

## Book Reviews

Gerald Graff: *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. University of Chicago Press, 1979. pp. 292.

The Canadian philosopher and social critic George Grant has stated that "in no society is it possible for many men to live outside the dominant assumptions of their age for very long." *Literature Against Itself* will be a disconcerting book for many of its readers because Graff's argument demands that we reject most of our prevailing assumptions about the nature of literature and literary criticism. His argument will only irritate those who have convinced themselves that contemporary aesthetic theories are in truth "radical" or "revolutionary", and stand in any adversary relationship to modern society. Readers less easily swayed by fashionable dogmas will find *Literature Against Itself* a stimulating and indispensable book, one which restores power and purpose to the teaching and criticism of literature.

Professor Graff's main argument is, although somewhat dispersed through various chapters, clear and cogent. Literature in our times, he says, far from stirring the human spirit and challenging the pervasive ethos of consumerism, is at best powerless and at worst actively in support of dehumanization. His book "seeks to understand why it is that we as intellectuals have defined our enterprise in ways that implicitly trivialize it . . . As if our society had not rendered literature unimportant enough already, literary intellectuals have collaborated in ensuring its ineffectuality."

Graff's explanation of what has gone wrong will not win him many friends. Instead of accepting the conventional view that there have occurred in critical thinking a series of innovative and progressive movements toward true understanding, Graff argues that literary criticism has, in its essentials, not altered very much since the Romantic "revolution." The modernist sensibility and the New Criticism are seen as a "logical evolution" from romantic theories, and the postmodernist "breakthrough" is the "logical culmination" of the premises of these earlier movements." These claims are not merely asserted; Graff documents his case impressively, displaying a gift for judicious quotation from his opponents reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's practice in *Culture and Anarchy*.

The result of this evolutionary process, Graff concludes, has been to establish a number of errors in critical thinking which have had disastrous results for our understanding of literature. "Reason," which for classical, Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers was "moral and evaluative and objective," has been reduced to "functional rationality," and associated with technological repression. "In exposing objective reason as a mere ideology, cultural radicalism leaves itself no means of legitimizing its own critique of exploitation and injustice." It is left, as well, with no means of evaluating literature, thus encouraging a pervasive relativism. The relativizing of belief is usually defended in our time as a "liberalizing strategy because it dissolves the authority of dogmatic and totalitarian systems of thought." But Graff notes that the actual effect of this strategy is to dissolve "the authority of anything that

tries to resist these systems, and smooths the moral and psychological paths to mass manipulation."

In addition to depriving us of the means of making judgments, the process described by Graff has had two other significant effects. First, it has eliminated any belief in the referential function of literature, in its relation to the "real" world of moral choices in which we must live. How then, asks Graff, can we speak of the power of literature to "help us make sense of the world when we refuse to grant it a mimetic relation to the world?" Second, and related to the first point, the study of literature (even contemporary literature) has been divorced from the study of history, again encouraging a sense of confusion and discontinuity that leaves us helpless amidst the experience of life.

There are also other effects, for our teaching of literature and literacy, for the structure of our universities, for the way in which we talk about our profession:

No problem seems more pressing in the humanities right now than the radical unaccountability that infects its talk. It is as if we see poets and critics as licensed to say anything they please, since their talk is weightless and without consequences. Yet even weightless ideas have consequences: literature, despite all sorts of utopian claims that continue to be made for it, settles all the more deeply into its familiar role as our vehicle and exemplar of socially sanctioned narcissism.

Contemporary literary theory "rationalizes the atomized culture we now inhabit," and, far from being radical, serves the interests of advanced capitalism, "with its built-in need to destroy all vestiges of tradition, all orthodox ideologies, and continuous and stable forms of reality in order to stimulate higher levels of consumption." In rendering literature powerless, the literary theories of our time have made it the servant of the very society they claim to oppose.

