Book Reviews

Ernest Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction, 1775-1914*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974. pp. 280. $9.50.

In his recent study *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction*, Ernest Earnest proposes to illustrate the vitality and variety of American women of the nineteenth century in contrast to the fictional heroines of the period. The fictional heroines have, he notes, been treated in detail in William Wasserman's *Heiress of All the Ages*. While Professor Earnest too looks at women as portrayed in the novel, his purpose is "largely an examination of the actual girls and women as they are revealed in diaries, memoirs and biographies" (p. 4). He defines clearly the limits of the study. The American Revolution marked the beginning of a distinctive American character, although American women showed certain special qualities before this date; after World War I, freedom for women in education, economic rights and social life is no longer unique to America but has extended to Europe as well. Between these dates, he claims, the opinion of observers is justified that "the American Eve is something new under the sun" (p. 8).

However, comments Earnest, the view of the novelists has come to be accepted as an authentic portrayal, even a mythic symbol, of nineteenth-century American women, despite the distinctive qualities noted by such visitors as Frances Wright, de Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau, the Trollopes and even Kipling (who conceded "They are clever, they can talk — yea, it is said that they think" (p. 2)). Earnest suggests several reasons for the stereotype of the fictional heroine: the predominance of middle-class women among the reading public, the catering of editors to the prudery of this group, the unhappy influence of the sentimental tradition of Richardson, Scott and Dickens, and the Calvinist prohibition of the illicit pleasures of novel-reading (p. 265). Earnest concludes the book with a statement of his central thesis:

> The limited or distorted fictional picture of American women is not merely a critique of the novel, but . . . has coloured our whole concept of what the real women were like before World War I. They were vastly more lively, able, full blooded, and interesting human beings than we have been led to suppose. (p. 270)

Professor Earnest's theory is interesting and his project ambitious. He carefully documents his sources and draws material from some forty-three biographies and autobiographies, eighteen diaries, memoirs and journals, and four collections of letters, in addition to literary studies, general studies of American society and analyses of the status, roles, rights and social expectations of American women. The women he selects for study reveal a

range of talents and abilities, intellectual, social and personal. Earnest examines in some detail the women of the Revolution and the "Republican Court" such as Martha Washington, Abigail Adams and Mercy Warren, the women who first set records in education, journalism and medicine (Emma Willard, Catherine Beecher, Sarah Josepha Hale and Elizabeth Blackwell), the women who organized the Women's Rights Movement, the women of the Civil War, and the new emerging types of the 1870's and after: the office girl, the college girl, the Titaness and the Gibson girl.

The case histories are interesting and convincing. It is in his comments on the fiction, however, that Earnest reveals the flaws in his argument. The title indicates a study of the fictional heroines in some depth, despite his disclaimer in the introduction. Although his conclusion differs from Howells, Earnest quotes from that writer: "Novelists are great in proportion to the accuracy and fullness with which they portray women" (p. 140). Earnest's assumption here is that it is the business of the novelist to reflect the character of the American woman in all her guises. As a whole, the novelists are berated for their failure to depict college women, office girls, career women, educationalists, sportswomen, or women with strong sexual drives. Howells and James are treated in some detail. Howells' ideal woman, he concludes, is:

> beautiful, charming, self-reliant within prescribed limits, thoroughly good, but puritanical and completely without intellectual interests. Thus his women are almost untouched by the great social changes of the late nineteenth century. (p. 154)

He goes further with James and suggests that, despite the vividness of Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Milly Teale and Maggie Verver, James' heroines share some of his own inhibited attitudes to family and to sex. Indeed he misses James' whole intent in his fiction, his concern not with his heroines as types but with their ambiguity. In the chapter "Daisy and Jennie," Earnest chooses as representatives of fictional and real women, James' heroine and Jennie Jerome Churchill, justifying the selection of Daisy by the remark of one of the characters in the novel: "Never . . . had he encountered *a young American girl of so pronounced a type as this*" (181). And he continues: "Whatever he may have intended in *Daisy Miller*, James portrayed Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as a representative national type," quoting again a character in the novel and also James' remark: "like the mass of American girls Isabel had been encouraged to express herself" (p. 183). Elsewhere he devotes several paragraphs to proving that James' heroines engage in little physical activity!

