

Book Reviews

Rachel Feldhay Brenner. *Assimilation and Assertion: The Response to the Holocaust in Mordecai Richler's Writing*. New York: Peter Lang. pp. 219. \$35.20.

Writing about the Jewish Holocaust has yielded critical insights that arise from the extraordinary nature of the subject. Because the topic is so painfully rooted in fact, writers have had to find ways of engaging with history in their creative and critical thinking. Such engagement guards against the formalist theories that have proliferated for a century, theories that would isolate literature aesthetically, linguistically, or textually. To be authentic, literature about the Holocaust must appeal beyond the text and its formal constitution. On the other hand, the Holocaust is so horrific that writers despair of rendering it accurately or intelligibly. Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, they speak instead of its inconceivable, inexpressible character, and of the nightmarish otherworldliness of "le monde concentrationnaire" (Elie Wiesel's phrase). Only surrealist techniques of contradiction and despair can do justice to the material, but these very techniques draw writers away from history and into a world of shifting rhetorical forms. The Holocaust thus makes opposing demands of those who would write about it.

The conflicting duties of literature with respect to history and fantasy provide fertile ground for critics, who have been debating this predicament for years. While Rachel Feldhay Brenner gives a competent account of Mordecai Richler's themes, she does not do justice to the complexity of this critical problem, although she acknowledges it in her opening chapter. Her problem is that while Richler frequently alludes to the Holocaust and uses it symbolically (as in the hunt for Mengele in *Saint Urbain's Horseman*), he rarely treats it directly and never depicts "le monde concentrationnaire." Consequently, if Brenner had substituted for her subtitle, "The Dilemma of Jews and Judaism in Canada," she could have presented much the same book, with the Holocaust serving as the darkest point of reference among others. Her main interest appears in her title: assimilation and assertion. She is concerned with modern Jewish identity and the fate of liberal humanism, which has been espoused so fervently by Jews, but which proved helpless against anti-Semitism,

whether vicious in Nazi Germany or genteel in Canada. Well-intentioned appeals to justice, honour, and tolerance for our common humanity fade into insignificance in view of Auschwitz. Worse, they are signs of betrayal:

From the liberal point of view, the Holocaust originated in the universality of human evil rather than in the specific issue of anti-Jewish hatred. By abstracting the Holocaust from history, the North American Jewish writer signals his desire to assimilate into the Gentile world. . . . The liberal has generalized the Holocaust to save the ideal of liberal society. Paradoxically, his attempt to universalize the suffering of his people results in a growing sense of alienation. (8-9)

Brenner is strict in her own moral standards, which direct her appraisal of Richler's characters and make her chastise him whenever he strays into nostalgia or offers an inadequate (85) response to the Holocaust. For her, liberal humanism is a delusion, at best hypocritical, and at worst cruelly self-destructive. Richler's attitude, at least as expressed in his fiction, is more complex, and I feel that Brenner does not acknowledge the complexity of his story-telling as opposed to his personal views. With some disapproval, she detects a "pattern of contradictory voices" (153) in his non-fictional writing about Judaism, but this same inconsistency can become a virtue in his fiction, where it provides a wobbly narrative vantage from which to observe the pathetic, comic, or absurd spectacle of Canadian Jews, thrown into the confusion of Richler's satiric style.

Brenner's study consists mostly of character analysis: she examines traits, motives, moral stature, and a character's relation to Judaism. I have no argument with her analysis, but I mistrust the way her approach produces so much plot summary and thematic commentary, while it diverts attention from style and tone. Brenner is careful to establish the mode of each work as comical, satiric, realistic, or ironic; but she seems content to announce these modes as facts, rather than to investigate their effects and significance. For example, she admits that characters in the middle novels are "two-dimensional typological representation[s] of social phenomena" (62), but then proceeds to discuss them as if they were real people. She announces that *The Acrobats* is comic (35), because its conclusion matches a pattern prescribed by Northrop Frye, even though she has shown that Richler's treatment is far from comic (later she calls the novel realistic [62]). She treats the deaths by gas and guillotine in *The Incomparable Atuk* so solemnly as to disregard the sheer silliness of the scenes. She notes Richler's fondness for the phrase, "We must love one another or die," but ignores how it is his parodic use of a line from W. H. Auden. She argues, correctly I believe, for the corrosive absurdity of Richler's satire in *Atuk* and *Cocksure*, but pays too little attention to its grotesque effects and, again, discusses characters as if they were people

rather than monsters. There is much more to be said about the wildness and even ferocity of his style, which confounds our sense of character and moral standing, and complicates our judgment as readers who must respond to the contradictory voices of Richler's writing.

I have stressed the faults of Brenner's book, perhaps unfairly in view of her thorough knowledge of Richler's work and her familiarity with modern Jewish issues. She has provided an informed introduction to a valuable subject. Nevertheless, I conclude by *kvetching* about the many typographical errors and the photocopied typescript that guarantees a headache after prolonged reading.

JON KERTZER

Peter de Bolla. *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. pp. vii, 324. £30.00.

This is an important, difficult, ambitious, and wide-ranging study, which most eighteenth-century scholars — including historians of all kinds, literary theorists and critics, and philosophers — will find useful and suggestive. The title has a double reference, effectively representing de Bolla's book itself as well as drawing attention to the primary discourse it analyzes; the subtitle suggests the book's interdisciplinary scope, as it attempts "to generate a historical account of the subject in and of the sublime" (291). Focussing on the period of the Seven Years' War but ranging throughout the eighteenth century, de Bolla begins by distinguishing a "discourse of" from a "discourse on" something, showing how a theoretical discourse that sets out to legislate a practice produces an excess that it cannot control, and arguing that the subject (in the sense of a subject position) emerges "adjacent to the discursive excess" (19). In Part I, de Bolla chiefly considers Burke on the sublime and beautiful, Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste*, and, in a particularly interesting section, Frances Reynolds's *Enquiry concerning the principles of taste*. The last chapter of Part I, on the national debt, shows de Bolla's skill at Pocockian scholarship and analysis.

In Part II, he examines three less dominant discourses, concerned with speaking (elocution), viewing (perspective), and reading (as an activity involving both voice and text), and he traces dominant figures, particularly that of the body, across different discursive fields that form parts of a network. The production of speaking, viewing and reading subjects is the emphasis in this part of the book: the chapter "Of the Transport of the Reader" examines the formation of what de Bolla calls the "feminized subject." The figuration in eighteenth-century reading theory of novel-reading as a disease makes