

## Book Reviews

Julia M. Walker, ed., *Milton and the Idea of Woman*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988. pp. ix, 262. \$27.50.

Recently, theorists, historians, and ethnographers of the academy have shown us that the healthiest, if not the only possible, state for the institution is that of controversy. Gerald Graff has argued that the best education a student of literature might receive from his department is in the hallway debate concerning the nature — or even univocal existence — of "literature." Lewis Thomas has suggested that the most edifying spectacle the science major might take with her from a university career is the running and unresolved battle between (say) the sociobiologists and the antisociobiologists. Tracing the institution of "Modern Thought," Clifford Geertz has suggested that insofar as there is such a thing as "general consciousness" it consists of the "interplay of a disorderly crowd of not wholly commensurable visions." Underlying all this celebration of debate is the appeal for a genuine — not merely gestural — pluralism, an acceptance, as Geertz says, of the depth of the differences between one interpretive community and another. Within such a pluralism, controversy becomes not a means towards a unified understanding, but understanding itself.

Milton — man, works, institution — has always been the field, if not the breeding ground, of heated debate; indeed it is difficult to think of a literary figure who has been so repeatedly the beneficiary of scholarly and critical controversies. Both in his mortal life and in his critical afterlife Milton has been the subject of contention and the object of numerous debates. Each of these debates has presented the academic world with newly synthesized and differently discontinuous "Miltons." The most recent debate — and to my mind the one that will offer us a more vital and enriching Milton, as a writer whose mind was not reified but fertile, whose ideas were not static but solvent — is that concerning Milton's sexual politics. Within such a critical context, then, *Milton and the Idea of Woman* might be a welcome addition, containing within itself and entering a dialogue beyond itself the most recent of the "Milton controversies." As it turns out, though, *Milton and the Idea of Woman* is not in the final analysis dialogic

in the way Graff or Geertz defines dialogism. That is not to say that the book does not contain debate; it does. The degree and axes of the debate — never merely polar — may be seen by comparing three of the volume's essays that deal with *Comus*.

Susanne Woods concludes that the poem reinforces patriarchal values evidenced by the way Sabrina, the female and efficient cause of the Lady's freedom, is superseded by the Attendant Spirit, the male authorial figure who finally presents the children to their parents. Leah Marcus's "local" reading of *Comus*, which strikes me as the most successful scholarly effort in the volume, counters by valorizing Sabrina's role. Marcus begins by giving us a narrative of the unfortunate Margery Evans, a 14-year-old servingmaid who was raped in 1631, thrown in jail without formal charge, and, as happens in a patriarchal legal system, made the victim and not the recipient of judicial process. Marcus goes on to argue that Milton presented the story of the Lady (Alice Egerton) in danger of rape as a counterpoint to the Margery Evans experience, and the figure of Sabrina as an exemplar of a justice that not only vindicates but reaffirms for the victim her sense of "integrity and self-worth." Both Kathleen Wall and Marcus answer Woods by arguing that the conjunction of the Attendant Spirit's inability and Sabrina's ability to raise the Lady from the chair bespeaks the importance of Sabrina as the figure of feminine guidance in the story. This brief examination demonstrates the volume's diversity in critical methodologies and conclusions.

What makes the volume less than dialogic, less controversial than it might be, is the relative absence of feminist theory. Lacan, Freud, and Derrida make their respective entrances, but Abel, Greer, or de Beauvoir are nowhere present. Only two essays, Jackie Di Salvo's and Janet Halley's, are informed by feminist theory, and both are admirable. However, when we turn to two other essays, Marshall Grossman's and Richard Corum's, the two most (putatively) *au courant* of the essayists, we discover an underlying philosophy that, like Lacan's, Freud's, and Derrida's, is archaic in the matter of sexual politics.

Like many who believe in language's irreducible aporia, Grossman begins by defining his terms. *Differance* in his elaboration acquires a maternal aspect: "The Mother becomes the deferred text in which a male image is reproduced. . . ." It is unclear whether Grossman is interpreting Milton's works or (as he says), in an appropriative swerve, installing his ego-formation within a specific temporality. In any case, Grossman waxes clever when he defines motherhood: "For the mother is here understood as the deferred origin of a subject that presupposes her and confers upon her, by the testimony of its being, the title Mother. The mother is the place the subject creates in order that he may issue from the interior space which is the outline of his