Little more than passing reference is made to several other novelists. More consideration is given to Hawthorne's failure in *The Marble Faun* to portray Harriet Hosmer, a real artist whom he knew, and to his satire of Margaret Fuller in *The Blithedale Romance* than to his central purpose in *The Scarlet Letter*. Wharton's novel, *The House of Mirth*, he concedes, shows "the darker aspect of the Gibson-girl era" (p. 232), but he discusses the novel in one paragraph, devoting more time to the

life of Wharton than to her heroines. Although he remarks in the conclusion that the novelists of the 1880's and 1890's were discarding the sentimental stereotypes inherited from Richardson, Scott and Dickens, he devotes little space to Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland and later Dreiser who are well within the range of his period. Indeed comments on some of the minor writers, for example Mary Jane Holmes or Charles Brockden Brown, sometimes occupy more space than those on the major novelists.

The organization of the chapters is basically chronological, progressing from the Revolution and the new Republic through the early nineteenth century, the Civil War and the last decades of the century. Other chapters, however, suggest a thematic approach. Chapter Four, "Girls and Goddesses," contrasts the sportsmanship and courting customs of real and fictional women while Chapter Eleven, "The Double Bed" looks at sexual practises, repeating to some extent the comments on courtship. These two cut across the whole chronology as does Chapter Three, "Her Infinite Variety." While some chapters consider only real women, others contrast living women and fictional ones. Chapters Five and Six are essentially a summarized history of women's education and the women's rights movement. The capsule biographies become at times confusing and even irritating, and the reader is sometimes lost in moving back and forth among the different characters, often without a clear transition.

Professor Earnest's study, then, may be welcomed as a complement to the fictional portraits of American women between 1775 and 1914. He is frequently interesting and provocative and the work suggests that a detailed study of some of these figures might be informative. He does, however, attempt to be too comprehensive, to document too many cases at the expense of real depth. He tends to illustrate the general accomplishments of his women in sports, social manners, and housewifery at the expense of the wit and intelligence which he asserts they possess. We might question, too, if he himself has not made a selection. The biographies and memoirs he has drawn on for his material have surely survived because they reveal certain qualities of leadership, perception or mind which sets them off from the ordinary. It may yet be proved that the writers of the nineteenth century did in fact reflect the average American Eve.

Catherine McLay

Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century.* London: Edward Arnold. 1975. pp. 215. $8.95.

Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1975. pp. 213. $19.50.

These two sudies of modern and contemporary British poetry have two main things in common. They both praise Ted Hughes almost to the point of idolatry, and they both have potentially interesting critical approaches weakened by exaggeration and a frequent lack of judiciousness.

Geoffrey Thurley makes his position clear from the beginning. What he calls the native English "existential tradition" — typified by such poets as Clare and Hopkins — has been adulterated and distorted by the ironist and intellectual stance of many poets since the first war, and the job of the English poet now must be to discover "a poetry adequate to our time, one which openly confronts the deepest issues." Over the past thirty years, "a sense of inadequacy and defeat . . . has infiltrated into the poetic consciousness," and the poet must recapture "the felt pressure and vibrance of the self in its need for articulation, expansion and definition," especially as ironist and intellectualist poetry displays "a marked incapacity for the powerful expression and articulation of emotion." The English poet, he goes on, must "regain possession of his function that informs the work of the sense of the great Romantic and symbolist poets" and move away from self-analysis and negative criticism of life.

This is good stirring stuff, but Thurley's argument becomes somewhat suspect when we move into the meat of his book and examine his judgements of individual poets. Looking for a "committed" and "exalted" poetry, he is forced into critical overstatement, and I doubt if he will carry many readers with him. Auden, Empson and Roy Fuller receive the harshest treatment, being seen as poets of "inward defeat." Compared with Spender and Gascoyne they are bad models; "the stale smugness" of academic poetry hangs over their work, and, somewhat incredibly, Mr. Thurley, discussing technique, claims that:

> It is apparent that for Auden and for Fuller, 'form' is a specific, bottle-like thing, a hoop the poet must jump through to prove himself a poet, a kind of penalty ritual he has to go through in a forfeits game . . . . Thus, for Auden, stanza, rhyme and symmetry guarantee tidiness, rather than the more portentous 'order'; no specific aims or intentions are involved, just an overall sense of good housewifery.

