

Book Reviews

Richard Bjornson, *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991. xvii + 507 pp.

The notion of national literature for Africa's many and diverse countries has not always been well received for various reasons. Some Africans deny national status to these countries because they view them as constructs of Europe. One can still find non-African scholars with a Conradian perspective, who see the entire continent as an undifferentiated mass of illiteracy hardly ready for admission to the world of letters. Yet evidence for the development of national literatures continues to mount—from Ihechukwu Madubuike's early study of the Senegalese novel through the many works on Nigerian literature. Even writers in the less "visible" countries such as Niger are now generating national consciousness with the most creative techniques and under exceedingly difficult conditions.

Richard Bjornson's study of Cameroonian literature documents this trend for Cameroon, but he takes the reader several steps farther down the road of cultural awareness. He examines not simply the development of a national literature, but Cameroonian literature as a key component in the development of a national consciousness. By weaving chapters on the literature with analyses of the politics and culture of that unusual country, he gives us a much broader picture of the evolution of a national literature than any other scholar has done for any country in Africa to date.

The Cameroonian case, of course, is unique in many ways. The country's diverse colonial heritage has left a variety of imprints—German, British, and French. The legacy of colonialism has become both a benefit and a burden to a nation that has more citizens capable of speaking two major European languages, French and English, than any other country in Africa. But that unique linguistic situation has also sowed the seeds of regional unrest. The francophone population tends to dominate the anglophones in both culture and politics. The recent naming of an anglophone prime minister by President Paul Biya reflects the ambiguity in the situation there. People ask if this is a move toward national unity or simply window dressing serving a belated effort to stem the rising tide of democracy that is sweeping across Africa.

Literature offers a privileged path for understanding today's fast-moving events in Cameroon. Bjornson takes the reader back to the roots of Cameroonian literature with discussions of 19th century writers and the creation of a growing print culture in the early 20th century. Chapters on Oyono, Beti, and the complex itinerary of *négritude* in Cameroon mesh well with analyses of the rise of anti-colonialism, the creation of a myth of national unity after independence, and the appearance of popular literature. The chapters on "Literature and the Pursuit of the Self" and the development of Cameroonian theater are particularly illuminating.

The depth of Bjornson's research is reflected in the many textual references and personal contacts. The reader with an introductory knowledge of only the most widely-read Cameroonian writers discovers a much larger world composed of an enormous variety of authors, male and female, writing in different styles and on a broad range of themes. The list of authors and scholars interviewed reads like a who's who of Cameroon's intellectual life.

Cameroonians like to say that their country is an example of Africa in miniature, with many different peoples, varied geography, and the official use of two major European languages. Bjornson sees literature as serving to identify and illustrate common points of reference for this diverse country, a kind of cultural glue that is contributing to a growing national awareness about what people can expect from their society.

The recent publication of another book on Cameroonian literature, Claire Dehon's excellent *Le Roman camerounais d'expression française* (Birmingham: Summa, 1989), serves to confirm Bjornson's view of the role of literature in the development of a national identity. Building on the work of other scholars as well as on his own research, Bjornson has given us a landmark in African literature that will guide scholars now working on Senegalese, Ivoirian, Nigerian, Kenyan, Zairian, and other national literatures. The most significant work on the African literature to appear in the last ten years, *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity* will have a major impact in Cameroon as well as in other African countries and outside the continent.

Thomas A. Hale
Pennsylvania State University

Hélène Cixous, *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*. With an introductory essay by Susan Rubin Suleiman. Edited by Deborah Jenson. Translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, Susan Sellers. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991. 214 pp.

Although Hélène Cixous is the author of more than twenty novels, seven plays, and numerous critical and theoretical books and articles, surprisingly few of her works have been translated into English. *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, which collects six of her essays into one volume, is a welcome and long overdue effort to make this important writer more accessible to American and British readers. Two of the translations and a portion of a third are based

on earlier published translations by the same people. The others have never appeared in English before.

In her sensitive and informative introduction; "Writing Past the Wall," Susan Rubin Suleiman sums up the recurring concerns in Cixous' work, "the relations between writing, exile, foreignness, loss, and death"; "the relations between all the above and being a woman—or a man" (viii). She points out the evolution of Cixous' writing, away from the angry, polemical tone of "The Laugh of the Medusa," undoubtedly her most widely read piece, towards the celebratory, poetic feminism of *Le Livre de Promethea* (1983), and to her entrance onto the "scene of History" with *L'Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge* (1985). The essays included in 'Coming to Writing' are all examples of Cixous' lyrical work and exclude her recent historical and political writing.

