Book Reviews

Browning's Beginnings: The Art of Disclosure. **By Herbert F. Tucker. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982. Pp. viii, 257. $22.50.**

"It is a sad fact of literary history that few readers of *Sordello* have found the discipline of its style worth pursuing." So says Professor Tucker in his chapter on the work that Thomas Lounsbury dismissed in 1911 as "a colossal derelict upon the sea of literature." That so few critics have written anything on *Sordello* worth reading is an even sadder fact of literary history; and the saddest fact of all is the paucity of first-rate book-length studies of the Browning canon. Alexandra Orr, Arthur Symons and William DeVane have provided two informative "handbooks" and an imaginative "introduction"; Chesterton, Dowden and Duckworth managed admirable general studies. Roma J. King wrote a fine study of five Browning poems (but his longer look at the entire corpus is unsatisfactory in several respects); and Robert Langbaum's milestone study of the dramatic monologue is not confined to Browning, nor does it encompass the full range of Browning's work. Professor Tucker's recently published book is primarily concerned, as its title suggests, with the first twenty years of the poet's output, more than half being devoted to *Pauline, Paracelsus* and *Sordello*—plus a chapter on the dramas; another on six poems taken from the *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842) and the *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845); and one more, together with a brief "Epilogue," on four poems from *Men and Women* (1855).

Tucker's thesis (and this book began as a doctoral dissertation at Yale where J. Hillis Miller, whose influence on it is apparent, was one of the readers) is stated in the Introduction: "Browning and the Future." Having glanced, in a couple of paragraphs, at Browning's immense impact on "the future of poetry," i.e., those poets who succeeded him, Tucker turns to his "central argument" which goes as follows. "Addicted to anticipation, Browning was a perpetual beginner. He kept beginning, both in the course of his innovative career and . . . in the course of any one of his distinctively nervous poems." The "rewards and difficulties of initiation" become a major theme in Browning's poetry, and "his moral doctrine of incompleteness finds a clear aesthetic analogue in his poetics. From the formal effects of its largest structures to the minutiae of its verbal style, Brown-

ing's is an art of disclosure, an art that resists its own finalities." In other words, Browning quite consciously seeks to evade what Barbara Herrnstein Smith (to whom Tucker pays his dues) calls "poetic closure." Doffing his academic cap to Bloom and Derrida (deconstructionists, both), Tucker theorises most persuasively that "Browning's defense of anticipation offered a means of self-defense against that familiar hobgoblin of the poetic latecomer, the threat that there may be nothing left to say," noting that what Smith deems "weak" closure is precisely what Bloom hails as "strong" because the "prospective imperfection with which Browning's poems typically end" keep the future open; "the 'transumption' whereby a poet overcomes his belatedness is not a closural failure but an assertion of the power of origination." Browning seeks to defer closure of poems, and so to defer interpretation and the closure of meaning, by the "rhetorical troping of figurative language" which represents absent objects, personae or points of view by re-representing them, making them present in a different way: by insisting on differences.

Having discussed in an intellectually exciting section the moral and aesthetic implications of Browning's famous assertion, in a letter to Ruskin, that all poetry is "a putting of the infinite within the finite (but without referring to Eleanor Cook's 1974 examination and exploitation of the meanings which the term "enclosure" had for Browning), Tucker proceeds to an extremely sensitive and illuminating analysis of the final book of *Sordello* which is filled with ostensible endings that discover themselves to be disclosures of new starts or beginnings. In a later chapter, Tucker asserts that "to learn to read [*Sordello*] is to learn to read Browning," and the excellent section entitled "Browning, Eglamor, and Closure in *Sordello*" (in the Introduction) augurs well for what is to follow. And, in the next three chapters, almost all *is* well; but when Tucker moves on from Browning's first three poems to the dramas the book begins to suffer drastically from the constrictions of space. The treatment of *Pippa Passes, Strafford* and *King Victor and King Charles* strikes me as a serious falling off, failing to seize upon the essential dramatic evasion of closure in *Pippa* (which Chesterton so objects to), the psychological and political evasions of *Strafford* and *King Victor*.

