

Readers led by the book's title to look for a sustained engagement with the question of Cixous's politics will find this addition to Cixous criticism disappointing. Unfortunately, Shiach cannot both introduce Cixous the writer to readers who do not read French well enough to read her several subversive, intricate texts in the original and address the vexed question of her politics in a short volume of 161 pages. The book might have been stronger in this regard if a direct and detailed confrontation with other critiques of Cixous's work had been undertaken.

On the other hand, Shiach may well accomplish her desired purpose of provoking readers to explore more of Cixous's texts than the relatively small number that have so far entered into debate. Her book could well function as a source book for thesis, dissertation, and book topics and as a spur to further translations of Cixous's *oeuvre*. In my reading I came across a number of stimulating ideas about Cixous's deconstruction of representation, which, to my regret, remained latent in the text. Reading *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* one senses more complex and extensive books inside.

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NOTES

- ¹ My article "The Body as Pictogram: Rethinking Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*" outlines the debate about essentialism before proceeding to discussion of bodies as signifying material.
- ² It may also be worth keeping in mind that Cixous is a professor of *English* literature in France.

WORKS CITED

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Malcolm Kelsall. *The Great Good Place: The Country House in English Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. pp. xiii, 210. 36 plates. \$32.50.

The continuing importance of the country house in the lives of the English people, for whom visiting a great house remains a favourite pastime, is the theme of Malcolm Kelsall's new book, *The Great Good Place*. It is not as original a study (given the subject) as his earlier book, *Byron's Politics* (1987), but it is equally elegant and erudite, and of wider appeal.

Kelsall is careful to situate himself in his own time and place: having lost an empire as well as their language to the rest of the world, the English turn to the country-house tradition to define their national identity, in ritual fashion, and Kelsall writes its history to explain "how

and why we are as we are" (7). His is a frankly conservative history that traces the idealisation of the English country house through the centuries, an idealisation that rises to the heights of mysticism as social and economic realities become increasingly hostile to its preservation, so that by the end (in modern times) it has the status of dream house or Platonic Idea, held all the more tenaciously for this divorce—somewhat like the Holy Grail, belonging to the order of grace rather than nature (not that these are Kelsall's terms). In fact, Kelsall alternates his examination of the house as icon in poetry and fiction with that of its representation in the visual arts, especially in the vocabulary of architectural motifs, so that this marriage of modes sets the terms of his discourse, which is governed by concepts such as Classic and Gothic, villa and castle. Indeed, the interchange of their symbols comprises the gist of his argument.

It is commonly known that the conventions of the country house poem derive from the Roman poets, but Kelsall drives the argument further to say that Rome provides the paradigm for the English experience, through rise and efflorescence to decline and fall: "As Rome, so England" (11). Stoic virtue and Epicurean retreat were corrupted by luxury and the subsequent reversal of values during the Roman decadence (the enemy within), as well as Goths and vandals (the enemy without), so that the fortress villa of the last phase replaced the organic community of the first. This fortified household is the "hinge of history":

The English country house originated from the fortresses of the Goths, domesticated itself in Nature after the example of the villas of the Romans, and, in the nineteenth century, like Pontius Leontius, retreated again (if only in symbolic form). (24)

It is Kelsall's view that the signs of feudal conquest and the fact of the dissolution of the monasteries were either intentionally suppressed or sublimated by early writers in this tradition, but history would seem to enact the revenge of the repressed when both the medieval castle of defensive function and the medieval community of learning, culture, and piety surface again during the Gothic revival. These new versions of the great house, however, were unable to answer the great questions of the Victorian age, when the country house acquired added value as aesthetic object, beyond use and morality—not only since Henry James but also in the earlier work of Benjamin Disraeli and William Morris.

Thus the country house survives feudalism, capitalism, and communism, but Kelsall does not develop a Marxist critique of the country house ethos; the dark side of the landscape is not to be found in the social and economic realities excluded by its idealisation so much as it is built into the common strategy of contrasting houses—the good House of Holiness, with its antithesis, the House of Pride, or show place and power house. As a consequence, the country house poem

lends itself to satire and panegyric. Kelsall exposes the contradictions, ambiguities, and evasions that come to characterize the image of the house and, often enough, the role of the poet after Jonson, as the ideal becomes harder to locate.

The emblematic but real house of the country house poem (from Jonson to Pope) yields to the naturalistic but fictional house of the novel (from *Tom Jones* to *Rebecca*) at the exact midpoint of the study, when the building is over and the task of preservation begins with the Georgian house. I have particularly liked Kelsall's discussion of *Mansfield Park*, where sober, evangelical, middle-class Fanny Price becomes the one to transmit country house values down the social scale and is herself lodged at the rectory, a part of Mansfield Park and apart from it, a stance necessary for the maintenance of the idea in its purity. Byron, however, was to the manor born, and Norman Abbey, in the later cantos of *Don Juan*, is true to form in being both an idea and its travesty, both developed through images of mother and child with meanings natural and religious, which Kelsall reads as eventually being "proleptic"—a recurring term—of Disraeli's two nations. Prolepsis is Kelsall's solution to a falsifying teleology in the writing of history, and, whether or not it is truer, it is the occasion for making witty conjunctions and connections that always instruct and delight.

The Great Good Place: The Country House in English Literature is fascinating as a species of historiography, but I do not wish to reduce it to its historical argument. The book is arranged as a series of close critical analyses of individual texts, and the pleasure of reading arises from watching conventions alter with context, the variety of contexts being Kelsall's great strength as a critic. The genre of country-house description expands and develops far beyond its classical antecedents when woman emerges as the redemptive spirit of place. The cultural hopes and values she embodies reflect Kelsall's conservative and humanist view of the function of literature and criticism at the present time, when it is said that we have no values to transmit.

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Brian Swann, ed. *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992. pp. xx, 478. pb. \$34.95, cloth \$53.95.

Brian Swann's *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* is an extremely important book for anyone interested in literature by aboriginal Americans. While the book addresses the matter of translating and transcribing oral aboriginal literatures into written English, the essays grapple with principles that reverberate even in the written texts of modern aboriginal authors who work exclusively in English. The collection comprises twenty-four intensely thoughtful and well-informed chapters that cover a wide range of problems encountered in the at-