*Literature Against Itself* will, no doubt, be either attacked or dismissed by those who cannot liberate themselves from the dominant assumptions of the age. For those who have the patience and the will to consider his arguments, Graff's book suggests the possibility of a truly radical approach to the problems facing our discipline. Such readers may argue that Graff's account of the evolution of literary criticism is too much tailored to his argument, and that his sense of the pervasive unreason of literary theory might be qualified if he were to consider British writers as well as American and continental ones. They might even dispute his claim that the challenge to modernist ideas in the work of Auerbach, Booth, Winters and Howe "has not fully registered." But even with these caveats noted, *Literature Against Itself* remains a challenging and encouraging contribution to literary criticism.

David Jackel

F.P. Lock, *Susanna Centlivre*. Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1979, pp. 155

Although several studies of Centlivre's work remain in dissertation form, publications on her virtually all deal with bibliographical and biographical problems, or attest to her popularity as a dramatist in the interval between Congreve and Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*. Thalia Stathas' introduction to A *Bold Stroke for a Wife* is an exception; otherwise, there has been no long article

or book either analyzing Centlivre's work and placing it in a political or social context, or tracing her literary development (she wrote nineteen plays, of which three or four deserve serious treatment). Fred Lock's study thus fills a surprising gap; it is a useful account of Centlivre's life and works, evaluating her strengths as a writer as well as pointing out shifts in her dramatic practice as she learned her craft and responded to such contemporary influences as the writings of Jeremy Collier and Nicholas Rowe.

The Twayne format requires some biography and an account of everything the subject author wrote, however minor or peripheral to her development. These accounts include plot summary or description of content; whatever else the Twayne critic does, a series of plot summaries organized within a biographical framework must provide the skeleton for his discussion. Lock's biographical chapter provides no new information, but does shift capably through the early biographies to sort out probable fact from uncertainty, particularly over Centlivre's early years. "Perhaps one of the most puzzling questions is why, if she was indeed born in 1669, she did not come to London before 1700. This would have been the obvious destination for an ambitious girl conscious of her abilities but without either friends or connections" (p. 17). Centlivre's letters, and prologues and epilogues written by others are used to determine where she stood in the literary world of her time (fairly well, except from Pope's viewpoint) and to substantiate her Whig affiliations. Centlivre's Whiggish politics have been generally noted; they are one reason why Pope made her a dunce, though her anti-Catholicism and the fact that she was a woman writer are two others which Lock comments upon.

Lock avoids the potential boredom of nineteen plot summaries by providing a whole chapter on *The Busy Body* (1709), his favorite play, and relatively extended analyses of *The Wonder: A Woman Keeps a Secret* (1714) and *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1718). He treats the plays as plays, emphasizing structure and coherence, the use made of fools and humour characters (Centlivre's humourists are generally amiable), stage business, and effectively managed scenes like "The Dumb Scene" and "The Monkey Scene" in *The Busy Body*. Lock emphasizes the larger structure; the language of the plays does not yield much to close analysis. His approach makes Centlivre almost entirely the professional, more interested in discovering successful formulas than in articulating ideas or producing works of art.

Lock integrates comments on Centlivre's politics with his analyses, most notably to account for her negative portraits of fathers and guardians (he finds only one good father in the nineteen plays). Centlivre's "hatred of absolutism is seen in her opposition to the tyranny of the father, of the priest, and of the king. On the positive side, Centlivre is a vigorous advocate of personal freedom of choice and action, of religious toleration and liberty of conscience, and of government based on a strictly limited monarchy" (p. 93). But the royalist Aphra Behn came down equally hard on repressive fathers, and Lock neither considers Behn's possible impact on Centlivre (though he wrote an article on the search for a new Astraea after Behn's death and quotes letters in which Centlivre refers to herself as Astraea) nor relates Centlivre's Whig resentment of tranny to her attitudes as a woman. Lock is not insensitive to feminist considerations. He several times notes antagonism to women writers, like the actor Wilks' contempt for his role in *The Busy Body*, and Centlivre's fear of being attacked, leading sometimes to anonymous publication. However, Centlivre was willing to draw attention to her sex in the plays as in Mr. Sewall's prologue to *The Cruel Gift*, which suggests that women had a special angle on the psyche:

they could be authorities on love. Lock does not consider feminist issues in the plays, but restricts them to his consideration of the prologues, epilogues, and prefaces.