A refusal to distinguish between kinds of lyrics and kinds of monologues in the final chapters mars the discussion of individual shorter poems and is responsible for some rather naive assertions about the nature of both. And an apparent innocence in the face of Browning's irony (a major structural device in every monologue, whoever the author) leads to some startling over-simplifications in the reading of shorter poems, and a serious misreading in the case of the "Epilogue" — "Cleon Orders His Urn" — in which Tucker's grasp precludes his reach, foreclosing on the truth which Browning's irony defers disclosure of in the final lines. Notwithstanding which, the opening chapters of *Browning's Beginnings* offer

some of the best (because defamiliarizing) discussion of Browning's early work I've read in the last twenty five years.

University of British Columbia *John F. Hulcoop*

A Distinction of Stories. The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury. **By Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981. Pp. xi, 258. $20.00.**

Despite many learned and ingenious efforts to discover its unity, the *Canterbury Tales* has remained magisterially apart, stubborn in its diversity, yet endlessly provocative. Judson Allen and Theresa Moritz have mounted a courageous and well-equipped assault, but they too have failed to domesticate their quarry. For them the *Canterbury Tales* is a "normative array" of stories, all of which, when rearranged and properly interpreted, can be seen to treat a common subject and point toward a common goal, "a definition of just order in human affairs and of the human acts and human communities which constitute that ordered way of life" (97-8). They start from the arguable but unargued assumption that "poetry is ethics." Leaving behind such "narrower" concerns as "aesthetics," they proceed to "unify" the tales by demonstrating that all of them relate analogically to one another as expressions of a higher meaning which is ethical. Their method is deductive, relentlessly so, as they strain to reduce Chaucer's poem to fit into their complex and rigidly articulated ethical paradigm. In effect they are adapting the exegetical approach to a social rather than a religious presupposition. While they reject Robertsonian exegetics as "tending to take the allegory and leave the letter" (9), they proceed in much the same manner, by reducing complex poetic texts to selective themes which they relate to their higher, non-poetic meaning. As ethical rather than Christian exegetes they face a difficult problem, for assent in their presupposition requires more than simple faith.

Hence they devote the first half of the book to explaining their paradigm. It is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* as interpreted by some medieval commentators and more specifically by Brooks Otis' *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (1970). According to this interpretation the stories in the *Metamorphoses* define four categories of human behavior: natural, moral, magical, and spiritual. By applying analogical thinking, as sanctioned by the medieval theologians' system of typology, Allen and Moritz find that the four categories present different aspects of a single subject, "right human behavior."

Applying this model to the *Canterbury Tales*, they find there the same four categories. They reject those interpretations which, in the interest of psychological and geographical realism, stress narrative or diachronic features in the progressive sequence of pilgrimage. Seeing the tales rather as a "normative array," they regard them synchronically, as a system of

finely graduated ethical exempla. To render the presence of their categorical pattern more clearly evident, they propose a new arrangement of the tales. Their order retains the integrity of the fragments but freely violates the familiar Ellesmere and Bradshaw arrangements, except for retaining I and X as first and last. The "natural" group is Ellesmere fragment I (General Prologue, Knight, Miller, Reeve, Cook), followed by the "magical" group, which consists of fragments VIII, V, III, VI. Next comes the "moral" group, sequenced II, IV, IX, and finally the "spiritual" group, VII and X.

The overall thematic unity of this arrangement is expressed in "the fundamental movement . . . which begins in order, meets challenge by struggle, and finally reinstates order and understands it" (105). This is the unifying theme into which the critics attempt to fit the rearranged tales. It is a complicated effort, carried out, as in medieval allegorical commentary, with intellectual ingenuity and by arbitrary selection of data to define thematic parallels and analogical versions of the governing idea. Just as one need not be a Christian to appreciate the intricacy and beauty of universal typology and Christian exegesis, one need not believe Allen and Moritz' interpretation in order to admire it.

