

Fiction

■ **A. S. Byatt. *The Biographer's Tale***
New York. Knopf. 2001. 301 pages
\$24. ISBN 0-375-41114-3

THE HERO OF A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* — for indeed this is a quest that requires a hero — is a “small, but perfectly formed” scholar, Phineas G. Nanson, who abandons the study of postmodern literary theory after deciding that he wants to pursue “the shining solidity of a world full of facts.” His initial plan is to write a biography of the celebrated biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes, but his pursuit of that task leads Nanson to question his easy confidence that facts can be found in a world he discovers to be full of projections, illusions, and labyrinthine puzzles.

Beginning with a great biographer as a scholarly beacon is an interesting launching point for this intertextual novel. Having given the Richard Ellmann Lectures at Emory University in 1999, Byatt might have been influenced in her depiction of Scholes Destry-Scholes by Ellmann's triumphant achievement. In his biography of James Joyce, Ellmann created a work of critical scholarship that is now an integral part of the Joyce canon. As Nanson begins his pursuit of Scholes's life story, Byatt reflects on the role of the biographer, and on the balance of restraint and fictive license in a great biography.

However, as he tries to discern and assemble the traces of Scholes's life, Nanson finds that the leads are fragmentary and end in mystery, with Scholes's disappearance into the mists of Lapland while researching a biography of Linnaeus. He also discovers that Scholes had made

notes on the lives of two other subjects: Francis Galton, the British scientist known for his theories of eugenics; and Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist. As Nanson follows their traces, he finds amazing similarities among the writings of these apparently unconnected thinkers, but he cannot discover exactly what overarching link Scholes Destry-Scholes was pursuing when he disappeared. Linnaeus, Galton, and Ibsen obviously share a historical reality outside the realm of this novel, and Byatt reinforces the factual presence by including photographs of these men in the novel itself, thus giving *The Biographer's Tale* the look of a “real” biography and suggesting that fact and fiction coexist in any narrative.

In addition to the tale of Nanson's quest among myriad historical texts for a coherent story to tell, the novel includes the tale of Nanson's part-time job in a strange travel agency that provides well-heeled, jaded world travelers with access to their most outlandish fantasies, and his love affairs with two women who seem to represent the opposite extremes of beauty. One, Vera Alphege, is delicate, ethereal, and meticulous, helping Nanson catalogue every scrap of Scholes's research notes, while the other, Fulla Biefeld, is an earthy Scandinavian biologist who introduces Nanson to the mysteries of Linnaean botany. In neither case, however, do Nanson's lovers come to life as psychologically plausible characters. They remain for the reader, as they do for Nanson himself, projections of possibilities within his own psyche, just as the travel agency suggests such a plethora of postmodern signification that it too seems to exist only in Nanson's imagination.

Ultimately, *The Biographer's Tale* succeeds as a demonstration of the fictionality of all narratives, and perhaps also of Borges's theory that there is only one narrative, of which each life story is merely a fragment. Byatt's research and assemblage of historical facts and documents is impressive, and in that sense, the novel is as impressive an accomplishment as her most acclaimed novel, *Possession*. However, as a story, the novel fails to reward the attention it demands. Phineas G. Nanson lacks the psychological depth required to carry a plot that centers almost completely on the inner life of the hero. By proliferating plot lines, and layering narrative upon narrative, Byatt assembles a highly ornate surface; but without a strong central point of view, there is no depth beneath it.

Mary Kaiser
Jefferson Community College (Alabama)

■ **John Biguenet**

The Torturer's Apprentice: Stories
New York. HarperCollins/Ecco. 2001
176 pages. \$23. ISBN 0-06-019835-4

THE TITLE IS misleading. So is the cover, with its display of tools that could hurt: scalpel, corkscrew, scissors, shears, hammer, saws. The stories do not celebrate beating, slicing, or even suturing. Extremities, there certainly are: shapes from the mind, threats of violence, uneasy transitions to another reality. Expressionism, naturalism, magical realism, and fantasy blend in the different fictive worlds of John Biguenet's stories. But each story, however strange or brief, evokes and completes a narrative. Each contains a center that holds, not minimalist slices coolly cut and displayed for some “hypocrite reader.”

The title story, certainly the most memorable, is reassuringly familiar in structure, a tale of the Inquisition that even opens with a signature “There once was . . .” Several other selections have this oral quality, recaptured in what has been called “magical realism.” “A Plague of Toads” locates in an unidentified South or Central American city, with discovered chronicles which refer to an earlier plague that ended only when some form of restitution was made to a lost emperor god. A narrator, now in exile, insists it is all true. A small gem, “A Battlefield in Moonlight,” rests on the vivid perceptions of a wounded man, impossible to verify — as is the case with the attorney obsessed with a small wax statue in “The Work of Art.”

Most of the stories feature a male protagonist who seems reliable, even ordinary, before being confronted by something strange and unyielding. The Something might be a lover who makes unreasonable demands (“Do Me”) or stigmata sores that gradually appear (“The Vulgar Soul”) or one's own family newly seen (“The Open Curtain”). In one story, a ghost child appears and disappears in the nursery (“Fatherhood”). It is less a question of leaving the disruptive element behind than of whether one can contain it through rational activity.

Some stories seem too carefully crafted. The opening three — “The Vulgar Soul,” “Rose,” and “I Am Not a Jew” — foreground or center on what I would call interesting story ideas or effects. “I Am Not a Jew,” in particular, ironically frames a character's guilt and humiliation, with an abstract moral judgment

from another character who has not really had a voiced presence up to that point.

Several pieces in this collection, including (to be candid) "The Rose," have been distinguished by their inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*, *The Pushcart Prize*, and the *O. Henry Awards* anthologies. Except for "The Vulgar Soul" and "The Work of Art," they maintain the economy one expects in the short form. The shifts in effect and subject suggest that John Biguenet might be a story source for a more psychologically based "Twilight Zone" or "One Step Beyond," should either of those admirable television series be revived.

W. M. Hagen
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■
Miriam Cooke. *Hayati: My Life*

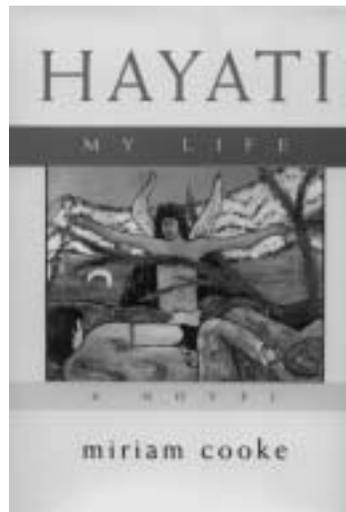
Syracuse, N.Y. Syracuse University Press
2000. x + 152 pages. \$22.95
ISBN 0-8156-0671-0

MIRIAM COOKE IS well known for her insightful literary criticism and her involvement in issues concerning Mediterranean, Asian, and Middle Eastern studies. For the past fifteen years, she has demonstrated interest in subjects related to women's writings, especially those associated with the representation of war through women's speech in the postcolonial Arab world (see e.g. *WLT* 75:2, pp. 237-45). Her recently published book, *Women Claim Islam* discusses and analyzes Islamic feminist discourse that examines the different links between language and identity. In *Hayati*, Cooke's first novel, a gripping fiction inspired by her prior works, research, and multiple trips to the Arab world, she proposes a different kind of writing, as she suggests an innovative approach to the Palestinian crisis.

By giving voices to women within three different generations, Cooke discusses the situation in Palestine from the inside. Through these women, she presents multiple perspectives and points of view, narrated through a powerful and frank testimony. As a result of such a vigorous narration, the story demands and gets readers' attention. The novel is built around several short stories that are set at different periods and in different places. However, the characters share a common condition of suffering, which is caused by war: there is Samya, representing the first generation, whose husband is killed while she is imprisoned during the British Mandate in 1929; Assia, Samya's daughter, lost a newborn baby

boy during the massacre of Dair Yasin in 1946, and lives with her husband in the shadow of this tragic death; Affaf the mute, one of Samya's granddaughters, was raped during the Iraqi invasion in 1990, and Maryam, the other granddaughter, lives in anxiety because she has been separated from her family for more than twenty-two years and also witnessed the Suez war, the Intifada, and the Iran-Iraq war.

Using an original technique, a simple style, and a historical setting, Cooke denounces the absurdity of war, which tears families and loved ones apart and causes deprivation, withdrawal, and alienation. Through repeated scenes, she demonstrates that war leads to and converges in the same repeated situation, which is similar from one generation to another. This is why, when the twelve-



year-old Maryam asks her mother to talk about war for a school assignment, Assia responds in a very aggressive tone, saying "Which war?"

Cooke presents *Hayati* in an innovative way, structuring the novel like an unorganized puzzle with thirty-three brief sections. Each section indicates the narrator and the date of the event it describes, and is composed of one or more short paragraphs containing narratives, dialogues, and visual scenes expressed through descriptions of Affaf's paintings. The novel also provides a convenient and useful chronology that allows the reader to locate each event within the overall corpus. The spontaneity of the speech, the language used, and the absence of both linearity and a conclusive ending to the story inscribes this novel within the genre of feminist writing. Women have strong voices that pull them out of their deep silence. Fiction

gives even the mute Affaf a strong voice, enabling her to free herself from the chains that prevent her from speaking.

The novel also raises an obvious paradox, however. On the one hand, the author gives voice to those who belong to the Third World, to those who are considered as oppressed, and more specifically to women from Palestine. By allowing ignored voices to be heard, Cooke's work can be viewed as belonging to the "subaltern" studies group. *Hayati* not only encourages oppressed women to express themselves, but also shows their courage and their distinctive voices. For instance, Affaf, despite her handicap and her frailty, does not hesitate to assist her mother after she is raped. Her courage and action have a great impact on the novel and produce a change in type style from italic to normal roman characters, thereby showing Cooke's subtle handling of the material. On the other hand, Cooke as a writer talks about the "other." Despite her knowledge of the subject treated in her novel, one must ask the following question: where does the authenticity of such configuration and representation of the "other" as described by a Western writer fall?

Hence, Cooke's novel contributes significantly to the debate on the "subaltern," as discussed by Spivak. It appears, in *Hayati*, that the women express a personal experience through a realistic vision of the Palestinian crisis. However, one cannot help but wonder if the novel represents the reality of Palestinian women speaking consciously on their own, or are they merely the mouthpiece of the opinion expressed? Whether *Hayati* maintains one opinion or another, one must admit the great involvement of this work of fiction with major recent critical discussions. It suggests not only the possibility for an oppressed group to speak, but also shows that if and when such a group does so, it can be heard. In the end, Affaf succeeds in speaking, and after several attempts her mother finally hears her.

Chabha Hocine
University of Illinois, Urbana

■
Lewis Davies. *My Piece of Happiness*
Cardiff, Wales. Parthian (Dufour, distr.)
2000. 220 pages. \$19.95
ISBN 1-902638-04-2

THE WELSH WRITER Lewis Davies's new novel *My Piece of Happiness* centers on George Rees, who works for a social-services "team" dedicated to assisting men-

tally handicapped men and women in Cardiff, Wales. Those he helps include Andy, confined to a wheelchair and able to undertake only the most basic communication; Sean, who holds down a newspaper-delivery job with George's help; and Sarah, Sean's girlfriend, who lives under the eye of a possessive and protective mother. Sean and Sarah, not so debilitated as Andy, yearn for intimacy, independence, acceptance — and don't understand why those things are denied them.

The novel's plot traces George's progressive disintegration as he grapples with inadequate social services, a public incomprehending of Andy, Sean, and Sarah's needs, his own isolation and loneliness, and his attachment to those needing society's helping hand — his co-workers believe he routinely becomes "too involved" with his clients. Because George's personal history is itself troubled, the reader senses early on that the novel must culminate in a catastrophe that George himself will trigger.

One great challenge in writing about characters who think and perceive differently from the majority is in finding a language true to the character yet compelling for the reader. To address this issue, Davies constructs intermittent short chapters of simple declarative sentences that render Sean's thoughts objectively: "Sean is watching a screen. A screen that flickers light, bathing his pale features in shadows of black and white. The screen cackles and splutters through a vision of static but there is no sound, only light touching Sean and the faded brown armchair which surrounds him." Davies presents the main narrative, however, in longer chapters. While these chapters maintain a realistic pace and tone, the language is sometimes trite, sometimes clumsy or melodramatic, as in the opening sentence of chapter 8, where a psychiatric hospital is described as "a dank, rambling hulk, stranded on a hill by the ravages of penicillin."

The reader does engage with George's struggle, especially in the early chapters. But as the novel progresses, neither the short chapters attempting to communicate Sean's sensibility and perceptions nor the traditional narrative generates the intensity of interest required to urge a reader through the plot.

David Lloyd
Le Moyne College

■
Bernardine Evaristo

The Emperor's Babe

London. Hamish Hamilton. 2001. xi + 253 pages. £10.99. ISBN 0-241-14114-1

THE EMPEROR'S BABE, a verse novel, is prefaced by Oscar Wilde's line "The one duty we owe history is to rewrite it" and concludes by acknowledging Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, where Bernardine Evaristo "first learnt that Africans lived in Britain during the Roman occupation nearly eighteen hundred years ago." Evaristo's book can be seen as part of the desire to imagine a usable past for black Britons of today.

There have been novels about blacks in eighteenth-century London; this is the first set in Roman London. Zuleika, the daughter of Sudanese immigrants, is unwillingly married to a rich, aristocratic Roman. He is fat, much older, and, after violently deflowering her, leaves her under guard in their villa while he is away with a nordic blonde with whom he has a family. Although having moved upward socially and economically, Zuleika feels life is passing her by, until she catches the eye of Septimius Severus, the Roman emperor who has come to England seeking to conquer Celts. He is a Libyan who has fought his way "from African boy / to Roman emperor." Their passionate affair is driven on her part by the excitement of intimacy with power as well as by physical attraction. She hopes to make him leave his wife, but he dies in York and leaves her defenseless against her husband, who, learning of her infidelity, has her poisoned.