Lock indeed goes so far as to write. "It is hard to believe that a man could not have written *The Busy Body*" (p. 64). Anonymous works are notoriously hard to attribute to either sex, but we know that a woman wrote *The Busy Body* and can read the play in that light. I find the following points interesting: in one of the play's best scenes, Miranda has to pretend to be dumb in order to outwit both her guardian and her suitor. In another major scene, that suitor is compared to a pet monkey. Miranda is a schemer, but Centlivre treats female contrivances sympathetically, since women have no outlets for direct speech or action (they cannot be good Whigs). The other heroine in this play, Isabinda, is kept locked up. Miranda's guardian is trying to cheat his son out of his estate; Miranda rescues him, making his marriage to Isabinda possible. No doubt similar plot elements exist in many plays by men, but taken together they add up to a defense of clever women, a suggestion that women can protect each other, and some insinuations about men's dependency on women.

The disguise motive is prominent in various Centlivre plays. In *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, Fainwell's multiple disguises (designed to please each of Mrs. Lovely's four tyrannical guardians) can partly be explained by Mrs. Lovely's wish to see him experience the kind of role playing that *she* has endured for many years. A Quaker disguise at last permits communication. The series of disguises assumed by Isabella in *The Platonic Lady* understandably puzzles Lock (the play is awkwardly constructed), but might be explained by analogy to *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*. Women are more accustomed to playing roles than to being themselves and Isabella only appears as herself at the end.

Finally, Centlivre's decision to rework a Dryden poem, *Sigismonda and Guiscardo* (1700), in the first tragedy she wrote in many years, *The Cruel Gift* (1716), might be accounted for by the fact that *Sigismonda* is both thoroughly political (Lock fails to see this) and feminist. *Sigismonda* is a major statement about women's political condition and Centlivre is not the only eighteenth century woman writer who admired it. But she questioned the way Dryden had *Sigismonda* suppress her femininity in order to become heroic. In contrast, Centlivre's Leonora is both stoical-heroic and feminine; she also succeeds in changing her tyrannical father, while *Sigismonda* failed, and in other ways takes a more active role in the plot. In this case, a precise account of Dryden's influence would have clarified the feminism of *The Cruel Gift*.

Perhaps I am asking for another book than that which Lock wanted to write, but there is a growing interest in the lives and works of women authors in the earlier periods. Lock has satisfied this demand by giving a fair and informative account of Susanna Centlivre; we have yet to be inundated with books on women writers before Wollstonecroft. His book is valuable and it stimulated my interest. But it also frustrated me, because of its missed opportunities for new analysis.

Judith Sloman.

Carl Dawson. *Victorian Noon: English Literature in 1850*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. pp. xv, 268.

Adapting G. M. Young's label for mid-nineteenth-century England as "the Victorian noon-time," Carl Dawson patterns his book on such well-known publications as 1859: *Entering an Age of Crisis*, the Tillotson's *Mid-Victorian Studies*, and Jerome Buckley's *Victorian Temper*, concentrating on the year 1850 because its rich diversity of literature can show "much about the Romantic heritage," "the mid-nineteenth-century literary world," and "new ways of looking at certain English classics." Dawson confesses that his book is simply "one reader's account . . . of the complex and often contradictory directions" of that literature, and concedes that he has no overriding thesis. His aim is firstly descriptive, but argues that description does raise

broader, theoretical issues about the status of imagination, the uses of myth and memory, the significance of heavily used words like *nature*, the impact of religious and scientific inquiry on literary works. (p. xiii)

Inevitably, Dawson's survey rests on the work of scores of scholars and critics, for he deals with writers as diverse as Wordsworth and Dickens, Arnold and Browning, F. W. Newman and John Henry Newman, G. H. Lewes and Aubrey De Vere, and periodicals as different as Lewes's *The Leader* and G. J. Harney's *The Red Republican*, Dicken's *Household Words* and the Pre-Raphaelites' *The Germ*.

