

BOOK REVIEWS

A Suit of Light. By Anne Hébert. Translated by Sheila Fischman. Toronto: Anansi, 2000. 103 pages. \$22.95.

Clad in a pink satin dressing gown, Rose-Alba Almevida leans out the window of her Paris apartment in an effort to display her "best assets" to people passing by (3). Although her gaze is fixed on the street, Rose-Alba's thoughts are focused inward, on the money that she will need if she is to forsake the shadows of her dingy home for "the bright sun of fame" (3). Rose-Alba's grand visions exclude her husband, Pedro, but include her son, Miguel, whom she imagines as a little torero bowing to an adoring crowd. Miguel, however, is preoccupied with dreams of his own: squatting on the sidewalk below his mother's perch, he draws the home of his dreams in coloured chalk, and, in "the very middle of that wide, high, magnificent bedroom," he draws himself, "waiting for [his] husband" (9). Baffled by son's tendency to "wave[r] between girl and boy" and his wife's "gnawing hatred for the life given her" (12, 5), Pedro Almevida sits alone inside the apartment, smoking cigarettes and dreaming of the day when his family will return to "the honour" of Spain, his homeland (12).

Like so many of Hébert's characters, these three frustrated individuals struggle to exceed the constraints imposed by their environment, but rather than seeking comfort in each other's company, they nurse their self-contained fantasies in isolation while quietly hoping that the other family members will come to accept their private visions of "the place where everything is dream and splendour" (5). As a result, Rose-Alba, Pedro, and Miguel come together infrequently until the second half of the narrative, when Miguel meets Jean-Ephrem de la Tour, the circus dancer with whom he and his mother become infatuated. Until this point, the story is captivating and beautifully rendered. For example, the contrast between the spare, precise language with which Hébert lists the tubes, jars, and props that Miguel employs in his bid to transform himself into a "strange and slovenly girl" (17), and his hopeful, impassioned exclamation when his mother discovers him in drag, evokes pathos while scrupulously avoiding mawkishness. However, with the introduction of Jean-Ephrem de la Tour, Hébert's tone wavers, becoming more arch and less compelling:

Tall stature, small heart, black skin, white smile,
green and blue feathers on top of my head, I am
Jean-Ephrem de la Tour. Dancer at the Paradis
Perdu. Lights pointed all over my skin, from top to

bottom, night after night.... Silver wings fastened
to my shoulders. I flame and I die in a single breath.
(45)

Although Hébert uses de la Tour's propensity for clichés to expose the tawdry, flimsy nature of the aptly named circus where Miguel eagerly awaits the opportunity to fulfill the dancer's post-performance whims and his mother looks forward to being groped by strangers, de la Tour's fondness for "theatrical lines worthy of the *Paradis Perdu*" makes the dialogue unconvincing. Hébert's ironic intent is never clearer than it is when Miguel observes that Jean-Ephrem "talks like a book" (49), but irony is not enough to retain this reader's interest when Miguel also starts talking "like a book": "And now," says the young virgin, "the feast for which I was destined, for all eternity, throbs softly like a quivering heart behind the walls of the *Paradis Perdu*" (47).

Even if we are not put off by the unrealistic dialogue in the second half of the text, Hébert's decision to rely so heavily on dramatic clichés in her characterization of de la Tour means that one feels very little for him at the end of the book when he sits alone and unemployed, scrutinizing his aging body "in the low muted glimmer" of his "devastated" loft (95). More problematically, the barely concealed derision with which the circus performer is characterized renders the desperate love that Miguel feels for him unlikely, if not inexplicable, and, as a result, Miguel's own very sad plight is less moving than it might otherwise have been.

Following Hébert's death in January, 2000, Eva-Marie Kroller published an overview of criticism of Hébert's work in *Canadian Literature*. At one end of the spectrum Kroller put Monique Proulx, who has criticized Hébert's "melodramatic obsessions" and "grandiose emotions." At the other end of the spectrum Kroller put Sheila Fischman, Hébert's long-time translator who celebrated the author's ability to use "words like jewels, like gemstones, that were sharp, clear, and fine." While I suspect that Kroller is right to suggest that Proulx misses the irony which often undergirds and undercuts seemingly melodramatic moments, I do not share her willingness to endorse Fischman's argument that every word Hébert used was "necessary and right." Without a doubt, there are passages in *A Suit of Light* that are characterized by a lyrical and tremendously evocative simplicity, but there are others that are simply trite. Perhaps it is enough that the beauty of Hébert's prose frequently compensates for the uneven nature of the book's tone and dialogue.