Evaristo is a good poet with a strong streetwise sense of humor. It is amusing to read of the "wild sloping grassland of Mayfair," "the wheatfields of Hyde Park," and "the humid jungle / at Bayswater," but the playing off of contemporary slang against tags of Latin (e.g., "futuo-off") soon tires. She wittily mixes a wide range of English registers, including Cockney, American, black British, and parodied poshness, but they sound wise-crackingly alike regardless of who is speaking: "Let me ball-of-chalk you home, darlin'"; "But I need a husband! Not a touch-your-toes- / and it'll-be-ten-bucks-more number"; "I wanna be immortalized, dontchaknowit, / and ain't no one never gonna write / about your life but you. Once you're dead, / you never existed, baby, so get to it." As part of her husband's plan to educate her from street urchin to a proper matron of

his villa, Zuleika reads poetry and joins the Roman upper class in writing verse. Although she fails as a poet, her story shows how poetry can create the past. Along with Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (which seems to have been an influence on rhyming and uses of language) and Fred D'Aguiar's *Bloodlines*, *The Emperor's Babe* is a form of popular epic in which former colonials and minorities rewrite history.

Evaristo's novel is filled with historical tidbits. There are vomitoriums and regular slave markets; Zuleika's vagina is sewed up followed by months of recuperation whenever she has sex with her husband. Roman London seems at times like a culturally diverse swinging London. The wandering of Zuleika's family through the Empire to London has its clever parallels to black Britain. That is the trouble. I became tired of that gag until Zuleika started spending time with her competitive friend Alba, who relieves the boredom of her marriage with extramarital sex, and with Venus, a witty cross-dressing gay. The verse is intense when Zuleika beds the emperor; here the poetry records desire, passion, ambition, and recklessness. I wish the whole book had been at this level, but that would have been a different story.

Bruce King
Muncie, Indiana

■
Alistair MacLeod

Island: The Complete Stories

New York. Norton. 2001. v + 434 pages \$25.95. ISBN 0-393-05035-1

SOME SENSE of the precise restraint Alistair MacLeod practices in his fiction can be gleaned from the title of this splendid collection and from the fact that the sixteen stories comprising his complete short fiction have been published over the course of thirty years. Set primarily in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, these stories address the islands people inhabit as well as the often hauntingly lonesome lives people lead even amid tight-knit families and small communities. The stories draw continuously upon oral history and exhibit an unostentatious gift of story-telling, but they also dwell frequently upon isolation, independence, and eloquent silences that testify to the difficulty of telling: "I have said farewells to our children . . . and wept outwardly and inwardly for all I have not said or done and for my own clumsy failure at communication." MacLeod consistently finds the delicate but powerful balance be-

tween the volubility of the storyteller and the silences of the reticent. In a quiet, unassuming way, these stories leave the reader feeling like the narrator who remembers when he first really hears a story, when it “more or less became *mine* . . . went into me in such a way that I knew it would not leave again.”

MacLeod peoples his stories with miners, farmers, fishermen, with people who labor in what he elsewhere calls the “killing professions,” where bodies are injured and lives lost in sudden yet expected accidents. Many of the stories recall childhood experiences or family tales, but MacLeod minimizes nostalgia and idealization with his clear-sighted, pragmatic sensibility and a prose style simultaneously steady, earthy, and poetic. In this collection there are stories about a boy whose dog saves him in a fierce storm; about a young man whose imminent death hastens his grandmother’s demise; about a man’s refusal to sing the old Gaelic songs in an inauthentic, commercial form. MacLeod’s genius transcends the immediate subject matter of his stories to ruminate upon love, desire, despair, doubt, solitude, grief. He evinces throughout an overriding compassion for his characters, for their way of life, for the animals with which they live and die, and for — I can’t help but think — his readers, who profit from his steadiness, his eye for the compelling amid the ordinary, his capacious understanding and acceptance of the multitude of human emotions, motives, failures, and achievements.

MacLeod’s quiet, careful prose, his ethical sensibility, and his generous compassion account for only part of the effect of his stories, because they are also marked by a constant violence, a violence of passion, of dangerous occupations, of the

brute desire of animals to mate, of the elements, and of history. Taken in its multiplicity and repetition, this becomes an almost quotidian violence, resolutely not sensational or exploitative, but rather a constant in lives that seldom submit to the control of individuals. A miner describes his work as “the beauty of motion of the edge of violence, which by its very nature can never long endure” but which constantly recurs. Death is a regular occurrence in these stories, as children, parents, and lovers succumb to a life tempered by harsh weather, arduous and dangerous labor, remoteness, and drunkenness. Neither sentimental nor ideological, MacLeod pays homage to the laboring body, damaged, sometimes badly mutilated, but resolute in its capacities and accomplishments.

“What is the significance of ancestral islands, long left and never seen?” one of MacLeod’s narrators wonders. This question lies behind these stories, behind these characters who live in a new world haunted by the family names, accents, place names, songs, anecdotes, and lingering Gaelic that evoke their ancestral Scotland. While MacLeod narrates a world strongly demarcated by these inherited characteristics, he wisely and compellingly speaks to readers far removed from Cape Breton with his memorable and strikingly humane stories.

Jim Hannan
University of Chicago

■ **Brian O’Doherty**

The Deposition of Father McGreevy

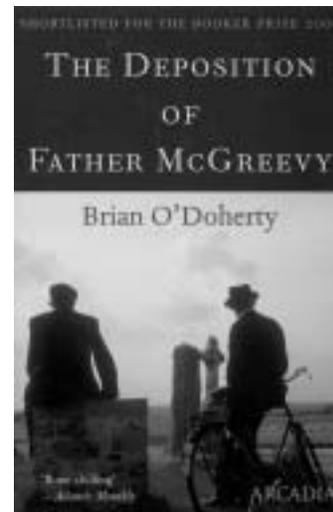
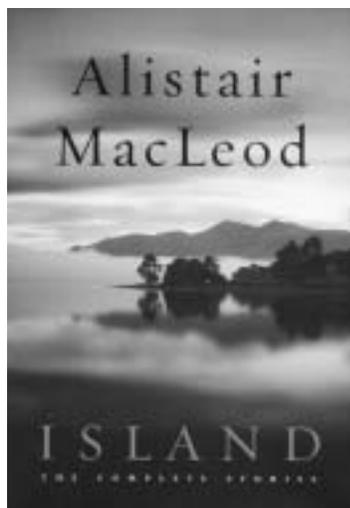
London. Arcadia (Consortium, distr.)
2000 (c1999). 314 pages. £11.99/\$14.95
ISBN 1-900850-48-6

BRIAN O’DOHERTY’S novel tells the story of the demise of a mountain village in County Kerry, Ireland, during the 1940s. Journal editor William Maginn, an Irishman resident in London, learns a little about the fate of the village through a random conversation in a pub. His interest piqued, Maginn travels to Kerry to investigate more fully what had happened. His research leads him to a deposition given to the local police by the village priest, Fr. Hugh McGreevy — Maginn’s distant relative — concerning alleged criminal conduct by men from his parish. Most of the novel consists of the priest’s deposition, which is engaging and convincing (though certainly unlike any actual deposition in its length and wealth of detail).

The priest’s soliloquy and the framing chapters draw the reader in through a series of mysteries, some presented at the novel’s outset, some arising as the story is told. What is the nature of the strange illness that afflicted the village? Did the men commit the crimes they are accused of? Is the priest culpable in some way? Was the ultimate tragedy avoidable? Not all of the questions are answered, and some are answered only ambiguously. But in refusing to offer easy explanations, O’Doherty stays true to his rich and complex material.

O’Doherty is adept at descriptions of the natural world and at creating characters and relationships that are heartbreakingly real. Father McGreevy is a good man: hardworking, devoted to his parish, endowed with the ability to analyze himself and others. But he is also a product of Irish Catholicism, committed to his faith, convinced of its crucial role in the survival of his people. While he can question his peers and superiors — his disengaged Bishop, for example — he must ultimately interpret the world from the perspective of a dedicated and opinionated priest during a period of religious conservatism in Ireland. His limitations blind Father Hugh to elements of the mountain culture in which he lives, and to certain dimensions of his parishioners, in particular “Old Biddy” McGurk, his housekeeper, a true relic from Ireland’s pagan past. The most compelling character in the novel might well be Muiris O’Sullivan, who comes to symbolize the best of what Ireland is losing as the Gaelic culture of the west slowly gives way to English-language culture and modern preoccupations.

While *The Deposition of Father McGreevy* is an engrossing and sometimes beautifully written novel, it does have flaws.



Muiris's silent and rock-solid character becomes inexplicably chatty and revelatory in the novel's conclusion. And the incorporation of sometimes lengthy footnotes to explain several of the priest's more arcane references (ostensibly written by William Maginn) leads to tonal dissonance and unnecessary interruption.

In charting the decline and demise of the village, O'Doherty investigates fascinating issues. To what extent are cultural losses (including the loss of the Irish language, the traditional way of life, the old myths and folklore) inevitable? To what extent are they due to the conflict between the Catholic Church and the still potent pre-Christian traditions and beliefs? O'Doherty conjures up an authentic mountain village in the west of Ireland during the 1940s, but he also undertakes an examination of the human spirit under tremendous stress. The result is an engrossing and intelligent novel.

David Lloyd
Le Moyne College

■ **Albert Russo. *The Age of the Pearl***
New York. Domhan Books. 2000. 202 pages. ISBN 1-58345-751-8 (752-6 paper)

THE THIRD VOLUME of Albert Russo's collected short stories contains his science fiction and fantastic tales. The reader familiar with Russo's writing may at first be somewhat puzzled by the author's exploration of these domains, which offer little scope for what Russo usually does best: i.e., sharing with his readers various human experiences of an intercultural nature.

In a recent interview, a French TV personality, confronting the accusation of taking part in a moronic program, answered: "I have read four books in forty-two days, including *1984*." His specific mention of Orwell's novel of anticipation clearly means that science fiction is commonly seen as more than mere entertainment; it has become a genre endowed with cultural value, whatever that may be. It is perceived as a restaging of, and a social commentary on, our life and world. In the case of Albert Russo's stories, it is also an attempt at human reconciliation.

One of Russo's distinctive traits as a writer is his multilingualism. Not only is he an accomplished writer in French and English, but he is also well able to play with other languages, real or virtual, in his fiction. One of his French stories, "Le Règne du Caméléon," evokes the Babel

of a language-laboratory session in which several students of different idioms come together in front of a single jack-of-all-languages instructor. For Russo, writing is a means of projecting his linguistic ability and inner cleft into fiction, as three pieces in the present collection show particularly well. "The Musichor" takes place in a society that has been submitted to a "delingualizing process," so that the thoughts of the inhabitants can be controlled through the use of a Newspeak-like idiom. The protagonist is being treated for "bouts of linguistic fits" in "such dead languages as Russian and French." "The Target" and "Article one-eleven" both explore the implications of a dictatorship based on racial "correctness," in which eugenics and medieval styles of punishment appear as the inevitable consequences of the abolition of "ethnic and national rivalries."

Science fiction and fantasy are the paths trod by Albert Russo in his quest for a pre-Babel reconciliation of man with himself in all his constitutive dimensions, linguistic and social, but also generic and transcendental. Generic distinction is, for Russo as for Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, akin to the loss of perfection. The androgyne is the norm. In the story "The Crimson Island" the protagonist comes to realize that the goddess he has a vision of, a Virgin Mary-like "Lady in Blue," is "none other than his projected self." In a more humorous vein, the extraterrestrial kite who is visiting Paris in the story "Quirk" belongs to a society that has solved/negated sexual identity even in its androgynous syntax: the personal pronoun is "s/he" when subject, and its object form is "hr."

"The Crimson Island" links the search for identity to a strong adoration of a "Lady in Blue." It is no surprise that, through many of his stories, Russo equates divinity to a figure, such as Mary, who embodies an ideal of youth, purity (the medium in one of the stories is a girl aptly called "Candice"), and beauty, which in Platonic fashion are fused in the image of the "Lady in Blue": "LOVE, i.e. TRUTH, was the source of all our enigmas, our drives and creativity . . . LOVE-ANDROGYNOUS in the cosmic sense."

Another, very prolific version of the same quest is pantheism, which is at work in many of the stories in this collection. Quirk's exploration of the Tuileries gardens leads "hr" to a very pessimistic conclusion: "The humans will be restricted within the confines of their zoo-like cities until they rediscover the funda-

mentals of life." The aptly named story "Return to the Source" ends on a "kind of osmosis" for the protagonist, who turns, Daphne-like, into an olive-tree: "He knew he had given his last breath the moment he heard leaves rustle above him, and though his eyes became tired and lackluster like those of a statue, he felt immensely relieved and elated. A bliss unknown to humankind."

The pervading feeling, when one reads through *The Age of the Pearl*, is that of human unworthiness; and the relevance of the fictional alienation brought by fantasy and science fiction is obvious. This alienation is best exposed in the title story, in which Russo's dialectical exploration of sense and the senses centers on the metaphor of the pearls, coveted objects of artificial beauty, colorful, changing, contradictory, profuse, created in amazing numbers, ironically spewed out onto our shores by millions of oysters and slowly choking humankind away from Earth. The humans in the story can only choose between death by profusion and death by sterility, just because of their initial greed and vanity.

The last story of the collection, "Kritix and Ripov," offers a funny way out. Ripov is a prolific poet who meets first a damning censor, then an enthusiastic advocate. Both lead him to a kind of death, first because of the profusion of insults, then through the reification brought about by fame (his poems "become required reading in high school" and he makes it into "the new edition of World Contemporary Literature"!); Albert Russo's final message seems to be that "real literature" is something else: a genuine, individual enjoyment of writing and reading.

