

Book Reviews

Selected Poetry and Critical Prose: Charles G. D. Roberts, edited with an introduction and notes by W. J. Keith. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. 326. \$5.95.

In the first eight volumes of Douglas Lockhead's Literature of Canada reprint series, the University of Toronto Press provided valuable reproductions of artifacts from our literary heritage. These volumes are not, certainly, of equal merit; Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound: A Novel* or Robert Barr's *The Measure of the Rule* are texts less significant than the Crawford, Sangster, or Howe collections. Nor are all the critical introductions to the eight volumes of parallel accomplishment. But the series itself has successfully transcended in importance the limitations that can be attributed to any single volume. Its reprints are needed by students of Canadian literature, and many of its introductions do render more than adequate critical service.

The ninth volume in this series, *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose: Charles G. D. Roberts*, edited and introduced by W. J. Keith, constitutes a departure in format from the previous reprints, but a departure which is well merited. Most of the previous volumes are reproductions of entire texts, while this text selects material from the several books of Roberts' poetry as well as from critical commentary that has hitherto been uncollected. The editors (Lockhead presumably participated in this decision with Keith) have correctly adjudged that, while a reprint of one or two single volumes of Roberts' poetry would be of undoubted value, of even greater value and need is a single volume which covers the range of this poet's accomplishment and which indicates his poetic development by providing the best example of his work. As Keith cogently argues in his introduction, Roberts is a poet whose work was very uneven in quality, and one whose individual poems will continue to diminish in number in subsequent collections of Canadian verse.

Keith's selection of the poems, for which he carefully and convincingly provides his criterion in an exemplary introduction, is excellent. One might quibble about the inclusion or exclusion of a few titles, but in doing so would be arguing on the basis of personal likes and dislikes rather than according to any sound critical dictum. Keith claims to have made his selection on the basis of "poetic excellence" first, followed by a regard for the "requisites for a reader's considered appreciation," and finally in the interests of clarity and scholarly convenience. These are good criterion in proper order, the proof of which lies in the collection itself.

And if one wished to make a much narrower selection of Roberts' poetry, this could be done very fruitfully by simply in-

cluding the titles which Keith has reserved for specific mention in his introduction. His succinct evaluations of poems from *Orion* and "The Tantramar Revisited," through *Ave* and "A Nocturne of Consecration" to "In the Night Watches" and "The Iceberg," furthermore, add a critical dimension to his introduction that is frequently and regrettably absent in the commentary of many editors.

If there are any reservations to be uttered about this volume, they will arise out of Dr. Keith's estimation of Roberts relative to his contemporaries. Undeniably, "the best of his work has an abiding place in the history of Canadian literature," and certainly "his poetry is proving more durable than Carman's," but there are probably many readers of Canadian poetry who would qualify the claim that he possesses "a wider range than Lampman and a more reliable poetic technique than Duncan Campbell Scott" and who would certainly question the consequent implication that Roberts is a better poet than these two.

But these are debatable judgments, and Dr. Keith's editorial efforts deserve finally to be acknowledged as productive of an excellent and much-needed collection of the work of a significant figure in the literary history of Canada.

Charles R. Steele

Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, ed. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo
(The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. xii and 172.
\$3.95 paper.

Despite contradictory statements, by Lessing herself and by her critics, about the centrality of feminism to her writings, it is Lessing's adoption by the feminist movement that has led to her acceptance as a major writer. *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies* mirrors this situation. The essays vary in their approaches to Lessing's work, and the critic, Ellen Morgan, who deals most directly with Lessing's feminism argues that it doesn't go far enough. However, the editors put their collection in a feminist context:

the quality that startled us in [Anna Wulf's] character was not her ironic "freedom" but the fact that (after years of our attempts to identify ourselves with Quentin Compson, Augie March, and the Invisible Man, not to mention Lolita and Franny Glass) we were presented with a novel whose persona was an intellectual, a political activist, an artist, as well as a lover, a mother — a woman (p. vii).

