

WEIGH, WAYWARD, WORDS

SOMETIMES A SPATE OF PUBLICATIONS reminds a wayward reader that the art of essay-writing is not dead, just hiding in small corners of occasional publications. The tomes that collect them can attract people who would never see the original, but such books seldom read consistently, despite their intent. They serve best as samplers — of phrases eloquent in their implications, and of ideas stirring into words. The late James Thurber's *Collecting Himself* (Harper & Row), a gathering of parodies and reviews, edited by Michael J. Rosen, quotes Carl Van Doren at one point, observing that "It's hard to write, but it's harder not to." This impulse helps explain the passionate commitment to clarity that one finds in the writings of John Clive, Stephen Jay Gould, Phillip Lopate, and others. It's also a passionate commitment to the specifics of individual observation.

Clive's *Not By Fact Alone* (Random House) reflects on the humorous, the anecdotal, the paced, and the cliometric as the techniques of the historian, defending the "validity of 'I'" in historical writing. Gould's detailed *An Urchin in the Storm* (Norton) delights in the particulars of nature, resisting overeasiness generalizations about Creationism, Cartesianism, and creativity. Lopate's *Against Joie de Vivre* (Poseidon) relies less on linear logic than on an intentional associative sprawl as it discourses on sex, suicide, habit, and the rare capacity for forgiveness. It, too, defends the particular and the private — not just against collectivity but also against the tyranny of rhetoric. About his title subject, for example, Lopate observes: "What rankles me is the stylization of this private condition into a bullying social ritual." And to what end? As Dick Hebdige's remarkable *Hiding in the Light* (Routledge) adds, apropos of Lopate's complaint, every social ritual (and every design of national authenticity, racial identity, and 'heritage') carries with it a set of attitudes which in turn are constructions that serve particular ends. Whose are they, and how do they constrain individual imagination? Hebdige, writing about design history and popular taste, refers in particular to the force of photography and stereotypes as agents of cultural organization. Two standard versions of adolescence, for example — as trouble and as fun — he traces respectively to nineteenth-century social document and to post-World War II market research. The images,

consequently, can be seen as the effective (because normalized) rhetoric of religious judgment and private profit. They are not neutral.

William Manchester's collection of Magnum photographs, *In Our Time* (Norton), testifies further to this conclusion. The Magnum Foundation was a collective concerned to give photojournalists "all freedom"; but *In Our Time* remains a deeply American book, its perspective shaped by a particular political context, and Manchester emphasizes that "freedom" does not mean "objectivity." If further evidence were needed, other books (through both commentary and illustration) stress the politics of all visualization. 1. Martha Anderson and C. M. Kreamer's *Wild Spirits Strong Medicine* (University of Washington) affirms that African art celebrates a binary: the civilization inherent in village life as opposed to the wilderness of the surrounds. 2. David Ward's *Chronicles of Darkness* (Routledge) elucidates the cultural frames or expectations (e.g., regarding social order and disorder) that white perceivers from Conrad to Coetzee have found in Black Africa, defining a colonial cultural as one with no memory — i.e., no effective belief in the past. Ward does, however, place a surprising faith in the promise of "true stories." 3. Roger Daniels' *Asian America* (University of Washington) draws on life stories and legal cases (and only one passing reference to Maxine Hong Kingston, though she is the one writer he says is "essential" to an understanding of the subject) with two ends in mind: to document the presence of ethnic Chinese and Japanese in the U.S.A. since 1850, and to question the system of social evaluation that, through the process of stereotyping, constructs these peoples as either "model minorities or scapegoats." 4. Maxime Rodinson's *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, translated by Roger Venius (University of Washington), shows how "Islam" was constructed in Europe as a "menace" before it became a "problem." 5. Peter C. Newman's *Empire of the Bay* (Viking) uses words to write a history of the Hudson's Bay Company and uses the full resources of colour illustration to record a parallel history in terms that visually say hardship, wealth, earnestness, expanse, mastery, and whiteness. 6. Even on a smaller scale, this process operates: Nicole Eaton and Hilary Weston's *In a Canadian Garden* (photos by Freeman Patterson, with comments by Arthur Erickson, Barbara Frum, Angela Bowering, and others; Viking) visualizes the domestic garden as escape, prospect, and "earthly paradise." These are metaphors of desire, constructed in part, perhaps, against memories of unease.

I am less persuaded by Cynthia Ozick's reviews and reflections — a reading of Coetzee in terms of *Huck Finn*, for example — as collected in *Metaphor & Memory* (Random House) or by the judgmentally absolutist versions of life-writing described in Jeffrey Meyers' *The Spirit of Biography* (UMI). Though when Ozick writes that what we value in biography is the *unfractured* nature of man (the version of *whole* as constructed by *story*), she is commenting further on the power of invention to construct "acceptable" truths. Against such a premise one might

read Wole Soyinka's *Ìsarà* (Random House), a dramatically fictionalized version of the author's own past, his double schooling in folktale and received European tradition, and his metamorphosis; or the Jamaican autobiographical essays of Louis Simpson's *Selected Prose* (Paragon); or Amin Malouf's imaginary autobiography of the sixteenth-century geographer Hassan al-Wazzan, *Leo Africanus* (Norton); or Marq de Villiers' use of family history in *White Tribe Dreaming* (Macmillan) — a personal analysis of the “politics of faith” that constructed a tribal bureaucracy in South Africa in the name of Christianity — to explain apartheid's roots.