But while the theory is attractive in its own right, difficulties abound in its application to the tales. Apart from the large problem of reducing poetry to theme, interpretations of individual tales according to the four-part grouping are too often strained and unconvincing. I cite but one example. In the first group, the "natural" group, Chaucer "is concerned with defining the authority—or rather authorities—by which the social *contextio hominum* is to be achieved" (121). Following the Knight's Tale, which sets the theme for the group (and also, in its own four-part structure announces the pattern for the grouping of the collection as a whole), "all the rest of the stories of the natural group emphasize a challenge to a householder's authority over his family" (123). Interpretive argument seeks to persuade us that such indeed is the essence of the tales of Miller, Reeve, and Cook. Few sensitive readers will assent to such a reductive interpretation. Furthermore, "Weddings make households," we are told, and "nowhere outside these first tales . . . is the pattern of conflict established in the *Knight's Tale* so thoroughly reproduced" (124). But one thinks at once of the tales of Merchant, Summoner, Manciple, not to mention the Wife of Bath, all of which also display what one could interpret as challenge to a householder's authority. These, however, fall in different groups, and the authors interpret them to accord with different aspects of their system.

Probably the least convincing single interpretation is that of the *Parson's Tale,* which the authors consider to be ironic because it does not accord with their ethical thesis. That is, it appears to be about salvation rather than about "Chaucer's subject . . . the prosperity of the world as it is capable of being the ground and exemplum of the true" (228). Also it is not a story, and therefore it falls outside the critics' system of storial ethics: it does not apply generalizations "indirectly through the principle of

analogy and normative array, which the tales up to this point have established" (227), or so the authors have argued.

A Distinction of Stories is learned and thoughtful, often provocative but finally unconvincing. Though heavily documented, it pays less than adequate attention to at least two important and relevant recent books. Except for a bibliographical listing, it fails to mention Donald Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (1976), which also treats thematic unity. Dismissed with a sentence is John Fyler's *Chaucer and Ovid* (1979). Perhaps because both of these books are sensitive to literary and aesthetic values, they are excluded from serious consideration by Allen and Moritz' ethical bias. Despite its rather extravagant claims to have discovered the definitive "medieval unity" of the *Canterbury Tales, A Distinction of Stories* finally reduces its great poetic subject to a diagrammatic system of ethical values and introduces a moral philosopher whom few readers will recognize as Geoffrey Chaucer.

University of British Columbia *Robert M. Jordan*

Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift. **by Michèle H. Richman. John Hopkins University Press, 1982. 178 pages.**

That Georges Bataille is a writer who has continued since his death in 1962 both to fascinate and mystify a slowly growing and always broad intellectual readership, is undoubtedly the case. That his writings have attracted over the years increasing critical attention is also a matter of record: writers and critics of widely divergent background and concern, such as Blanchot and Barthes, Breton and Sartre, Derrida and Foucault, have laid forth their often more dazzled than dazzling responses to an opus that tends to defy traditional classification and assessment. Poet, novelist, author of erotic texts and essays, of an 'inter-disciplinary' nature, on literary, anthropological, sociological, economic and philosophical subjects, Bataille often finds himself dealt with in piecemeal fashion and according to perspectives that are too particular and restricted to encompass the full intricacy of his thought. In many respects the situation has not changed appreciably and, whilst it may be broadly true that Bataille's generally 'deconstructive' stance before the idealist, rational and transcendent 'forms' of the world has left its mark upon contemporary thinking, it may well be that the very diffuseness and mildly arcane orientation of his work will mean that the situation will not radically change in the future.

It is regrettable to have to say that the present volume, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift,* based though it essentially is upon a wide appreciation of Bataille's multiple complexities and paradoxes, is not likely to contribute to a significantly heightened awareness of the latter on the part of its readers. Michèle Richman's study endeavours to show, amongst other things, how Bataille's work seeks to broaden our under-

standing of the 'general economy' that regulates human activity. Economics and the received theory of society as economic activity are thus deconstructed, the logic of productive, rational, constructive expenditure of human energy and material resources gives way to consideration of a neglected logic of disruptive, non-productive, 'sacrificial' expenditure. The search for truth must come to entail a confrontation with death, with the 'humiliating', with that other, repressed side of our being, with the meaning and function, too, of poetry, madness, ecstasy, laughter, our sense of the 'sacred', and so on, in our lives, our daily exchanges, the coming-into-being and always imminent loss of ourselves. Bataille thus moves in a general way to stress the non-utilitarian, the 'unconfessed' and the non-aesthetic dimension of existence and human 'economy'. The notion of the world as ideal structure, society as neat, pragmatic form, as aspiration to beauty and perfection, tends in consequence to be severely questioned, indeed routed, in favour of a view of the world and humanity that would not constantly assimilate the irrational, the 'use-less', the insignificant, in order better to affirm the 'tame' idealist notions they, for Bataille, in effect constantly, intractably, contradict.