This is perfectly appropriate. One is interested in significant women writers and in complex female characters, not necessarily in women writers who declare themselves spokeswomen for a movement. Major women writers from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu on have found it necessary to dissociate themselves (or their work) from the movements of their time in order to maintain a position of critical detachment *vis à vis* society, but

this intellectual detachment has prevented none of them from writing analytically about the position of women. In my own experience, the readers who assert that Lessing is chiefly important for evoking the quality of the African landscape do so because they cannot admit that feminism can be central to anything, and presumably are able to ignore Lessing's own disparagement of a "nostalgic" African style, reminiscent of some of her own early work, in *The Golden Notebook*. All the essays in Pratt's and Dembo's collection go beyond this position (they do not bother to attack it), and the view that Lessing writes mere autobiography. The humanist approach, as well, which characterized the better work on Lessing done before the feminist movement (e.g., work by Selma Burkom, Frederick R. Karl, and Paul Schlueter), is also superseded in this collection. Humanism had the virtue of making Lessing approachable and relevant: her work could be placed in the context of other established, modern British writers, usually male (it is an asexual and transcendently universalizing approach), but it happens to be too reasonable and optimistic, marked as it is by clear plot synopses and an emphasis on committed personal relationships and themes of social relevance, and totally failing to come to terms either with the most distinctive aspects of Lessing's style and literary structures or with the irrational elements in her subject matter.

A continuing split in Lessing criticism (Burkom discussed it in an article published in 1969 in *Critique*) is whether to take a formalist approach (which you would think *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*, at least, demand) or to discuss her themes, primarily women or Marxism, or, if one takes *The Four-Gated City* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* as the central texts, Eastern thought. These approaches could be reconciled if one defined "crises of thought in our time" as Lessing's central subject and as the determinant of the shape(s) of her novels, and the other themes as specific expressions of these crises in the lives of her characters. Lessing's own words would support this, her insistence that *The Golden Notebook* is about form and that the other subjects are subsidiary, present because they are the contents of the modern turned on mind. As Lessing says in the interview with Florence Howe included in this book, certain ideas tend to cluster together in the modern consciousness; a novel written from a modern woman's perspective would inevitably discuss feminism; feminism is thus to be taken for granted. The interesting fact is that Lessing makes her characters so exceptionally tuned in to the spirit of the time that they become embodiments of it, though not always conscious of their extreme consciousness until later. It is a heavy determinism, especially since Lessing's characters do eventually realize that they are subject to it.

None of the essays in *Critical Studies* really succeeds in or is in a position to try reconciling the different levels of analysis, but all can be taken as persuasive guidelines for further study. The amount of work that exists in Agate Nesaule Krouse's checklist implies that the books are yet to come. Except for Michele Wender Zak's "*The Grass is Singing: A Little Novel*

About the Emotions," a political interpretation of the novel, the emphasis is on Lessing's later works, from *The Golden Notebook* on. Their approaches are concrete, pertinent to what Lessing is trying to do, the orientation towards archetypal criticism and attempts to place Lessing in the right intellectual context. The most interesting to me was Evelyn J. Hinz's and John J. Teunissen's, "The Pietà as Icon in *The Golden Notebook*," an archetypal analysis of the Golden Notebook section (the second version of Saul Green's relationship with Anna Wulf). Though I resent the authors' implication that refusal to believe in archetypes implies an inability to come to terms with one's own psyche, the authors' choice of a less than obvious archetype (Anna as Mary, Saul as Christ) leads to a close analysis of the significant verbal detail of this section, its structural relationships with the novel as a whole, and the relationships of the encounter between Saul and Anna to tendencies in Western culture. Their conclusions are plausible no matter what the grounds of one's belief. However, some of the extended inferences become ludicrous, as when the American idiom "get laid" (i.e., Saul, a man, uses the passive voice to describe his role in the sex act) is said to be an allusion to Christ's being laid in his grave; the passive implication is important, but surely the obvious explanation, that Saul and the kind of man he represents are scared little boys only half trying to brazen it out as he-men, is enough. (The corresponding, aggressive idiom, used by women, "to screw," has no relevance to the New Testament, but then Lessing doesn't use it. The idea of role reversal, or personality exchange between Saul and Anna, is important and might be seen in other contexts than the one discussed in this essay). Here and elsewhere, the religious content of the commentary seems far removed from the overall tone of the episode, though analogies to the Bible are a good guideline; Saul and Anna are Biblical names. One could also consider — Anna is an aged prophetess who speaks of God (St. Luke 2:36-38), but who has no relationship to the Saul who undergoes a conversion and becomes Paul; there is also on Old Testament Saul who might be equally pertinent, as he is a mentally disturbed king, who visits a witch in a time of extremity. It appears as if Lessing chose Biblical names to create uncertainty as to 1) whether Saul and Anna are good or evil, in the special sense of whether or not they are in the mainstream of providential history, and 2) whether a meaningful conjunction between a male and a female prophet has taken place in the novel, or could take place, given their character as outsiders, which implies a psychologically based incapacity to join the human or the divine community. The name "Saul" in either case suggests the identity of a reject. Anna and the Witch of Endor make transient appearances, but have no central role in Judeo-Christian history; the name of Lessing's other heroine, "Martha," similarly alludes to the busy, housekeeping woman rejected by Christ. Lessing may be speculating about a community of rejects, if rejects can in any way make contact with each other (but if "the last will come first," perhaps they aren't rejects after all, and we are left even more uncertain). The Biblical names, however, create near certainty that history deterministically repeats itself, which does not have to be explained as the persistence of an archetype.

