

BOOK REVIEWS

Speaking of Beauty. By Denis Donoghue. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. xi, 209 pages. \$24.95 US.

Plato puts Beauty, Truth and Goodness together in his Formal heaven. The three concepts are sometimes interchangeable as the 'top' Form in his hierarchy. At other times he distinguishes their roles. In any case, for millennia it has been a commonplace that 'beauty' is the unifying concept that governs the realm of aesthetics, and that it is a value closely related to truth and goodness.

Wittgenstein puts 'beauty' in another place. Emphasizing the word's *use* in our actual discourse, he claims that 'beauty' has myriad senses and is said of radically diverse objects. He warns us to be content to describe, and not to pursue theories. A generation of philosophers concluded that there is no such thing as beauty, and that systematic aesthetics is a non-starter. Denis Donoghue, Henry James Professor of English and American Letters at New York University, seems to have missed Wittgenstein's lesson. Although he is adept at seeing the beauty in particulars, he yearns for a theory of it nonetheless.

Donoghue raises big questions: Can beauty be at one with truth and goodness? Must its cultural context be understood? Does it belong to the world or to ourselves? Is it dependent on form? Are aesthetic and moral judgement independent? On the first theme, Donoghue cites an Emily Dickinson poem:

He asked me softly "Why I failed?"
"For Beauty," I replied—
"And I for Truth—Themselves are One —
We Brethren are," He said—(60-61)

I take these two, artist and scientist let us say, to be brethren because their goals, beauty and truth, are in reality identical. Donoghue, oddly, takes beauty and truth to be the brethren "sharing a common fate" (61). It is typical of him, however, to have put the theoretical issue in terms of careful commentary on a work of literary art.

A ten-page tour of the history of philosophical aesthetics highlights Kant's attribution of autonomy to the arts; it is based on their freedom, their having no utilitarian aim, and this bolsters our disinterestedness. Donoghue ingeniously connects this to arguments generated in 1816 to justify the British Government's purchase of the Elgin Marbles: e.g., that their historical, religious and architectural contexts are irrelevant to their beauty, and indeed that

it is better to be “free to look at them without feeling culturally burdened” (80). Here one feels Donoghue’s gentle irony about the lengths to which theory will lead us, but still he perseveres. In “Every Wrinkle the Touch of a Master” (his third chapter) he begins with a wonderful essay on Henry James’ “The Beldonald Holbein.” This is a story of a painter’s revenge on mere reality. A woman chosen, because of her universally acknowledged plainness, to be servant and foil to an acknowledged beauty (a natural Titian) is identified by a painter as a veritable Holbein. Her social status dramatically alters, until the ‘Titian’ sends her back to her small town, where Holbein is unknown and her newly acquired beauty vanishes. Are we to conclude that beauty is not a constituent of the world as such, but is constructed in the imaginations of people whose cultures make it possible?

Donoghue’s main stalking horse is not Wittgenstein but cultural theorists. In the interests of liveliness in seminars, “content analysts” and their students “are willing to set aside the difficult virtues of irony and skepticism for the trivial satisfaction of feeling morally superior to whatever they read” (122-23). He stalks Paul de Man, who is “concerned with language as a system of rhetorical figures” rather than with the achieved form of a poem (128). Famously, de Man thinks that the ambiguities of poetic language reflect the “contradictory relations between natural being and the being of consciousness,” but Donoghue incisively replies, “A division in a writer’s mind proves only that his feelings are complex and discrepant, not that language is a dud” (131). Again, confronting the ubiquity of “theory” in departments of literature Donoghue puts things quickly right: “It seems implausible to me that theory belongs to the history of art” (170). What does belong to it, and to its appreciation, is careful attention to beauty.

Chapter 4 claims that form is more fundamental than content. Donoghue insightfully develops a familiar example. *The Great Gatsby* is in three parts. Part I evokes in the reader hope and desire, through the sunny flow of Gatsby’s life. Part II defeats all the hope, through deceit, betrayal, and destruction. Part III is just one page long. It is required, says Donoghue, because aesthetic form demands that the awakened desire receive some satisfaction. Fitzgerald envisions his novel’s island setting without grand houses, as it would have looked to the first Europeans who saw it. Hope is re-evoked—but it is for something past. “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (136).

