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REVIEW ESSAY

Mary Kay Temple

Inventions: Writing, Textuality, and Understanding in Literary History, by Gerald Bruns. Yale, 1982. 210 + xiv pages.

GERALD BRUNS BEGINS *Inventions* with two disclaimers. He declares in the Preface that the book “is not a history of interpretation” because “This history cannot be written; it can only be studied. It is too vast for any one scholar to comprehend it.” Less directly, he warns his readers not to expect a tone of passionate engagement with the modest admission: “It is, of course, difficult to speak before an audience who wants its criticism in the form of methodological combat.” In other words, Bruns is warning us to expect an easy way out of a difficult subject, and the extent to which he writes up to his threat is the extent to which the book fails; the extent to which he reneges on his promise is the book’s success.

The success of *Inventions* is in that, while Bruns refuses to write a full-scale history of interpretation, he uses the skeletal outline of such a history to structure the book. In the next chapter he follows the outline of the ideal curriculum sketched by Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*: he begins with the Bible and the Qu’ran as examples of texts with a well-known history of what he calls interpretation, that which is written to be read aloud, taught, preached, between the lines of an existing text. He goes on to describe the relationship between texts in a manuscript culture, in which the very flexibility of the form in which works were transmitted, a mortal handwriting rather than a fixed and forbidding type, physically invited the copyist’s own interference. Again Bruns takes a well-known example: Chaucer’s radical recasting of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato* to create *Troilus and Criseyde*. For the chapter on Descartes he shows us what his own interlinear interpretation looks like. Why he does not choose Descartes’ more “literary” predecessor in solipsism, Montaigne, becomes clear only later in the book. Bruns continues his chronology into the nineteenth century with what is one of the strongest chapters of the book, a reading of *Pride and Prejudice* that explains why Austen is what we know she is, one of the most compelling writers in English even while she refuses to follow Mark Twain’s dictum: “Bring on the old lady and let

her scream!” In this case, the old lady is all the characters in a conversation piece in which the dialogue itself remains unreported in favor of the real subject of the visit at Lambton:

The odd thing here is that very little narrative is devoted to the visit as such: we are told nothing, or virtually nothing, of anything anyone says. What takes place takes place as if in silence or as if in secret, yet not quite silently or secretly. The real subject never reaches the level or condition of something actually spoken, but neither is this subject an inward, private, or psychological affair. Things take place beneath the surface of words and action and explicit behavior—but the question is: What is this subsurface reality and how is it to be arrived at or recovered? (p. 112)

The “subsurface” created by a writer content to summarize proposals of marriage is that of what is not, and should not be, said in polite society. In Bruns’s reading, Austen emerges as the most realistic of writers, and one who puts mere naturalists to shame.

The chapter which follows the one on Austen is also excellent. Bruns relates Gerard Manley Hopkins’ observations of nature and poetic theory to nineteenth-century physics in an admirably lucid discussion. The next chapter, which begins the “Modernist” section of the book, would have profited from more examples from the subject, W.C. Williams’ *Kora in Hell*, but I suppose Bruns felt the space better occupied by a necessary, and fascinating, definition/description of what an improvisation is.

The last chapter, on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, contains what I suspect to be the “secret motto” of *Inventions*: “Alas, the Jesuits taught me that the truth always lies side by side, never in between.” The truth in this chapter is the juxtaposed readings of the novel by Fritz Senn and Hugh Kenner, whom Bruns sees as the most correct and most violently opposed of Joyce’s critics. Bruns uses the example of the muse/whore at the center of Stephen’s epiphany in *The Portrait* as an example of how truths can lie feet to head like Molly and Leopold, always together and never one. I am reminded of the kitchen-midden of postwar criticism on Molly herself, a more complex case, in which every interpreter regarded her either as an earth-goddess/redeemer or his own personal cuckold, and I wish Bruns’s common sense in this matter had appeared forty years ago.

By the end of the book, Bruns is able to assert triumphantly, “Identity is conferred from the outside in, not (as Cartesians suppose) from the inside out.” The reason he chose to confer meaning from the outside on Descartes is clear now, and brings me to the sense in which this book, by definition, fails. Bruns’s secret purpose throughout *Inventions* has been to discredit his enemies, the philosophers, by using the weapons of his own party, the rhetoricians, or, in a more traditional sense, the poets, since Bruns’s rhetorician nothing affirmeth, and so never lieth. The underlying theme of the book is the contrast between the two parties, which supplies what coherency, other than that of historical outline, the book possesses. It is the single most common motif in the book. What Bruns calls “the antagonism between

rhetoric and philosophy” is the real subject of *Inventions*, and what are actually the most useful and interesting portions of the book, the insights into individual texts which vindicate as well as demonstrate Bruns’s method, read like mere by-products of his war-reporting.

I say this book fails “by definition,” that is, because Bruns’s own definition of the purpose of his book precludes the most effective use of what ought to be effectual weapons. Bruns sees these weapons as those of his opponents, and cannot allow himself to use them. He attempts to disarm the philosophers by conceding that, by their standards, the rhetoricians get nowhere: “But the rhetorician does not desire to get anywhere He does not, for example, seek to solve problems.” But his adoption of the persona of rhetor fails, precisely because he despairs of “certainty” and rejects the philosopher’s “piety,” which could supply its lack. He does not have the talent of Socrates (who also affirmed nothing), and the final result of his skeptical mask is not, as he intended, to support his truths by indirection rather than assertion, but to spoil the tone of the book. Rather, *Inventions* has no tone, and this creates an impression that the style itself is at fault, which it is not. When Bruns writes about something, he is quite easy to follow; when he writes around something, as he too often does, the book is unreadable, the fine ideas and insights buried under a heap of weighty nothings.

I know that any academic who writes clearly runs the risk of his colleagues’ scorn for “popularizing”; more seriously, he exposes himself to the charge of being wrong, since if no one knows what he is talking about no one can tell if he is right or not. For example, it is easy to find cases of overstatement, simplification, errors of interpretation in so fine a work of historical criticism as Russell Fraser’s *The Dark Ages And The Age of Gold* (Princeton, 1973), just because Fraser defends his thesis, that the two epochs of the title ought to have each others’ names, with real passion and energy, if not piety. But I found Fraser’s book impossible to put, or in the normal case of literary criticism, throw down, while if I hadn’t taken careful notes on the well-hidden beauties of *Inventions*, I wouldn’t remember a single one. I am not arguing that a critic should write like James Branch Cabell, but if any writer declares himself of the party of the poets, or rhetors, and forsakes the philosophers’ armor (often rusty and creaking, to be sure) of Absolute Truth, as Bruns claims to do here, he should make sure he uses the weapons of his own side well, the weapons of beauty and clarity and a style suited to the matter. By conceding too much to his enemies at the beginning, Bruns cripples himself before the battle begins, since his style reflects only his own doubts and hesitations before their weapons. He would have done better to leave the philosophers alone and written “A Brief Outline of the History of Interpretation, With Projections As to the Future,” as the most interesting and useful part of *Inventions*. Or he should have remembered the words of that guerilla philosopher, who lurks around the peripheries of the interpretive camp with an eye, no doubt, to the throats of the boys and ponies: “And if you cannot be saints of knowledge, at least be its warriors.”