In the first essay, "Coming to Writing" ("La venue à l'écriture," 1977), Cixous discusses the "walls" that obstructed her path towards writing—her relationship to gender, to culture, and to language. She was a Jew growing up in colonized Algeria, the daughter of a German mother and a French father. German, not French, was therefore literally her mother tongue. About her sense of linguistic rootlessness Cixous muses: "I have no legitimate tongue. In German, I sing; in English I disguise myself; in French I fly, I thief. On what would I base a text?" (15). She then develops her idea of a new "feminine writing," that is, a writing derived from the female unconscious, made accessible through dreams. This type of writing, characterized by "continuity, abundance, drift" is, according to Cixous, not the domain of women alone; if a man writes this way, "it's because in him femininity is not forbidden" (57).

Two of the essays, "Tancredi Continues" ("Tancrede continue," 1983) and "The Last Painting or the Portrait of God" (in *Entre l'écriture*, 1986), discuss the relationship between writing on the one hand and music and painting on the other. "Tancredi Continues" is Cixous' reading of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* and especially Rossini's opera version, *Tancredi*. In "The Last Painting" she discusses Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Rembrandt, and the Japanese painter Hokusai. In these two essays the author explores the enigma of sexual difference, the opposition of self and other, her longing to live and to write the depth of the present moment, and finally the problem of writing the truth in a deep sense.

The remaining three essays, "Clarice Lispector: The Approach" ("L'Approche de Clarice Lispector," 1979), "By the Light of an Apple" ("A la lumière d'une pomme," 1989), and "The Author in Truth" ("L'Auteur en vérité," 1989) elaborate various aspects of Cixous' textual/spiritual relationship to the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector.

Recognizing her feelings of gratitude to Lispector, Cixous underscores the absence of self, the tenderness, the infinite respect with which the Brazilian writer approaches all of life, beyond any preconceived notions of beauty and ugliness. In her writing Lispector is able to touch the mystery of life itself, "delicately, with the tips of words, trying not to crush it, in order to un-lie" (134). In Lispector's work ascension is, according to Cixous, a

movement towards the low, and the body of a cockroach is that of a respected "other," a "morsel of life, horrifying, repugnant, admirable in its resistance to death" (134).

In her concluding essay, "Coming to Reading Hélène Cixous," Deborah Jensen explains that her concern as editor was not to convey a thematic coherence among the essays, but rather to show "the development of Cixous' readings of artistic sources" from 1976 to 1989, and "the way her writing changes according to the nature of her readings" (134). The problem of intertextuality in Cixous' work is of course infinitely more complex than it may appear on the basis of the six translated essays alone, and the selection of essays was clearly made to convey the spirit of this work rather than its intellectual complexity.

To translate Cixous' prose is not an easy task. While one translator is chiefly responsible for each essay, the translations have been read and frequently modified by other members of the team as well as by Hélène Cixous herself. As a matter of policy the translators do not attempt to transmit in English all the possible meanings of Cixous' French words. Instead the editor resorts to endnotes to convey the multiple alternative readings and plays on words that characterize Cixous' writing. As a result the English versions are linguistically simpler than the French originals, but they almost always catch the flavor of Cixous' writing.

'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays is an exemplary piece of collaborative feminist scholarship, prepared with skill and sensitivity. The translated essays convey to the reader a vision of life and literature which has frequently been obscured by layers of intertextuality and theoretical arguments. As a result the book will undoubtedly be appreciated, not only by feminist scholars in many areas, but by general readers interested in contemporary women's writing as well. It will hopefully enhance Cixous' status in the English-speaking world as a writer and thinker of great depth. According to a quote by Jacques Derrida on the book's jacket, "Hélène Cixous is today, in my view, the greatest writer in what I will call my language, the French language if you like. And I am weighing my words as I say that. For a great writer must be a poet-thinker, very much a poet and very much a thinker." *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays* helps us perceive the truth contained in Derrida's statement.

Randi Brox Birn
University of Oregon

Susan Derwin, *The Ambivalence of Form: Lukács, Freud, and The Novel*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. 208 pp.