Jean-Luc Breton
Paris

■ **John Updike. *Licks of Love***
New York. Knopf. 2000. 359 pages \$25. ISBN 0-375-41113-5

"LICKS OF LOVE" is the title of the novella that dominates John Updike's new short-story collection. This final narrative picks up the Angstrom clan nine years after their flawed patriarch breathed his last. Joseph Street in Brewer now houses sixty-three-year-old Janice, Rabbit's widow; Nelson, Rabbit's son; and cuckold Ronnie Harrison, Janice's second husband, he whose former wife became the long-term apple of Rabbit's eye. Ruth Leonard, the local nymphomaniac, is dead, and the illegitimate daughter she

had with Rabbit has just been told that the rodent is her father. Naturally, Annabelle comes calling on Janice in order to manage a family connection and to attach herself to this branch of the magnetic chain of humanity. Strawberry marks on backs or shoulders are scarce, but acrimony is plentiful as Annabelle, sans gypsy ancestress, snags a friendship with Nelson and ultimately a relationship with one of his friends.

Continuing in the Puritan vein of the American Renaissance, Hawthorne in particular, they all at times smart, rage, or otherwise marinate in decades of misdeeds and gloomy wrong. So Rabbit's death cannot be without its postscript. But Updike suffers as much as Hawthorne did from the same problems of creating "romance" in such a young country and with such thin background in historical time. Unfortunately, without mystery, the Stuarts, or the French Revolution, Updike turns out stereotypical characters reminiscent of case studies in a social worker's files. They come across as anecdotal figures drawn from letters to Dear Abby. Perhaps this is why Nelson, also cuckolded by his father, has become a "mental health counselor" who wears "a kind of social worker's uniform."

As I read *Licks of Love*, other books and chapters in American literature and sociology came to mind. I thought of Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*. From the opening group of short stories to the novella that usurps the collection, I felt Winesburg's gravity pulling *Licks of Love* into a familiar American solar system moving around a black sun. Intertextuality at its best. Olinger and the Dutch farm country of eastern Pennsylvania began to feel like it was littered with the "knurled apples" in Anderson's vignettes. I also recalled Roth's Neil Klugman in *Goodbye, Columbus* struggling with the three-headed monster of Capitalism, Social Stratification, and Sexuality. Caught up in the gaze of this American Cyclops, Neil was transfixed by the biggest head of them all, the one-eyed Jack.

Rabbit's surviving son and literary allusionist, Nelson, wants members of his clan to see *American Beauty* (1999). After viewing the film, Pru, Nelson's ex-wife, says, "I think that [the sex scene between Kevin Spacey and Mena Suvari] was unrealistic, too. Most men would have just screwed her anyway." Even in death Rabbit haunts his surviving family members and friends. His substantial presence inflated by his absence made me feel that rabbits should be treated like

coyotes were in Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*. Aging has not been kind to these characters. Getting and staying interested in them tends to exhaust the lingering curiosity that motivates readers of the earlier novels to find out how these contemporary velveteen rabbits are moving through time. In many ways, Updike's fourth in the series, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), brought his masterwork to a satisfying close.

This latest sequel to Updike's spate of burrowing-mammal books tends to decelerate in terms of impact like the third sequel of an initially popular film. It often feels like yet another episode of "Hares of Our Lives." The combination of interest and respect that *Licks of Love* generates feels like a Yankee version of the regard felt by the townspeople who went to look into Emily Grierson's home at the end of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Death and aging run like a leitmotiv throughout the collection. The generational picture of Updike's sex-besotted or sex-wounded "grotesques" has led to a predictable early old age for them all. They are as emotionally bereft and relationally baffled as the generation Gertrude Stein labeled "lost."

Updike's characters stumble at the starting gate and never recover. They haven't moved through the cycle of life growing and developing. They are all stuck in time, bugs in amber, artifacts of anxiety, stress, and depression. Their lives are as meaningless as they have found themselves to be. They exist and provide the "hell" that Sartre declared was other people in his play *No Exit*. The only Eros they know is sexual, and they are never more animated and eloquent than when they are in heat. No wonder Nelson wants them to see *American Beauty* and Updike portrays them as misunderstanding it.

They trust no one, even themselves. Alienated from others and without any genuine autonomy, they wallow in doubt and shame. Guilt so galvanizes them with inanition that new initiatives become second editions of the defenses that failed them in the past. Inferiority replaces industry as energy drained by depression turns against them in the form of self-devaluation. Their failure as companions is replaced by their failure as spouses, which itself is followed by their failure as parents as they reproduce replicas of their dysfunctional selves. Their social roles are striated with confusion, as they cannot embody nor integrate any identity offered to them. Incapable of intimacy, they stay sealed in

their permanent isolation, deprived of the dynamic necessary for the growth that intimacy provides. They are stagnant. Their experience of generativity which came accidentally in the form of pregnancy and birth confirmed the magic in the wand and provided yet another challenge to their capacity for separation, abandonment, and loss.

Thus we have this galaxy of predictable characters in *Licks of Love*: portraits of despair, aliens from the land of maturity, hopelessness gathering together to substitute proximity for intimacy, sex for love, irritability and defensive redneck conservatism for ego integrity. They face their fear of the grim reaper with disingenuous forms of denial. Nonetheless, *Licks of Love* ends on a fragile note of optimism that someone in the splintering barrel would survive the worm and not be so grotesquely unhappy. Thus, when Annabelle tells Nelson that she is seeing Billy, he balks at her faith in his old friend's thinking she is wonderful merely because she was able to admit her sexual abuse in front of him and Nelson. "Well, is that a good reason—?" Nelson questions. "Nelson," Annabelle responds, "no reason is perfect. But then neither are we." Mrs. Hopewell in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" could not have said it better.

Ronald Curran
University of Pittsburgh

Theater

■ Ariel Dorfman. *Speak Truth to Power: Voices from Beyond the Dark*

London. Index on Censorship (Supplement), 30:3, Issue 200, July 2001 (c2000) 46 pages, ill.

BEST KNOWN FOR *Death and the Maiden*, his 1991 play (and later film) about terrorism and torture, Ariel Dorfman has once again returned to a topic that informs a good deal of his writing: human-rights abuses. The awkwardly titled *Speak Truth to Power* is based on Kerry Kennedy Cuomo's *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World*. The book by the daughter of the late Robert Kennedy features interviews with a wide range of activists, both famous and lesser known, through which Dorfman has sifted and extracted passages that became the basis for this dramatized version.

The play had its world premiere at the Kennedy Center in September of 2000

with a star-studded cast of Hollywood actors, including Alec Baldwin, Kevin Kline, Alfre Woodard, Sigourney Weaver, Rita Moreno, John Malkovich, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. The European premiere was staged nine months later at the Playhouse Theatre in London, featuring such notables as Rupert Graves, Janet Suzman, and Rufus Sewell. Unfortunately, all of the star power behind these highly publicized productions cannot hide the fact that *Speak Truth to Power* is dramaturgically inert and does little to further the cause to which it aspires.

Technically speaking, *Speak Truth to Power* is not really a play but an elongated recitation that often sounds like the author reading Kennedy Cuomo's book aloud. Although over fifty rights activists are quoted in the work (the Dalai Lama, Václav Havel, and Marian Wright Edelman, to name just a few), none of the voices gives any hint of individuality, and the dozens of characters are invariably defined with lugubriousness and heroic resolve, often to the point of tedium. Taken alone, each story narrated by a particular activist is disturbing, but when strung together and delivered in this journalistic fashion, these numerous tales of abuse quickly lose their impact.

Ostensibly about the enigma of evil, *Speak Truth to Power* does little to examine the metaphysical nature of wrongdoing; instead, it hints broadly that evil is largely political in origin and can be overcome with knowledge and determination. It's instructive to compare this work with Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*, a two-character one-act play that explores similar territory, but in a far more philosophically effective and esthetically satisfying manner. Pinter's play, rich in subtext, is emotionally resonant, whereas the Dorfman work is basically a horizontal, consciously conceived thesis that appeals primarily to the mind. The main problem with this kind of intellectual approach in the theater is that it more often than not provides the audience with a painlessly acquired feeling of moral superiority simply by their being present at the production.

Stephen Grecco
Pennsylvania State University

■ Tennessee Williams. *Fugitive Kind*

Allean Hale, ed. New York. New Directions 2001. xxv + 147 pages. \$13.95
ISBN 0-8112-1472-9

THE MOST EXCITING THING in Tennessee Williams scholarship over the last few

years has been the (re)discovery of his "apprentice plays," not unearthed or, in some cases, produced since the late 1930s. As she has already done for two of these apprentice plays — *Not About Nightingales* and *Stairs to the Roof* (see respectively *WLT* 72:4, p. 833, and 74:4, p. 816) — Allean Hale, magisterial Williams scholar, offers an extraordinary edition of and introduction to Williams's second attempt at a long play, *Fugitive Kind*. (*Candles to the Sun*, to be published in 2002 by New Directions, was his first.) Performed in 1937 by the Mumpers, a St. Louis experimental little theater, *Fugitive Kind* is a far different work than *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, or *Night of the Iguana*.

Set in a Depression-ridden St. Louis flophouse with a cast of over thirty assorted character (and ethnic) types decrying social ills, *Fugitive Kind* reads like a combination of gangster films, Clifford Odets-style agitprop drama, melodrama, and Elmer Rice-like expressionism. Clearly, it is indebted to all of these forms, but particularly to Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, which it follows in part. In short, as Hale points out, the play flows with "kitchen sink realism." At times Williams's dialogue is puerilely trite ("Glory, you don't belong here"), but it can also be terrifyingly poetic: "Death's like a river. It's dark and running away."

Setting in *Fugitive Kind* becomes an early Tennessee trademark. The St. Louis flophouse ("This town is a jinx," says a resident) is run by a dialect-speaking Jewish father (Gwendlebaum) and his adopted, symbolically named Christian daughter Glory. It is a haven for the transients the likes of whom populate O'Neill's *Long Voyage Home* and *The Iceman Cometh*, Charles Gordone's *No Place*

to *Be Somebody*, and the assorted derelicts in David Mamet's plays. Texas, the warbling troubadour with a guitar, reminds Hale of Williams himself. Tubercular Carl, who "spits up blood all night," is callously rushed to his death by a city ambulance. The crazed Abel obsesses over setting a woman's hair on fire.

There are three main protagonists. Terry Meighan, the fugitive gangster, seeks sanctuary and talks Glory into escaping with him. In his voice — "Fugitives from justice. Naw, we're fugitives from in-justice. We're running away from stinkin traps that people tried to catch us in" — we can hear John Garfield, Humphrey Bogart, and James Cagney. Glory, the doomed damsel, and her brother Leo, the revolutionary expelled from college, are the other two principal figures. Carl voices a perennial Williams theme: "We didn't build walls around us, we don't belong — No, we're the outcasts, the lunatics, criminals — the Fugitive kind." What they flee is the law, a father's disdain (Williams's own plight), loneliness, and hollow love. But Terry never escapes; he is shot by a federal agent.

The verbal/physical imagery of *Fugitive Kind* accommodates the ambitious set: brooding cityscapes, arc lights, warning cathedral bells, and snow (atmospheric and hallucinogenic). Williams never lets us forget we are in the pit of the Depression — its humor, lingo, violence, class warfare, racism, and hopelessness.

Despite its proletarian clamor, *Fugitive Kind* is artistically proleptic. Terry first recalls Canary Jim in Williams's prison film *Nightingales* (done in 1938) and the later peripatetic Jeremiahs, Val Xavier or Chance Wayne. In his views on impending war, Leo sounds like Tom Wingfield: "Bombs will explode in the streets of Shanghai, and the rebels will make another drive on the lines at Barcelona." Glory is a precursor for Williams's women who give and lose all for love: Blanche, Alma, Heavenly. The ischemic transients foreshadow the street people in *Camino Real* and the habitués of Monk's bar in *Small Craft Warnings*. The prostitute Bertha resurfaces in the same city of St. Louis in *Hello from Bertha*. Finally, at the end of scene 3, Glory sends Terry (whom she truly loves) away because she is frightened, and as he leaves, her dull, conformist boyfriend Herman enters. Williams's stage directions read: "Dabbing her face with powder, she rushes out to join him [Herman]. We hear a truck rumbling down the street or a clanging



streetcar." Williams heard the mournful sound of a streetcar and the death of desire ten years later in 1947, when *Streetcar Named Desire* revolutionized the American theater — a greater revolution than Terry, Leo, or their creator could ever have imagined in 1937.

Once more, kudos to Allean Hale for recovering a lion's share of the early Williams canon.

Philip C. Kolin
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Verse

Geoffrey Hill. *Speech! Speech!*

Washington, D.C. Counterpoint. 2000. 60 pages. \$23. ISBN 1-58243-098-5

Geoffrey Hill's new book-length poem *Speech! Speech!* is a sequence of 120 stanzas loosely based on the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, but this is no record of libertines descending into a world of debauchery. Rather, it is a scathing look at the conditions of being available in our time and an equally scathing look at the people who have to cope with them. The jacket illustration is from Daumier and depicts an audience of particularly brainless men (they are all men) applauding a theater performance with vacuous enthusiasm. In this book human nature is not admirable, but it exists in a qualifying form.

For the poet, the conditions of being are the conditions of speech, consciousness, language, and in the opening stanzas Hill turns to these. The first three words of the book are "Erudition. Pain. Light." This is the poetic condition for Hill, but it is no different for any of us. All light and knowledge is coupled with pain. Here the curse of the fall and not the world is "too much with us." Heroic verse, he says, is "music / for taxiing to take-off; for cremation," life and death, but his commitment was to heroic verse from his first great poem, *Genesis*, so his suffering is great: "How is it tuned, how can it be un- / tuned, with lithium, this harp of nerves? Fare well / my daimon, inconstant / measures, mood-and-mind-stress, heart's rhythm." The harp of nerves is the Muse, and this is the romantic poet giving her up; but, like Byron, he says "fare well," not "farewell." His hope is that somehow she will survive and come back.

The prevailing metaphor of Hill's book is that of life as a performance, and his lines are often interrupted by stage direc-

tions such as "applause" or "laughter" to indicate the theater, at least of the mind. He receives ironic instructions in stanza 12 to remit nothing at this time, but they refer to his pain like an HMO number, indicating how little the modern world can do about it. Like Hamlet, he flirts with shuffling off "this mortal coil," but he wants to stay alive while shuffling and knows it is impossible. What saves him, as it saved Wordsworth, is memory. It is memory which, in some of the book's best lines, "wrests back / more than can be revived; inuring us / through deprivation below and beyond life, / hard-come-by loss of self self's restitution."

