BOOK REVIEWS

Rotten Poetry Fish. By Hume Cronyn. Oakville: Mosaic Press, 2000. 82 pages. $15.00 paper.

In "Stephen's House," the exquisitely layered long poem that constitutes the final section of Hume Cronyn's *Rotten Poetry Fish*, readers are invited to reflect upon the titular character's mutterings about a poem "that has recently been preoccupying him." More specifically, we are asked to share in his fascination with "Pessoa's lovely line, 'There are ships moored in every poet'." Speaking this line aloud, Stephen "grow[s] indignant with the warships currently anchored in the Thames: what are they doing there?" This demand is followed by a qualification and a further question: "how different from the ships moored in poets! or should a poet contain a few warships, too?" (74). It is this final question that Cronyn addresses most eloquently in his third book of verse, a collection that moves fluidly from lyrical rememberings of lost dreams and oppressive silences to poems of impassioned, in-your-face contentiousness.

At its edgiest and its best, this is warship poetry. Crackling with a determination that "sticks in the throat / like a fist" ("Sing Man Sing" 55), this is poetry that drags readers from "the tranquilized slopes of nostalgia" ("Born To Buy" 41) and out of "the haze of sulphuric heaviness" ("Trolley Man" 27) that threatens to choke poetry and humanity from everyday lives. As the speaker of "Christmas Blues" stops to point out to Santa, the rotund embodiment of an over-consuming suburban culture that mainlines sanctimony with Sunday-dinner ferocity, it's time to face the facts: "the manger and the three wisemen have failed, / what comes down the chimney goes up in smoke," and "sometimes white hair equals snow" (3). In such poems as "Born to Buy," "Broken," and "Sing Man Sing," Cronyn straddles the razor's edge of polemic, while in "Stranded," "Trolley Man," and "Coffee with Doug" the interrogations, though still piercing, are quieter, less direct.

As issue-driven as they might first appear, these are poems that find their gravity in the shadows and contours of individual lives, in the stories of the marginalized, the overlooked, the broken. These are poems about "My Uncle," a man of (em)bracing humanity but also of deep silences, who can "talk / until we are laughing with tears" but "[o]ther times ... says nothing / as if he is living inside himself" (49). Among others seen to be living inside themselves (too deeply, perhaps?) are the poet "just back from an associate professorship at Princeton / ... he is only six months away from a jump out of a third-storey window" ("Monday Night at the Troubadour" 52); "Carlos," whose new suit cannot protect him from the demons in his head or the impact of a thirty-foot jump from a bridge; and the unnamed Guinness family heiress, whose "Descent," though less sudden, is nonetheless poignant. To his credit, Cronyn views these stories through an intensely reflexive lens. Susceptible to the pressures of all-too-familiar platitudes, his speakers are forced, too, to look directly and discomfortably into the eyes, often quite literally, of the safely imagined Other: "Today I see him, and instead of turning away, he looks at me. Will I stop? Does it matter if I have nothing to say, little to give? I worry about intruding.... I pass by, helplessness weighs in the pit of my stomach" ("Trolley Man" 28–29). Having toured Stephen's house—a house overflowing with books, learning, loss—the speaker asks and answers a question that echoes in the angles and alleyways of this volume: "who can talk about a life, look from one angle it appears tragic, overgrown, too weighty, not weighty enough, lost, confused, abused, abusing, look from another angle, it is gifted, it celebrates, it jokes, it loves" (82).

Helplessness weighs in more disconcertingly in those poems about familiar lives, about the exhaustions of quiet disappointments carried by individuals who find themselves without the time "to be wrapped in the breezes / and whisper to the moss / restless songs / that are forever bubbling" ("A Day at the Cottage" 66). With too much to do and too little life in which to do it, these are people for whom "an aimless day is a priceless gift" ("Our Flat" 35) but also a moment during which to ponder how a life, once overflowing with "stars to swallow" ("Something to Do with the Stars & the Beautiful Unseating of a Cop" 32), becomes burdened with routine, resignation, and, ultimately, nostalgia. Nowhere is this realization rendered more painfully than in "A Night In," a poem in which a couple find themselves trapped in a Prufrockian loop of reticence and hesitation:

> I want to talk about
> mystic flights,
> a Tibetan monk
> who torched himself,
> Tolstoy at Astapovo
>
> you want to talk about
> a broken step
> that needs repairing,
> the wind beating at the window,
> the loneliness of your mother
>
> and I bite into white mooniness,
> my eyes fixed on the sleeve
> of your blouse
>
> . . . .
>
> not a word is said. (65)