The provocative nature of this study appears in its title, is intensified on the jacket of the book, and is alleviated inside the text.

The author provides an avowed "speculative" (4) reading of György Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) that disregards its important Hegelian dimension and "left" ethics to focus almost exclusively on the influence of German, Romantic, "right" epistemology, the Schlegelian structure of irony, the Kantian preoccupation with the subject-object dichotomy, and Lukács' youthful Kierkegaardian negativism. This is followed by a discussion of Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) that is geared toward establishing the precarious link between Lukács and Freud through the latter's stress on the importance of the concept of unity, *Einheit*, which, the author argues, "in a way parallels the significance Lukács accords the concept of totality" (35). "Freud's study," she maintains, "reads as an efficacious translation of Lukács's *geschichtsphilosophische* [sic] discourse" (4).

The validity of these theories is then tested on four "realist" novels chosen from different national literatures and historically diverse periods: Balzac's *La Recherche de l'absolu* (1834), Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel* (1892), and Percy's *The Second Coming* (1980). The stated purpose is to demonstrate that not only realist fiction but even theoretical works on realism such as Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* contain "counter-narratives" that reveal their subjectivity and violate the realist principle.

The lively and imaginative style of this study makes for easy reading. The "tale" of each chapter could indeed be enjoyed almost as fiction were the reader not constantly reminded of its false theoretical basis. The major problem seems to stem from a grave ignorance of Lukács' work. Indeed only Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* and one chapter of *Soul and Form* (1911) are considered, and even those not in their entirety. Lukács' important works on realism, written in the 1930s, are dismissed as "late essays" (5). One essential text, "Narrate or Describe," is merely quoted in a note but even then with a wrong German title (197, n. 10). Many Lukácsian concepts such as realism and modernism are misunderstood because they are not considered within the totality of Lukács' work. This leads to numerous peremptory statements such as: "I argue that Lukács views the loss of an objective social totality . . . as a positive development" (3). The author grossly overlooks Lukács' Fichtean anti-modernism and revolutionary spirit that dictated the mood and were at the heart of *The Theory of the Novel*. Lukács' entire sociocritical and political concerns are simply ignored. His understanding of mimesis, we are told, "does not assume the presence of a representable object" (5). In the discussion of Lukács' concept of the epic, the all-important notion of "immanence" is hardly developed and confused with concepts such as mimesis and realism.

Contrary to what is so boldly stated on the front jacket and in the introduction, this study does not enhance the "relevance of Lukács' work to studies of the novel." Nor does it (in about one paragraph?) make a "significant contribution to the understanding of his early influence on the Frankfurt School." In view of the many problematic theoretical statements, the acknowledged help of several established critics and editors is surprising.

What Derwin's study provides is a fairly original, Freudian *misreading* of Lukács' *The Theory of the Novel* and an interesting but similarly controversial reading of a few well known texts. Derwin's psychoanalytic and linguistic methodology make her conclusions about realism, totality, and self-knowledge quite predictable. The author appears well versed in theories that deal with the manipulative power of language ("identity is not based on essence but on the ability to control narrative" [139]), the Saussurian notions of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, linguistic polysemy and semantic and etymological ambiguities, and uses all to promote her thesis. So she does not hesitate to engage in "displacements" of meaning and to modify the official translations of her lengthy quotations whenever it suits her purpose. Linguistic and even bilingual puns are used abundantly and detract from the scholarly quality of the work, as do the wrong splits in the foreign-language quotations, and the typographical errors. In Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel* Derwin builds her analysis of Corinna's ability to "ironize herself" (122) on the German "*Ironie*" and the English homonym "ironing" (123). The sexual indeterminacy of Leopold's character is alluded to by Corinna's wish to burn his "Rock" which in German can mean both jacket and skirt (136). Her wish to attend a lighthearted dinner party, "Ich sehne mich manchmal nach Ungescheitheiten" (132), is rendered after some linguistic acrobatics from "gescheit" to "scheiden" to "Scheide" to "vagina" in a modified translation as: "I sometimes yearn for something . . . (undivided)" (132). Similarly, in *The Second Coming*, the name Allison or Alli-son leads to insinuations of an incestuous relationship (168).