The difficulty of this book for the ordinary reader attracted to poetry is a detail of reference beyond the experience of most readers. In stanza 58, for instance, Hill refers elliptically to William Cowper's poem "The Castaway," to Cowper's having kept hares as pets, and to Charlotte Brontë's fascination with the poem — all in a mere three lines packed with verbal electricity!

This is a great and difficult book. Both the rewards and the difficulties of reading it are great.

David Rogers
Seton Hall University

Mimi Khalvati. *Selected Poems*

Manchester, England. Carcanet (Paul & Co., distr.) 2000. 136 pages. £6.95. ISBN 1-85754-472-2

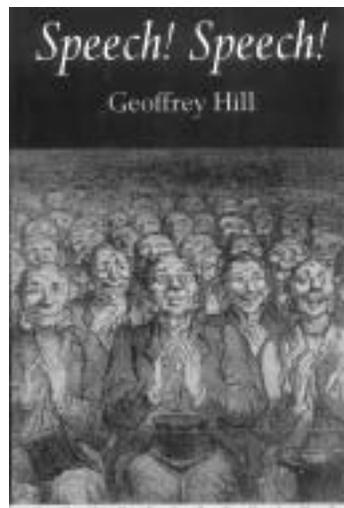
IT IS A SHOCK to realize that Mimi Khalvati has only been a published poet since 1990, when she appeared on the literary scene by winning two prizes, one of

which led to her first book, *In White Ink* (1991), with its notion that women writing are a continuation of mothers nursing their young. Mother's love and breasts remain recurring themes. The first poem republished here is "The Woman in the Wall": "And her child suckled at the wall, drew / the sweetness from the stone and grew." "Family Footnotes," "Shanklin Chine," "Sick Boy," and "Blue Moon" are about a mother and her children. Somewhere behind the volume, if such poems as "Stone of Patience" are to be trusted, are a bad marriage or an unhappy love affair or two: "And a woman faced with a lover grabbing for his shoes / when women friends would have put themselves in hers / no longer knows what's virtuous. Will anger / shift the boulder, buy her freedom and the earth's."

A feminist ideology infuses this poetry without becoming polemics or slogans. There is a seriousness in craft as well as in tone and in what it treats. *In White Ink* begins in a free verse hovering vaguely around an iambic pentameter and, as the volume progresses, becomes increasingly formal.

Khalvati is unusual in her Persian origins, which pop up in several poems based on readings about Iran rather than actual memories, as she was sent for schooling in England while young. "The Bowl" is prefaced by a passage from a late-nineteenth-century English voyager and uses a Persian bowl the way Keats used pictures on his Grecian urn to imagine a world of fancy. In her case it is a past she either never had or lost and is trying to assemble.

Fourteen poems from *In White Ink* are here, along with over thirty pages of *Mirrorwork* (1995) and the entire *Entries on Light* (1997). As Carcanet has also republished *Entries on Light* separately, the *Selected Poems* are a bargain, an inexpensive introduction to someone who has already become one of the better poets in England, indeed one of the best. She not only has traditional poetic technique at her fingertips, but has learned to give form and structure to much of what is thought of as free verse. The kind of things American poets talk about, such as breath groups, voices, indentations, and lineation, have been thought about and used by her with the same conscious craft as conventional metrics. This is possible because her poems are driven by syntax, a syntax which pushes sentences over lines, stanzas: the syntax drives the thought or argument as it does in Milton, piling simile on top of simile. But there



are many other forms. I love the ironic haiku which concludes the Persian section of *Ink*: "On the verandah / the wet-nurse thinks of her own / pomegranate tree." Wallace Stevens compressed?

Each poem seems a new start. Khalvati is no epic poet, not a writer of big themes, but each volume has its own characteristics, recurring images and words. *Mirrorwork* aims for lightness and light, many refractions, like some spacious Persian dome with its many little bits of mirror creating light. *Light* is one of her recurring words. *Entries on Light* consists of contemplations on light, each poem written at one sitting, an attempt at seeing whether it is possible to make structured verse directly from moments of inspiration. While not as hermetic as, say, French poetry, it concerns the idea rather than objects. There is an unusual sensibility here.

Bruce King
Muncie, Indiana

■ **Thomas Kinsella. *Citizen of the World***
Dublin. Dedalus (Dufour, distr.). 2001
28 pages. \$24.95 (\$14.95 paper)
ISBN 1-901233-67-7 (66-9 paper)

———. ***Littlebody***
Dublin. Dedalus (Dufour, distr.)
2001. 28 pages. \$24.95 (\$14.95 paper)
ISBN 1-901233-71-5 (70-7 paper)

THE IRISH WRITER and translator Thomas Kinsella's two recent poetry collections address a theme familiar to his readers: the precariousness and instability of human relationships. These books, released simultaneously as numbers 22 and 23 in the Peppercanister series (Kinsella himself founded Peppercanister Press), are a single publishing event. They share a spartan design: a simple cover consisting of the title and an image in black (of Oliver Goldsmith on *Citizen of the World*, of a fifteenth/sixteenth-century carving of a piper on *Littlebody*). And they share a similar unity and consistency: each is just twenty-eight pages, containing short poems or short sections cohering into longer works.

The language of the books is characterized by extreme compression and an irony that infuses almost every line but that is sometimes so delicate as to barely register, as in "Design," the opening poem of *Citizen of the World*:

Goodness is required.
It is part of the design.
Badness is understood.
It is a lapse, and part of the design.

Acknowledgement of the good
and condemnation of the bad
are required. Lapses
are not understood.

It's an irony that holds back, hinting at reserves of meaning underneath. Indeed, in their particular authority and ambiguity, these poems have more in common with the work of English poet Geoffrey Hill than with any of Kinsella's more effusive Irish contemporaries.

The title poem of *Citizen of the World* focuses on English novelist Oliver Goldsmith, and ends with this dialogue: "When Goldsmith was dying, Dr. Turton said to him / 'Your pulse is in greater danger than it should be, / from the degree of fever which you have: / is your mind at ease?' / Goldsmith answered it was not."

The poems of *Citizen of the World* and *Littlebody* depict a guiding spirit that, like Goldsmith's, is distinctly "not at ease." What fuels the unease are inadequate human connections — or the absence of such connections. Many poems provide close observations of human foibles, conceits, vanities, pretensions, and missed opportunities. Many are vignettes or portraits, scenes from larger stories presented with the artist's discerning and objective, if somewhat jaundiced, eye: "She lit the lamp inside without a word / and I knew it was the start / of another long hate" (from the last stanza of "Going Home," in *Littlebody*).

This is a poetry that doesn't pander to the reader: few people or places are identified beyond the briefest phrase, few situations fleshed out, or social or historical contexts illuminated. The poems communicate a sensibility under rigorous restraint. Indeed, some readers will long for a looser grip, while others will celebrate the discipline and expertise evident in these poems — the result of a master's many years of immersion in poetic craft.

David Lloyd
Le Moyne College

■ **Yusef Komunyakaa. *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems***
Middletown, Connecticut. Wesleyan University Press. 2001. xv + 445 pages
\$35. ISBN 0-8195-6425-7

THIS POET belongs to an American tradition that includes Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes; one can easily add Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, novelists and critics who have the sensitivity to language that one expects from good

poets. All of these writers have grown up with a parallel tradition of jazz and the blues, and indeed several of them have collaborated with musicians.

Yusef Komunyakaa, who was born in Louisiana in 1947, close to the birthplace of jazz, has made good use of this subject, but he has scarcely confined himself to the native tradition. In his poems he mentions Villon, Pushkin, Cézanne, Vallejo, and Pascal (among many others) as easily as he does Thelonious Monk or Lady Day (Billie Holiday), and he probably expects his audience to have the same familiarity with these names. On the other hand, in a late poem called "No-Good Blues" he almost seems to say that the great names in high European culture are not as important in his experience: "I try to hide in Proust, / Mallarmé, & Camus, but the no-good blues / come looking for me. Yeah, / come sliding in like good love / on a tongue of grease & sham / built up from the ground."

Like many other poets since Tennyson and Whitman, Komunyakaa tends to construct his work through sequences. The longest poem in the collection, "Testimony," is a vivid account, in fourteen sections, of the life of the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. Each section consists of two unrhymed stanzas, each in fourteen lines. In brief, here we have a sonnet sequence, perhaps Komunyakaa's finest achievement. Although he never uses rhymes, he has a strong sense of formal organization through stanzas. The solitary reader of the printed page may sense this better than the audience at a public reading, even though this poet's work has evolved from the oral traditions of song and storytelling. The printed stanza helps to shape one's response — so this reader feels.

The major public event during Komunyakaa's early career was the war in Vietnam. In 1965, after he graduated from high school, he enlisted in the army and soon found himself in Vietnam, where, fortunately, his verbal talent was recognized and he became the editor of an army newspaper. This is where his life as a poet really began. After his tour of duty was over, he attended the University of Colorado, where he had the usual training in poetry "workshops," after which he published extensively. What about his experience in Vietnam? Although he was a journalist at the time, he did not rush into print with his reactions to the war; this important phase of his life became a subject a dozen years later in two books, *Toys in a Field* (1986) and *Dien Cai Dau* (1988). They compose a

memorable and sometimes powerful group — relatively short poems in the classic mode of Imagism, mainly done in the present tense for immediacy. They made his considerable reputation, and more recently he has been honored in various ways, including the 1994 Pulitzer Prize. He is now a professor in the Creative Writing Program at Princeton.

Incidentally, Komunyakaa's recent poetry is so plentiful that an entire volume is missing from *Pleasure Dome*: namely, *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (see *WLT* 75:3/4, p. 153), published in 2000 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Readers who try to keep up with the poet will have to acquire this in addition to *Pleasure Dome*.

Ashley Brown
University of South Carolina

■ **Norbert Krapf. *Bittersweet Along the Expressway: Poems of Long Island*** Hardwick, Massachusetts. Waterline. 2000 134 pages. \$15. ISBN 0-9628492-8-6

IF GOOD POETRY has a tendency to be more subjective and introspective than other literary genres, Norbert Krapf's latest verse collection is certainly a most remarkable volume. Divided into four sections, *Bittersweet Along the Expressway* presents an intensive attempt at self-identification — in a genealogical as well as geographic, in a personal as well as universal perspective.

The first part of the collection contains the volume's title poem: a nostalgic reflection about the contrast between civilization and nature, specifically about the loss of nature caused by technology (highway traffic). The endangered nature which has been forced to retreat from man-made environment is a recurring theme in these poems, particularly in the first section, "Arriving on Paumanok." The Native American place-names of Long Island provide a linguistic archeology and historical entryway for the author, who moved to New York from rural Indiana.

The author's concern about nature is evidenced by the fact that tree names occur eight times in poem titles, but flowers and other plants also find their way into the volume's headlines. Whereas in Romantic tradition nature becomes a mirror of the poetic subject, this contemporary poetry often sees nature as damaged and under siege. Still, an encounter between nature and poetic ego is possible. In this respect, the approach of another author from the American Mid-

west, Theodore Roethke, remains relevant for Norbert Krapf.

The whole first part of this collection reflects the process of settling down in a new environment, of adjusting to the everyday life in a town (Roslyn, Long Island) different from the author's geographic and social background. It soon becomes obvious that this artistic enterprise is a major attempt at self-determination, at articulating one's place and form of existence, whereby the voice of the poem seems to become — in an autobiographic twist — the voice of the actual author. This search for one's self leads to more than one look homeward, to excursions into family history, but also to an immersion into the new *genius loci*.

The second part of the collection bears the title "When the Call Came" — i.e., the call to fatherhood and family. Of particular emotional quality are those poems dealing with the adopted children from Colombia: daughter Elizabeth and son Daniel. Apart from poems dedicated to family members, we come across more examples of the nature theme: lyrical contemplations about flowers and other plants, birds and other animals.

Of course, any genealogical review would be sorely incomplete without a tribute to the wife and her relatives. Part 3 of the collection covers this inalienable aspect in a fascinating way. "Narrative on a Four Poster Bed from Louisiana" offers a family portrait based on an heirloom object. This poetic celebration of objects surrounding us in our daily life is reminiscent of Rilke's *Dinggedichte* (Krapf translated a selection of Rilke's early poetry, *Shadows on the Sundial*, 1990). "A Cajun Story" honors the author's in-laws from Abbeville in the former French colony. The title poem of this section presents another attempt at finding harmony with nature, the past, and the present by gaining access to the spirit as a given place on Long Island ("By the Waters of Cedarmere").

Part 4, "Closest to Home," does indeed take it all home by concentrating on domestic idylls reaffirming family ties and family traditions. When the poetic ego in the title poem of this section declares, "I resolve to cultivate / that which I love / closest to home," the motif for this cultivation is a latent fear of transitoriness. As a work of literature, however, this poetic family chronicle tries to transcend the course of human life, the fate of mortality and oblivion.

Although Krapf, who received the 1999 Lucille Medwick Memorial Award of the Poetry Society of America, is clearly committed to traditional human val-

ues, his literary method is not traditional at all. His sober, unpretentious language often flows like a narrative monologue, common in contemporary American poetry. Many texts in this collection read like *poèmes en prose*. As is often the case in a poetic discourse, there is more than one reading possible. *Bittersweet Along the Expressway* is first of all a collection complete in itself and thoroughly intelligible by itself. New Yorkers may even claim it as an example of New York literature. Those readers familiar with Krapf's previous work may feel invited to read the volume as the final installment of a trilogy: *Somewhere in Southern Indiana* (1993) focuses on the geographic and ethnic background of the author (b. 1943 in Jasper, Indiana); *Blue-Eyed Grass* (1997) is a critical review of the German past, both personal and political; *Bittersweet Along the Expressway* features the author's current life at his latest place of residence. As much as the first two verse collections are warmly recommended, they are not the *conditio sine qua non* for understanding and appreciating Krapf's new volume.