The desperations of this captured moment, like those echoing in such equally well-turned poems as "Around the Pool," "Red and Green," "Our Flat," and "A Day at the Cottage," are intensified by the presence of "Love Poem," an early inclusion in which a world-weary commuter finds his most profound renewal in his enduring passion for his partner of two decades. His epiphany is a moment at which domestic intimacies go supernova: "I want you so much, twenty years, and I still want you, bursting through my clothes, / through our skins" (19). Moments handled with such a delicate confidence lift *Rotten Poetry Fish* far above the volumes of solipsistic drudgery and smoke-and-mirrors theatrics that too often pass for contemporary poetry in this country. Not surprisingly, Cronyn's metapoetic "Don't Call Me a Poet" and "Monday Night at the Troubadour" sparkle with similar honesty; indeed, they should be mandatory readings in creative writing classes everywhere.

Rotten Poetry Fish is not without weak moments, to be sure. "Rolled," a poem that catalogues those various moments when "you know you've been rolled by one of God's messengers" (5) lacks the sweet science of a well-timed counterpunch. And readers are asked to skirt the occasionally misplaced or heavy-handed line or stanza, as when the careful touch shaping "Trolley Man" is ruptured by the over-obvious "I worry about how we abandon people" (29) or when the line "kill kill and kill" punctuates the otherwise constrained "Nyarubuye (Rwanda)." Tangentially, I propose a moratorium on cover-blurbs that invoke comparisons to Whitman; such suggestions are extravagant, at best, as Cronyn himself acknowledges in the magically surreal "Birthday Poem" when the poet-speaker notes that "Walt Whitman dropped in for a minute, / Chided me for my immature efforts to imitate him" (56).

But these are minor complaints. This is a collection of profoundly radical angles, of bloodied knuckles, of a wind that in one tree "seems to soothe" while "[i]n another ... is angry and ravaging" ("Coffee with Doug" 15). This is also, and without hesitation, one of the richest and most deeply rewarding collections of poetry I have read in years.

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Swimming Among the Ruins. By Susan Gillis. Winnipeg: Nuage Editions, 2000. 90 pages. $12.95.

Volta. By Susan Gillis. Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2002. 74 pages. $12.95.

It is a truism that poets reveal themselves in their work. With few exceptions, the raw material for much of the poetry we see published in contemporary literary journals is provided by the daily life of the poet. Some take family and friends as their subject, others write about illness and death, still others focus upon longing and love. However, the ever-present danger is that if the language fails to rise above the material, the mundane nature of the events being chronicled can cause poetry written in this vein to seem pedestrian and uninspired.

Montreal poet Susan Gillis does not fall into this trap. She possesses a gift for taking a simple moment of time and dressing it in language that renders it jewel-like and resplendent. And though her poems arise from personal observation and experience, they reverberate with human emotion and are rich with broader implication.

Gillis's voice is thoughtful; she assumes a role that is close to passive reportage, allowing phrases and images to do their work beside each other on the page. She refuses to push or prod her reader toward conclusions, preferring instead to let her poems operate subtly upon the mind and suggest a multitude of meanings. Nor does she strain for effect or engage in flashy pyrotechnics. This is poetry that emerges from a sophisticated intellect commenting upon and striving to make sense of the world around it.

The poems in *Swimming Among the Ruins* reflect Gillis's extensive travels. But they are not simply 'travel poems.' The moment in time—the autobiographical instant—is every bit as important as the setting. As we follow her across physical terrain that might be unfamiliar, we gradually realize that we are also following her as she traverses a region of the heart that is familiar to us all. Gillis writes about love's triumphs and failures with a steady hand and unflinching eye.

The poems in *Volta* are also chiefly concerned with love and travel, but in this later book we encounter more of longing and less of love fulfilled. In *Volta* Gillis seems concerned chiefly with portraying 'love' in the abstract or ideal, as something to strive for even if we cannot hope to attain it. With the emotional content held in check, the writing seems more tightly controlled and economical than in *Swimming*. Tellingly, some of the poems in this book are loose reworkings or modern interpretations (or, as Gillis herself describes them, "radical translations or permutations") of fifteen poems of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47), who is notable in the annals of English literature as an innovator, especially in the sonnet form, having studied Petrarch's originals and adapted them for his own use. In *Volta*, Susan Gillis works a further variation on the Italian originals, bringing them into the twenty-first century. Each line is supple and vivid, and though she acknowledges the debt she owes to her literary forebears, the results of her efforts are unmistakably her own, as in the following passage from "Love as Pure Desire" (34):

> It chanced one day while he was weighing
> a small yellow tomato in his hand, his look
> landed on me, rippled through and opened my mouth.
> "Taste this," he whispered, and eased it in.
> My husband one step behind me.
> One yellow tomato.

