly in his subject, unaware of anything

else... [His] emotion is purely contemplative; it is not personal, it is wholly evoked by the object of contemplation, to which it is adequate." From here it is but a short step to the *Four Quartets*, which surpass anything the later Auden wrote because, even in their deconstruction of language and self, they do not forget the conditions of modern writing: in Eliot's words, tradition unself-consciously assumed is no more than "some pleasing archaeological reconstruction."

Awaiting the second installment of Professor Mendelson's excellent study, therefore, we must provisionally agree not with the later Auden he so warmly endorses but with the younger man whom we find at the beginning of the present book. The strain may indeed be heavy, but "Private faces in public places/Are [still] wiser and nicer/Than public faces in private places." (From the poem prefatory to *The Orators*.)

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