If Michèle Richman therefore does well to draw our attention to the unquestionably overriding significance of notions of *dépense,* 'sovereignty' and 'heterogeneity' at the root of Bataille's thought, her study remains sadly in need of much improved expression and reorganisation of its elements. A clear-cut account of Bataille's own thinking was evidently required. Instead the book often reads like a discussion of certain concepts in which Bataille's own significance can appear oddly dubious. Jargon and logorrhoea, poor wording and poor editing, also regrettably mar an effort to come to grips with Bataille's work that is clearly serious, well-intentioned and even well-informed. Ironically, Barthes' and Sartre's comments come across with much greater cogency and clarity, and Bataille, when speaking for himself, can be powerfully, if densely, eloquent. His thought needs to be gently and subtly teased out, the strands of his criss-crossing discourses more elegantly and more crisply displayed before us.

Dalhousie University *Michael Bishop*

***Tarts and Muggers: Poems New and Selected.* By Susan Musgrave. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982. Pp. 137.**

Susan Musgrave's *Tarts and Muggers: Poems New and Selected* is her first collection of poetry since 1979. It is a curious and disappointing collection, and one which is difficult to review. Out of the seventy-one poems in it, only thirteen appear to me (after I had backtracked through her early pamphlets and five previous collections) to be new. This is a very small amount for somebody in mid-career to show for three years work, and in addition it is not very exciting work. With the exception of

"Requiem for Talunkwan Island", an elegiac sequence for the island (destroyed by poor logging practices, according to the poet's note) and for its people, the "New" poems show no artistic development beyond the previous collection. "Finding Love" and "Dog Star", for example, are competent representatives of a kind of poem she can probably write in her sleep by now, and "Vern and Joanne: Dead" and "Boogeying with the Queen" are loosely articulated, chatty, and ineffective. The reprinted "Selected" poems seem arbitrarily chosen: they do not represent by any means the best of her previous work and their order of appearance is confusing, since they are arranged neither in a visible pattern nor in a simple chronological order. It is perhaps rather too early in Musgrave's career for a well-edited volume of Collected Poems, which would provide the serious reader with everything previously published in chronological order and with a note of the first publication, to be really appropriate. I would suggest, however, that it would be a considerable improvement over the current mishmash.

Dalhousie University *Patricia Monk*

***The Impossible Promised Land: Poems New and Selected.* By Seymour Mayne. Oakville, Ontario, 1981. 128 pp. Cloth, $14.95. Paper, $7.95.**

***Friend and Lover.* By John Ditsky. Princeton: The Ontario Review Press, 1981. Pp. 70. $10.95. Paper, $5.95.**

***War in an Empty House.* By Don Domanski. Toronto: House of Anasi Press, 1982. Pp. 72. Paper, $6.95.**

There are, these days, so many different standards by which poetry is judged that it seems important at the outset to establish one's criteria. The main object of art, Flaubert declared, is to "*faire rêver*", to move the imagination, set it thinking, wondering, dreaming. This is surely what one looks for in poetry. And one is always amazed at the variety of styles in which this can be achieved: a primitive chant, haiku, Pope's "And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box", Keats' "Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars"—so many ways in which language can reverberate.

Seymour Mayne takes as his tradition that of Canadian poets like Klein and Layton whose Jewishness has made itself manifest—at times splendidly—in the English tongue. He is, one feels, a concerned man, faithful to his people, tender to ancient rites, contemptuous of "the twisted/ junk of the spirit", outraged by history's obscenities. I wanted very much to like *The Impossible Promised Land* and found myself desperately pressing every poem upon my imagination. But nothing stirred. Had I tried too hard? Where had I gone wrong? How was this

work different from Klein's, Layton's? On re-reading the first poem in the volume, I found my answer in the last lines:

> No protest, only submissions
> to where our feet have to walk it out for us
> trailing the wisps, mists coiling
>   into the magnetic eye of fog.