Such linguistic displacements and projections are used to locate what the author calls "counter-narratives." They appear suddenly (and strangely!) at "pivotal positions in the text" (168), like a switch from mimetic to subjectivist narrative. They allege the fetishism of ideals such as totality (Lukács), the Absolute (Balzac), achievement of selfhood (Brontë), female identity (Fontane), and male identity (Percy), to the point where Lukács, on a par with the characters of the novels, emerges from Derwin's deconstructions as strangely phallic. The objects of natural human beliefs, aspirations, needs, and desires, and realism itself are identified as mere fetishes. Increasingly, the eclectic reading of Lukács and the twisted interpretations of the novels result in a discourse in which the author's views appear not just individualistic or ambivalent but even like sophisms that venture on to deceive the reader. The critique of *me-connaissance* (17) in the end collapses into a total *méconnaissance*, and Derwin indiscriminately implicates Lukács in this phallic game of critical *jouissance*.

Eva L. Corredor
United States Naval Academy

Amy K. Kaminsky, *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 160 pp.

Amy Kaminsky, who is in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Minnesota, has been working since the 1970s on Spanish American women writers. *Reading the Body Politic* is her first book. It starts out with two chapters of general considerations about feminist criticism and the development of a literary feminism suited to Latin American women's writing, a critical endeavor that Kaminsky argues will require much thought and cultural awareness. There follow one chapter treating the topics of absence and exile in three writers' production and five chapters each concentrating on a single author's work. Overall issues of feminist criticism continue to receive discussion all through the chapters analyzing specific works, so integrating theory and critical analysis. In this sense, the title is well-chosen in its placement of *Feminist Criticism* before *Latin American Women Writers*.

The territory the book covers is a bit more selective and specialized than its title might seem to indicate. The study's subtitle should more accurately read *Spanish American Women Writers*, since all the women whose work is discussed are Spanish-language authors; Brazilians are only named in passing. The writers who receive extended treatment are either from Mexico (Elena Poniatowska, Elena Garro) or the River Plate (Luisa Valenzuela, Marta Traba, Cristina Peri Rossi, Alicia Partnoy, Sylvia Molloy). In her selection of works to discuss in detail, Kaminsky has been especially, though not exclusively, drawn to testimonial literature (Poniatowska and Partnoy) and texts that bring in issues of lesbianism (in the discussions of Molloy and Peri Rossi) and, more broadly, women's sexuality. The works discussed in the chapters of analysis are generally quite recent. The exception is Elena Garro's 1963 *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (*Recollections of Things to Come*). Kaminsky has done well to include *Recollections*, a novel widely acclaimed by mainstream critics, making the point that feminist critics can analyze the same texts as anyone else. The theoretical discussion of broader issues in criticism ranges further backward historically, with Gabriela Mistral, the 1945 Nobel Prize winner, being especially quoted.

The feature of *Reading* that can most be singled out for praise, and that gives the volume its valuable potential for course adoption, is that it raises and touches upon all the issues that the author has seen as most important in contemporary feminist criticism, particularly as this criticism is developing in the study of Latin American writing. The book is written so as to showcase the characteristics that distinguish much of current literary feminism, such as the effort to view literary texts in a context that includes the author and his or her cultural, historical situation and the concern with seeing the effects of gender demarcation in as broad a spectrum of phenomena as possible. The author believes that feminist critics should declare what they bring to the reading of the text, revealing themselves as writing subjects. First-person pronouns are frequent in *Reading*; the author displays her self-consciousness as a U.S.

reader of Spanish American texts; she identifies herself as a mother, a Latinamericanist, a socially committed critic; there are such personal notes as "I approached Alicia Partnoy's book with apprehension . . . I let the book remain unopened for weeks" (51) "I read Peri Rossi as if she were a lesbian, even though I do not know for certain that she is" (117).

At times, *Reading* posits as traits of feminist criticism features typical of current theory and criticism generally, such as a preference for open-ended, problematic, and difficult-to-classify texts over well-resolved ones. An attraction to texts that are unstable in genre and meaning and seem full of contradictions is characteristic of twentieth-century literary theory and criticism; in an era devoted to constructing theory, "hard cases make good law." *Reading* states that "What also makes a U.S. feminist reception of Latin American women's writing problematic is that North American feminists who are not Hispanists are often uncomfortable with and ignorant of the Latin American cultural context" (49); the assertion would be as true without reference to *feminist* and *women*. *Reading* clearly emerges from a long immersion in feminist discourse. This circumstance is an advantage in that the author is thoroughly at home in her chosen terrain, but it results in some sacrifice of an overall perspective on literary criticism and theory.