Gert Niers
Ocean County College (N.J.)

■ **Philip Levine. *The Mercy*** New York. Knopf. 2000 (c1999) viii + 81 pages. \$22 (\$15 paper) ISBN 0-375-40138-5 (70135-4 paper)

READING THESE DEEPLY human and well-crafted poems is a major literary experience. They remind us of what poetry should be: not the record of merely arranging words, but a transforming experience in which human reality is given new life by the wisdom and craft of an experienced voice. If you read this book through from cover to cover, by the time you get to the superb last poem, "The Secret," you feel like saying with Edgar at the end of *Lear*, "we . . . shall never see so much / Nor live so long."

Philip Levine's poems are filled with real people, and you cannot touch their lives — including that of the poet — without being deeply moved. In "The Unknowable" we find a trumpeter playing his horn on the Williamsburg Bridge, looking down on the streets of New York, "a man who stared for years / into the breathy unknowable voice / of silence and captured the music." Other musicians appear in these poems, including Charlie Parker, "his eyes fixed on nothing," seeing it all. It is the artist, often wounded and broken, who is given the profound

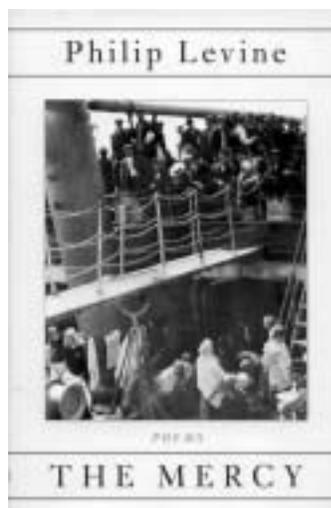
vision here. But ordinary people, if there are any ordinary people in these poems, touch the truth as well. The sheer vitality of life in the poet's grandfather, selling freestone peaches in "The New World," outhollering all competitors, is a testimony to the fullness of life. And Bernadette Strempek in "After Leviticus," breathing in "the holy air" while three serious drinkers pass a bottle of Seven Crowns, is touched by the truth that the air is holy even if slag heaps are burning.

In the title poem we see the poet's mother, age nine, on a ship called *The Mercy*, heading for New York to find her family. A sailor gives her her first orange, and "she learns that mercy is something you can eat / again and again while the juice spills over." Truth is concrete, to be tasted, a well-cooked potato, salt, oil.

The great strength of these poems is their inclusiveness of vision. In "The Dead" the dead are with the living, asking only "the least little daily miracle." The young and the old are here, those longing for life and those too tired to care. Levine sees the diversity people, but the wind also speaks to him in "The Return," "the language creation once wakened to." And as he drives through a particularly evocative valley in "I Caught a Glimpse," a door opens for him. What he sees behind it we are not told, and it quickly closes.

Craft in *The Mercy* is a control of voice so complete it amounts to a spiritual discipline. It is discipline in observation and choice of detail governed by creative love. What Levine sees is taken into himself. It emerges transformed in these remarkable poems.

David Rogers
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■
Lawrence Millman

Northern Latitudes: Prose Poems
Minneapolis. New Rivers. 2000. 71 pages
\$14.95. ISBN 0-89823-207-4

THE DAY I received *Northern Latitudes* for review was the day that its author Larry Millman came to Bear Swamp in the boreal forest of Vermont to read to a group of us gathered in from the hills at the Center for Northern Studies. This was hardly a literary gathering, treemen in wool plaid shirts, students bringing in their potluck beans to simmer on the woodstove, elderly neighbors venturing out on dirt roads on the dark night, botanists and mycophagists, friends and aficionados of the North — like Millman. Some of these folks had already found their way into Millman's writing, and others, with their backwoods quirks and arctic vagaries, might be included in his next musings.

All these Northern folks had gathered on a chilly evening to listen to this man of the North reach into his roving and bring to life these vignettes in imaginative and compelling ways. Drawn from Millman's peripatetic travels on the borders and extremes of the Northern reaches of the world, these seventy prose poems bring to literary life tiny moments of recognition, deep instances of insight from places most other readers never visit, even in their imaginations.

A glance through the table of contents of *Northern Latitudes* is like a tour of those skerries and floes and glaciers and remote places Millman seeks out: "Herschel Island: Inuit Graveyard," "Greenlandic Guesthouse," "Arctic Mushroom," "Parliament of Ravens," "Hoy Windsong," "St. Kilda Mailboat," "Ronay of the Sorrows," "The Last Angakok," or "In the Westfjords of Iceland." Some of his wanderings are imaginary, as with a hallucinatory visit from the now-extinct Beothuck Indians of Newfoundland, where ghostly presences attend his solitary campfire, their very beings arising from the flora and detritus of the place: "Their eyes are crowberries squeezed into the swartness of their lost archaic faces. Their hair is slick with melted snow and littered with spruce needles, their fists like calcified chunks of suet." These Beothucks disappeared from the planet centuries ago, but their existence still haunts their homelands.

Other of Millman's wanderings reanimate primitive forms of life in exacting, exalted prose, as in his paean to lichen, dedicated to Dick Smyth, the resident

hermit, moose and coyote and raven observer, woodchopper, mushroomer, and tender of fires at the Center for Northern Studies. Together, Millman and Smyth have plumbed the depths of fungi and lichen, and here Millman begs to *be* lichen, any lichen, "a rich orange nitrophilous lichen tumbling like a fugitive sprit from the stones of an Inuit burial cairn," or a "foliose lichen, stitch[ing] otherwise naked granite into a tapestry." And he gets to the essence of being lichen, saying, "A millennium later I'll still lack all presumption. And still grasp the rock of my choice with a full-bodied embrace." This is poetry, the searing eye of precise observation, the calculating hand of exacting description, the soaring arch of imagination, and the precise care of loved words shaping it all.

But Millman is no romantic, no dandying Victorian ethnologist, no nominal traveler. He gets right into things, living close to the ground he travels, close to the hearths he visits, and not eschewing the scatological for the sublime, as in this perfect little vignette describing a drunken Cree elder: "Only a man like him who grew up with hardly a nudge from missionaries Catholic or Anglican and neither sugar nor spice from the Hudson Bay Company trader can know that when he pisses skyward in a vigorously rising trajectory the long yellow stream will reach all the way to the moon and illuminate it." In a single sentence, its trajectory as arching as that of the Cree elder, Millman encapsulates all that is wrong and all that is good about Northern native societies in just a few select words and in a single, extraordinary image. And isn't that what poetry is all about?

Kathleen Osgood Dana
Center for Northern Studies (Vermont)

Essays

■
W. H. Auden. Lectures on Shakespeare
Arthur Kirsch, ed. London. Faber. 2000
xxiv + 398 pages. ISBN 0-571-20712-X

FOR THOSE OF US who are passionate devotees of both Auden and Shakespeare, and we are legion, it must be said that this previously unpublished book tells us more, infinitely more, about Auden than it does about Shakespeare, who after all is purportedly what it's all about. Example: "Our duties are to have . . . a right relation to God." Religious thought was extremely important to Auden, but when

he goes on to attribute that same importance to Shakespeare (if that is what he is doing), we readers can only balk, for one of the characteristic traits of WS is precisely the *lack* of religiosity in the totality of his works, in contrast to that in Milton, Dante, even Chaucer, right down through G. M. Hopkins and T. S. Eliot. There is a Friar Tuck, a few cardinals more political than religious, a Joan of Arc more witch than saint, et cetera. But what the Bard himself thought about Christianity we shall never know, for he could convincingly put himself into anyone's shoes, and express opinions accordingly.

In any event, as we work our way into this book, we realize it never did aim to be the objective introductory guide to Shakespeare's works which the title and circumstances might lead us to expect, but rather to be a subjective record of Auden's ideas, mostly on contemporary life, *as set off* by Shakespeare. As such, it certainly has its fascinations, and if we wish to learn more about Shakespeare, we'll just have to look elsewhere, as did Auden's students at New York's New School of Social Research, where these lectures were given during the 1946-47 school year. Presumably they had to read each play beforehand.

First, though, how much of this work really is Auden's? Tape recorders did not exist at the time, nor are these verbatim transcriptions of his own notes. I doubt that any of his students were stenotyping court reporters, yet the book does consist entirely of an amalgamation of the notes some of them took at the time, most notably Alan Ansen, who later became Auden's secretary, and Howard Griffen, who still later replaced Ansen. Some basic information is missing here as to how such notes can possibly have been taken at the breakneck speed of speech, which when transcribed can seem incoherent until revised. Yet these lectures read exactly as though they had been written out in full by Auden himself. Could it be that Ansen and Griffen knew shorthand? We are not told. Despite my initial misgivings, I conclude we can take these reconstructions to be authentic Auden.

Snippets will show what is going on here better than I might describe:

[*Henry V* is] where Shakespeare is getting bored.

Why do people [like Falstaff] get fat? — because they eat humble pie as their food and swallow their pride as their drink. What does drink do? It destroys the sense of time and makes one childlike and able to return

to the innocence one enjoyed before one had sex.

[Benedick and Beatrice] are the characters of Shakespeare we'd most like to sit next to at dinner.

The Merry Wives of Windsor is a very dull play indeed. We can be grateful for its having been written, because it provided the occasion of Verdi's Falstaff.

[In *Twelfth Night*] women are the only people left who have any will, which is the sign of a decadent society.

Snippets out of context can be misleading. These are not. They show Auden to be by turn sassy, profound, superficial, and not a little maddening. When is he being frivolous, when serious? Or is he simply camping it up? Whatever, even when Auden does relate to Shakespeare, what he displays remains himself.

His most egregious opinion as an outsider, and at once the most out-of-place in this context, is his disbelief in romantic love, no matter how many of Shakespeare's characters firmly believed in it and lived by it. His point *per se* may be worth pondering. But whether love is an illusion or not, it is surely one of the major motors in our lives as well as in our literatures, and as such certainly needs to be taken in light of how deeply an author or an author's characters believe love is real, not in light of what Auden says he thinks about it. Anyway, love was known to the Greeks and the Chinese long before troubadours in the South of France "invented" it, as Auden appears to believe. It therefore deserves a certain respect, a less jaded superiority on the part of however great a debunker.

All this is not to deny that at times Auden does rise above romping about. In his analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra* he is magisterial, even if on the very next play he tackles, *Coriolanus*, he is not. His contention that the latter is about "the many against the one" may show him to be unafraid of breaching accepted dogma, but he is also for the most part wrong. All other commentators, rightly I believe, hold that the main conflict is between "the many (plebeians) against the few (patricians)," with Shakespeare most likely in support of a kind of aristocracy not necessarily based on birth. One is reminded of Bernard Shaw's complaint about what's wrong with democracy: "There are more chumps than geniuses."

These lectures begin with a tedious review of the family trees of the Yorks and Lancasters (not from Ansen's notes), but items of greater interest soon appear. When Auden deigns to consider what Shakespeare was at, illuminations can re-

sult — always debatably, but that can be a good thing. Auden calls *Love's Labour's Lost* one of the most perfect of Shakespeare's plays. I always found it a dour mixture of the sublime with the ridiculous, and only upon reading Auden's comments did I realize why and how that was exactly what Shakespeare intended. That Armado, Holofernes, and Costard are incomprehensible to us today proves what buffoons Shakespeare wished to show them to be. Eureka!

You will agree, though, that the following, outrageous hooey or not, is too much, too much by miles, however thought-provoking? "I am glad that Shakespeare made Shylock a Jew. What is the source of anti-Semitism? The Jew represents seriousness to the Gentile, which is resented, because we wish to be frivolous and do not want to be reminded that something serious exists. By their existence — and this is as it should be — Jews remind us of this seriousness, which is why we desire their annihilation." If any of us might wish to add a book of such breathtakingly excessive outbursts to our shelves of Shakespeareana rather than to those of Audeniana, it could only be on the grounds that its irascibility sends us back to WS's texts, which finally is the greatest service anyone can render him.

The most practical, most useful guide to Shakespeare, *before* we read or reread his plays, remains the one written by Isaac Asimov, of all people, who believed in the scientific method. However, as Auden is one of the two foremost English-language poets of the twentieth century, his opinions and run-on thoughts remain of paramount interest to us, even if Shakespeare here is only his excuse for expressing them. It must be admitted that when it comes to Auden, the better we get to know the man, the greater the poet turns out to be, which is not true of Eliot.

Leslie Schenk
Chevilly-Larue, France

■
A. S. Byatt. On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays

Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. 2000. 196 pages \$22.95. ISBN 0-674-00451-5

A. S. BYATT believes that narrative is "as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood." In this collection of essays, Byatt reflects on her experience as a writer of richly nuanced metafiction and as a passionately en-

gaged reader of narratives that range from the journals of nineteenth-century naturalists to the tales of Scheherazade. Comprising her 1999 Ellmann Lectures at Emory University and the Finzi-Contini Lecture at Yale, as well as essays written for the collection, this is a coherent and engaging discussion of the current state of narrative writing.

A novelist who abandoned the realistic contemporary novel and turned to postmodern intertextuality in 1990 with her acclaimed novel *Possession*, Byatt can speak with firsthand knowledge of the convergence of history, biography, memoir, and novel as alternative forms of narrative. The historical novel is an example of this convergence, whose recent resurgence, she argues, may be seen as a strategy for filling the need for historical narrative at a period when history has become more tentative about proposing master narratives. A lively work of history like Simon Schama's *Citizens*, however, may be seen as bringing the past to life in much the same way as Peter Ackroyd's *Chatterton* explores the tragic life of the Romantic poet, so that the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction become less important than a narrative's ability to engage the historical imagination.

In her own narratives, from *Possession* on, Byatt has explored the possibilities of intertextuality, references to a variety of texts that provide a context for another text. In the essay "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction" she recounts the process of reading and research on Tennyson and the genesis of *In Memoriam* that led to a complex web of references in her novella *The Conjugal Angel*. The story of Byatt's research makes an interesting narrative in itself, but she also includes a discussion of the use of intertextuality in the work of other contemporary writers, contributing a useful concreteness to a hitherto hazily defined literary technique.