The author recognizes that the problem confronting the writer of a book like this is providing a meaningful pattern of interpretation rather than a mere chronicle. His strategy, therefore, is to seek unity and perspective. He links writers through their adopted modes, demonstrating that Tennyson, Clough, Browning, and Arnold, for instance, typify a large proportion of mid-century writers who expressed themselves autobiographically and showing that autobiographical fiction is at mid-century the characteristic form of the novel. This does not necessarily point to a debt to Wordsworth, Dawson concedes (though Kingsley fully acknowledged his debt), but *The Prelude*, he feels, is nevertheless central to the literature of 1850. Like *The Prelude*, *In Memoriam* begins "with a large crisis in the spiritual and creative life of the poet, a crisis fusing personal despair with a conviction of widespread human failure" (p. 50), and like *The Prelude*<sup>61</sup> *In Memoriam* shows the importance of "spots of time" in the building of a new self. There are striking likenesses, too, between the Alpine scenes in Book VI of *The Prelude* and Chapter 58 of *David Copperfield*, the psychological climaxes in these works (pp. 133-135). Other writings he connects through common themes or metaphors. He agrees with Saintsbury that Matthew Arnold may have derived his "metaphors of sea and islands and separation" from Thackeray's *Pendennis*; indeed, Dawson claims, "Arnold shares the sense of isolation, the metaphoric patterns and the exclamatory rhetoric with Newman, Browning, and Tennyson, as well as with Thackeray" (p. 117). And a concern with nature links writers as various as Ruskin, Dickens, the Pre-Raphaelites, and George Julian Harney, editor of *The Red Republican* (in whose pages the first English translation of the *Communist Manifesto* was published in 1850). Thus at one point (p. 118), Dawson succeeds in linking William Michael Rossetti, J. H. Newman, and Karl Marx!

But how much of this is really new? Even when Dawson makes his discriminations he seems to owe them to other writers. For instance, he remarks that "while mid-century poets inherit Romantic methods, they seem shy of

Romantic egotism and unsure of the value of their work. The expression of "inner experience", of *self*, comes with reluctance and pain." This seems to be what Jerome Buckley said in 1976 in his essay on Victorian self-consciousness in *The Mind and Art of Victorian England*, edited by J. L. Altholz:

. . . the difference between Romantic and Victorian self-consciousness is one essential difference between *The Prelude* and *In Memoriam*; whereas Wordsworth is endlessly fascinated by himself as his all-sufficient subject, Tennyson . . . is embarrassed by his tormenting self-absorption, half apologetic for his extended self-concern. . . (p. 14)

Moreover, what sort of unity is to be discerned when a key term has multiple meanings? "Probably no term," Dawson writes, "occurs as often in mid-century literature as *nature*" (p. 32), but admits to the complexity in its meanings when he indicates in the same breath that it could refer to "scenery, the order behind that scenery, a norm of temporal or casual events, the essential qualities of human beings, [or] the evident workings of God."

As one might expect, the perspective which Dawson seeks is obtained through looking before and after, comparing the literature of 1850 with earlier and later works. Nevertheless, sensible as this approach is, we feel a little discomfort when Dawson goes as far back as Macaulay's 1825 essay on Milton or even Ruskin's *Modern Painters* of 1843. His allusion to diachronic vs. synchronic literary history (p. xii) is not particularly helpful in this respect. And the fact that Dawson includes in his survey of the literature of 1850 works written long before though not published until that year (the *Prelude* being the striking example) as well as works written in that year but not published until long after (Clough's *Dipsychus*, for instance) raises unanswered questions about his strategy.