When one looks for form in Donoghue’s book, one must work harder. The five chapters each raise a big question, but in effect each theory is defeated. Donoghue writes: “The idea of the equal and simultaneous fellowship of truth, virtue, and beauty, ‘the complete consort dancing together,’ belongs to the realm of hope” (139), but having thus returned to his opening theme he lets the hope end quietly with the failure and death of Ruskin. We seem to have made our way from part I through part II of *Gatsby*, but with no part III. Perhaps one could argue that the formal re-balancing of the book comes only

in the Appendix, which offers twenty-three samples of words on beauty from twenty-two authors (Shakespeare, appropriately, speaks twice). Is the lesson that in spite of death and the failure of theory, beauty and words about it live on?

The book's beauty, then, does not lie in its form. I say this, even though as books go it is well produced. It is not a small treasure like one of Jan Zwicky's hand-made *Songs for Relinquishing the Earth*, or even the Gaspereau Press's fine production of her recent *Wisdom and Metaphor*, but from the wistful cover photo of the remains of a conversation in a Viennese café, to the typo-free text unmarred by 'scientific' footnotes, Yale University Press has done a fine job. Nonetheless, the book's best beauties lie in the scattered miniatures of works of artistry subjected to Donoghue's own elegant analyses.

The Preface invokes Donoghue's childhood, his oblivion to the beauty of the Irish countryside where he grew up, and his struggle with breath control as he learned to sing Bach. We then witness his failed struggle to find durable aesthetic theory. The Appendix is thus a sort of benediction. I think, though, that when he says that he wishes the whole book consisted of quotations, and that his own contributions were confined to footnotes (xiii), he vastly underestimates his accomplishment. Anyone who finds beauty in words will find much to admire in this book.

Steven Burns

Dalhousie University

Ireland's Eye: Travels. By Mark Anthony Jarman. Toronto: Anansi, 2002. 292 pages. \$32.95.

The cover of *Ireland's Eye* looks like a Guinness label, claiming the text is "brewed" rather than printed, and Mark Anthony Jarman certainly has fermented a heady brew here, one in which the writer searches for the perfect memory with the same relish with which he looks for the perfect pint, even if the joy of the goal is that it can never quite be attained. Jarman attempts to trace his Irish roots in these evocative travel and memory writings about repeated visits to the "auld sod," yet the more he searches, the more he unearths, the less stable the ground is beneath his feet.

In a series of narrative essays, Jarman attempts to map this ground. Initially, he does so by paralleling his private search concerning the "facts" about his grandfather, Michael Lyons, with the public record of the near-mythical Irish revolutionary hero, Michael Collins. Jarman sets out particularly to map the circumstances of the death of Michael Lyons, whose drowning went almost unnoticed while the public was concerned with the funeral of "the Big Man," Michael Collins, that same day. Ultimately, Jarman's search of the public record, which places his grandfather's death in the wrong place

on the wrong canal, only serves to underline that such records are mis-mappings. Even after he gets the “facts” right about the place of his grandfather’s drowning, the exact quality of the event and the man still elude (and must necessarily elude) Jarman. Eventually, he acknowledges that his search has been for an ur-Éire that cannot possibly exist. Yet this acknowledgment of the lack of originary truth does not lessen the “truthfulness” of the impulse to explore the past. His finding (and not finding) of the “facts” do not lessen his need to engage in this increasingly fragmenting search for wholeness.

I found that I read the book in fragments. I read it piecemeal and, of course, here pieces are the meal—like Jarman’s selection of words from a pub character known only as Interpreter Woman: “I *hate* Canada—biggest collection of transvestites and lulu headcases per capita, but they won’t let you smoke. I hate Canada.” Though this opinion is clearly (?) false, it is a true reporting of a truly held opinion, a revelation of a perspective distortedly seeing back to Canada, and a damn funny quote.

Perhaps the drinker’s viewpoint (the viewpoint most frequently and joyfully inhabited by Jarman, Interpreter Woman, and others in this work) is the appropriate one for this text. *In vino veritas* and also fog, and, in this book, the veritas is in the fog, the blurred perspective. The important recognition here is the necessity of mis-recognition. Of course, the inevitability of mis-recognition has almost become cliché, but Jarman here imbues it with the kind of pleasure that such writing does not always or easily seem to hold. His writing, like Guinness, “is good for you.” It is full of literary nutrition, drunken in its wild playful excesses and poignant personal revelation. And no hangover.