That was all.
But I can say to you, happy is she
who may dine nightly at his table.

It is impossible, in a brief review, to describe all the ways that Gillis's poems reward the attentive reader. Her writing celebrates the strength and infinite frailty of love. The poems are filled with the kind of closely observed detail that comes from lived experience and encourages us to observe the world around us with renewed fascination. There is a narrative thread suggested by recurring settings and images, by the person addressed as 'you' (sometimes present, often absent), and the poems flow without apparent effort from page to page, compelling the reader to follow, as if to reach the end of a suspenseful story. However, the temptation to dip into these books, to select poems at random, is strong, and they work just as well when read in this fashion and continue to reveal new facets on repeated readings.

In her first two books Susan Gillis risks much by leading us through the uncertain terrain of the heart, and we are the richer for it. Graceful, eloquent, and deeply personal, the poems in *Swimming among the Ruins* and *Volta* herald a remarkable new voice on the Canadian literary scene.

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Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil. By Laurence Lampert. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. x, 320 pages. $40.00 US.

Nietzsche was a determined and, indeed, implacable opponent of traditional philosophy. He sought nothing less than to dissolve all consciousness of truth and goodness and reduce it to nothingness. Nevertheless, the finest commentators—Heidegger, Derrida, Frank and Habermas, amongst others—see ambiguity in his attitude. So too does Laurence Lampert, a philosophy professor at Indiana University. In this remarkably detailed study of *Beyond Good and Evil*, we find the other side of Nietzsche's scepticism. According to Lampert, Nietzsche's task was really a traditional philosophical one of "gaining a comprehensive perspective … that could claim to be true" (1). Nietzschean consciousness on this view does not involve a merely subjective relation to external nature, morality and the like; it is subjective but makes the truth of the world as a whole its object. This is for Lampert the all-embracing standpoint, "the perspective from above" (12).

Lampert alerts readers to contradictions which must be resolved and, in doing so, brings out the one-sidedness of earlier modern positions. Religion cannot be put on one side, and humanity in its freedom on the other. Freedom must not be opposed to nature and thus posited as a pure relation of human consciousness to itself. Such freedom to Nietzsche was limited, abstract and cut off from everything living, from the one and all. Freedom determined negatively—as in the Enlightenment or the French Revolution—is divided, evil. True freedom is rather absolute affirmation, a life of passionate devotion to the "truth" of "the whole" (269–70).

But it is here—and not only here—that Lampert fails to uncover the central incoherence of Nietzsche's philosophy. He sees Nietzsche's passion for the world as a religious ideal. We are told, for example, that for Nietzsche a "world-affirming human being" is one who "wants his life once more" and is therefore willing to view it from the perspective of "eternal return" (118–19). But this perspective is not "eternal" at all; it does not give us the starting point, the beginning of time, the root of humanity and the world. Nature and humanity are to Nietzsche not what God produces out of his activity—the divine forms where eternity connects with time, with the coming and going of everything finite and particular. If Nietzsche's "eternal" perspective is to be allowed, the temporal world will appear as negative, unreal, and reconciliation in nature and history will at best be transitory and illusory. Nietzsche may have known something of "disharmonics" and "tragedies," but nothing of "a unitary world" or "a comedy of redemption," and Lampert is naïve to suggest otherwise (289).

Like Nietzsche himself, Lampert both affirms and denies the teaching of scepticism—that all that is finite and particular is radically unstable. Scepticism enters in, and finite existence can no longer be the ultimate. But then how can one find the highest truth of humanity in the natural world or in the political life of the state? So long as the unity of humanity with the world is understood in a purely finite and temporal way it will appear to be utterly fictitious, a lie. That is the chief lesson of the Nietzschean philosophy, which dismisses or takes no notice of higher forms of unity, and despite its own pretensions to do otherwise can only assert a subjective standpoint—the negative—against content of every sort.

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Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern. By Michael North. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 269 pages. $87.50.