In these pages in October 1973 I took Dawson to task for the many inaccuracies in the bibliography in his Critical Heritage volume on Matthew Arnold's poetry. There are fewer complaints to be made about the present volume. "Chalk" is misspelled in the "Illustration Credits" on the verso of the title page; Robert Vaughan was editor of the *British Quarterly Review*, not of the *Quarterly Review* (p. 116); "To Marguerite — Continued" is misquoted on p. 117; "primary" is given for "primacy" in the passage from Ian Watt on p. 159; and there are five errors in transcription in the quotation from G. M. Young on p. 225, one of them substantive. He misspells "Sohrab" (p. 71) and "Renaissance" (p. 238), and supplies the wrong page number in footnote 45 on p. 244. Finally, why in a book on the literature of 1850 does he give the 1852-55 version of 1.5 of "Memorial Verses" (p. 68)?

Robert H. Tener

## Books Received

- ABRAHAM, LIONEL, *The Celibacy of Felix Greenspahn*. Johannesburg: Bateleur Press, 1977. pp. 181. unpriced.
- ALLEN, JAMES LOVIC, ed., *Yeats Four Decades After: Some Scholarly and Critical Perspectives*. Butler, Pa: Edward A. Kopper, Jr., 1979. pp. 84. \$3.00.
- BOSTON, RICHARD, *The Amiable Urquhart*. London: Gordon Fraser, 1975, pp. 205. \$13.95.
- CALLAGHAN, BARRY, *The Hogg Poems and Drawings*. Don Mills: General Publishing Co., 1978. pp. 141. \$10.00.
- CAVAFY, CONSTANTINE, *Poems*. Translated by George Khairallah. Heidelberg Press: Beirut, 1979. pp. 55. Unpriced.
- DARWALLA, KEKI N., *Crossing of Rivers*. New Poetry in India Series. Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1976. pp. 63. \$2.35.
- EATON, CHARLES EDWARD, *The Case of the Missing Photographs*. Cranbury, N.J.: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1978. pp. 239. \$10.50.
- FORD, R. A. D., *Holes in Space*. Toronto: Hounslow Press, 1979. pp. 60. Unpriced.
- GABE, DORA, *Depths*. Translated from the Bulgarian by John Robert Colombo and Nikola Roussanoff. Toronto: Hounslow Press, 1979. pp. 59. \$4.95.
- GLESS, DARRYL J., *Measure for Measure, the Law, and the Convent*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979. pp. xviii, 283. \$15.50
- GODREY, DAVID, *Dark Must Yield*. Erin, Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1978. pp. 192. Cloth \$12.00; pb. \$6.95.
- IRWIN, MICHAEL, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel*. Winchester, Mass: Allen & Unwin, 1979. pp. ix, 161. \$19.50.
- KESSLER, EDWARD, *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. pp. xi, 202. \$12.50.
- LAMBERT, BETTY, *Crossings*. Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1979. pp. 284. Cloth \$11.95; pb. \$5.95.
- PARKER, PATRICIA, *Inescapable Romance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. pp. x, 289. \$17.50.
- RIVERS, ISABEL, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*. Winchester, Mass: Allen & Unwin, 1979. pp. 231. Cloth \$25.00; p.b. \$9.95.
- SMITH, ANNE, ed., *The Novels of Thomas Hardy*. New York, Barnes & Noble, 1979. pp. 196. \$18.00.
- SNYDER, SUSAN, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979. pp. 185. \$12.50.

- SPENCE, CATHERINE HELEN. *Gathered In*. Australian Literary Reprints Series. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1977. pp. xii, 315. \$12.00 U.S.
- STUDING, RICHARD, and KRUZ, ELIZABETH. *Mannerism in Art, Literature and Music: A Bibliography*. San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1979. pp. xvii, 63. \$7.50.
- SURTEES, VIRGINIA. *Reflections of a Friendship: John Ruskin's Letters to Pauline Trevelyan, 1848-1866*. Winchester, Mass: Allen & Unwin, 1979. pp. xiii, 287. \$27.50.
- WIEBE, RUDY, SAVAGE, HARRY, and RADFORD, TOM. *Alberta: A Celebration*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1979. pp. 208. \$29.95.