Anyone familiar with her recent fiction will be aware of Byatt's fascination with all types of traditional storytelling, including fairy tales, myths, fables, parables, legends, narratives long on bizarre and implausible incident and symbolic overtone, short on psychological probing. Thus, it is no surprise that several of the essays in this collection focus on the relationship between traditional tales and contemporary narrative writing. Byatt writes that she was drawn to myths and legends as models for her own writing when "I felt a need to *feel* and *analyse* less, to tell more flatly, which is sometimes more mysteriously." In the

development of fabular narratives, Byatt explains, symbolic motifs and highly patterned plots, with tales within tales, replace the dense description and character analysis of the realistic novel.

As Byatt's fiction becomes more and more interlaced with references to historical and literary lore, and as her essays revolve around discussions of narrative, the two genres seem to converge, so much so that this collection of essays could be read as a gloss on her most recent novel, *The Biographer's Tale* (see p. 145 above), or the other way around, the novel as a gloss on the essays. In either case, the theme is the centrality of narrative to our understanding of life.

Mary Kaiser

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■ Randall Jarrell

No Other Book: Selected Essays

Brad Leithauser, ed. New York. Harper-Collins. 1999 (released 2000). xxi + 376 pages. \$27.50. ISBN 0-06-118012-2

RANDALL JARRELL is now considered a transitional figure in American poetry and criticism: he followed — and predicted the demise of — High Modernism, and he never lived to witness the literary pyrotechnics and the culture wars which enlivened (to put it mildly) the last three decades of the twentieth century. One might well ask why Harper-Collins chose to publish, at this time, a selection of his major critical essays, all of which have been previously anthologized as well. Brad Leithauser, in his thoughtful and appreciative introduction, suggests three answers to this question: one is that Jarrell is arguably the best American poet-critic we have had, deserving of a single volume collecting the best of his critical prose; another is that Jarrell's criticism, far from being of merely "historical" interest, speaks directly and eloquently to many of the literary issues of our time; the third is what Leithauser calls Jarrell's "clairvoyance," his having been so right so often in his critical appraisals (on Frost, for example) that we now think of them as our own.

Though he could not have foreseen the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism as such, Jarrell did discern — and warn us about — the bubbling ooze from which these movements were to take shape and waddle their way ashore: the emergence of a culture of criticism. It is easy to forget that it has been fifty years since Jarrell's essay "The Age of Criticism" (1952), in which he worries that

"there is an atmosphere or environment, at some of the higher levels of our literary culture, in which many people find it almost impossible not to write criticism and almost impossible to write anything else," and bemoans that fact that many contemporary critics "have a language and style as institutionalized as those of sociologists," indeed a "strange sort of Law French which the critic can now set up like a Chinese wall between himself and the lay (i.e., boreable) reader."

On individual writers too, we need to be reminded of the ground Jarrell broke, of his critical audacity and courage: he was one of the first to recognize the greatness of Elizabeth Bishop; he stood up for the work of Robert Graves when the academic world scoffed; he gave us the "darker" Robert Frost who has become, once again, a poet to conjure with. (Leithauser points out that a major university-press volume of Frost criticism mentions Jarrell by name only in a few footnotes, though his ideas resound ubiquitously in the essays of the contributors.) One of Jarrell's anecdotes may explain why these battles were lonely: "When I taught at Salzburg," he writes, "I found that my European students did not find *The Waste Land* half as hard as Frost's poetry, since one went with, and the other against, all their own cultural presuppositions; I had not simply to explain 'Home Burial' to them; I had to persuade them that it was a poem." Given the Europeanized climate of American criticism in the decades to follow, scenes like this played themselves out again and again, though with different texts, in the American classroom as well. (There may be some irony in the fact that Jarrell was himself one of the great American Europhiles, but this not as a poststructuralist — it is the translator of *Faust* who unabashedly refers to Goethe as "the last of the Old Ones," who even in these essays feels comfortable quoting Goethe on Lichtenberg, Malraux on Cézanne.)

But American poetry is here Jarrell's chief concern, from Whitman to William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens and beyond. The essay "Fifty Years of American Poetry" (1963), a masterful synoptic overview from E. A. Robinson to Robert Lowell, shows Jarrell at his best: a critic at once candid and generous, brazen and deliberate, with a prose style to rival anyone's. There are twenty-three other essays in this collection, along with an interchapter of brief and memorable excerpts from a wide range of works for which there wasn't room in this volume (Leithauser calls it "A Jarrell Gallery"),

all reminding us of how quotable and aphoristic Jarrell can be. In the essay "The Taste of the Age" he writes, for example, "But literature is necessarily mixed up with truth, isn't it? . . . One can almost define literature as the union of a wish and a truth, or as a wish modified by a truth." For such phrases alone, these essays need to — and doubtless will — find a large and grateful audience.

John Boening
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Criticism

Herbert Blau. *Sails of the Herring Fleet: Essays on Beckett*

Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press
2000. x + 214 pages, ill.
ISBN 0-472-11149-3

BOTH IN THE theater and in print, Herbert Blau has been one of the foremost interpreters of Samuel Beckett's works for over forty years. Among many other distinctions, he was the director of the best-known, least-seen production of *Waiting for Godot* in that play's long history: its performance by The Actor's Workshop of San Francisco at San Quentin Prison in 1959, later immortalized in the opening chapter of Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd*. There, at least, was an audience that could find meaning in the play's apparent meaninglessness, in the seeming plotlessness of the characters' wait for (perhaps) nothing, and in the nearly uneventful duration of time that is passed in almost-solitude. For the remainder of Beckett's life, Blau remained a loyal friend and thoughtful interpreter as the playwright's work in both prose and drama became more oblique in content and more untraditional in form. *Sails of the Herring Fleet* presents twelve of Blau's essays and interviews from 1957 through 1998, introduced with a new preface by their author.

In effect, Blau's collection is two books in one. The first is a record of his friendship with Beckett and of a number of productions of the plays; the second is a group of essays linking Beckett's works to contemporary literary theory. The volume begins with Blau's now-classic program note from the Actor's Workshop production of *Godot*, simply titled "Who Is Godot?" — a question that is answered forthrightly and provocatively: "Never mind. We ain't talking. You see the play and takes your choice. But if you must have questions, there are better ones.

Who am I? What am I doing here?" The 1964 "Notes from the Underground" essay chronicles the Actor's Workshop productions of *Godot* and *Endgame*, from both of which photographs are provided as well. Two interviews are also included: "On Directing Beckett" (1992, with Lois Oppenheim) details much of the history of the Actor's Workshop as well as Blau's early productions; and "Remembering Beckett" (1996, with Marie-Claire Pasquier) offers a more personal reminiscence, especially focusing on the subject's later life. Blau's eloquent elegy, "The Less Said" (1989), echoes many unmistakable phrases from Beckett's own writings, noting that "he made it hard in mourning, to mourn him, fittingly, in anything but his own words."

Blau's essay "The Bloody Show and the Eye of Prey" was originally part of a panel on "Beckett and Deconstruction," and he lucidly links Beckett's works to the thought of Derrida and Lacan. "The Oversight of Ceaseless Eyes" extends the Lacanian analysis, rightly pointing out that Beckett's "slim volume [on] Proust . . . was an already exhaustive preface to poststructuralist themes and the specular obsessions of the discourse of desire. The loss, the lack, the rupture, all of it is there, the break in origins and the originary trace, and — in the 'gaze [that] is no longer the necromancy that sees in each precious object a mirror of the past' — the terror of separation and uncertain signs." There is also a fascinating essay on "Beckett and Barthes" (whom Blau also met in Paris), exploring "The Punctum, the Penum, and the Dream of Love."

As a record of Blau's long friendship with Beckett and as a lucid and insightful contextualization of his works within contemporary literary theory, *Sails of the Herring Fleet* is a welcome addition to the library of Beckett criticism.

William Hutchings
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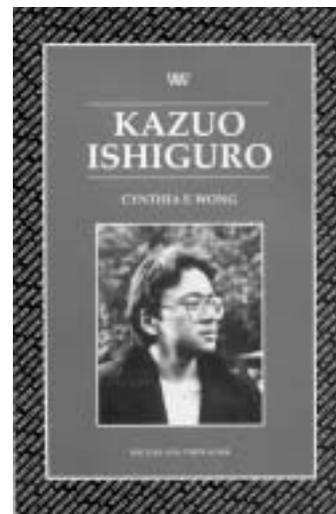
Cynthia F. Wong. *Kazuo Ishiguro*

Tavistock, England. Northcote House
2000. x + 102 pages. ISBN 0-7463-0861-2

ALTHOUGH KAZUO ISHIGURO has only published five novels, Cynthia Wong's book is the third introduction to his work, and a fourth is in the post. It is a useful book that includes a biographical outline as well as a list of criticism, reviews, and interviews, and which offers many quotations from what Ishiguro has said about his writings. An introductory chapter is

followed by one discussing criticism and theory, then by individual chapters given to each of the first four novels, from *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) to *The Unconsoled* (1995). A late addition is two pages about *When We Were Orphans* (2000; see *WLT* 74:3, p. 595).

As each of his novels evolves from the concerns of his first, the characteristics of Ishiguro's fiction are obvious, as is his desire to avoid repeating himself. There is an exiled or alienated narrator recalling his or her past in a manner which conceals part of the truth and which the reader suspects is a way to make shame or guilt acceptable. While Ishiguro plants clues to guide the reader, the story is incomplete, fragmentary, and the ending unresolved, although the telling proves some consolation to the teller. Usually there is loss of face, a coming down in the world, and an attempt to recover from humiliation. It is seldom clear what is loss of memory, self-deception, or lying. Sometimes what is said is by way of a parallel story about someone else. Private griefs are usually associated with public events; the world changes and the narrator is now in the wrong, even the wrong place. There is a generational gap, with the young holding the old as guilty, a conflict between a parent and child. There is a self-reflective element, as the narrator may be an artist (such as a painter or pianist) or someone seeking the truth about the past (a detective). Four of the five novels have some relationship to World War II. Two have to do with Japan, one with pro-fascism in England. Although the themes remain the same, Ishiguro has experimented with the form and technique by moving from the melancholy understatement of his first two novels to the Kafkaesque



humor of the lengthy *Unconsoled*, which avoids any finality.

Wong uncritically accepts Ishiguro's disclaimer of ethnic influences on his work. While he does not write about being an immigrant in England, there is an obvious influence on his plots, characters, and themes of his being the offspring of Japanese parents who came to England after World War II and of his becoming a British citizen. While Wong is good on memory and narrative technique, there is nothing here as stimulating or original as Gregory Mason's 1989 *East-West Film Journal* article about Ishiguro's images of Japan coming from Japanese films rather than from his own memories.

It is good to see the British Council's Writers and Their Work series brought back to life, but the resurrection is unfortunately accompanied by the Theory Vampire, thirsty for students taking examinations. Wong has decided that reader-response theory (remember it?) throws light on Ishiguro's unreliable narrators. We are continually informed that what Ishiguro or one of his characters says is similar to some statement by a theorist, whose jargon is quoted and then followed by an attempt to explain the already dated gibberish. With theory sucking the blood from literature and turning students batty, it is not surprising that literary criticism no longer sells.

Bruce King
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Anthology

■ Writing Black Britain, 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology

James Procter, ed. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press (St. Martin, distr.). 2000. xv + 338 pages, ill. £15.99 ISBN 0-7190-5381-1 (5382-X paper)

"THERE WERE Africans in Britain before the English came here," Peter Fryer famously says on the opening page of *Staying Power* (1984). But even if we don't go back as far as the Roman imperial army and its African soldiers, black people have been a part of the British Isles for so long, that today we cannot begin to understand Britain without taking account of black British culture. Yet within the expanding field of postcolonial studies, black Britain is an area that has only recently begun to receive proper attention: the publication of James Procter's anthology indicates that this is now changing.

Although the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had their share of British authors with African, South Asian, and Caribbean origins — and this is how the term *black* is often used in the UK — it is twentieth-century cultural production which stands at the center of the current buzz. Procter's well-made anthology begins with the year 1948, when the *SS Empire Windrush* carried the first wave of Caribbean migrants to Britain, spearheading large-scale postwar migration from former colonies to the "Mother Country." The general introduction provides useful and nuanced information which allows the reader to put into perspective the selections from fiction, poetry, and drama. And since the volume also reprints essays both on and from the periods covered, the material is generally well cushioned in contextual information.

One pressing problem for the anthologist is to strike the right balance between the number of voices to be included and the amount of space then devoted to each. Rather than leaving out too many authors, Procter has tended to be more inclusive. One consequence of this, however, is that the excerpts themselves can sometimes be short. And what is lacking sorely, no doubt for reasons of space, is some background as to the specific source of an excerpt or a poem. What, for example, is the function of the passage from *The Emigrants* in Lamming's novel?

Covering the second half of the twentieth century, Procter has subdivided his anthology into three phases: 1948 to the late sixties, then to the mideighties, and finally to 1998. These phases receive their own separate introductions, and each of them is in turn divided into two sections, with the first documenting the literary production. Here Procter includes writers from Louis Bennett and James Berry to Jackie Kay and Jean Binta Breeze. Popular writers such as Victor Headly are represented, just as is the highbrow V. S. Naipaul, the most recent winner of the Nobel Prize. The second section features essays and documents from critics like Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, A. Sivanandan, and C.L.R. James. A range of disciplines is covered, such as sociology, cultural studies, feminism, historiography and film, art and literary criticism.

Closing with a short chronology of "moments, movements and publications" and a useful bibliography, Procter's volume is a definitive resource for courses on black British literature and is also a prime starting point for those wishing to acquaint themselves with the

budding field of black British literature and culture.

