

Book Reviews

Timothy Brennan. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. London: Macmillan, 1989. pp. xv, 203. \$29.95.

Timothy Brennan's book enjoys some advantages over the run of thesis-generated studies, not the least of which is the worldwide translation of its subject into a household name, by courtesy of the Ayatollah's fiat. Rushdie is no longer merely an author, of however remarkable originality, but a cause, one which has made strange bedfellows — none stranger than Margaret Thatcher's government and the British literary and artistic establishment, neither of which had formerly managed to happen upon an issue conducive to the comradeship of shared outrage.

Brennan's dense and at times difficult analysis is primarily a detailed exploration, occupying four of the book's six chapters, of Rushdie's four novels: *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*. This is given direction by two opening chapters which establish key contexts for the consideration of Rushdie's work: the place of fiction in contemporary nationalism (and *vice versa*) and the relationship of Third-World literary cosmopolitanism to anti-colonial liberalism. Thus Rushdie is made both particular and representative, allowing the book at once to establish and question the role of the most internationally recognized Third-World writers in the articulation of a post-colonial voice. At times categorizing strategies incline towards the programmatic, as in the rash provision of a twin-columned checklist of contrasts between "postmodernists" and "Third-World cosmopolitans." But overall this is an original and engaging exploration of an ambitious topic.

In the process of developing his argument, Brennan obliquely suggests why the Rushdie affair should have so decisively concentrated the liberal, and not-so-liberal, Western mind. The "Third-World cosmopolitan" writers with whom Brennan associates Rushdie are distinguished by "that perpetual flight from a fixed national and ideological identity that has become the trademark of the humane cosmopolitan writer from the Third World" (142). Among the obvi-

ous manifestations of that flight is the translation of "authorial ambiguity . . . into bi-polar morality in which every group has a good and a bad expression" (89), a radical relativity that Brennan identifies as a governing principle of duality in much of Rushdie's work.

Such translation is inevitably productive of an equivocal relationship with authority and tradition, and an only marginally more secure kinship with an immigrant culture that lacks the one and strives to create the other. Twentieth-century English liberalism has often seemed at one extreme little more than effete Forsterian high-mindedness (fit raw material for the cinematic "Raj revisionism" disdained by Rushdie) or at the other mere Orwellian slumming. Brennan's Rushdie, for all his indignation in the face of Thatcher's England or the Ayatollah's Iran, cannot entirely avoid the traps laid for political good intentions by his sex and class.

If there is "something offensive about the way Rushdie often depicts women" (126), this seems ultimately less problematic for Brennan than the distance between Rushdie's mandarin sensibility, shaped by public school and Cambridge, and the experience of "the people," particularly those striving to find a voice through Britain's protean black cultures. The one cultivates detachment, the other demands engagement. The problem is identified most directly in discussion of *The Satanic Verses*, a novel that despite "the distorting images of the protests or what the media made of them . . . is, after all, primarily about a very secular England" (147). The novel's offense to "ordinary lower-class Muslims in India and Pakistan — as well as in the English cities of Bradford, Birmingham and London" is for Brennan indicative of "the class resentments that are simmering beneath the surface of an affair that has persistently been seen in religious terms alone" (145).

Brennan's own allegiances, adumbrated in his earlier analysis of decolonization, which places Third-World cosmopolitanism against the work of such pragmatic theorists as Antonio Gramsci, José Carlos Mariátegui, Amílcar Cabral, and Frantz Fanon, emerge most confidently from the shadows towards the end of his final chapter, which finds him playing Fielding to Rushdie's Godbole: "*The Satanic Verses* shows how strangely detached and insensitive the logic of cosmopolitan 'universality' can be. It may be, as he [Rushdie] says, that 'bigotry is not only a function of power', but it does not seem adequate to argue in the particular immigration/acculturation complex of contemporary Britain that the central issue is one of 'human evil'. The means of distributing that evil are obviously very unequal, and the violence that comes from defending one's identity or livelihood as opposed to one's privileges is not the same" (165).

If that is a truth, it is one to which Salman Rushdie has surely been in an uncomfortably better position to attest, at least since 14 Feb-

ruary 1989, than Timothy Brennan. But behind the occasionally facile tones of armchair identification with the oppressed stands a serious and subtle study not only of Rushdie himself but also of the paradoxes embodied in and experienced by the Third-World intellectual, who may not be the agent best equipped to solve the problem of our "still being unable to conceive of the colonial as even having a voice that matters" (166).

Given the interest of this book, and the wide circulation that its timeliness should guarantee, Macmillan might have expended a little more editorial energy in proofing it. Typographical mistakes, including a spelling error on prominent display on the back cover, and subject-verb disagreements create redundant non-Rushdian mystery. Within three pages we are told that Rushdie's family "moved to Pakistan only slightly more than ten years ago" (142) and that Pakistan is "where his family had moved from Bombay in 1964" (145). One trusts that inattention to scholarly detail has become neither an anti-colonial, nor Third-World cosmopolitan, nor postmodern virtue.

KEITH WILSON

Humphrey Carpenter. *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*. London and Boston: Faber, 1988. pp. 1005. \$40.00.

Interpretations of, commentaries on, and, of course, critical assessments of Pound's work have increased exponentially over the last few years, and to many people, the inevitable question is, Why? Why Pound, and why the increased interest now? Is Pound more amenable to the ultra-theoretical approaches to literature that have proliferated of late? Have we "discovered" that Pound has more to offer than we previously thought? Is it that critical studies come in waves, and that the tide is in once again for Pound? More cynically, is it because Pound's poetry is so obscure that any interpretation can be foisted off on us? Or, more cynically still, is Pound simply the sort of author that many an assistant professor can milk for tenure?

If Pound's very confusing works puzzle critics immensely, his hectic and controversial life challenges biographers not a whit less. Biographers of Pound, like his critics, are sharply divided. On the one hand, there are enthusiasts who believe almost everything Pound said about himself or about his poetry. Noel Stock's influential biography (*The Life of Ezra Pound*, 1970) is close to that. A disciple of Pound, Stock rarely challenges Pound's claims. On the other hand, sceptics, such as C. David Haymann (*The Last Rower*, 1976) and E. Fuller Torrey (*The Roots of Treason*, 1984), treat almost every word of Pound's as a trap. Humphrey Carpenter is well aware of the near impossibility of his task: "So agile and slippery a creature cannot be