Like fog, Mayne's language is too loose, too vague. It makes for confused imagery, imprecision of feeling, an unmysterious, frustrating blur. Where is the poetic sureness and authority of Klein and Layton? One knows one should be struck with horror and pity at the last lines of "For A. M. Klein (1909-1972)"—but how can one, when the words get in the way?

> double voices speaking, gasping,
> apostrophizing from the round zero of the mouth
> rings to the empty ear's circle
> and woven labyrinthine laurels
> over the vacuous glycerine of the sunken eye.

And what dream, nightmare or wonder can be aroused by

> Where does that cold-blooding call
> hide its shark-eyed nose?
> ("The Abrupt Siren of Beit Hakerem")

This is all too clumsy, too convoluted. It is not that one expects every poet to have the talent of the very best. But to *faire rêver* the poet has to handle words with skill. Magic is very precise.

In *Friend and Lover* John Ditsky establishes himself as a poet of precision. He delights in formal arrangement, the exact placing of every word. A noticeable strand in his tradition is seventeenth century wit, part Metaphysical, part Cavalier. For theme and happy handling of tone "The Incubus Begs Tolerance" could be compared to Lovelace's "To Lucasta". As modern cavalier he begins "Ponder, He Said" with

> Lady, I
> am told to give
> no worship to this brief
> conspiracy of gristle gland
> and fatty tissue that
> is you here here
> & here ...

Such formality runs the risk of becoming over-mannered, self-conscious. These are faults of which Ditsky can be guilty. In final lines one sometimes feels that he is giving himself a little pat on the back for having executed a neat minuet. "Repairing" is such a poem. For all the inventiveness that springs from the first comparison, "She is a seamed and parting cell", the

final tenderness sounds strained. Here Ditsky is more donnish than Donne-ish.

Where he does succeed is in "Two-Part Invention", a finely-wrought poetic rendering of a musical exercise, quite perfect in tone:

> The scent
> of sun is on your skin
> smell of earth and green.
> Traces of growing things
> remind me, awake,
> of past loving; asleep
> you cause me dreams
> of loving coming.

"A Shining, a Crossing," which has to be read entire, has something of the magic of all childhood. "Hamlet at Ludlow" haunts with its repetitions of "play" and "castle", its sense of history and individual life. Though not a master magician, Ditsky is a wordsmith whose carefully crafted verse can produce a shining.

In *War in an Empty House* Don Domanski shows himself to be a real magician. His concern is not so much to pull off a difficult trick (though he sets himself plenty of those) as to conjure up mysteries, reveal us to the universe, the universe to us. He puts us in touch with the silence which

> is inventing itself again
> . . . .
> is a terrible thunder
> that only the little finger can hear
> when the whole body is fast asleep. . .
> ("Metaphysica")

In this silence there is that strange interconnectedness that one finds in dreams and religions, as in "Nocturne" where

> A beetle opens the door
> a tuber closes the door
>
> outside in the grass the keel of a dog
> knocking against sleep
> the crossbones of a rose
> the wish bone of a spider

In "Dreamtime", "in the place where sleep comes from" there is a marvellous incantatory interweaving of ancient peoples: Hittites, Sumerians, Babylonians, Bacchantes, with modern places: factories, a seaside hotel, diners, a train. Then there is "you", "the same old story about / your thick black hair", "the clippings / taken from your long nails," and "the radio on the empty seat" that

> sighs once to itself
> sounding like a strange church

> sounding like a strange season
> sounding like you.

The individual "you" is so much more than its finite attributes of hair and nails (though here one might note, too, the importance of hair and nail clippings in some magic rites.) This "you" is mysteriously connected with all times, all places.

Enough has been quoted to show that Domanski has moved into a Surrealist mode. But there is nothing gratuitous or gimmicky about these unusual juxtapositions of words and images. Domanski's surrealism is actually very precise. It is a necessary speech, an integral part of his complex vision. In a way, it *is* his vision.