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Ruskin's God. By Michael Wheeler. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. xviii, 302 pages. \$59.95.

This would be better entitled "Ruskin's Religion"—a phrase Michael Wheeler himself invokes in the second sentence of his Preface—or better yet "Ruskin's Religions." In it the author sets out to chronicle the religious journey of the great Victorian art critic from Ruskin's early Calvinistic, evangelical Anglicanism to his later pluralistic, naturalistic conclusions. Wheeler, a well-known scholar of Victorian religion and literature, was well positioned to take on the topic: he was Director of the Ruskin Programme and Ruskin Collection Project at Lancaster University when he wrote the book.

The task Wheeler assigns himself is the deliverance of Ruskin from the post-Victorian critic and the modern literary critic, both of whom he believes have minimized the consistent significance of religion for Ruskin's writing. This mistake, Wheeler claims, can be traced to unfounded arguments about the general secularization of nineteenth-century intellectual culture (arguments which owe more to the agnosticism of those writing on the Victorians, he says) and to a few scholars of Ruskin who in the 1950s set the scholarly agenda by dismissing Ruskin's youthful evangelicalism as wholly negative. Wheeler's thesis is that Ruskin's life was intensely religious to the end—though he became a kind of free-thinking Unitarian—and that one cannot read Ruskin fairly without seeing this. The key to this religiosity, he says, is "his spiritual and imaginative response to Old Testament [i.e. Hebrew] wisdom literature, and particularly the teaching and symbolism associated with Solomon and the temple" (xiv).

And so the heart of Wheeler's book is a close, thematic reading of everything from the sequential volumes of *Modern Painters* and other art criticism to his later lectures and the humanistic eight-point creed Ruskin wrote for the Guild of St. George, founded and endowed by Ruskin: "I trust in the kindness of [God's] law... I trust in the nobleness of human nature ... I will strive to save and comfort all gentle life, and guard and perfect all natural beauty" (225). Through all of this, says Wheeler, runs a sort of natural theology of beauty and art and work, a golden cord of divine wisdom as revealed through the life and teachings of the ancient King Solomon.

On the general religiosity of Ruskin, Wheeler is convincing. And as far as the significance of the wisdom theme for Ruskin's art criticism and later social criticism, Wheeler really cannot be challenged. He is a careful exegete of an impressive range of Ruskin's books, essays, and lectures. But Ruskin's context is not explained. There are references to his interaction with Spurgeon and a few others, but not to the general drift of Victorian religion. And the premise of the study is open to challenge. Ruskin may very well have been religious and counted on religious themes. Few Victorians were not religious in some meaningful way and few Victorian intellectuals didn't countenance religious themes. But even by Wheeler's admission Ruskin's religion and reli-

gious imagination drifted far from the evangelical moorings of his youth (even the convictions of Ruskin's twenties and thirties), as was the case with many, many Victorians. This may or may not imply secularization, but it represented a profound change in the way Victorians lived and thought, and cannot be dismissed as insignificant development in the religious life of a nineteenth-century churchman. It is a transformation that begs not for arguments that mitigate its impact, but that explains its reality.

In the end Wheeler's book reads best not as a study of Victorian religion or religious biography, but as a specialist literary volume for those initiated into Ruskin studies.

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Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality. By Ronald Dworkin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000. 511 pages. \$54.50.

This book contains many of Ronald Dworkin's most important essays in political philosophy. Together they paint his vision of the political principles by which a government which shows "equal concern for the fate of all those citizens over whom it claims dominion and from whom it claims allegiance" (page 1) ought to be guided. According to Dworkin, left-leaning liberals ought to seek to build a society in which each individual receives equal concern and respect from the governing institutions of the society. If we suppose that each person has a right to equal concern and respect from her government, what practical consequences follow for our collective political arrangements? The first half of the book consists of essays attempting to answer this question at the theoretical level. The second half contains essays dealing with the particular legal and political circumstances of America (though their broader applicability is obvious).