Deliberate coat-trailing, or critical barbarity? Only Thurley knows. And judgements of this sort increase as the author proceeds to sort out the literary sheep and goats. On the black list are Wallace Stevens (who "has remained a Sunday poet"); Emily Dickinson ("compared with Emily Bronte, she does not seem major"); MacNeice, Marvell, Catullus, Apollinaire, Corbière, Thomas Mann, I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, and, of course, Leavis. Robert Graves, we learn, "fails to consummate his imagery"; Edwin Muir's "Georgic allegoricalizing" accompanies "a regressiveness of attitude"; Kathleen Raine, surely "committed" and "exalted", has too much "emotional reserve" and suffers from "excessively fluent trafficking in the archetypes"; Roy Fuller's language "does little"; Larkin "belongs to the Auden stable" and "rationalizes his own timorousness"; Geoffrey Hill "consummates the intellectualist position" and is "like an expert with nothing to say"; Roethke and Saul Bellow (strange bedfellows, I would have thought) create "facticity upon which they are unable to confer significance"; Seamus Heaney is "provincial." And so it goes, sometimes backed up by examples, sometimes just stated baldly.

Who, then, are the poets who fulfil Thurley's criteria for excellence? Marlowe, Milton, Shelley, Yeats, Joyce, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Hopkins, Hardy, Edward Thomas, Clare, Lawrence, R. S. Thomas and Jack Clemo are some of them. We are told that Stephen Spender is "Auden's superior as poet, and, with David Gascoyne, the most powerful English poet of his time." In Spender we see "primitive animism, almost fetichistic in its intensity;" in Gascoyne's *Night Thoughts*, great wisdom and the "awareness of Nothingness." Dylan Thomas is praised for his exalted tone; Edith Sitwell wrote "major poetry" and her 1939-45 poems "rank among the finest and most serious statements about war in our time;" R. S. Thomas is in "the front-line of reality" (so *that's* where it is — up in the Welsh hills!); Jack Clemo's work "is the metaphoric landscape of Hopkins and Clare, made actual" and "After Clemo, English poetry had to find a new way." But it is with Colin Wilson, Alan Sillitoe and, above all, with Ted Hughes that Mr. Thurley sees the important breakthrough to "a new and more vital life-principle."

His praise of Hughes is, to say the least, fulsome. He states that Hughes' poem "The Hawk in the Rain" "surpasses 'The Windhover' in the more consistently intense, sustainedly watchful momentum of its language," and "as an act of spiritual archeology, 'Gog' can be compared only with the finest moments of 'The Waste Land.'" But the real accolade is reserved for *Crow*, about which even Mr. Thurley excels himself with his claim that it is "a more consciously fundamental utterance, perhaps, than anything else in the language." *Crow*, he goes on, as if this weren't enough, "transcends in annihilating a whole phase of European consciousness." But the future of English poetry lies not only with Hughes but with such poets as Anselm Hollo, Lee Harwood, Spike Hawkins, Dave Cunliffe, Libby Houston and other children of Albion, who are showing "how superior beat poetry is to the academicism it displaced." (And Mr. Thurley calls Herbert Read "an amateur"!)

So there we have it. A mixture of Beat, existentialism, Romanticism and symbolism as the solution to the mess left by Auden and his followers. It is, perhaps, an interesting thesis, but I have quoted as much as I do to try to show the kind of outrageous critical extremism which is likely, I would think, to worry rather than to convince; to undermine an argument rather than to further it. There are some fascinating things in this book, notably the provocative chapter on Auden, whether one agrees with it or not, and the valiant attempt to resuscitate the reputation of Spender. But this ironic harvest needed better tending and more protection from extreme and violent weather to produce the nourishment it might have yielded.

It is good to see the first full-length study of Ted Hughes. It is almost twenty years since the poet's first collection appeared and he has been so widely discussed, so widely taught in schools and universities, that a critical study is probably overdue. Keith Sagar covers all the work, up to and beyond *Crow*, and his book will probably be gratefully seized upon by many readers, teachers and students of Hughes' poetry. However, Dr. Sagar suffers

from a milder form of Mr. Thurley's disease of critical overkill and his book is disappointing in several ways.

"I believe Hughes to be a great poet," the author begins, and goes on to explain that the "great" poet is one who has the function of making "the dangerous journey, on behalf of his society, into the spirit world, which is to say, into his own unconscious." Keith Sagar believes in the poet as *shaman* and sees Hughes as "searching for a way of reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences, of the non-human cosmos." Every generation must have a writer who is "at the limit"; for us that writer is Hughes. (It is interesting, and perhaps revealing, that Sagar has previously written a book on D. H. Lawrence).