Bill Kerr

University of Manitoba

Latex and Lingerie: Shopping for Pleasure at Ann Summers Parties.
By Merl Storr. Oxford: Berg, 2003. xii, 235 pages. \$33.20.

With the recent flood of erotic products aimed at female consumers, we might be tempted to assume that heterosexual women are increasingly able to develop their sexuality according to their own desires, and less in response to the desires of men. Companies like Ann Summers, a ‘party-plan’ organization that sells sex toys, lingerie, and other erotic paraphernalia in private homes (the Canadian equivalent is the Fantasia Home Parties company), appear to work on the assumption that women are now ‘empowered’ in their erotic lives, and that the purchase of erotic products will continue to improve women’s sexual confidence.

On the surface of it, the Ann Summers ideology sounds promising, but Merl Storr’s sociological study of Ann Summers parties and their participants reveals the unfortunate truth: that while such events may provide a

forum for women to share their sexual experiences and validate female desire, they do so in a highly prescribed manner. Using interview and participant observer methods, Storr followed fifteen party organizers through a number of parties. She found that the Ann Summers system does not challenge heterosexist or patriarchal constructions of female sexuality. Storr traces how the sales events themselves, particularly the games played at the parties, reinforce heterosexist expectations, even to the point of being overtly homophobic. The most extreme interpretation might posit that Ann Summers parties are actually “for men,” Storr notes, since they act to remind women of masculine desires, even as they claim to provide a space (and a market) catering to female desires. Some of the most interesting parts of Storr’s book are her analyses of the intersections of class, race and sexuality we resonate at Ann Summers events. The white, working-class women who participate in the parties perform particular constructions of female sexuality that we often imagine as different from the sexuality of ‘posh’ women. Women of colour seem to be rare, and are occasionally actively excluded from these events.

The feminist promise of female self-employment suggested by Ann Summers is also largely illusory. Economically, it can’t be said that the employment offered to women by Ann Summers will make a significant enough difference to raise working-class women (who are the most common demographic participating in the company) to a more stable position. While the extra money is clearly helpful, the saleswomen must have either a partner who works, or additional employment herself in order to make ends meet. Ann Summers employment might have some benefits, like flexible hours, and working from home, but Storr notes that it is not constructed to encourage female economic independence.

Storr is careful not to condescend to her subjects: she is highly aware that, as a middle-class academic, she is applying a critical language and theoretical perspective to these women that the women themselves do not invest in. She recognizes the positive effects of Ann Summers parties; the events are often a fun “girls night out” that give the women a welcome break from their daily lives, as well as a space that prioritizes female pleasure. Ultimately, however, Storr concludes that the Ann Summers phenomenon is not as much about the fulfilment of individual female desire, born of genuine social and sexual liberation, as it is about a communal policing of female desire, which assumes gratification is to be had through consumerism.

Janine Rogers

Mount Allison University

City of Sin: London in Pursuit of Pleasure. By Giles Emerson. London: Carleton Publishing, 2002. 288 pages. \$27.50.

In his book about the pervasiveness of sin throughout London’s history, Giles Emerson argues that London’s hedonism had wider implications than mere

pleasure-seeking, that the city was a place where people became part of a social experiment in a freedom that could not to be found in small towns and villages. This book is not a scholarly work, but a slightly more comprehensive companion to a television series called *Sin City*. The author makes it plain that there was a pressing time constraint to ensure that the book complemented the series, and admits that this caused him to rely heavily on secondary sources. This book is more history 'lite' than a serious look at the seedier side of London.

The book begins in Roman Londinium with an "imaginary snapshot" of a girl celebrating the festival of flowers in AD 124 that turns out to be entirely fabricated. Emerson explains that there was a devastating fire in London that year that "disrupted the course of London's early festival and buried the scant evidence of such festivals" (15). This desire to paint a picture is repeated throughout the book, doubtless a result of the visual medium from which it sprang. Nevertheless, the emphasis on imaginative stories comes at the expense of historical records and is a weakness that pervades the entire book.

Emerson writes in a style that can best be described as breezy. In his attempt to make the material accessible to a wide variety of readers he often slips into modern comparisons that may prove incomprehensible to readers not familiar with the latest celebrity news. His description of King Charles II and his mistress Nell Gwynn as "the Posh and Becks of the late 17th century" (52), is not only a questionable statement in itself, but also presupposes that the readers will be *au courant* with twenty-first century pop culture references.