A reader unacquainted with the feminist discussion of Latin American literature would come away from *Reading* with a good sense of what is most likely to be agreed upon and debated among participants in this area of criticism; the major premises are stated explicitly. If there is a drawback to this highly visible setting-forth of the most prominent issues in feminist criticism, it is that *Reading* at times goes over such much-worked ground that it appears to be stating the obvious. The case is frequently made that European and U.S. feminism cannot be applied across the board to the Latin American situation, and that knowledge of Latin America's culture results in better readings of its literature; it is difficult to imagine a rational person taking the opposite side of these arguments. Other points made with more emphasis than subtlety are the tendency of the works discussed to resist classification and the scant treatment of women's writing by literary historians and critics. The explicit, emphatic, and at moments somewhat classroom-like manner may, however, increase the work's value for a target audience of students.

Reading can be recommended to anyone, student or post-student, who is looking for an orientation to the general state of feminist criticism among Latinamericanists. Its discussion of issues and analyses of texts would not seem outstandingly sophisticated if they were judged by the same standards as journal articles or specialized studies, but they certainly highlight all the major issues and show what it is like to view literary theory and criticism, as well as Spanish American women's writing, from a determinedly feminist and women's-studies perspective.

Naomi Lindstrom

University of Texas at Austin

Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. xviii + 232 pp.

The interests and concerns of Rainer Nägele's two most recent books—*Text, Geschichte, and Subjektivität in Hölderlins Dichtung* (1987) and *Reading After Freud: Essays on Goethe, Hölderlin, Habermas, Nietzsche, Brecht, Celan and Freud* (1989)—echo throughout his latest study. This is not a book solely on Benjamin, certainly not one that elucidates yet again Benjamin's messianism, his place within the Frankfurt school, or his notions of the aura and *Erlebnis*. Instead, using Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* as an axial point or lens, this book ventures far afield in an exploration of Kant, Hegel, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, Marx, Nietzsche, Rilke, Kafka, Lukács, and Celan, among others. It offers a reading of baroque theater as it resurfaces in Hölderlin's commentaries on tragedy and in contemporary plays by Peter Weiss and Heiner Müller. The author works with and through such vast concepts as melancholy, allegory, tragedy, aesthetics, secularization, and the epic, giving an expansive mapping of how their definitions have shifted in the era of modernity.

Rainer Nägele, a prolific, insightful scholar, has written extensively on most major German-speaking authors. He brings this intimate knowledge to bear on his study of Benjamin in a style that makes for exciting but demanding reading. His associative mind is frequently difficult to follow, and the uninitiated or impatient reader probably will not tarry to think through the connections he makes. Nägele works painstakingly with minute textual detail, and he requires an equally attentive reader. A sentence in Hölderlin will be examined rigorously, word by word, and then evoke a similar turn of phrase in Brecht, then Kafka, and so on. Clearly, Nägele is inspired by Benjamin's own prescription for reading, as formulated in the *Trauerspiel* book: "stylistic criticism is not permitted to consider the whole other than in its determinateness through the detail" (cited 80). What this critical attention entails is an intense, rich analysis of the German language and the reverberations that certain words, such as *Vorstellung*, *Verstand*, *Haltung*, and *Versenkung*, carry for Benjamin and other authors. Although wide-ranging, this book is thus grounded in textual specificity. But it is a ground, to follow the author's own dialectic train of thought, that is simultaneously an abyss or chasm, into which only the undaunted reader dares to descend. Nägele emulates the writers of modernity, of whom he observes: "In modern times, the individual is already confronted with a world of abstract forms and fixed concepts. The modern task is therefore not so much conceptualization but rather the liquification (and liquidation) of fixed thoughts" (36).