In the first two essays (which I think are among the most important essays Dworkin has written in political theory, and the real gems in this book), Dworkin first rejects the idea that governments committed to equality should seek to ensure that each of its citizens has an equal amount of welfare. (None of his ingenious arguments rely on skepticism about how to measure levels of welfare, yet they comprise a devastating attack on welfare egalitarianism.) Dworkin then turns to the task of developing his own liberal egalitarian theory of distributive justice, which he calls equality of resources. He argues that, in a society where everyone has a fundamental right to equal concern and respect, governments will seek to ensure that each person has equal resources at her disposal to enable her to seek to lead the sort of life she decides is best for someone with her talents and capacities. He argues that this requires a market economy, coupled with a system of universal education and health care and a system of welfare provisions which afford

protection for those with skills and abilities market economies do not value. The level of welfare provisions is to be determined by asking what level of insurance it would be rational to purchase should one be beset with various handicaps. This full-blown theory of distributive justice (which has received widespread scholarly scrutiny in the years since the essays were originally published) deserves broader public consideration and debate. One can hope that their re-publication here will lead to this outcome.

The next essays discuss the proper role of liberty and political equality in a society devoted to equal concern and respect. These essays, which are quite difficult, reward close scrutiny, for they show that many of the restraints on liberty that we find in western democracies (and which are sometimes defended in the name of equality) actually violate the best understanding of what equality requires. The theoretical half of the book ends with an essay responding to criticisms from a leading Canadian critic, the egalitarian Marxist Gerry Cohen, and from Amartya Sen.

In the second half of his book Dworkin argues for an understanding of American law which includes constitutional protections for affirmative action (in limited roles) and for homosexuals, and extensions of various free speech provisions. In another essay he deals in a calm and considered way with the ethical issues posed by new genetic technologies, convincingly showing that most of the concerns raised by some theologians, politicians, and ethicists are nothing but cheap rhetorical nonsense, and beginning the difficult task of figuring out what it is that really worries people about such advances and how the saner amongst us should think about such matters. He also considers issues having to do with abortion and euthanasia. These essays, written for the educated general public, are much easier to read than those in the first half of the book. Nonetheless, they tackle the issues in the robust manner Dworkin's fans have come to expect of him.

Dworkin claims that the more applied essays in the second half of the book are linked to the theoretical ones found earlier in the work. No doubt this is so, but the connections are not always clear and are sometimes quite obscure. Hence, while one finds much to intrigue and fascinate and disagree with in every part of this book, the reader is left feeling that a better job could have been done showing how the theory connects with the practice and how the practice informs the theory. Despite this, no one who works on theories of justice will want to miss reading this book. Those interested in the area but who have not kept up with the literature might do well to start with the first two essays in Part I and then skip ahead to Part II.

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The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf. Edited by Sue Roe and Susan Sellars. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. xxii, 286 pages. \$59.95 US.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1928; London: Penguin, 1945) Virginia Woolf urges women to "write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science.... For books have a way of influencing each other. Fiction will be much better for standing cheek by jowl with poetry and philosophy. Moreover, if you consider any great figure of the past ... you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator" (107). It is this spirit of identifying influences and innovation that ties together all twelve "especially commissioned chapters, written specifically for our students" (xiii) in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*. As editors Sue Roe and Susan Sellars note in their preface, "we are concerned with [Woolf's] mind: the breadth of her intellectual range; her impulsive flights of creative brilliance, the long labours of composition; her conversations with the present; her arguments with history" (xiii). Indeed, the *Companion* contains an impressive array of essays—by well-known Woolf scholars and editors from Canada, the United States, and the UK—that explore Woolf's, intellectual, social and cultural milieu, and her oeuvre.

The collection fittingly begins with a general essay on Bloomsbury outlining the general intellectual climate within which Woolf circulated and to which she contributed. This essay by Andrew McNeillie is particularly strong for its lucid introduction to the philosophical and aesthetic debates important to Woolf's development. The next three essays focus specifically on Woolf's novels. Suzanne Raitt discusses voice in the early fiction, arguing that Woolf's imagination and aesthetic project "were unusually aural" (33): the "languages" of music and mathematics figure prominently in *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, respectively, and *Jacob's Room*, she suggests, is centrally concerned with "the ontology of voice itself" and "the unreliability of voice as a figure for identity" (46). Susan Dick's essay on literary realism argues that one of Woolf's primary literary aims was to reform the realist novel; nonetheless, her experimentation always rested on close attention to "details of ordinary reality" (57), and these details Dick meticulously identifies in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando*, and *The Waves*. The essay is disappointing, however, since it provides insufficient context to help those unacquainted with Woolf or the literary realist tradition to appreciate the novelty of Woolf's resistance to the styles of contemporaries such as John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett. Julia Briggs' insightful essay "The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History" explains how the urgency of political and historical circumstances profoundly affected Woolf's writing by encouraging her to explore the connections between personal and public and the influence of each on the other.