The scope of the book is large. It covers the history of London from Roman to Victorian times. Each chapter is dedicated to a different vice or pleasure, including sex, gambling, sport, theatre, drinking and gluttony. Perhaps it is the sheer breadth of the topic that has inspired Emerson to a number of sweeping overstatements. The chapter on drinking, entitled "Altered States," begins: "The majority of Londoners and their forebears have always preferred the state of intoxication to that of sobriety" (185). Such breathtaking assumptions make the reader wish to question at once not only this statement but any other the author has confidently asserted.

The *City of Sin* is not as fun or as interesting a read as its title would suggest. There is no conclusion in this book. Emerson's concept of the city as a place of experiment and freedom that he posits in his introduction is never fully explored; and this is too bad, since it is an interesting idea. In the end, *City of Sin* fails to satisfy.

Karen Berrigan

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Dylan's Visions of Sin. By Christopher Ricks. New York: Penguin, 2003. 517 pages. \$45.00.

Christopher Ricks appears to have two main reasons for publishing this huge treatise on Dylan's lyrics. The first is admirable, as Ricks wants to close the gap between literary and popular culture: "To set Dylan among the poets, there with Keats, is to give both poets their due" (369). The second reason, although well-intentioned, is deeply disturbing to those who have long fought "the howling beast on the borderline" (Dylan, *Idiot Wind*) that separates the western literary canon from so-called lesser works: "Most people who are likely to read this book will already know what they feel about Dylan, though they might not always know quite why they feel it, or what they think" (7). Since virtually all of those who even pick up this book, let alone get through it, will probably have considerable knowledge of Dylan's career and lyrics, Ricks seems to be placing another borderline between impressionable folks like them and reflective literary critics like himself. He underlines his address to such people with his many unexplained allusions to Dylan images. For example: "She opened up a book poems and handed it to me, written by an English poet from the fourteenth century: *Handling Sin*" (2). Ricks contributes a footnote for Robert Mannyng's translation "of a manual of the sins, by William of Wadington," but does not bother to remind his Dylan-feeling audience about his clever reference to *Tangled Up In Blue*. Or, in his subsequent sentence, "My left hand waving free," to *Mr. Tambourine Man*. Those who catch the allusions shouldn't worry if they don't understand them because Ricks is happy to provide explanations..

Ricks doesn't just put Dylan with Keats, he places him, through constant intertextual comparison, in the illustrious company of—among others—Tennyson, Eliot, Hopkins, Beckett, Rossetti (Christina), Browning (Robert), Milton, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swinburne, Hardy, and Donne, as well as writers of the Old Testament. He is certainly very good at underlining Dylan's ability to play "his timing against his rhyming," and very perceptive in his detailed discussions of the affinities between Dylan's lyrics and earlier songs and poems, such as those between *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* and the early nineteenth-century Scottish ballad *Lord Randal*, or between *Not Dark Yet* and Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* (which Ricks quotes in its entirety). He is obviously most comfortable when he can show how, for example, Dylan and Keats both use "sleep" and "time" in the second line of their respective works, and how little difference there is between Keats's "thy soul" (line 3) and Dylan's "my soul" (also line 3). He is particularly adept at joining a wide range of canonical expression to specific Dylan lyrics, as with the elements of Swinburne, Blake, Keats, and Ezekiel 26 in *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands*, and the traces of Robert Browning, Milton, William Empson, and Psalm 11:2 in *Blind Willie McTell*. Ricks's certain mastery of the intertext results in nota-

ble tributes to Dylan: “*Not Dark Yet* stands to Keats’s *Ode* very much as Keats’s *Ode*, in its turn, stood to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73” (367).

The learned critic, however, overstates his case, often burying Dylan’s lyrics beneath a host of literary comparisons and interpretations of Dylan terminology sanctified by definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. He is ultimately too clever, showing off his ability to elevate such ordinary Dylan ditties as *Clothes Line Saga* and *Lay Lady, Lay* alongside works by Housman and Donne. Apparently everything Dylan writes (and everything by the canonized Housman and Donne) is worthy of serious attention. One implication of such attention is that, in qualitative terms, Dylan’s individual songs over five decades of his expression cannot be distinguished from one another.