But, in contrast to the above essay, Bolling's "Structure and Theme in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*" takes the self-evident archetypal journey very seriously and engages in no speculation as to what exactly Lessing meant by her use of this common idea, or how innovatively she used it. Bolling makes me wonder how many archetypal critics distinguish between pre-modern writers, who must have discovered their archetypes intuitively, and contemporary writers, who have all the sources, and may just be exhibiting their intellectual backgrounds, with which there is no reason for us to be especially impressed (i.e., as special insights into the depths of the psyche). The sea journey in *Briefing* seems boring to me, and it's made worse by the portentousness with which it's communicated to us and by the authorial blackmail, whereby if we are unimpressed by Watkins' experience we automatically end up on the side of the shock therapists. How does one explain the fact that Watkins experiences his sea journey under the influence of drugs, prescribed by doctors who have no idea what Watkins is thinking about, or sympathy with it, or of the perhaps arbitrary relationship between their drug therapy and the expansion of Watkins' consciousness? Is this an irony, that to some degree invalidates Watkin's journey, or is the irony directed against the doctors who do not realize that they are doing him a service? In either case, Watkins is controlled by arbitrary outside forces (the doctors) even while he thinks he is most involved in his own inner experience.

John L. Carey's "Art and Reality in *The Golden Notebook*" is also a clear account of the obvious, a useful introduction. Lynn Sukenick's "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction," a very good essay, is interesting in part for refusing to take Lessing's statements about her intentions as an ultimate authority; Lessing's stated intentions can be subjected to analysis and commentary, as passages that appear in her fiction are, to arrive at a comprehensible relationship between them. Sukenick is thus careful in establishing precise relationships between the author and her heroines; just because they are not totally the same doesn't mean that they have nothing in common with each other. Ellen Morgan, on the other hand, in "Alienation of the Woman Writer in *The Golden Notebook*" seems to assume a total identification of author and heroines, and indeed of the reader, who gets less out of a novel that fails to offer her a positive role model. Morgan's approach is explicitly political; the worth of the novel is ultimately determined by its influence on the reader, and the author and reader are felt to be incapable of an ironic understanding of Anna's limitations — her evasions of the anger at men which is her authentic response to their treatment of her. Whether Anna indeed fails to understand herself might be debated as well, but a relatively subtle reading of *The Golden Notebook* (e.g., the function of the Yellow Notebook as embodying advances in Anna's, not just Ella's, thought; a consideration of the several possible meanings of the last "Free Women" section) would be required to prove it, and Morgan's argument makes the most sense if one keeps discussion to the more obvious ideas and feelings in the work, those readily accessible to the common reader. To me, this implies a distortion of this particular novel as it stands, but Lessing herself may be going in this direction,

if the didacticism of her latest works and the suppression of individual personality in their characters, are any guide.