Mark Stein
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Interviews

■ Salman Rushdie Interviews: A Sourcebook of His Ideas

Pradyumna S. Chauhan, ed. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood 2001. xx + 320 pages. \$75 ISBN 0-313-30809-8

WHILE SALMAN RUSHDIE is one of the major literary figures of our time, his life, views, and influences are not well known. To help fill in the picture, Pradyumna Chauhan has republished thirty-four interviews from around the world, along with a chronology, a selected bibliography, and a list of other interviews. The interviews presented are divided into two parts: 1981-88, from *Grimus* to *The Satanic Verses*; and 1989-99, from Khomeini's fatwa to *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. While the former group are mainly concerned with the meaning of specific texts and the latter argue for freedom (of speech, to discuss religion, of artists' imagination, from state and extremist terrorism), the final interviews focus once more on Rushdie's aims as a writer.

For anyone interested in Rushdie's work, the book is essential. Most pages contain some new insight, a surprising fact, a useful quotation, or a different way to see his work. I was struck by how much Rushdie was formed by and remains wedded to memories of the Bombay of his childhood. I should have known from *Midnight's Children* that his family is Kashmiri.

Reading through the interviews, I am surprised how seldom Rushdie is concerned with ideas, esthetics, or world politics; the interviews are mostly about himself and his art, especially problems of narrative technique in each of his books. These are interviews with an artist, not an intellectual — an artist who blunders into politics. Rushdie's reading appears to be mostly in fiction and in research for his books rather than in ideas. The interviews suggest that his commitments are more emotional than thought through. This perhaps explains some of the explosive charge of his best books and why he seems to stumble into defiance of the powerful without being aware how dangerous they can be. Be-

for the fatwa, Rushdie usually spoke of himself as a Marxist when he really meant something like a trendy British version of a liberal. He was against American involvement in Vietnam and Nicaragua; for similar reasons he was against oppression in India and Pakistan. Although he speaks of *The Satanic Verses* as being about the birth of religion and kinds of revelation, it reads as a secular liberal's amazement at belief, especially the kind of belief that leads to action and fanaticism.

This is someone who worked in a North London project for Bangladeshi immigrants and part of whose family left India for Muslim Pakistan, someone who was writing about the terrorism that blows up airplanes yet who had no idea that his own novel might provoke a violent response. While Rushdie says he was raised in a tolerant, secular, part-Muslim Bombay, how can he, after the bloodbath of Partition, claim that as the norm? Indeed, after the portraits of Islam in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, it is not credible. Rushdie's comments in interviews need to be examined critically. It is clear that he prepares his comments, since many are repeated almost word for word in various interviews.

While disliking nineteenth-century realism, Rushdie surprisingly speaks of himself as a realist with an imagination who builds on the comic realism or comic prose epic of the eighteenth century. He is an urban novelist (and *The Satanic Verses* is largely about London), in contrast to the Latin American magic realists. His favorite twentieth-century novelist is James Joyce. Among the influences on *The Satanic Verses* were Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (in the rivalry of the twin brothers and the "fall" motif). This is an extremely useful book for understanding Rushdie's novels and some of his blind spots.

Bruce King
Muncie, Indiana

Biography

■ **Josyane Savigneau**

Carson McCullers: A Life

Joan E. Howard, tr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. xii + 370 pages, ill. \$30
ISBN 0-395-87820-9

JOSYANE SAVIGNEAU'S volume ranks as the best of the very few French "lives" of Carson McCullers. It is less well documented and less scholarly than the defin-

itive work of Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*, which rarely indulges in personal judgments. Savigneau, on the other hand, although she admits that she has used Carr as an invaluable source of information, disagrees with her predecessor, who she says "creates a rather negative image of McCullers" and "shows little warmth or compassion for her subject." Savigneau's subjective approach rejects "objectivity" in favor of "feelings." (She never knew McCullers personally, which is probably just as well; direct knowledge might have prevented her "canonization" of Carson!)

The volume consists of ten chapters, of which one of the most diverting, "Frankie, the European," is devoted to Carson's residence in France, which is handled expertly by Savigneau, the literary editor of *Le Monde*. Carson had long desired to go to Paris, since friends like Truman Capote were always telling her about their exciting days there as expatriates. In April 1946, Carson learned that she had been awarded a Guggenheim. The cash came at a good time, and in November she and her husband Reeves boarded the *Ile de France* bound for Paris. As the European representative of Carson's publisher, I met them at the Gare St. Lazare, escorted them to their hotel, and informed the press of Carson's arrival. She was soon invited by Simone de Beauvoir, but the wonderkind of Columbus, Georgia and the queen of the existentialists had nothing to say to each other. Carson's French editor, André Bay, recounts his first luncheon with Carson. She received him, still in bed in her nightgown, with a bottle of cognac beside her and a glass of cognac in her hand: "She was unforgettable. It's not every day that you meet one of your lady authors in her nightgown."

Carson's husband wrote to friends back home that "the literary set of Paris had fallen at her feet." As a matter of fact, she had few contacts with French writers, except for a minority interested in American literature and who spoke English. She never met major figures like Malraux, Sartre, or Breton. She and Reeves frequented bars rather than bookshops. She never visited Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Co., the gathering place for American literary expatriates. However, the critic René Lalou arranged for her to speak at the Sorbonne during a conference on "the new American literature. She appeared on the platform "looking like a boy" in knickers and white socks. Lalou speaks of the occasion

in his preface to the translation of *The Member of the Wedding*: "With a graceful awkwardness, she apologized for being unable to express herself in our language, but as a sign of good will she proposed to read the last poem she had written."

Carson ended her visit to Paris after having suffered the first in a series of strokes. The doctors insisted that she return to New York to get proper care. On 4 December 1947, they both arrived on stretchers. (Reeves had suffered an attack of delirium tremens during the flight.) Carson's devoted mother was waiting for them and took them home to Nyack. Reeves soon left to get a job in New York City, and after a few months Carson joined him, since the stage version of *The Member of the Wedding* had opened on Broadway to excellent reviews.

At the beginning of 1952, they returned to Paris again after an absence of several years. On arriving, they had no place to stay, and so the Browns invited them to their big old house just outside of Paris. The hosts soon realized that this was a mistake, for the McCullerses were impossible guests, constantly drunk and quarreling and beating each other up. The Browns insisted that they leave and helped them find a house in a nearby village. At first, they were happy to have "an estate of their own," but their felicity didn't last. They drank heavily, Reeves became more and more violent, Carson's health was worsening, and by late summer 1953 she decided to return to Nyack. Reeves, alone, grew more and more desperate. Friends persuaded him to return to Paris, to a hotel on the avenue Montaigne. On the morning of 19 November, the maid found him dead in his room, following a massive overdose of drugs. Memorial services were held in the American Church, at which Truman Capote and I read passages from the Psalms. Reeves's ashes, at Carson's request, were buried in France. When notified of his death, Carson "apparently did not say a word, but only asked for a drink."

In other chapters, Savigneau traces Carson's career from her birth (as Lula Smith) in the small town of Columbus, Georgia, to studies at Columbia, a career as a writer in New York, down to her final tragic years. "Something from Tennessee" recalls her love of the South, her homeland: "After many years in Europe, I visited my home state. Until that time, I did not realize that I was homesick." The concluding chapters, "The Ultimate Rebellion" and "The Dour Desire to En-

ture," speak emotionally of the pain-ridden later years of her life, when she courageously continued to work on her autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare* (unfinished at the time of her death and published posthumously). She lived much of those years in and out of hospitals, and died in the Nyack hospital on 29 November 1967, at the age of fifty. Her funeral took place in St. James Episcopal Church in New York and was attended by many faithful old friends, including Auden, Capote, Janet Flanner, and Gypsy Rose Lee.

A touching epilogue in Sauvigneau's volume, "She Was Ageless, Carson" (essentially an interview with Mary Mercer, her psychiatrist and lover), bids Carson a moving farewell, praising her "mad desire to stay alive, to live, and to write" — fitting final words for this admirable and eminently readable celebration of Carson McCullers as an artist and as a person.

John L. Brown
Washington, D.C.

Thomas A. Underwood

Allen Tate: Orphan of the South

Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press 2000. viii + 447 pages + 16 plates. \$35 ISBN 0-691-06950-6

THOMAS UNDERWOOD, an "independent scholar" who has taught at Harvard, spent years on this (presumably) first volume of his biography of Allen Tate, which covers the period 1899-1938 (Tate died in 1978). One hopes it may be followed by a concluding volume, since *Orphan of the South* ranks as the most authoritative treatment yet of the early years of Tate's life. Underwood has a wide-ranging knowledge of the post-Civil War South, as well as of Tate's career, based not only on published sources but also on his subject's personal correspondence and notes, to which he had been given full access, as well as on interviews with Tate's friends — and critics.

Tate was recognized early as a promising young Southern writer, as one of the founders of "the Fugitives" (a group of Vanderbilt intellectuals), as a poet whose mentor was T. S. Eliot, who hailed him as "the best poet writing in America," as a critic who vigorously defended the esthetic doctrines of Eliot, Pound, and the "Modernists," and as a social and political activist and a leader of the "Agrarians," a movement which attacked industrialization and capitalism in favor of a traditional Southern agricultural society.

His own Southern birth played a decisive role in his formation, both as a person and as an artist. His family life was far from idyllic. His father John Orley Tate, aggressively "macho" and given to violence, womanizing, gambling, and drinking, squandered his inheritance and condemned his family to a life of financial insecurity. His mother Eleanor Custies Parks Varnell invented her own family background in order to play the role of an aristocratic Southern belle. Unable to take charge of her maverick husband, she tyrannized Allen, the youngest of her three sons.

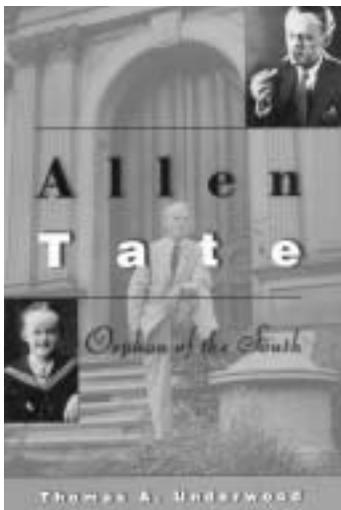
With the family always on the move, fleeing their creditors, Allen attended a series of secondary schools, where his record was far from brilliant. (Underwood gives in full detail his subject's grades in both high school and college — one example, among many, of his often tiresome tendency to "heap up the plate.") Tate managed nevertheless to gain admission to Vanderbilt, where he made many friends, including John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and others, members of a poetry group that met to discuss Modernism and aspired to lead Southern literature out of the nineteenth century. The group decided to publish a poetry magazine, *The Fugitive*, whose first issue appeared in April 1922. By the autumn of 1922, broke as usual, Allen had to work in his brother Ben's coal firm in order to earn enough money to return to Vanderbilt, where he finally obtained a degree in October 1923. More and more, however, Allen desired to leave the South. "Here am I," he lamented, "a fungus on a decayed magnolia stump!" He arrived in New York in June 1924 and went to stay with Hart Crane, through whom he met other Manhattan Modernists. But soon,

"a Southerner at heart," he wanted to leave the city. He headed South and stayed with R. P. Warren in Gaithersburg, where he met Caroline Gordon, a young journalist who had written an article for her paper, "The Best Poets in the U.S. Here in Tennessee." They immediately fell for each other and soon were making love in the village graveyard!

But now Tate longed to go back to New York. He got a job with a small publisher and returned in November 1924. He became even more conscious of the conflict between North and South, of the problem of "Who am I" and "Where am I from." His affair with Caroline had turned out badly. She insisted that he marry her since she was pregnant. Tate finally agreed, but only on the condition that she would ask for a divorce as soon as the child was born. They wed in a joyless ceremony in New York in May 1925. Soon afterward, they divorced. Meanwhile, their daughter Nancy was born, whereupon they remarried . . . and remained so for nearly twenty years, when Caroline, fed up with Tate's incurable philandering, divorced him again.

When Allen lost his publishing job in New York, the Tates went to stay with Malcolm Cowley in Connecticut, where he wrote an enthusiastic introduction to Hart Crane's *The Bridge*. Back in New York, he wrote *Ode to the Confederate Dead*, considered one of his finest poems; it marked the beginning of a long period during which he was absorbed by Southern culture and the history of his family. When his New York publishers offered him a contract to write a biography of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, he immediately accepted. In the resulting book, Tate denounced the North as "bent on destroying civil liberty in America by freeing the slaves." The success of the Jackson biography persuaded Harcourt Brace to accept Tate's *Fugitives: An Anthology of Verse*, and his first book of poetry, *The Pope and Other Poems* (1928), revealed that he had rejected modernism to write about the historical imagination of modern Southerners.

Thanks to his success, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in September 1929 he sailed off to Europe with his wife and daughter. In England, he visited his "mentor," Eliot, who "seemed like a New England minister." In Paris, he met Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, ("the best American novelist of his generation" and "a fatuous drunk"), and also Gertrude Stein, "mad as the March Hare." Back in the U.S., he organized with Ransom and Davidson a group which would become the Agrarians, de-



voted "to the defense of spiritual values." Their controversial activities kept Tate from his writing, however, and he finally decided to withdraw his active support. Still, he assisted in editing an "Agrarian anthology," *I'll Take My Stand*, to which he contributed an article titled "Remarks on Southern Religion." Meanwhile, he also published *Three Poems and Poems, 1928-1931*, both criticized for their "obscurantist pedantry." He also edited a special number of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* on "Southern Poetry." It was harshly criticized by Pound, and Tate struck back: "Pound lacks the natural dignity of a Negro field hand."

Tate was having difficulty in settling down to work on *The Fathers*, a semifictional account of his own family, when he realized that his project was more a work of history to be researched than it was "a novel to be imagined." But after a visit to Georgetown which brought back a host of youthful memories, he had "a creative explosion," producing several significant chapters on the fate of slaves in the Old South. *The Fathers* was published in 1938, but Underwood does not comment on its reception, reserving this perhaps for the final volume of the biography.

The period covered in *Orphan of the South* witnessed rapid change. The traditional South was being replaced by an industrialized modern South of assembly lines and skyscrapers. Northern businessmen were heading southward, while Southern intellectuals were moving northward to teach in prestigious universities (Tate was at Princeton). Showered with awards and honors, he had become an outstanding international man of letters. Readers can only hope that Underwood will soon produce a second volume of his admirable biography covering the second half of his subject's life.