Yet, with this complexity goes simplicity. The divine is domestic, the domestic divine:

> I know the shoe is a temple
> a basin of sleeping water
> I know God drinks there
> like a lion made from my single foot
> ("Hierology")

In "Pleiades" there is the small vulnerable person "on the night I was born" when

> I felt small as a leaf
> like the ghost of a hand
> hem of a centipede
> discarded inside a white cup

and his vision of the sky

> while up there
> just above the rooftops
> the moon and the wind
> and seven dead girls
> sitting on six burning chairs
> spun slowly by . . .

So we wonder and dream ourselves deeper into our lives, the ones we lead now, the cities we inhabit, the pages we turn, and the others that "you didn't know existed". It is rare to find a poet with such power to reveal and "*faire rêver*".

Cambridge Station, N.S. *Elizabeth Jones*

***A Different Lens.* By Alastair Macdonald. St. John's, Nfld.: Harry Cuff Publications, 1981. Pp. 72.**

The anomaly of Newfoundland's time zone ("half an hour later in Newfoundland") might well have provided a more apt metaphor for the title of Alastair Macdonald's third book of poems than the photographic one ("a different lens" from his poem "Detail") that the collection actually bears. For it is time, as we try to read it from the distorted dials of the Daliesque watches of middle age, that is the central theme of this fine collection of poems. Time in all its manifestations—memory, recurrence of experience, looking forward, looking back, "now"—is the principal concern of the great majority of the poems in *A Different Lens* and provides the theme of its best work.

Macdonald seems fascinated in several poems by the manner in which we may look into any given moment in the past and see that what is a stream of unbroken and well-known memory back to that moment for us now was a completely unknown flow of the stream of time into our future then. In the poem "Un Beau Demain", he recalls a moonlit walk of long ago, when a small French boy read the weather to remark that it would be "Un beau demain". The lovely phrase becomes a metaphor for whatever has happened to the boy:

> I hoped it wouldn't dawn
> cloudy and cold for him.
> But the sun shone
> on time yet
> for a pile of fine tomorrows
> into the years
> those yesterdays ago.

Again in "west wind", the west wind "this spring-or-autumn day" (read in youth-or-age) buffets "with memory / of what will come tomorrow / thirty years ago", and in "True Love", a young girl who is the image of an old love causes the poet to look as many years ahead, and wonder.

The difficulty of sorting out the relation of the past to the present is the splendour of another excellent poem, "In Perpetuam Rei Memoriam", where the poet, a surviving soldier, meditates at a remembrance ceremony upon his own youthful soldiering and upon his fallen fellows:

> And it's not much good asking if one has failed them
> Whom ceremony honours here, or failed
> the life one was. We move in the successive nows,
> contend with change beyond and in the self.

The successive nows and the self as the locus of existence emerges also in "Sounion", a poem wherein the poet records a number of wandering soldiers or tourists whose names have been carved during two thousand

years into the rock of an Aegean temple ruin; they "carve the present / in a word / the centre of a universe".

The last two poems of *A Different Lens*, both on time, are among the most poignant: "Adagio for Afternoon", an autumn poem on the old metaphor for oncoming age, sees the poet walking "ankle-deep in dry fallen years". In the last poem, "Time Now", the ageing poet is a child again in summer dusk, crying out! "Let me play/longer,/there's still /some light".

Not all the poems of this volume involve these meditations on the river of time, although as a group they are certainly the most penetrating and satisfying. Among the balance are some fine other poems, most occasional, and many involving travel. "Learning's Language" is a witty discourse through which are woven stock phrases from German, French and Italian phrase books. "The Birthplace" records the familiar, standard experiences of tours of the houses where great writers have been born, and the relevance of such tours to their work and us. And "The Calves" is a moving poem in which a railroad car full of calves pauses in an Italian station on their way to market. In all these poems is wit and sensitivity.

There is an occasional whiff of Dylan Thomas in the diction of these poems, but even though Thomas died at mid-century, it is hard for anyone who was reading poetry when he was alive to escape his influence. Macdonald's syntax also occasionally shows something of the convoluted, chopped, no-articles school of a generation ago:

> Smoke-bite in far air of February
> blue from wood and hill
> stirs eighteen's expectancy
> with false sense of a spring
> soon to be real . . . .

but this is soon lost in what he has to say and is smoothly integrated into the warmth of a very good collection of poems, the best of which will be read more than once.

Dalhousie University *Richard Raymond*