Last, two essays, Dagmar Barnouw's "Disorderly Company: From *The Golden Notebook* to *The Four-Gated City*" and Nancy Shields Hardin's "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way" discuss Lessing in intellectual contexts, the European Bildungsroman and Sufi mysticism, that go beyond the need to relate her primarily to other modern British writers. These are interesting new directions. In general this collection will stimulate Lessing readers; the variety as well as the general high quality of the contributions (none of which is a mere appreciation or emotional evaluation) testify to the intellectual and personal commitments of the readers whom Lessing has found in the last few years. My arguments with some of the contributors are meant to imply the nature of my own commitment and I hope will not be taken as a put down of the articles. However, I am left wondering why the two articles that strike me as safest and least provocative should be the two by male authors and the one that is most assuredly brilliant should be the one co-authored by a man and a woman. I hope it is coincidence. But could it be that male critics are still too cautious about expressing a personal response about a woman writer, or are simply unable to hook in to what is emotionally significant? And perhaps there really is something to be said for a man and a woman working jointly (it's an excellent application of the section of Lessing which they discuss, in which Saul and Anna get each other to write). If so, then literary criticism is just beginning to be liberated, and this point has no necessary relation to the specific critical approach which the writer chooses to employ.

Judith Sloman

Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist*. London: Cape, 1974. pp. 276. £3.

Ten years ago, in conversation with Alan Ross, the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer remarked that to write in the service of a political or social cause was to her a betrayal. Yet social and political realities in Africa have always been central to Gordimer's writings, the very substance of her characters and plots. In short stories and novels alike, people are a despairing testimony to the society which has shaped them, and, as the author herself says later in the same conversation, "in South Africa society is the political situation." The fact that Gordimer has chosen to remain in her homeland, writing for a largely foreign readership, describing in often appalling detail the life of that country, yet remaining in essence uncommitted, has led at least one black South African writer, Dennis Brutus, to condemn her for her lack of warmth, her cold, detached observations. The implication is that hers is the real betrayal, and we are reminded again that to be a writer in South Africa is to be forced to make the kind of political and moral choices most of Gordimer's readers need only reflect on from a distance.

The dimensions of this problem are nowhere more skillfully realized than in her latest novel, *The Conservationist*. Those hints of contrivance and virtuosity for its own sake which perhaps contributed to early success in the *New Yorker* have disappeared completely from this deep and somber novel. It is the most ambitious and taxing of her works, and it also demonstrates clearly the nature of her commitment: not to race, party or ideology, but, more difficult, to her very function as passionate observer. She does in this novel what eludes so many writers of a more "committed" disposition: she convinces the reader that everything that is observed is important because she has observed it, important both in itself and in relationship to the political and social reality which produced it. In the same way Mehring's farm, important in itself, is only fully understood when seen as linked to the tin shacks around its perimeter, to the "locations" and slag heaps beyond, and finally, by snaking motorway, to Johannesburg, where Mehring, a captain of industry, has an office, an answering service, and ready access by jet to the rest of the world. Yet the city is not much described, and the rest of the world, wherever Mehring's pig-iron interests might take him, is simply a list of names on a flight schedule. This is a novel which deliberately blurs at the edges.

The focus is always on the farm itself, whether Mehring, who bought it originally as a tax deduction and as bait for a mistress, happens to be there or not. Out of a life soured by personal resentments and self-justifying greed emerges the 400-acre farm with its fields, rivers and swamps, described by Gordimer with an economic intensity and an almost too calculated avoidance of easy lyrical effects. But the farm must also be a "going concern," and it is peopled. In addition to the nucleus of those who run it while Mehring is absent and whose existence depends upon it as his does not, there are families, relatives, acquaintances, shading off into nameless passers-through who might be visiting or trespassing — Mehring does not bother to distinguish. Together they make up a world to which the farm properly belongs. It does not belong to Mehring, for all his careful weekend husbandry; his title deeds are as meaningless as the passes for Africans, and both are the natural expression of the white army of occupation. The novel records Mehring's slow dispossession.