The fifth and sixth essays in the volume, by Hermione Lee and Susan Sellars, explore what until recently have been undervalued or neglected aspects of Woolf's writing—her essays, diaries, and letters. Lee argues that Woolf's essays provided her space to work out “the kind of novelist she wanted to be” (92) and are personal without being confessional, a challenge that Woolf recognized as crucial for an essayist to meet. The purpose of Sellars' essay is twofold: first, to present an almost encyclopedic catalogue of the range of topics covered in the diaries and letters (this is well done); and secondly, drawing on French feminism's elaboration of “feminine writing,” to argue that Woolf's more “private” writings should be read in their own right as enacting “the new form for writing for which Woolf was searching throughout her career” (122).

In the provocative essay “Virginia Woolf and the Language of Authorship,” Maria DiBattista convincingly argues that Woolf was essentially “a radical conservative in practicing her craft” (129), meaning that she did not play with language and word forms to the extent that, for example, James Joyce did; however, her “resolve to represent the world from the point of view of incertitude gives her sentences their peculiar character” (139). (Echoes of Raitt's analysis can be heard here.) Michael Whitworth's excellent essay on modernism presents a clear account of Woolf's affinities to and differences from other, mostly male, High Modernists with regard to subjects ranging from new science to representations of the city and crowds, from technology to the rejection of economic and literary Victorian materialism. He argues that Woolf's “responses to literary and urban modernity ... [are] influenced by her immediate literary community, by imaginary communities of writers living and dead, and, importantly, by her political outlook” (161). Sue Roe's essay on Woolf and post-impressionism may be slightly over-dramatic at times (“The civilised among us know that task [of selecting what to represent and how to represent it] will feel superhuman; the mad move, in agony, between seeing, and the sudden horror of not being able to see” [182]), but it presents an insightful analysis of the convergence of Bloomsbury's discussions of ethics and art and their influence on Woolf's experimentation with the synaesthetic possibilities of language.

The final three essays dwell on the social and political aspects of Woolf's writing (David Bradshaw), feminism (Laura Marcus), and psychoanalysis (Nicole Ward Jouve). Bradshaw cogently points out that one of the impressive strengths of Woolf's novels is the omnipresence yet unobtrusiveness of her political sympathies. I would suggest that further evidence of this fact is that only within the last two decades have critics (notably Jane Marcus and Naomi Black) begun to address the socialist and feminist dimensions of Woolf's writing. Laura Marcus's chapter presents an informative survey of Woolf's own attitude toward feminism as well as feminist criticism of her work from Winifred Holby in the 1930s to the Rachel Bowlby and Pamela Caughie at present. Jouve takes the daunting topic of Woolf and psychoanalysis and

presents a clearly-written, intelligent, and balanced survey of the range of studies that discuss Woolf's mental illness, her knowledge of and attitude toward Freud and other psychoanalysts, and the influence of psychoanalytic concepts (or reactions to them) in her writing. This is the sort of essay to be admired by scholars for its clarity and non-reductiveness and by newcomers for its provision of scholarly paths for further study.

Indeed, one might make that same assessment of this *Cambridge Companion* as a whole. Although the essays in this collection were written independently of one another, references to Woolf's authorial voice, cultural and political influences, relationship to Victorian materialism and modernism, and to the tensions Woolf felt between politics and her art emerge with conspicuous and reassuring regularity. (Unfortunately, the index is poor at pulling together these topical threads.) The editors and authors are to be congratulated for weaving a complex and impressive tapestry of influences and associations that were so clearly important in Woolf's life and to her writing. Having said that, however, the book does contain one notable absence: an essay devoted to Woolf and lesbianism, an absence especially disappointing given the many fine critics who have written on this significant area (Toni McNaron, Jane Lilienfeld, Patricia Cramer, Eileen Barrett, and Elizabeth Meese to name only a few).

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The Western Theory of Tradition: Terms and Paradigms of the Cultural Sublime. By Sanford Budick. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000. xix, 293 pages. \$61.95.

How should we understand "the Western tradition"? Traditionalists think of it as an inheritance which preserves and transmits cherished cultural ideals. Poststructuralist critics characterize it as "logocentrism," reason's effacement of difference by the Same or the One. What many defenders and critics of the Western tradition have in common, however, is the view that its philosophy and literature reflect the dominant belief-systems of their times, considering, for example, that Virgil's *Aeneid* provides a rationale for the imperial rule of Augustus. They would agree that the slaying of Turnus by Aeneas represents the judgment that law must supercede individual sentiment, and would differ only over whether this is a rational insight concerning the justice of the state or a rationalization for its oppressive power.