Salome of the Tenements. Public Opinion. Peoples of All Nations. The Seven Lively Arts. Merton of the Movies. These are not the titles you were expecting—for 1922, that oft-cited *annus mirabilis* of Anglo-American modernism, takes on an altogether new shape in Michael North's fascinating study. In his Preface, North remarks that rather than starting with *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, the year's two modernist monuments, he simply began to read omnivorously in the hope of gaining "a more comprehensive understanding of how the masterworks of literary modernism fit into the discursive framework of their time" (vi). Yet one of the most intriguing aspects of North's book is that this never quite happens. What happens instead is the gradual dissolution of the very distinction between "masterwork" and "framework" with which the enterprise commenced.

Each of North's five chapters moves through a series of texts arranged so as to constitute a particular aspect of or analytical perspective on the modern. North's modernism ultimately inheres neither in textual properties nor in cultural conditions; it might best be defined as a particular point of view, an ironic self-consciousness about conventionality and culture that attempts what it at the same time more or less recognizes to be impossible: to pull itself up by its own bootstraps to a place outside the irreducible diversity and particularity of viewpoints. On this account the paradoxical role of the participant-observer becomes an archetypically double modern stance, generated by the increasingly international character of modernism and the pervasiveness of context-produced misunderstandings. A central theme can be located in each chapter; but each is also, crucially for the book's claims, a tour de force movement across wide swaths of 1922. Hence some summary is necessary to suggest the book's scope.

The first chapter, "Translation, Mistranslation and the Tractatus," moves from Cambridge to the Trobriand islands to John Cournos' novelized memoir of early modernism, *Babel*, using Wittgenstein's mythologized transition (from the universalizing linguistic science embodied in the 1922 initial English-German edition of the *Tractatus* to the later attempt to stand outside everyday linguistic convention) to frame two foundational works of cultural anthropology. In the field, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski discover the fact which would become crucial to Wittgenstein's later work: "that misunderstanding and mistranslation are not merely disruptive but actually constituative of anthropological understanding" (46). "The Public Unconscious" centres on the figure of Edward Bernays—Freud's nephew, Horace Liveright's employee, and the inventor of the business of public relations—arguing that the traditional liberal sphere had been reconceptualized on a psychoanalytic model as an "open arena in which drives and phobias, prejudices and impressions combine" (72). "Tourists in the Age of the World Picture" circles back to the notion of universal languages as a context for a reading of mass-media photography and its role in late British imperial tourism. Tracking the Prince of Wales, the publisher Lord Northcliffe, and D. H. Lawrence on their near-simultaneous 1922 routes across the Indian subcontinent, North argues that the very totality promised by photographic taxonomy only made the irreducible contingency and particularity of human beings more unavoidable. The *Dial* editor Gilbert Seldes, in his dual role as publisher of *The Waste Land* and cultural critic, is the focal figure of "Across the Great Divide." North's assertion that "the same person who made American popular culture a legitimate object of criticism also played a central role in formulating the public definition of literary modernism" (141) sets up an argument that both these phenomena were taken as revolutionary for an anti-realist quality North calls "syncopation" (172), visible most notably in the work of Charlie Chaplin—North's choice for the "one thing every human being living in 1922 ... could have agreed upon" (163). North's final chapter, "All Nice Wives Are Like

That," rereads a series of attacks on Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein, and concludes that Stein's revelation of "the duplicity of the commonplace" is the archetypal modernist achievement: "Even the most ordinary writing … was aware that something uncanny and strange had been exposed within the everyday, and even the strangest writing felt the attraction of ordinary language and experience, once it had been destabilized in this way" (203–204).

The difference in tone between North's Preface and his Conclusion is striking; the modestly couched goal of a "dramatically enlarged context" (vii) with which he begins itself becomes no mere revision of context, but a new text of modernism. The brilliance of North's juxtapositions is indisputable. Nevertheless, I want to pose some methodological questions about his effort to derive a speculative redefinition of modernist studies from these constellations.