De Villiers asserts that one reason the British social model failed in South Africa is that it didn't take account of ethnic divisions, with centrifugal forces consequently proving more powerful than cohesive ones. David Noritz and Bill Willmott's anthology, *Culture and Identity in New Zealand* (GP Books), takes up related issues, asserting the “dialectical” nature of national identity (and therefore its constructedness); particularly illuminating chapters include those on speech, Maori, and the cultural survival of pastoral aspirations. Lawrence Steven's *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction* (Wilfrid Laurier/Humanities Press International) further pursues the question of duality, using social “value” (rather than “mythic transcendence”) as a normative measure, and attempting to explain (with reference to five models) White's coded desire for permanence and wholeness.

Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession* (a 1983 book reprinted by Virago/Random House) seeks to validate what she calls “The Woman's Novel 1914-39” by appreciating the life-skills female writers require; yet the numerous misprints, and the construction of some writers (Mansfield for one) as straw critics, opens the judgments, if not the aspirations, to question. Critically and stylistically more satisfying is Kay Schaffer's *Women and The Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* (Cambridge). Schaffer is concerned with the way cultural myths of national identity construct ideas about gender and with the way (from settler narratives to *Crocodile Dundee*) language circulates these ideas and gives them credence. For example, women are generally absent from bush narratives and bush traditions in Australia, she argues, yet represented (as “harsh and unforgiving”) through metaphors of landscape. In a brilliantly contrastive reading of the text and critical history of bush stories by Henry Lawson and Barbara Baynton, Schaffer then goes on to illustrate how a dominant discourse can mask the recognition of cultural plurality, and to demonstrate how it does so in part by lulling readers into accepting as “natural” the hierarchy of values that a dominant discourse covertly reinforces.

Ellen Rooney's *Seductive Reasoning* (Cornell) questions the naturalness of all systems of persuasive discourse. It begins by presuming that such critics as Hirsch (privileging logic), Booth (ethics), Fish (the rhetoric of persuasion), de Man

(trope), and Jameson (politics) *all* are pluralists of some order, and proceeds by arguing that their criticism, like that of others (representations of a “democratic” practice), uses these attributes of discourse in order to deal with the anti-pluralist edges of poststructural theory. “Social contradictions,” from this perspective, can be seen not as a ground for theory but as “*internal* to theory, . . . constitutive of its structure.”

The eleven essays in Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse’s *The Violence of Representation* (Routledge, Chapman & Hall) — studies of tyranny, hysteria, witches, Vietnam, rhetoric, and the carnivalesque (with Coetzee writing on perceptions of “idleness” in South African travel writing) — collectively question the effectiveness of anti-canonical criticism. In the name of opposing the canon, the editors argue, such writings appropriate the margins, incorporating them into the residual discourse of criticism and therefore losing any political “oppositional edge” they might have aspired to. Though it calls for a *recognition* of “subject-position,” this adopts covertly an American rhetorical position — its fascination with representations of violence articulating some deep-seated cultural assumptions about “democracy,” “independence,” and “resolution.” Its own interest in margins, consequently, runs repeatedly up against the anti-pluralism of its own expectations. Yet that textual “violence” — or interruption — is not a distinctive characteristic of American *texts* is amply demonstrated by the republication of what may be the first English novel, William Balwin’s *Beware the Cat*, written in 1553 (introduction and modernized text, based on a British Library transcript of the first [1570] edition, by William A. Ringler, Jr., and Michael Flachmann, with an appended history of longer prose narrative in English to 1558; Huntington Library). Made up of “interludes” about cats (asking if beasts have reason, retelling folktales and superstitions, and dismissing papists), it conveys the discussions that take place between the narrator, a divine, and an astronomer. It also thereby constructs a version of a society at war with its own conceptions of truth. It may therefore not be irrelevant that it should be rediscovered in — and appeal to — the last years of the twentieth century.

Peter Gay in 1974 asserted in *Style in History* (Norton) that matter and manner are organic, and that “style is the art of the historian’s science”; Lionel Gossman argued in *Between History and Literature* (Harvard) that historiography is not a series of unresolvable confusions but an evolutionary system involving decipherment, narrative, and semiotic code. Beside both books one has to read Brian Stock’s *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Johns Hopkins), which observes yet again that cultures tend to prefer one form of retrospective or another, and that over time these alter. Generalizing about Western cultures, based on both medieval and modern texts, Stock observes how evolutionary models (involving thesis and antithesis) have been giving way to theories of origin and global mentality and to game models (involving “fields of interactive play,” expression, and performance).

This shift, Stock avers, indicates an increasing preference for a *lived* rather than a *symbolic* reality, and an increasing expectation that resolutions can come about not in symbolic ways but only in ways (such as wars) that affect real human lives. One “use” of the past is clearly to justify such courses of action. Another is to challenge them. Even within the single house called “Western Culture” are many separate rooms, and the understanding of the efficacy of both symbol and “actual” continues to change.

Resources of Hope (Verso/Routledge, Chapman & Hall) collects several essays by the late Raymond Williams, written from 1958 on. They remain full of resonant phrases that bear on the issues that have been raised here: “Western societies do not embody the democratic values they proclaim,” “Culture is ordinary,” “A writer’s job is with individual meanings, and with making these meanings common.” Most importantly, perhaps, Williams seeks to retrieve “commonality” from the ash-heap of pejorative utterance and to claim judgment away from the absolutists by insisting on the value and clarity of thoughtful exchange. “Some people,” he writes, “when they see an idea, think the first thing to do is to argue about it.” Far better, he writes, is to “see why the notion of commitment which an idea articulates was developed and against what alternative ideas it was directed.” Why? Because language, for all its thorny ambiguities and entrenched biases, remains one of the “resources of hope” out of which human beings can still try to fashion meaning.

W.N.

We would like to dedicate this issue to the memory of our colleague, Ann Munton, who contributed frequently to *Canadian Literature*, and whose scholarly enquiries into Canadian poetry and prose are familiar to students both at home and abroad. She succumbed to cancer in September 1990. We valued her advice and her friendship, and we miss her.

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