It says much for Gordimer's power as a novelist that the dispossession of what was never in any sense possessed, but only appropriated, should carry the weight of tragedy. Mehring lacks nobility of either mind or spirit. In his personal life he seems incapable of more than immediate lusts, described by the author with evident distaste (his attempted seduction of a Portuguese immigrant girl 35,000 feet above Africa might in other hands have been rendered comic). Throughout the novel old and bitter arguments are endlessly rehearsed — with an ex-wife now living in New York; with an ex-mistress whose glib radicalism he despises because it exposed him; with his ex-son, now adolescent and possibly gay. It is not always easy to disentangle these internal dialogues: one is conscious of a chaotic babble from which Mehring can extricate himself only temporarily, when he is at the farm alone, or with Jacobus, the overseer with whom

he experiences a closeness which at times resembles love. But such moments only stress the profound estrangement of Mehring — from himself, from the white society he represents, and from the blacks and coloureds the whites depend on and despise. It is impossible not to read in Mehring the larger political and moral lessons which Gordimer declines to teach. They are the more deeply absorbed for not having been taught, and to realize this rather simple fact is to realize how far white South African writing has come since *Cry the Beloved Country*.

The myth of occupation, tenure, lies exposed at the centre of the novel. Its power over Mehring, crudely acknowledged in his sexual forays but only fully understood in his lonely walks around the farm, is not diminished by the fact that he is neither Boer nor British (though speaking both Afrikaans and English); he is of German descent and was born in South West Africa. Memories of clean sand dunes, rocks and bones return at intervals, but only his son goes there now, and his son refers to the place as Namibia — a name particularly irritating to the father, along with all the other radically enlightened gestures which his son and mistress affect. A paradise is lost and not regained in the Transvaal. The body of a murdered African is found on the property, is buried hastily in a shallow grave by the police, and is slowly uncovered by fire and flood. Mehring is haunted by the body and drawn to its burial place and gradual exhumation. The dead man is the counter-occupation. At the end of the book Mehring, lured to an old mine dump halfway to the city by a girl who is possibly white, possibly coloured and possibly an informer, panics, escapes, and, fearful of exposure, leaves "for one of those countries white people go to, the whole world is theirs." On the day of his departure the black man is given a fitting and solemn burial at the farm. "They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them." It is a measure of the distance of Gordimer's readership from both the novel and its place of origin that most reviewers have assumed that Mehring died — and one at least has said that he got "a decent burial on his own farm."

A. F. Bellette

Andrew Kennedy. *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1975. pp. 271. \$16.50. pb. \$6.50.

Margery M. Morgan, *The Shavian Playground*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1972. pp. 366. £3.80.

Andrew Kennedy's *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* is an exploration of the problems encountered by twentieth century dramatists in their search for expressive dramatic language and of the strengths and weaknesses in the dramatic language of Shaw, Eliot, Beckett, Pinter, Osborne and Arden. Much has been said about the *theme* of the death of language which is frequently encountered in modern drama, and Shaw's drama of discussion, Beckett's silences, Pinter's super-naturalistic incoherence, Eliot's struggle to make poetic dialogue both individual and

universal have all been discussed individually. But Kennedy's study of the language of modern drama in general, focusing on particular playwrights to illustrate varying degrees of critical self-consciousness about the language of drama and varying modes of coping with demands made by the modern theatre on language, is both a useful survey of the problems of dramatic language in modern drama and a move in the direction of developing a critical approach suitable to the study of dramatic language.

In approaching each of the six playwrights included in his study, Kennedy asks to what degree the writer is aware of three factors which influence the language of drama: 1) the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of naturalism, which is both useful and limiting as a style of dialogue; 2) the array of possibilities for dramatic language, both those used in past drama and those which are as yet only products of theory or imagination; 3) the diminishing ability of language to represent meaningfully emotion and idea. Having determined the playwright's degree of critical self-consciousness in these areas (and only Shaw is found to be significantly naive in this respect), Kennedy proceeds to evaluate the steps taken by the playwright, in light of his awareness, to run the obstacle course twentieth century dramatic language faces. The central chapters on Beckett and Pinter are most successful; that on Osborne seems least satisfactory, treating the stylistic problems of Osborne's "rhetoric of self dramatisation," and finding little to say about language problems in this connection that had not been said already in the chapter on Shaw. One wonders if Osborne (and possibly Arden) were not an afterthought, added to justify the clever title, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, an inspirational improvement on his working title, *Language and Modern English Drama*.