North argues persuasively that, rather than challenge Kenner's construction of the "Pound Era," criticism has instead attacked the modernism so formulated, and that the only solution to the resulting impasse is a broadened version of modernism: "Modernism has so thoroughly come to mean that which rejects everything progressive and challenging in the twentieth century that another term is needed, such as 'avant-garde' or even 'postmodern,' for those artists and writers friendly to change" (11). Modernism on this account names an enlarged and destabilized context; the efficacy and artificiality of convention was brought to light as never before by the technologies and discourses of modernity. Modernism and/or the avant-garde have been understood as assaulting conventionality in the name of the "new"; North, by contrast, reads them as existing in dialogue with the establishment of new conventions by (American) commodity culture. Aestheticism issues most significantly not in the mandarin formalism of a Joyce but in the marketing of products as experiences. Rather than dismiss "ironic self-reflexiveness," North installs it at the level of the popular—precisely the attitude towards advertisement that we now take as 'postmodern' or contemporary.

The picture of modernity this offers is compelling; one hopes that North's account will mark the end of simple evaluative oppositions between modernism and postmodernism. The historical shift in the relations of aesthetic and political values behind this move is worth tracing; I'll draw upon Fredric Jameson's summary in *Late Marxism*. At the moment of (primarily but not exclusively European) modernism, as Adorno has argued, "[modern] art was by definition politically left." The extended American reception of this art by the New Criticism within the university converted it into a conservative canon which would then be rebelled against as hegemonic by the populist American left of the 1960s (Jameson, *Late Marxism* 140–41). But insofar as North attempts to rehabilitate modernism not by rereading particular works but by associating them with the mass culture of their own day, I would suggest that the category of aesthetic innovation must not be so swiftly dismissed. To reduce formal accounts of modernism to a single citation of Clement Greenberg's "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch" re-enacts the very strategy for which North chastises Andreas Huyssen, who—as North observes—grounded his now-famous opposition of modernism to mass culture on the textual evidence of "exactly one brief statement from T.S. Eliot" (207). The immense historical consciousness present (very differently) in the work of Stein, Joyce and Eliot goes unexamined by North, whose modernism registers the culture (whether self-consciously or otherwise) in a symptomatic manner by re-enacting its patterns and ironies. Adorno and Bourdieu have reminded us that autonomy is not merely a formalist fantasy but a historically determined condition: art's turn from society was itself social, and should not be erased in the aim of constructing a modernism better suited to today's palates.

This is to say that North's powerful redefinition neglects the attention of a certain strand of modernism to the cultural intervention possible at the level of form. The enlarged canon of modernist studies he envisions would include not only writers such as Claude McKay, Anzia Yzierska, and Willa Cather but various now forgotten 'popular novelists.' These texts are already the property of approaches such as the new American cultural studies; to argue that they should be 'in the canon' of modernist studies is uncontroversial—unless in so doing they displace other texts on the syllabi that teach 'modernism.' North feels able to admit that Anzia Yzierska's *Salome of the Tenements* is "a very bad novel" (102); it is interesting, on his account, in that its protagonist embodies facts about the social formation of selfhood that are endemic to the conditions of 1922 and the modern more generally. The dangers of universalizing such a paradigm—and here I'll risk a glib formulation—is that it teaches us to think we're smarter than the texts we read, a stance by no means simply liberatory for teacher or student.

Nor are the major works of literary modernism simply canonical Medusae that petrify the viewer. The "ironic self-reflexiveness" close reading might locate in popular novels differs not merely in degree but in kind from what North calls the "extreme literary experimentation" (209) of Eliot, Joyce or Stein—a mode he at moments seems eager to dismiss. This formal experimentation was by no means the exclusive property of an elite: a look into anthologies such as Jerome Rothenberg's groundbreaking *Revolution of the Word* (1974) will reveal a remarkable variety of modernists who engaged, at a fundamentally innovative level, with their particular medium. Such engagement remains, on my view, best understood as associated not merely with a particular canon but with an impulse, critical and utopian, which—if not identical with 'modernism' itself—deserves a place within the modernist studies of the future.

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Feminism and the Biological Body. By Lynda Birke. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1999. viii, 204 pages. $79.95. $28.50 paper.

Lynda Birke is a biologist who has contributed extensively to the literature that is commonly referred to as 'feminist critiques of science.' In this book, her arguments are directed against two main targets. In the first instance, she criticizes those branches of feminist theory that neglect the biological body. And secondly, she attacks many aspects of biological science as it is now practised. The two foci are connected by Birke's contention that one reason many feminist theorists have turned away from biological accounts of the body is because they think such accounts must be reductionistic, deterministic, mechanistic, essentialist, static, and generally inimical to feminist aspirations. She calls for a new biology of the body, one that focuses on the organism rather than its parts, a biology that allows the body to change and to interact with its environment while preserving its own integrity. This is the body to which feminist theories must attend.