John L. Brown
Washington, D.C.

Miscellaneous

■ **Alan Cheuse. *Listening to the Page: Adventures in Reading and Writing***
New York. Columbia University Press
2001. x + 290 pages. \$24.95
ISBN 0-231-12270-5

ALAN CHEUSE, a member of the writing faculty at George Mason University since 1987, has spent a lifetime reading and writing books. For two years (1963-64) he read and reviewed a book a day for the

Kirkus Review Service (about 800 books). He has been National Public Radio's book commentator since 1982 (about 1,000 books). Like Jorge Luis Borges, he says, "I am more proud of the books I've read than I am of the books I've written." The ones he's written include three collections of stories, three novels — among them *The Grandmother's Club* and *The Light Possessed* — and a memoir, *Fall Out of Heaven*.

Listening to the Page is a collection of twenty-two essays written over the past quarter of a century, two thirds of them previously published, and evincing no sign that they were reedited to form a coherent whole. But as disparate as some of them are (the one that stands most apart is the essay on the neglected Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier), there is a powerful bond between them — Cheuse's passionate love of books: "Think of reading, then, as an act of praise, of prayer, even, in which individuals reassert their devotion to creation and to the imminent world in which we reside, a world in which every aspect of life, from old tires piled high in a trash heap to the multi-form patterns of snowflakes on a day in high winter, from the sickness of murder to the charity of parenthood, all make up part of a larger pattern." His attempt to define that pattern ranges from a brief look at the literature of Greece and Rome to his take on John Grisham.

It requires three sections to cover all that: "Reading," "Rereading," and "Writing." In "Reading," a complex and sometimes marginally coherent essay on "The Paradoxes of Narrative Painting and Pictorial Fiction" is followed by an essay titled "The Consolation of Art," which phenomenon he says consists of the consolations of "language," "psychology,"



and "form," and "the consolation of the underlying natural rhythms and mythological patterns" of the novel or story. The "Rereading" section includes insightful essays on Thomas Wolfe (the one from Asheville), John Steinbeck ("the single most widely read North American writer in the 20th century"), James Agee (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is "possibly the one great book of its kind of the century"), and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The third section ends with a brilliant discussion of the writer-editor relationship, using in particular the Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway collaborations with Maxwell Perkins, and a very interesting 1999 interview Cheuse gave to Andrew Wingfield that appeared in the Autumn issue of *Pleiades*.

This is a fascinating book — and why not? Cheuse has probably read as much as anyone ever, and had the good fortune of a literary career that included studying at Rutgers under John Ciardi, working at Breadloaf with Frost and Ellison, and teaching with John Gardner and Bernard Malamud at Bennington. It shows.

Marvin J. LaHood
SUNY College, Buffalo

■ **Juan Felipe Herrera. *Giraffe on Fire***
Tucson. University of Arizona Press
2001. 94 pages. \$14.95
ISBN 0-8165-1985-4

ALTHOUGH JUAN FELIPE HERRERA describes himself as a Chicano poet, the bilingual poems in *Giraffe on Fire* have less to do with cultural identity than with issues of self and survival in a world marked by rapid flux. The voices of the poems are alternately defiant, vengeful, contemplative, and seductive. The polyphonies that emerge in the densely textured, twenty-eight-part long poem "Giraffe on Fire" evoke the complex and unfinished process of "conquest," which for Herrera is ongoing in the sense that cultural and identity appropriations have not ceased in the southern North American cities, deserts, mountains, and temples. It would be rather facile to state that Herrera assumes a shaman's role to let his body and his mind become inhabited by the energies and images of the cultural narratives transmitted to him. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that his intricate narrative technique involves weaving the seemingly spontaneous grunts, howls, and imprecations of psyches undergoing forced transition.

A key element in Herrera's poetry is a sense of grounding in the body. The

body functions as a receptor and transmitter of meaning, a place to communicate when words are inadequate. For Herrera's narrator, the image of reproductive organs mutilated either by self-inflicted abuse or social obligation repeats itself. The pain blurs boundaries between conscious thought and the internally generated echoes of past voices. The body parts, spread out in highly visible patterns, remind one that one's offspring may have nothing at all to do with one's progenitors. However mangled, bloody, or deformed the offspring may appear to be, what they have in common is a kind of primeval life-lust, which is precisely what typifies Herrera's poetics. The following is just one passage that illustrates this, as well as the evocative rhythms: "Then I rolled up my arms and punched myself in the testicles, so I could feel a coolness travel in a star shape through me. So I could kiss the ground with my entire body, feel the rumble from below. So I could leak into the gravel and the torn pages and knotted sheets, so I could reach for the green trousers of Chucho el Roto, so I could escape with him to Orizaba where we would climb the mountain by Jalapa."

The poems that appear in both Spanish and English versions are close translations of each other, which usually does not bode well for either version. Herrera's Spanish and English versions are equally interesting, which is not to say that they are precisely equivalent. For example, "Beneath Your Skin," which appears in Spanish as "Bajo tu piel," maintains the same structure, but the alliterations that occur in the English version cause the reader to slow and pause, perhaps due to the sibilance of alliterations focused on the *s* sound. In "Bajo tu piel" Herrera maintains the alliterations, and even in the same lines. The result is quite different, however. "Bajo tu piel" emphasizes the more percussive *d* sound, which results in a more driving rhythm and contrasts dramatically with the subtle and pausing rhythms of "Beneath Your Skin."

Susan Smith Nash
University of Oklahoma

Noted

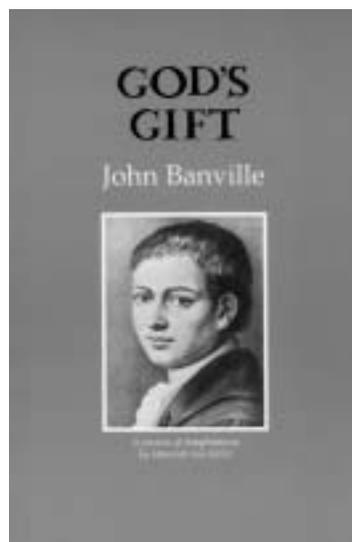
■ **John Banville. *God's Gift***
Oldcastle, Ireland. Gallery (Dufour, distr.)
2001 (c2000). 72 pages. \$24.95 (\$13.95 paper)
ISBN 1-85235-281-7 (280-9 paper)

GOD'S GIFT IS John Banville's version of Heinrich von Kleist's *Amphitryon*, which traces its

ancestry back over 2,000 years to Plautus. The myth on which it is based holds up remarkably well in this newest incarnation and seems almost contemporary in its examination of the complexities of love and lovers. (It often calls to mind Harold Pinter's 1963 one-act play *The Lover* in its portrayal of the schizophrenic nature of lovemaking.) Set now in 1798 in County Wexford, Ireland, in the aftermath of the Battle of Vinegar Hill, *God's Gift* features General Ashburningham (Amphitryon), returning home in triumph, only to experience a night that plays nightmarish tricks on him and his wife Minna (Alcmena) and two of his servants, Souse (Sosia) and Kitty (Bromia).

Jupiter, tired and old, tries to reignite his flagging passion by assuming the guise of the victorious general and sleeping with Minna. Mercury, Jupiter's son and sarcastic sidekick, aids his father by periodically assuming the persona of Souse and adds more than his share of mischief to the tragicomic proceedings. Both gods and mortals are eventually transformed during this night of impersonations: the gods seem to become more human, and the humans ultimately take on a touch of the divine. *Delightful* may be one of the most overused terms in reviewing, but here it seems almost tailor-made to describe Banville's delicately poetic rendering of this timeless tale. *God's Gift* is a theatrical present of the first order and deserves to be widely produced and seen.

Stephen Grecco
Pennsylvania State University



■ **Alice Fulton. *Felt***
New York. Norton. 2001. xii + 92 pages
\$22. ISBN 0-393-04882-9

ALICE FULTON has fun with language. A wizard at maneuvering the tropes and figures of the medieval schoolboy's rhetoric, she makes use of many kinds of asymmetry, including aposiopesis ("a sudden breaking off of a thought in the middle of a sentence as though the speaker were unable or unwilling to continue"), antimetabole ("turning about"), asteis-

mus ("refined, witty talk"), on through the alphabet of word and sound plays, including arrangement on the page. One section of a poem puts a single word on alternate lines, the very tic that afflicts my printer when it prints e-mail.

Taken from the opposite angle, "what the poems mean," we connect with her experience in the opening poem, "Close," of an overwhelming whiteness as she falls, nose to canvas, onto a large white painting, Joan Mitchell's *White Territory*. In a flashback, she relives a very conscious near-death in a car accident. Closeness to the edge of nonbeing, like the intricate design of an ironwork scroll, lacy but rigid, is reflected in the breathless pace of the poem.

The word *close*, of course, has another meaning, and the last poem, "Close," becomes a meditation on finality. The same title at front and back illustrates her theme of the fabric felt, a fabric so closely woven it has no front or reverse. Felt becomes her analogy to the universe, pressed together so ground and figure are one.

Twenty poems, most previously published in slightly different versions, are arranged in five sections. Four poems in part 1 move from poems of beginnings and unopened treasure to the key poem, "Fair Use," in which felt, "the fabric of entanglement," indicates that "whatever happens to others also happens to me." This large thought is followed by the twisted, comic "What joy, what sad."

Part 2 is one poem, "About Music for Bone and Membrane Instrument," in thirteen sections, exploring fans — Japanese/Spanish fans and rock-and-roll fans. The five poems of part 3 celebrate life and death, love, suicide, willingness to fail. Ugly practices and indignities like eating a stuffed ortolan come in for comment in part 4, with a mother-love meditation permeated with a sense of the moment, "full of severance / . . . the edgeless mono calm of / appliances, this century's ambient sound."

Doris Earnshaw
University of California, Davis

■ **Philip C. Kolin. *Deep Wonder***
Takoma Park, Maryland. Grey Owl (Ingram, distr.). 2000. xi + 97 pages. \$12.95
ISBN 0-9671901-1-8

A REVIEWER is seldom asked to comment on a volume of religious poetry these days. During the 1940s, in time of war, one was confronted by new works from Eliot, Auden, Tate, and the early Lowell, among others; they almost demanded a response from the most secular of readers. But what might have seemed a new era of Christian poetry has scarcely lasted, and a prophetic poet like Geoffrey Hill is almost an anomaly today. Religious poetry always exists in one form or another; there is inevitably an impulse to describe an experience which defies some entity, and even the most skeptical reader has to respect this.

Philip Kolin had an experience of a highly personal sort that he briefly describes in the preface to *Deep Wonder*. A woman whom he

loved, his fiancée, suddenly abandoned him, and his despair was deeply felt: "When I desperately needed love, God filled my emptiness with His very self." And *Deep Wonder*, essentially a book of prayers, is the result. The poems are mostly written in short unrhymed lines of two stresses. They occasionally echo lines in traditional hymns, but their brevity gives a certain "cut" to the phrases, as in "Let me hide / Myself in thee." There is no doubt about the sincerity of this poetry, and perhaps a reader is being unfair to suggest that the great Christian poems of the last century or so (such as "The Windhover" and "Ash Wednesday") are based on a certain tension, a dialectic between faith and doubt; they involve more than piety.

Ashley Brown
University of South Carolina

■
Eva Kollisch

Girl in Movement: A Memoir

Thetford, Vermont. Glad Day. 2000. x + 262 pages. \$16.95. ISBN 1-930180-05-5

THERE IS SOMETHING special about memoirs: in one respect, they are eyewitness reports giving testimony of historical events; on the other hand, the distance of time provides room for contemplation and abstraction, thus allowing memoirs to expand into works of literary dimension. Such has been the case with Eva Kollisch's recent volume *Girl in Movement*. The title implies a double entendre: it refers to the emotional development of a young woman, as well as to her formative years in a political movement. By focusing on such an important process in the life and personality of a human being, the author engages in a famous literary genre known as the *bildungsroman* — this time, however, from a woman's perspective and specific experience.

Still, Kollisch's report is a most fascinating piece of Americana, since it examines a little-known group on the far left of the political spectrum, a group which was active in the United States and deserves a footnote in historiography. We are talking about a Trotskyist splinter group called the Workers Party, which operated under the leadership of Max Shachtman in several American cities. The headquar-

ters were in downtown Manhattan on 14th Street, and the total membership never exceeded 500. Kollisch, a young refugee from Austria, was in contact with members of this movement during the early forties. The author, born in Vienna in 1925, was fourteen years old when she and her two brothers escaped Nazi persecution on a *Kindertransport* to England in July 1939. They were reunited with their parents in New York in April 1940. The family then lived on Staten Island. Teenaged Eva, who often considered herself an outsider, joined the Workers Party in the summer of 1942 after she had made friends with several party members, among them her future husband Walter.

Kollisch leads the reader into the picturesque world of American socialism during the early forties. It is almost a literary time capsule which is being opened before our eyes. In consideration of the Cold War and the excesses of McCarthyism, today's reader may be surprised that such an exotic faction like a Trotskyist workers' party could exist in America at all. Of course, what Kollisch describes happened before the end of World War II (when the United States and the Soviet Union were still allies). Apart from that, the Trotskyists were strongly opposed to the Stalinists who were in control of the Soviet Union. However, all the Trotskyist theorists in her circle could not explain to the young immigrant girl what socialism is. These young idealists combined theoretical discussions with practical missions, particularly recruiting efforts among workers in their neighborhoods and in the factories. Such endeavors led Eva to accept work in sweatshops in downtown Manhattan and later at Dodge in Detroit.

It becomes clear that this search for socialism was at the same time a search for the self, an act of self-realization with all of its adventures, pleasures, disappointments, and errors. The immigrant girl, who married her ten-years-old tutor Walter in 1942, decided three years later to leave both him and the movement. Theory and reality were just irreconcilable. Eva Kollisch writes this story of her early adult life with wit and wisdom, with irony and sincerity — an exemplary memoir of a movement which also moves the reader.

Gert Niers
Ocean County College (N.J.)