After this strong, somewhat startling introduction and a brief biography of Hughes up to 1957, Sagar treats each collection in order, giving us a chapter on each, before concluding with an excellent and extended bibliography, which is perhaps the most useful feature of the book. His method, unfortunately, tends to fall into an easy, repetitive pattern. In each chapter we are given a few lines about the genesis of the particular volume, followed by discussion of a few selected poems, liberally interspersed with many remarks about poetry from other critics. The chapters on Hughes' first three collections of poetry disappoint, largely because they do not go deeply enough into the actual poems. And the summaries and analyses of individual poems are often obvious, sometimes a little simplistic, and occasionally incredible, in a Thurley-like way. "No one since Hopkins had used rhythm and rhyme so powerfully," Dr. Sagar claims of the lyric "October Dawn"; a statement which weakens, by gross overstatement, his analysis of a good poem, and many readers of Hughes will find little here that is original or particularly penetrating. Sagar has some good things to say, certainly, and it is hard to disagree with statements such as this:

> Hughes watches, and makes us watch, such violence, not for frisson, but for estrangement. He wants to undermine our sense of the ordinary and let in a sense of the miraculous, a shock of recognition of ourselves as animals, as killers, as new-born babies or as corpses.

This is very close to the feeling of *The Hawk in the Rain*, and Sagar is prepared to admit that Hughes fails at times here, displaying both crudity and derivative staleness.

Lupercal he sees as "a careful pruning" of the luxuriance of the first volume. "Gone," he suggests, "are all the faults of the earlier book," and from this point he will admit little wrong with Hughes' work. The *Lupercal* chapter suffers greatly from a surfeit of long quotations (almost as much from Lawrence as from Hughes) and again from inadequate critical treatment of the poems themselves. We are kindly told, for instance, the meaning of the word "apostasy," but not that "To Paint a Water Lily" is a poem about art. And in the chapter on *Wodwo*, some extremely difficult poetry is given very generalised treatment, accompanied by an impressive, but seemingly random spray of quotations from many sources. Again we find the tendency to

exaggerate: "In the whole of *Wodwo* I can find only one stanza which could have been written by a bad poet." (What, when one examines that statement, does it really *mean*?) When we look here for help we tend to be met by vague, pseudo-Lawrentian utterances like " 'The Bear' is part of Hughes' initiation into the secrets of the earth, a confrontation with that which seems capable of swallowing all we are." Dr. Sagar is better on the stories in *Wodwo*, but as soon as he returns to the poems we are greeted with the preposterous remark that "Skylarks" "is one of the great poems of the language."

Many readers will go to this book for help with *Crow*. Widely acclaimed as a masterpiece, or condemned as pretentious gesturing, this sequence of poems has attracted much attention and much bewilderment, and this book was surely the place to attempt a coherent interpretation. However, this is the weakest part of Sagar's study. Instead of analysis, he plumps for source-material. He claims that "very few of the poems in *Crow* demand a knowledge of the mythic framework, a good deal of which can, in any case, he deduced from the poems themselves," but then he goes on to discuss the mythic framework in detail. We are treated to a dazzling display of possible source-material, often quoted at great length, including Eskimo, Celtic, Greek, English, Tibetan, Indian, East Indian, Egyptian and Biblical mythology; the works of Popa, Shakespeare, Lawrence, Graves, Laing, Jung; *The Golden Ass*, the *Romance of Taliesin*, etc. It is impressive. It may well be accurate. But it never forces us to see the pattern of *Crow*, the techniques of the poems, the humour, the tragedy, the blood and laughter, the ghoulish rhythms, the wildly various tonal qualities. This strange collection, probably, in retrospect, slightly over-praised when it appeared, is a vital and dynamic poetic act, and it is a great pity that Sagar does not bring this out more clearly. He writes that "the only important job for the critic . . . in response to a talent of this magnitude is to select the best poems and passages and try to account for the power and truth of them." Amen. Unfortunately, this book does too little of this. I wonder whether most readers, looking to Sagar for help with a difficult poet, will find their needs met by this kind of criticism:

> Thus Crow, the serpent, the dragon, the vulture, the fallen god, anathema, is resolved in Anath, the supreme goddess who preceded Jehovah in Jerusalem, the goddess responsible for perpetuating the life of the gods and of the crops, for sacrifices and for the dew. The transformation is a direct result of the 'final reconciliation' of man and his suffering to which the 'negotiations with whatever happened to be out there,' opened in *The Hawk in the Rain*, have brought Hughes.

This book should not have been called *The Art of Ted Hughes*. It is more a brief discussion of the early work and some thoughts on the sources of *Crow*, and this is a pity, because Keith Sagar obviously is a sophisticated critic well-versed in Hughes' work. Ted Hughes is probably not as important as Sagar (and Thurley) believe, but he is a fine and interesting poet, deeply concerned

with man's alienation from healthy natural energies, and he is prepared to hop out screaming on to a limb to tell us about it. And the pity is that the poems are much more interesting than their sources.