Birke is at her best when criticizing those theorists who neglect or minimize the materiality of the body. This includes those who portray the body as just a surface for cultural inscription and representation (always malleable and subject to multiple readings), as well as those who hope to "leave the meat behind" through better living cybernetically. So much emphasis on the fluidity and flexibility of the postmodern feminist body, or the possibility of transcending it altogether, causes people to lose sight of both the constraints of the flesh and the remarkable capacity of the biological body for self-organization. More specifically, according to Birke, these accounts neglect the *insides* of the body. This is where she wishes to direct our attention: toward our internal organs and the importance of the narratives of physiology.

The sex/gender distinction has in many respects served feminism well. It is a useful first step to say that although one's sex may be biologically determined, the gender roles assigned to males and females are socially constructed and highly variable. Unfortunately, however, this distinction has led some people to make the following false assumptions: that gender can be socially constructed almost any old way (perhaps even without reference to the material conditions of the body), and that biology, on the other hand, is simply a given—a kind of theory-free bedrock untouched by social practice. Birke wants feminists to take into account both the materiality of the body *and* the theory-laden character of the biological sciences—including their models, metaphors, diagrams, and pictures.

So, for example, one component of Birke's argument goes roughly like this: Line drawings and other schematic representations of internal organs lead people to think that their bodies are full of empty spaces that individuate and separate the organs from one another. This in turn tends to reinforce the view that the body is best understood as a collection of separate component parts rather than a unified organic whole. The former view is the one that Birke describes as reductionistic, deterministic, mechanistic, and so on. Reductionism (thus understood) is said to support not only flawed theories but also questionable medical practices premised on the essential separability of body parts.

Birke is quite right to stress the theory-laden character of models, metaphors, diagrams, and pictures. Indeed many of the best feminist critiques of science have dealt with specific examples and diverse aspects of this issue. The problem with Birke's argument is that she tries to take too much of that scholarship on board. Many positions are summarized, but the connections and tensions among them are not worked out in any detail. Too little care is taken with the niceties of argumentation. Terms (including 'determinism' and 'reductionism') are used very loosely. Premises are introduced on the basis of little evidence, and occasionally the connection among argument parts appears to be little more than juxtaposition.

The central question that Birke investigates is timely as well as important, and there is much in this text that is valuable. The argument, however, might have been stronger and better worked out had its scope been more restricted. Birke might have been well advised, for example, to focus her entire text on "the disappearance of the organism"—from many branches of biology as well as from parts of feminist and postmodern theory. That would have meant excising numerous bits and pieces of the present corpus, including the chapter on metaphors associated with the heart. Although such cuts can be painful, it remains true that in argumentative texts as in physical bodies, organic unity is sometimes served best by surgical removal of separable parts.

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Janet Lyon. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1999. x, 230 pages. $19.95 US, paper.

It is virtually impossible, these days, to write an unproblematic, unapologetic history: something big, complete, that neither admits nor offers apologies for authorial subjectivity. Janet Lyon's *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* is no exception; it begins with a demarcation of her project, a demarcation whose self-imposed limitations both make the book successful and raise questions. Lyon begins by proposing "to offer a history and theory of the manifesto" (1), a move which of course announces the book as a very big project indeed. But a few pages later she also argues that she has "no wish to produce a definitive profile of 'the manifesto,' secured by taxonomies of conventions and modalities" (12). Rather, her project is to offer a "few key historical moments" (2). This may be the right decision (what else is there one *could* do with something as monstrous as the manifesto?), but one might look at *why* Lyon makes this decision. Is this because she believes such a taxonomy inherently can't be done? Or is it because such an approach would make the book too long? Whatever the answers to those questions might be, Lyon's book offers a general outline of the manifesto in history, an outline which is articulated by some central moments. (Despite the considerable interest of the examples she has chosen, Lyon could be more clear about what it is that makes some moments more "key" than others.) But every book also needs to be granted some delimiting moves, and her strategies allow Lyon to tell a convincing narrative and theory.