Although a collection of discrete, individual essays, this book is most convincing when read as a whole. Only in this way do the repercussions of Benjamin's thought for literary modernity become transparent, especially his centrality for the reconceptualizing of theater. Although the notions of

the term constellation is not: this book traces the key conceptual and historical constellations that crystallize in Benjamin's thought. Most chapters set up a constellation linking Benjamin to another thinker, be he the Marquis de Sade, Brecht, Lukács, or Freud. Nägele reads these authors through Benjamin, frequently in light of Benjamin's own reading of them. This approach results in a significant reappraisal of their critical reception. For example, Nägele aligns Brecht's epic theater and Benjamin's baroque *Trauerspiel* against classical and nineteenth-century tragedy. Not only are Brecht and Benjamin's concepts of the theater both gestural and emblematic, they both militate against *Einfühlung* or empathy. They undermine the belief in psychological interiority, bourgeois subjectivity, and the private sphere.

Through Brecht, then, one can glean Benjamin's connection to contemporary performance practices in the works of Müller, Weiss, and, one might add, Handke. For all these writers, the body does not express an interiority but ostentatiously stages its mortified parts. According to Nägele, Benjamin calls for a physiognomic or topographical reading of the body, in other words, a reading of its exterior as dead materiality. (The female body, of course, has been represented through its fetishized parts, highlighted with makeup as surface and superficiality. It would be interesting to reread the various authors discussed for a possible encoding of this puppet-like body as feminine.) Nägele then argues that baroque and (post)modern theatricality foregrounds the signifier. A caesura or rift opens between art and life, actor and role, signifier and signified. This representation of the representation paradoxically leads to a depressed silence, accounting for the melancholy of the Baroque mentality. Sadness lingers when the mourned object cannot be named but only displayed. Nägele explores the guilt that is attached to this inability to name in Kafka and Hölderlin, as well as in Benjamin.

The German Romantics are conspicuously absent from the list of authors Nägele aligns with Benjamin. Romanticism is only mentioned globally with regard to its presumed aesthetics of wholeness and organicity, embodied in the symbol. This commonplace assumption about Romanticism, however, is not one shared by Benjamin. Having written a dissertation on *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*, Benjamin was an eminent specialist on Idealist literature and philosophy. In the *Trauerspiel* book he looks to two German Romantics, Friedrich Creuzer and Josef Görres, for a definition of allegory that includes mention of its ability to register temporality. Creuzer's theory merits review for its similarity to Benjamin's. In his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (Leipzig: Heyer and Leske, 1819), Creuzer observed that, because allegory represents an "idea that differs from itself" (70), it lacks referential immediacy. This deficiency works to allegory's advantage: whereas the symbol represents an instantaneous totality, allegory registers progression in a series of moments. It thereby displays a flexibility (namely the rendition of temporal flux) prohibited in the symbol. As Creuzer's friend Görres noted in a response Benjamin cites, allegory is "a successively, progressively, dramatically versatile flowing copy of time itself" (cited in Creuzer 146). It could be added that the Romantics' reassessment of allegory

parallels their interest in the hieroglyph, for the latter likewise designates temporal distance from its referent. The hieroglyph is an enigmatic, silent sign whose original meaning is lost, a cipher that is purely figurational. The hieroglyph is thus not unconnected to the baroque emblem Benjamin investigates. The same could be said for Friedrich Schlegel's theory of the arabesque and ornament as sheer surface and sign. But in referring to the Romantics, I am far from pointing out an omission in Nägele's work. This far-reaching, yet slender volume on Benjamin sheds light on a theory of modernity that is excitingly and inspiringly suggestive in its implications for future readings.

Alice A. Kuzniar
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. 187 pp.

Many literary critics, especially those influenced by contemporary critical theory, wish to safeguard cultural diversity. According to this line of thought, diversity needs protection because we typically punish or minimize it. We punish differences by treating them as deviations from natural, reasonable norms; we minimize differences by reducing them to superficial variations on some deeper truths we all presumably hold in common. Contemporary theory reinforces our concern for diversity by questioning the universality of our standards. These standards end up being only ours, not self-evident truths we all share.

Critics embrace this argument when the truths in question are ones they want to dislodge—the “truth,” say, that abortion is unnatural. But what about those values we want to uphold—the value, for instance, of tolerance itself? The relativity of values can begin to feel like a double-edged sword, as the same reasoning that unsettles our adversaries' values jeopardizes our own. Respecting difference may be as arbitrary, as culturally specific or even ethnocentric, as mocking it.