own being and of which he is the visible testimony." In deference to his deferring, some critics might exult in this liberating the mother of her burdensome subjectivity. But, begging to differ, I find Grossman's method, like Derrida's, like Lacan's, merely sophisticated sexism. Is there any *différance* between what Grossman writes and what the Reverend George Clark had written in 1917: "In the noblest periods of a nation's history the ablest women are ambitious of bearing distinguished sons. Only in periods of decadence do women seek in barrenness to be distinguished themselves. . . ." In the end, isn't Grossman's delineation of a mute mother's birthing a male subject who will then name her another form of celebrating patriarchy, and an even more insidious form of celebration than Clark's because it parades itself as a form of subversiveness? According to the logic of Grossman's argument, had the "Mother" given birth to, let us say, a "mute, inglorious Milton," she would have received no name; likewise, Clark. And is that not precisely what has happened for millenia? In 1989, one hopes, in a volume of this sort, to find that fact deplored, not deployed in some linguistic game. If the best that one can come up with to argue a feminist point is Derrida's *Spurs*, then one might as well be beating a dead horse.

In his essay, "In White Ink: *Paradise Lost* and Milton's Ideas of Women," Corum, like Grossman, refuses to acknowledge feminist presences in his male world. White ink is what the author uses to write and, coterminously, to erase a disobedient self from the text that, in black ink I imagine, presents an obedient self. So Corum's task is to "recover an invisible 'Milton' inscribed in white ink who hides unrepentantly in the text of Milton's ideological perfection." In what is perhaps a confessional and self-reflexive moment, Corum writes, "Such is the power of subversive pleasure to be one with and at the same time to trope the scene of obedience." Like torture, and other solitary pleasures, interpretation requires a certain insensitivity to the interpreted's pain. But, behind the impassive mask of the torturer and the interpreter is the grimacing face belying the impassivity. So, when we try to recover the unrepentant Corum, in white ink, we too find one who tropes and is one with the scene of obedience. In black ink, he cites Lacan's "The Mirror Phase," but, with the sublime subtlety of white ink, he does not cite anything by Luce Irigaray, thereby enacting precisely her speculation on how Lacan's discourse of "flat mirrors" is subverted by a feminist discourse of "concave mirrors." In another trope-obedience subversion, Corum cites Derrida's "White Mythology" to validate/impress the idea of "white ink," but, again with admirable troping aplomb, does not bother to consider or cite Hélène Cixous's definition of "white ink," thereby partaking of the power of subversive pleasure. Corum concludes his essay by condemning the Milton writing in black ink and celebrating the one writing

in white. How, then, may I end this brief analysis of Corum, finding, as I do, that the one writing in black ink is neither so attractive nor so well informed about feminist theory as the one inscribed in invisible white ink? I suppose I too could celebrate one and deplore the other. But I know enough, I think, to recognize that the Corum who writes in white ink is a product of my imagination. And I am careful enough to know that the white ink you spill may be your own.

In the end, then, I find the volume's success to be marred by at least two major problems. First, as the title suggests, these are essays, for the most part, that deal with the "idea of woman" in a way that does not escape or confront the basic kinship systems operative in patriarchy. Indeed, the exchange of the "idea of woman" is only one, slight intellectual remove from the kinship exchange of "woman." It is not surprising then that Marcus's essay, the only one that deals with the material conditions of *women* in patriarchy, is the most successful effort in the volume. Second, too many of the contributors use theoretical constructs devised by men and which work towards supporting the patriarchal biases of Western culture. Lacan, Derrida, and Freud do not subvert patriarchal values or masculinist ways of intellection. That such a volume should contain only *two* essays that at all approximate a feminist argument is shameful. Had Grossman been familiar with Adrienne Rich, he would have saved himself from some puerile errors in assessing motherhood as institution and potential. Had Corum been familiar with Irigaray or Cixous, and less obedient to his patriarchs, he too might have approached a genuinely subversive reading.

In his essay on *Samson Agonistes*, John C. Ulreich twice writes "[wo]man." The first time he is quoting Aristotle; the second, Christ. This is emblematic, perhaps, of the ways a man may read the foundations of Western patriarchal culture without in any meaningful way questioning them. A genuine revision does not supplement women into male history; it discovers both the contributions women have made and the means by which these contributions and the women who made them were written out of that history. What might have redeemed this volume would have been an essay heeding Adrienne Munich's advice to examine not the sexism allegedly inherent in a canonical figure, but the sexism implicit in the critical construction of that canonical figure. Unhappily, with the exception of a few self-conscious essays, the articles in this volume just continue labouring at the construction.