More disquieting, given Ricks’s critical talents, are the times he simply fails to deal with the complexities of Dylan’s narrative voices and the political and social contexts from which he draws their sound and sense. “In a Dylan song,” Ricks writes, “it is usually clear whether a man or a woman is being addressed” (65). This view flies in the face of the extraordinarily unsettling qualities of the address in *Like a Rolling Stone* that depend upon the ambiguities of just who is being harangued (the woman? the song’s collective audience? the singer-songwriter known as Dylan?). It also fails to note that in *Idiot Wind*, Dylan employs the same trio of listeners, presumably to indicate what he means, at least partly, when he sings, “I kissed goodbye the howling beast / ... / that separated you from me.” Ricks even quotes, supportively, another critic’s lament at the “willingness” of *Like a Rolling Stone* “to judge others without judging oneself” (186). This is a remarkable simplification and underestimation of the same writer whom Ricks compares to Ovid and Shakespeare. “Of all Dylan’s creation,” Ricks asserts, “this is the song that, while one of his most individual, exercises the severest self-control when it comes to never mentioning its first person. Never say I. Not I and I: you and you” (190). Ricks misses entirely the “I” in the “you,” as Dylan speaks powerfully of his need to abandon his own performer’s condition in 1965 after his last tour as a solo artist: “When you ain’t got nothin’ / you got nothin’ to lose / You’re invisible now / You got no secrets to conceal.”

As for the socio-political aspects of Dylan’s material, Ricks is quite right to emphasize that Dylan possesses “a supreme understanding of the difference between writing a political song and writing a song politically” (233), but only once, in his assessment of *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* (arguably Dylan’s magnum opus for Ricks), does he consider from start to finish the significance of lived human experience and how such experience shapes formal expression. Elsewhere, Ricks plays down the influence of specific time and place on Dylan’s metaphors and terminology. His explanation of Dylan’s gender-exclusive use of “man” in *Blowin’ in the Wind* is plain silly, not to mention sexist. According to Ricks, Dylan employs “A man” in this song, “not because of thoughtlessness or a hidden gender...[but] because of the forms that a man’s courage may have to take, forms different

from those of a brave woman ..." (325). But what is specifically male about the questions and possible answers in the following lines? "How many times must a man look up / Before he can see the sky / How many ears must one man have / Before he can hear people cry / How many deaths will it take 'til he knows / That too many people have died?" What's clear here (in 1962) is that "man" includes "woman" in the usual (for the times) exclusive manner.

Of *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, Ricks writes, "What precipitated the song was the Cuban crisis. Agreed. But the song, being a work of art, is always going to be larger than and other than what precipitated it" (343–44). This is true, but Ricks needs to apply his dictum to his constrained consideration of Dylan's art, the amplitude of which does not always have to do with explicit comparisons to the literary canon. Ricks skips over, as well, the personal as political, citing the image of "evening's empire [returning] into sand" in *Mister Tambourine Man*, but not connecting it to the actual time of day of Dylan's stage(d) performances as lone troubadour and protest singer to which he was saying goodbye as early as 1964. As for what Ricks has to say about Dylan's striking paean to the blues, *Blind Willie McTell*, he quotes Dylan urging young songwriters to listen to Robert Johnson (361), but he'd rather bring in that list of illustrious canonical references to justify the song's worth than address the blues as historically-based resistance literature—resistant to the impacts of slavery as well as of specific personal problems.

I haven't mentioned Ricks's chapter-heading visions of sin and virtue—on the one hand, Envy, Covetousness, Greed, Sloth, Lust, Anger, Pride, and on the other, Justice, Fortitude, Faith, Hope, and Charity. They don't really matter, except to provide a neat schema within which to compartmentalize Dylan's lyrics that ultimately remain larger than Ricks's constructions of them. I don't think Ricks understands the irony of Dylan's words that he quotes on the first page of his book, words that separate Dylan's imaginings from the critic's attempts to stamp them with formal and formalist approval: "I'm the first person who'll put it to you and the last to explain it to you" (1). This doesn't mean for a moment that explanations don't matter; it means that it's the iridescent glimpses of meanings in Dylan's lyrics, not Ricks's attempts "to make [them] too concise and too clear," that keep us "up past the dawn." For many of us who feel *and* think, after wading through this 517-page tome, the songs, in the end, like the "visions of Johanna," will be "all that remain."

J.A. Wainwright

Dalhousie University