Lyon argues that manifestoes arose when the assertion of universal human rights became part of public discourse (3, 32). For manifestoes to exist, Lyon claims, there must be some kind of public sphere; the enabling conditions for manifestoes were created by a *public* discourse of egalitarianism and universality. This placement accounts for one rhetorical feature of manifestoes: often, manifestoes argue that they are not *new*; they claim that their assertions are based on what humans have always asserted. Manifestoes occur at those moments when the discourse of the universal human subject is prodded by those who feel left out, who call the discourse into question. Lyon's governing thesis, then, is that "the manifesto marks the point of impact where the idea of radical egalitarianism runs up against the entrenchment of an ancien régime" (1). In doing so, manifestoes capitulate to the idea of universalism as well as deny that it actually works. Lyon asserts that the repeated surfacings of manifestoes over time has cumulative force: "Each manifesto in effect embellishes a long-standing diachronic narrative of exclusion and oppression; the cumulative narrative wrought by successive manifestoes serves as a rebuke to modernity's narratives of progress" (30). Manifestoes thus assert that the myth of progress is just that: a myth. But there is a slipperiness here; Lyon oscillates between portraying this claim as a typical assertion of manifestoes and sounding as if she thinks manifestoes really got this aspect of their analysis right. This has a great impact on the scope of the book, for Lyon basically does a history of those who got it right. There are no nasty right-wing manifestoes in this book, while feminist manifestoes are given pride of place. Of course, writers tend to write where their sympathies are, but Lyon's claims for completeness aren't quite accurate.

The book moves somewhat along chronological lines (although earlier moments in individual chapters are always matched by forays into more recent material). Lyon begins with the seventeenth-century Diggers, and moves to a feminist manifesto of the French Revolution and beyond. This organization is implied by the book's thesis, of course. Given both Lyon's thesis about universality and exclusion, as well as irrefutable characteristics of manifestoes, the political aspects of manifestoes receive more attention than their aesthetic. This may explain why the book is curiously reticent about Peter Bürger, never addressing his central thesis head on. This happens, I think, because this isn't really a book that characterizes manifestoes as being central to and inescapable from the avant-garde.

Beyond the central thesis of her book (which, despite my hedging, is very useful) Lyon presents some really smart arguments. Chapter 1 outlines the kinds of rhetoric manifestoes typically contain; Lyon's section on the use of the word "we" is really very well done. Lyon is also very good on manifestoes' sense of audience, arguing that "all manifestoes aim to *invoke* even as they *address* charged audiences" (28). There is also some very good writing on the implicit accounts of history contained in manifestoes, and the book presents an illuminating reading of Jenny Holzer, articulating how her bare sentences carry weight even as they don't provide a context for their assertions. Such moments show that, even though *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* does not accomplish all it sets out to do, it is really good at what it *does* do, presenting a cogent and illuminating reading of manifesto history.

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The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism. By Molefi Kete Asante. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1999. 128 pages. $19.95 US, paper.

In the years leading up to this work, Molefi Asante, the founding theorist of Afrocentricity, has come under attack from different factions within the academic world. Scholars of very different political stripes, such as Kwame Appiah and Mary Lefkowitz, have found common cause in attempting to debunk Afrocentrism. They depict Afrocentrism as a dangerous and anti-intellectual movement more interested in creating myths about history than conducting serious scholarly investigations. In this short book, Asante clarifies the definition of Afrocentrism and broadly labels his critics as Eurocentrists. Building on earlier works, such as *The Afrocentric Idea* and *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, Asante argues that Afrocentricity is "the relocation, the repositioning of the African in a place of agency." In contrast, his detractors are guilty of adopting critiques based on white supremacist Eurocentrism that "views Africa and Africans in a junior light" (ix). Asante divides his critics into two categories. The first group, primarily white scholars and journalists, are opposed to any theory that challenges European domination of intellectual pursuits. They fear that "African scholars might have something to teach whites" (113). The second group, black scholars, are dismissed as poor imitations of Europeans. Asante accuses both groups of subjecting his work to flippant and *ad hominem* attacks.

One particular site of conflict between Afrocentrists and their opponents is over the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians. Asante draws on numerous ancient authors such as Herodotus in order to support his claim that ancient Egyptians were "black-skinned Africans" (56). Moreover, ancient Greece owes many of its cultural achievements to this civilization of black Africans. Asante argues that critics of this position are simply unwilling to recognize the contribution of Africans to European civilization. Certainly, the debate over the ancient Egyptians' racial identity will continue undecided for many years to come. One wonders why scholars, both Afrocentrists and their detractors, feel the need to understand ancient Egypt in terms of the relatively modern concept of race. In declaring that Egyptian civilization was black, Asante accepts the very tenets of race and racial reasoning that are the hallmarks of Eurocentrism.