In the end, then, it is a sad fact that this volume demonstrates a relative ignorance of feminist theory and a patriarchal insistence on treating woman as idea. What *Milton and the Idea of Woman* lacks are the ideas of women.

Edwin Ernest Christian, *Joyce Cary's Creative Imagination*. New York: Peter Lang, 1988. pp. 266. \$34.95.

Edwin Christian's *Joyce Cary's Creative Imagination* is intended as a general introduction to Cary's novels. To this end, Christian structures his book around Cary's notion of the "creative imagination," defined as "the constant search for new ways of understanding reality or for new expressions of age-old ideas which have lost their meaning through familiarity" (1). Christian chose Cary's notion of creative imagination as a means of introducing readers to the novels because when "examined by the light of this theme," all of Cary's "opinions, characters, plots, and attitudes show their true shapes and the unusual consistency of his work can be seen" (2). This consistency is rooted in Cary's contention "that everyone uses creative imagination in life" to construct what Christian terms "models" of reality (16, 7). Cary himself compares these constructions to "maps" of reality (*Art and Reality* 22), but Christian's invocation of model theory is felicitous.

Christian argues that although creative imagination is "the process by which people make sense of life and choose how to act" (59), virtually all of the "maps" or "models" constructed by Cary's characters fail in some degree to conform to "reality." Since the characters' "triumphs and tragedies are due largely to the congruency of their ideas of the world's nature with reality" (36), the adequacy of the various characters' "models" can be assessed by examining how reliable they are as guides to action. Accordingly, the structure of Christian's book reflects his contention that the "sum of Cary's theory of creative imagination is best discovered by analyzing the decisions his characters make and the reasons for those decisions, then determining the relative success or failure of those characters' lives" (11). Most chapters consist of a short introduction, followed by a series of character analyses, each explicating the particular form taken by that character's "creative imagination," the degree and nature of the failure of his or her "model" to conform to some aspect of reality, and the consequences of this failure. The chapters close with brief summarizing conclusions.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the soundness of Christian's readings of Cary's fiction. Especially welcome is a most interesting chapter in which Christian analyzes Cary's two long narrative poems, one of the very few critical treatments of these works in existence and (to my knowledge) the only one which places them in relation to the novels. Also of particular interest is his discussion of the role played by an inadequate education in the construction of flawed "models" of reality. Christian's detailed readings provide important support for his contention that Cary's works manifest a remarkably consistent attitude, for he suggests that by examining the inadequacies

of various "models" of reality the reader can arrive at an accurate assessment of Cary's own point of view (107). His references to the Bodleian Library's collection of Cary's notes and manuscripts in order to support individual readings and to trace consistent themes are both judicious and illuminating.

The principal weakness of this otherwise useful book is Christian's lack of rigour in discussing Cary's often idiosyncratic vocabulary. Cary is in the habit of using common terms in quite specific ways that differ from their conventional use, a fact of which Christian is aware (4). In particular, Christian errs when he equates Cary's use of the term "intuition" with "one's world-view or idea of life" (6). Cary employs the phrase "idea of life" to refer to the self-constructed "maps" or "models" of reality (Cary, *Art and Reality* 5, 24, 72-74). He reserves the word "intuition" for a complex process by which one gains insight into the nature of an objective "reality" (Cary, *Art and Reality* 1-2, 18, 31). "Intuition" certainly plays an important role in the formation of an "idea of life," but as Christian himself is at great pains to demonstrate, so does education. However, Christian fully appreciates the special nature of Cary's notion of "intuition" in relation to the process of artistic creation, and for this reason his discussions of an artist's "intuition" (in the introduction and in the chapter devoted to *The Horse's Mouth*) are insightful.

Fortunately, Christian's lapses of rigour in discussing Cary's vocabulary do not significantly impede the fulfilment of his expressed intentions. *Joyce Cary's Creative Imagination* not only provides readers with a reliable introduction to particular novels, but also argues persuasively for the consistency of one aspect of Cary's own "model" of reality.

*University of Ottawa*

JULIE FENWICK

Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli, eds., *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*. Edmonton: Longspoon/NeWest, 1986. pp. 427. \$24.95 pb.