One curious conceptual paradox in Kennedy's view of dramatic language is his apparent uncertainty about whether the language his dramatists are in search of is in fact single or multiple. He is aware, of course, of the multiple possibilities for language, speaking of the "imaginary museum" of styles to draw upon. Yet he seems to reject the concept that a play may require a particular language unsuitable for other plays, stating as a criticism that "the language of a play can become so specialized that it functions for one play only" and faulting Osborne for moving from one style in one play to another style in the next play in what seems to Kennedy an "improvized, even haphazard" manner.

In critical approach, the book strikes a good balance between generalizations and detailed analysis of specific passages from the plays. The passages are carefully selected to illuminate particular critical issues; this makes the technique satisfactory for theoretical discussion, but the very selectivity renders it uncertain as a means of arriving at conclusions about a playwright's methods of accomplishments. Kennedy is himself quite aware of the spots in which his critical pronouncements may be questionable. His awareness is suggested covertly by his own style, as when he deplores Shaw's use of pastiche to express a character's truly felt emotion. "When so used it *tends to be felt*

as the language of pseudo-experience" (my italics), or overtly, as when he adds to one critical observation the footnote, "I am aware that in this instance my personal value-judgment is inseparable from the stylistic judgment."

Six Dramatists in Search of a Language is most valuable as groundwork in a field in which much remains to be done. The introductory chapter, which surveys the problems of language in naturalistic and post-naturalistic drama much more broadly than the six chapters on individual writers permit, the concluding chapter, which suggests possible developments in criticism of dramatic language, the extensive bibliography and sometimes excessively conscientious footnotes all provide informative and stimulating material for further thought about dramatic language.

Margery Morgan's *The Shavian Playground*, first published in 1972, has now been released by Methuen in an attractive paperback edition. The book explores most of Shaw's full-length plays, including the later ones which are often neglected, in some detail. Miss Morgan takes an approach which has been too rare among Shaw critics, that of allowing the plays themselves the final word instead of allowing biographical, political, philosophical or other considerations to determine her view of the plays. Insights prompted by such considerations are not excluded, but the perspective from which each play is seen is dictated by the play itself rather than by some sweeping theory of the critic's. Bits of information from little-known sources and observations about the relationships between one of Shaw's plays and others of his own or another dramatist help to broaden the reader's view of the play.

Miss Morgan's personal insights into the plays provide both the strengths and the weaknesses of this study. Her view of *You Never Can Tell* as a study of the comic dramatist's art, for example, is an appealing one; in it the dentist, Valentine, describes Shaw's past career as well as his own in the rueful reflection, "I acted conscientiously, and told my patients the brute truth instead of what they wanted to be told. Result, ruin," and the dentist's laughing gas is analogous to the dramatist's humor as anesthetic against the pain of direct attack. Sometimes, however, the "insight" offered is less persuasive. Such is the case of the suggestion about Raina in *Arms and the Man*: "the image of the 'chocolate cream soldier' . . . contains, latent, an omen of the tigerish woman who devours her mate." Since the image is not a soldier of chocolate cream, but a soldier who eats chocolate creams, Raina could be seen as one who might kill her mate by over-stuffing him or starving him, but hardly as one who might devour him.

The Shavian Playground is not really a whole in the sense that each chapter builds on the one before it or supports a unifying argument. Miss Morgan states her intentions in the introduction, but these intentions are so many and diverse that her treatment of any one play may touch on one or more of her objectives without necessarily following from the preceding chapter or building to a thematic conclusion. As a result, the

discussion of a play is not forced into any particular pattern or mold. The book is valuable for its provocative commentary on individual plays and for its panoramic view of Shaw's drama. Now more accessible as a paperback, it will be a welcome addition to the personal library of those who turn to Shaw's "playground" to exercise their faculties of thought, imagination, and humor.

Susan Stone

Books Received

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