As a professionally trained African American historian of the Black Atlantic and Africa, I find Asante's response to his black critics anti-intellectual and crude. Instead of engaging the ideas of Kwame Appiah, he resorts to an *ad hominem* attack on Appiah's bi-racial heritage. He claims that Appiah is "clearly located on his white side" (78). In fact, Appiah has written a very important book about his African heritage, *In My Father's House*, a critical appraisal of Pan-Africanism and Ghanaian nationalism. Africanists are critical of Afrocentrism because it clearly simplifies African history and culture for the benefit of African Americans. Indeed, Asante does not even bother to address the seminal works of the Ibadan school in his discussion of agency or he might have reconsidered his arguments about African centredness. Africans have been viewed as agents in the making of their own history for quite some time; how Afrocentrism contributes to this is not clear.

The debate surrounding Afrocentrism has become so vitriolic that scholarship and personal attacks have become one and the same. Afrocentrism is popular among the African American community and deserves to be examined in a serious and systematic fashion, something that many detractors of Afrocentrism have failed to accomplish. In criticizing Arthur Schlesinger and other aspects of American hegemony Asante is at his best. Yet, Asante's personal attacks on his critics, such as Appiah, have not helped move the debate forward. Afrocentrists will view this book as a definitive re-statement of their goals, while sceptics will find plenty of ammunition to buttress their claims that Asante and his cohorts are simply incorrect.

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The Death of Comedy. By Erich Segal. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. xi, 589 pages. $35.00 US.

Erich Segal's latest book on comedy belongs to that often overlooked, but never entirely forgotten, strand in the contemporary study of literature that is, for the lack of a better word, usually called archetypal or mythical criticism. In Segal's case, this particular approach, which originates in the research of Cambridge anthropologists and culminates in Northrop Frye's work, also relies heavily on Freudian terminology. *The Death of Comedy* itself could best be described as a historical account of the development of "the *idea* of Comedy" (9) in all three of its original aspects: its dreamlikeness (comedy from *kōma* as sleep); its ties to nature (comedy from *kōmē* as country village); and its carnivalesque dimension (comedy from *kōmos* as communal revelling).

Though this triple etymology initially appears to be an almost tongue-in-cheek epistemological provocation, Segal actually follows through with it and analyzes from this perspective a number of comedies, from the birth of the genre in Greece and Rome, through its maturity in the early modern era, to its death due to the lack of *gamos* in post-Holocaust absurdism. The list of discussed playwrights reads like a true canon of comic literature: Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, Terence, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Molière, Jonson, Jarry, and Beckett, with Euripides, Marlowe, and several seventeenth and eighteenth-century playwrights serving as control samples. Each play is interpreted according to its treatment of sexuality as an inherent component of fertility celebrations: Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, for instance, is seen as an allegorical representation of overcoming old-age impotence; "Jarry's characters" apparently "have unbounded libido and no superego" (407); while Feste in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is described as "the phallus incarnate" whose final "song is a kind of life cycle of the organ, beginning with the tiny boy's 'foolish thing' and concluding with the winter rain which sees man old and cold in bed" (327–28).

Segal's study is all about tying loose ends and elaborating on ideas that are already a part of our critical discourse. His writing is refreshingly free of jargon and exhibits great erudition, yet his argument seldom makes the transition from methodologically coherent and historically sound scholarship to original theory. His readings of plays are entertaining and informative, but rarely inspiring: the most important achievement of *The Death of Comedy* is perhaps to prove that Freud and Frye were right.

In many respects, Segal's latest book is a natural extension of his previous research on ancient comedy which includes *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, and his book on *Roman Laughter*. This, in turn, is the study's greatest strength and its main weakness. On the one hand, the intimate knowledge of ancient culture, philosophy, and literature enables Segal to see the influence of Greek and Roman playwrights on Western comedy more clearly, and explain it more convincingly, than most other critics. His observation that Terence's major contribution to drama was "the invention of dramatic suspense" (226), for example, is an intriguing suggestion with numerous potential implications. On the other hand, his fascination with antiquity results in the strange asymmetry of Segal's argument: more than a half of *The Death of Comedy* is actually spent on ancient plays, and the depth of his analyses of the more recent comedies never approaches the expertise with which Segal comments on, say, Aristophanes' or Menander's competitors. In general, the author puts so much effort into trying to pinpoint elements of ancient comic dramaturgy in plays after the Middle Ages that one occasionally wonders if the book should not be subtitled *A Study of Ancient Comedy and its Influences*.

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