As the semantic uncertainty in its title suggests, *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* is not an ordinary book. This book collects and celebrates writing by and about Canadian women. But *how* it collects and celebrates is just as important as *what* it collects and celebrates. Speaking of the literary production of native women, Barbara Godard notes "an increasingly active reader is required to construct their [*sic*] meaning in what has been empty space" (89). This collection not only fills the previously empty spaces of Canadian writing, but it also, through formal play and linguistic provocation, requires active readers to investigate and extend those spaces.

Consider, for example, the subtitle: *Writing Canadian Women Writing*. The syntactical arrangement of these words, along with an obvious pun on the repeated word "write," encourages at least all of the following readings: Canadian writing *is* women writing; to be a Canadian woman is to be written; Canadian women's writing needs to be "righted" — given a legitimate voice; or Canadian women's writing has always been a "righting" of women's position.

The sheer bulk (427 pages) of righting writing gathered between the voluptuously oversized (8½" x 11"), glossy, purple and green cover (by Jorge Frascara) means that this volume, quite literally, takes up space. The photographs of shells (collected off Bathurst Island, Northern Australia by printmaker Lyndal Osborne) figured on the covers and scattered, in black and white, throughout the text, configure a particularly female space of meaning-making. Because of its size, it is impossible to put this book away (all bookshelves are too small). But its issues, like its pages, are even more vast and unwieldy: the marginalization of black and native women's writing in Canada, Québécois rereadings of feminist post-structuralism (via Derrida and Lacan), feminism and nationalism, writing and speaking in the feminine, men in feminism, and feminist theatre. Neuman and Kamboureli's preface to the collection calls it a "conversation" full of different voices which signal "their divergence from our received literary history" (ix).

Not only do the theoretical and political methodologies in the essays diverge from our received literary history and our received ways of reading (and writing) literary history, *A Mazing Space* gives voice and space to unacknowledged Canadian women writers (and readers). Potential contributors, asked to extend their consideration beyond Atwood and Laurence, engage broadly and easily with such writers as Lily Dougall, Marjorie Pickthall, Hélène Ouvrard, Anne Wilkinson, Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, Sharon Riis, Betty Lambert, Louky Bersianik, Laure Conan, Anna Jameson, Maria Campbell, Sharon Pollock, Laura Goodman Salverson, Yolande Villemaire, Nicole Brossard, and many others.

Participants in the conversation include dramatists, non-fiction writers, critics, poets, and theorists. Along with the editors — Neuman's feminist interrogation of French psychoanalytic theory and Kamboureli's consideration of "the body as audience and performance" in Alice Munro — thirty-three women's voices join the French and English conversation. We hear Sarah Murphy "Putting the Great Mother together again," Louky Bersianik rereading Aristotle, Bina Friewald locating "femininely speaking" in Jameson, Heather Murray on English-Canadian women's writing becoming "less 'English,' possibly even less 'Canadian,'" Jeanne Perreault on

"Narrative strategies and feminist fundamentals," Claire Harris on "Poets in limbo" — the marginalization of black women's writing.

There are discussions of women's autobiography by Helen Buss; feminist theatre by Diane Bessai and Louise Cotnoir; and feminist theory by, among others, Linda Hutcheon, Carolyn Hlus, France Theoret, and Lola Lemire Tostevin. Fine examples of what Aritha van Herk would call "ficto-criticism" can be found in essays by Janice Williamson, Donna Bennett, Sarah Harasym, and van Herk herself. Given the overtly political challenges this book makes, I am troubled only by the editors' silence on the ideological implications of including, in *Writing Canadian Women Writing*, the voices of men (E. D. Blodgett, Douglas Barbour, Laurie Ricou, Fred Wah).

The most significant aspect of this book's publication is, I think, its publication. This first of what are now numerous anthologies and collections of writing by and about women in Canada makes a space for women's writing to be seen and heard. In the words of Nicole Brossard: "perhaps above all it is a matter of taking a space and occupying it. Of keeping an eye on what's happening and on what is often beyond us because of a lack of inquiry, a lack of information" (335). With this "volume" (all puns intended), women's writing in Canada occupies a very particular, informed space.

University of Calgary

SUSAN RUDY DORSCHT

David G. Pitt, *E. J. Pratt: The Master Years 1927-1964*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987. pp. 555. \$34.95.

This companion to *E. J. Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927* (1984), like all biographies, which are almost *fictive* offsprings of exhaustive research and astute selection, reveals as much of the pith of its creator, David Pitt, as it does of its subject, E. J. Pratt. That is both the intriguing and the annoying feature of this second volume.