Both Geoffrey Thurley and Keith Sagar have the courage of their convictions. That I consider Thurley wrong-headed and Sagar too far from the poetry and irritatingly generalised is not as important as the propensity in both of them to exaggerate in order to make points. In both books the poetry often becomes swamped and water-logged by the massive weight of critical overstatement, and as a result, the pleasure, the delight, the craft, the humour are usually submerged, surfacing only occasionally, as if for air.

Christopher Wiseman

James R. Mellow *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company* New York. Avon Books 1975. pp. 640. pb. $2.45.

Carolyn F. Copeland *Language & Time & Gertrude Stein* Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press 1975. pp. 183. $8.95.

More important, perhaps, than the simple fact that new interest in women writers of our century is at its peak just now is the opportunity to closely examine familiar figures as new evidence is introduced and previously forgotten works are reprinted. Gertrude Stein has been in the history of her time an enigma, a sage, a figure of fun, a patron of the arts. Several recent biographers have tackled the daunting job of attempting to separate and delineate these various roles. This is an especially difficult task when dealing with a controversial figure about whom much gossip and misinformation has already been purveyed.

James R. Mellow's biography is successful in several important ways and his admirable organization is one of them. Wisely he has not attempted a "definitive" biography (p. 572). And this is not a strictly critical biography, though Gertrude Stein's major writings are discussed. Mellow's focus is on the essential character of Gertrude Stein and the bearing of this character on her world and on her writing. It is significant that he begins with the place 27, Rue de Fleurus and peoples the famous salon with its habitués, then slips back to early biographical material only gradually. The way in which Gertrude Stein manipulated and controlled the people of her immediate environment is a fascinating chronicle. Mellow reveals Miss Stein as a sometimes stubborn but ultimately generous woman. He tries to indicate how her influence grew, how her opinions foreshadowed modern ideas in literary style, art criticism, ethics. The parade of celebrated and promising expatriates through her life is well known, and only a few of the threadbare anecdotes are repeated. The totality of the impressions is continuous.

By relating Gertrude Stein constantly to those around her, Mellow maintains a balance against her own strong ideas and gives one a valuable insight into the various prejudices of her

friends and enemies. Mellow's easy style is unmannered, so flowing that it occasionally slips into prolixity and oversimplification (p. 292). I question whether an extensive note on an artist as famous as Matisse is necessary or desirable here (p. 104).

However, somehow Mellow separates the various strands of this complex life and if he occasionally criticizes his subject, he nevertheless builds surely and informatively. What eventually emerges is a portrait if not a complete biography. Mellow's portrait bears little in common with those of Picasso or Lipshitz but taken in conjunction with them it develops our knowledge of one of the leading cultural presences of our time much more amply than ever before.

Carolyn F. Copeland's study is of a very different sort. It is an attempt to examine a much more specific use of certain stylistic methods in Gertrude Stein's writing. Copeland proposes to deal with the role of the narrator in various pieces by Stein at several periods in her developing literary career. The book is divided rather arbitrarily into three sections: The Early Years, The Middle Years, The Later Years. Within these sections Copeland examines, frequently in minute detail, the place of the narrator in works which seem to demonstrate her thesis. But what is that thesis? The creation of a "narrative reality" by Gertrude Stein depends frequently on the overall impressions of the author's persona in any given work. That is to say that minute examination of specific passages do not necessarily lead us to enlightment. Copeland's method of dealing with short monographs such as "Two" and "J. H. Jane Heap" may be of some value but I question her analyses as applied to Stein's language in *The Making of Americans* or *Everybody's Autobiography*. This study is most convincing when dealing with the various temporal considerations of narrative in a book like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

I suppose the most annoying aspect of a work such as this one is its pretension. The static critical apparatus with its plodding predetermined structure, the pages of footnotes (many of them totally unnecessary), the incomplete bibliography (p. 18), the turgid, plodding prose, the digressions. Some of the tedious explanations are apparently an attempt to read Gertrude Stein's mind; but I question this method of criticism unless it is done on a grand scale (i.e. Leon Edel on Henry James).

There are too many inaccuracies here, too many quotations which could well be paraphrased, too much awkward tortured prose (p. 112, p. 74). Copeland makes a couple of points in spite of her stylistic and organizational faults, but her thesis would have been considerably clearer and more convincing if she had been able to achieve the fluency and interpenetration demonstrated by James Mellow.

F. A. Couch

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