The death of Turnus is a central moment in Sanford Budick's *The Western Theory of Tradition: Terms and Paradigms of the Cultural Sublime*, which argues that a work such as the *Aeneid* belongs to the Western tradition, not because of its substantial content, but because it makes possible an experience of the sublime. Budick draws upon and extends Kant's theory of the

sublime—that imagination’s failure to present the ideas of reason allows the self to have a momentary experience of moral freedom—in his claim that what living traditions or cultures have handed down are lines of repeated textual fragments (which he terms “commonplaces”) imparting a sense of the inadequacy of representation. The free repetition of moments which cannot be reduced to a unified representation or meaning opens the reader to an experience of moral choice. The making of tradition and the momentary achievement of moral freedom together constitute the “cultural sublime.”

Virgil’s poem achieves the open-endedness which belongs to the cultural sublime by its repetition of fragments of Homer’s *Iliad*. Through a detailed textual analysis, Budick shows that the wording Virgil employs to represent the death of Turnus, with its echoes of Homer, is at odds with the poem’s overt meaning: Virgil irretrievably speaks in a “double voice,” at one and the same time openly articulating the grounds of imperial rule and resisting its barbarity underneath. For those who can hear it, this doubleness yields a momentary experience of freedom from coercion by either substantial traditions or political power. The *Aeneid* thus belongs to a living tradition as a text which subsequent generations of writers can freely draw upon. They, and we, would not have continued to read Virgil if his poetry did not have this capacity and rather merely transmitted the values of the Augustan age.

Budick uncovers a number of other lines of culture as well, revealing unexpected connections, for example, between the Hebrew prophets, Descartes, Rembrandt and Kant, and between Plato, Tasso, Schopenhauer and Freud. Repetition of “commonplaces” occurs and is effective in texts even when it is unconsciously performed by their authors: the close reading of a number of passages by writers who claim they are making new beginnings (such as Descartes in regard to pre-modern philosophy, and Wordsworth in regard to neoclassicism) reveals how extensively they invoke their predecessors nonetheless. Kant himself is unaware how much his thought participates in rather than inaugurates a tradition. Thus, while the tradition provides an opening for individual freedom, it does so on the basis of something greater than the intentions of the individual author, who by participating in a line of culture experiences a “dying away” of the self.

One of the most arresting arguments of this book concerns the presence of women’s voices in the Western tradition. Philosophy and poetry are often accused of silencing them: in general women have not represented themselves as authors or been represented as primary subjects. But Budick finds within the tradition an opposing undercurrent, the voice of the “matrilineal muse,” which hears and speaks of women’s suffering, loss, and victimization. The concluding chapter comments on Nathalie Sarraute’s *Portrait d’un inconnu*, which he sees as bringing that undercurrent, generated by the hitherto hidden resistances of women, to the surface; by her writing, therefore, Sarraute’s “feminine sublime reclaims for women the entire Western line of culture and literary tradition” (201).

Although he challenges contemporary theories of tradition, especially those of Harold Bloom and Paul de Man, Budick's most sustained critique is of Hegel. He argues that Hegel has Aeneas's killing of Turnus in mind when he distinguishes between acts of vengeance and rightful punishment. The problem with Hegel in general is that, despite his attention to the moment of the encounter with death, there is no truly sublime experience: self-consciousness recuperates all losses, and representation is always adequate to its object. In the case of his treatment of Virgil's final scene as the exemplification of just punishment, Hegel has not heard the poet's second voice, and therefore his theory of the tradition enforces domination and coercion. Nevertheless, the reader discerns even in Hegel's writing, through its repetition of Virgilian commonplaces, the experience of the cultural sublime in ways its author cannot acknowledge.

In conclusion, *The Western Theory of Tradition* presents the surprising thesis that the act of freedom in writing lies in repetition rather than repudiation of the past. Despite its affirmation of tradition, it is by no means a defence of the history of the West, which has all too often been the scene of barbarism, nor does it side with the self-proclaimed advocates of Western culture. A line within a tradition is living only when it bestows a capacity for the cultural sublime and thus the experience of moral freedom. When the sublime is used to shore up power it becomes a pseudosublime; when a tradition is fixed into a unified set of values it degenerates into a pseudotradition. While this work should disabuse critics of the Western tradition of the notion that they are the first to have a free relation to what is inherited, it should also warn traditionalists of the dangers of the "petrifications and coercions of substantive traditionalities" (xv).

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