The ironies which beset the poet's early life reappear in this volume. Though a popular and much awarded poet, who could publish even in journals that did not ordinarily recognize poetry, Pratt realized little financial reward for his efforts even in these master years. Though a robust and fun-loving man (Pitt documents Pratt's love of entertaining and of golf), Pratt saw his only child suffer repeated surgery and hospitalization which diminished the poet's meagre financial resources and his emotional well-being. Though a man initially tutored in the science of psychology, he participated in seances (a fact he later suppressed) in which he believed he had spoken with his dead mother. And — for Pitt, the greatest of ironies — though genuinely kind, supportive, and well liked on those accounts, Pratt continued to fabricate aspects of his own life story, exaggerating his



forgetfulness (which was very extensive to begin with), hyperbolizing his accolades, and disarming would-be critics and friends alike with offers of largess which he would dearly have loved to realize. For the most part these ironies of Pratt's life make entertaining reading, so one wonders with Pitt, why Pratt was so determined not to be seen as forthcoming about his work: having given John Sutherland help with a critical manuscript that was, according to Pitt, to change the course of Pratt criticism, he subsequently disavowed any contact with the book prior to its publication.

Where this second volume diverges from its predecessor is in its greater contribution as a document of literary and cultural history. Pratt met Mackenzie King, was a good friend of Arthur Meighan, taught with "Mike" Pearson, and took pride with Joey Smallwood in Newfoundland's entrance into Confederation. Many of the important names in Canadian literature can also be counted as Pratt's acquaintances, students, or dear friends: Charles G. D. Roberts, D. C. Scott, A. J. M. Smith, Frank Scott, Earle Birney, "Eddie" (E. K.) Brown are but a sampling of the names that cross the pages of Pitt's biography. That is not surprising, for from "dear old" (Pelham) Edgar, his mentor, to "Norrie" (Northrop) Frye, his office boy for *Canadian Poetry Magazine* and protégé, many of the Canadian literati of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s passed through Victoria College where Pratt began and ended his career as teacher of literature and became, in spirit, if not in name, department head. Even the Montreal poets who generation after generation were inclined to see themselves as avant-garde, or at least avant-Toronto, are represented in letters to and from Pratt. Though he berated the direction in Canadian poetry that the later Montreal groups seemed to be taking, Pratt was quick to recognize a like-minded spirit. Irving Layton, who had attacked him and his friend and devotee, John Sutherland, ceased to be the target of Pratt's acrimonious comments once they met at a Toronto bar. Layton claims that at a subsequent meeting of the two on the occasion of the launching of *Red Carpet for the Sun*, Pratt greeted him "by asking mischievously, 'How are your gonads?'" (486).

It is in Pitt's portrayal of Pratt's overt preference for the company of men (his stag parties were renowned) that one is apt to become annoyed, for it is difficult to say whether Pratt was a sometimes misogynist — he seems to have disliked the literary ladies, both the tea-party and the Dorothy Livesay sets — or whether Pitt has selected his material in order to perpetuate the Pratt legend. Pitt occasionally offers what was probably typical Prattian plethora on a subject that was the brunt of jokes at his stag parties: the sentimental woman writer. In writing to Arthur Smith about his continuing headaches editing *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, for example, Pratt waxes obscene: "Who would think that some of the females who in real life

are so cold that they would piss icicles would get Vesuvian with the rejection of their poems or even with the delay of publication. And what poems ye gods! They're talking about their cunts all the time in verse in lieu of their actual existence'" (307). As to the relationships which Pratt did have with women, Pitt betrays what reads like admiration for his subject: regarding Pratt's affair with a graduate student, Pitt says that Pratt "was ready for a new adventure" (217); and he seems to delight in (and perhaps embellish à la Pratt) the poet's bohemian summers in Kingston, where, among other things, Pratt introduced his friends to "Hebridean" (408) kissing. One cannot then be blamed for being unconvinced by Pitt's continual protestations of Pratt's love for home and family.

Despite the occasional flaws, Pitt's second volume, like his first, is a delightfully readable and needed piece of Canadiana. Pitt's own criticism of Pratt's poetry is informed by his intimate contact with the poet's manuscripts and letters. But, like "cautious Ned" who did not like to explicate his poetry, or who, if he did, would later disavow having done so, Pitt is careful to indicate that his major task is biography not criticism. What is not so clear — and perhaps this does not matter in the fictive world of biography — is how much Pitt has added to the myth of Pratt.

*University of Saskatchewan*

WENDY L. SCHISSEL