This is one of the problems raised by John Tomlinson in *Cultural Imperialism*, a fine study of the many current arguments against one culture, usually contemporary American culture, imposing its way of life on others. When analyzed by Tomlinson, each step in this seemingly straightforward formulation—“way of life,” “others,” even “imposing”—raises difficult questions. “The American way of life” can mean our media (internationally viewed television shows like *Dallas*, for example), our language, our products (Coke, McDonalds' hamburgers, etc.), our consumerism, our multinational corporations, and/or our capitalist economic system. Tomlinson shrewdly questions whether one of these things necessarily implicates people in something larger and more sinister—whether watching *Dallas*, for instance, plunges viewers down a slippery slope terminating in frenzied consumerism.

These viewers are often described as sharing an intact, authentic, indigenous culture that imperialism disrupts. But Tomlinson points out the regional, ethnic, and historical tensions that divide modern countries. An invading culture often does not so much shatter its target as add to divisions already there.

Even more importantly, Tomlinson shows that the scenario of one culture dominating another can underestimate the intelligence, critical skills, and autonomy of the people being overpowered. When Third World people report enjoying Kentucky Fried Chicken, Western critics of cultural imperialism typically lament their false consciousness and irrationality, thus putting themselves in the paternalistic position of speaking for others, casting them as “cultural dopes” (129), and claiming to know what they really need. As Tomlinson shows, critiques of ethnocentrism always risk being ethnocentric. Even complaints about the global homogenization or Americanization of culture can mask the privileged Western tourist’s plea that other places stay quaint.

Tomlinson himself prefers describing cultural imperialism as the global spread of modernity. Although modernity for Tomlinson is inflected by capitalism and the growing importance of mass media, modernization is not reducible to any one of these developments, thereby allowing Tomlinson to escape a crude technological and economic determinism. Modernity brings with it problems (environmental damage, for instance), but also benefits (such as improved medical care) that Third World countries might understandably want: hence Tomlinson no longer needs to see Third World people as helpless cultural dupes. Instead of romanticizing the past or demonizing the present, Tomlinson pictures the modern world as “ambiguous in its capacity to deliver human happiness and fulfillment: its attractions are bound up with its woes” (142).

Tomlinson’s problem becomes criticizing modernization while appreciating its complexity and power—criticizing it as a resistible process. He argues that modernization releases us from repressive traditional world views and customs but saps our collective will to devise new “narratives of meaning and orientation” (165) to put in their place. The destruction of tradition creates a void that administrative routine and marketplace imperatives fill. As modernity spreads, technologically and economically developed countries infect other countries with their own inability to make political choices. Cultural paralysis accompanies accelerated economic activity.

Cultural Imperialism leaves us with no obvious villains or answers. Now “we have to think of a *situation* being to blame and this is less satisfying to the critical spirit” (169). Our task becomes sustaining and mobilizing resistance in a situation that encourages passivity: “what is required is a radical structural reorganization of the way in which human cultural goals become defined and enacted” (178). Tomlinson does not solve the problem of developing new cultural values; sometimes he even skirts it, as when he calls the gap between the affluent West and the impoverished Third World “obviously morally wrong” (124). Elsewhere he realizes that what is obviously wrong varies from

culture to culture, an insight that at once enables the critique of imperialism and complicates it. Sensing the difficulty of legitimizing tolerance in the absence of universal truths, Tomlinson asks, "why, after all, *should* being human mean we should tolerate other people's cultural practices? Would this apply, for example, to cannibalism, or, more immediately relevant, to female circumcision, or the stockpiling of nuclear weapons?" (71). Anyone interested in these crucial questions will find *Cultural Imperialism* a helpful book.

Michael Filcher
University of New Mexico

Richard Weisberg, *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature*. Columbia University Press. New York: 1991. 312 pp.

Richard Weisberg's *Poethics and Other Strategies of Law and Literature* is a richly ambitious study of issues and texts central to that emerging interdisciplinary field. Its numerous essays, written and revised over the last decade, map the varied terrain of law and literature with a range of interests that defies justice in this brief accounting. Undertaken for a legal as well as literary critical audience, the collection is united by Weisberg's interest in the politics of legal rhetoric and his call for a newly conceived "ethical criticism" that would rescue professional communities, the literary enterprise, and jurisprudence alike from the corruption of uncommitted formalisms.

As such language suggests, Weisberg's "poethical" approach is founded in a version of foundationalism, variously negotiated and instrumentally linked to the canon debate, theory wars, and the problem of interpretive communities. The widest plank in his theoretical scaffolding is "the notion that form and substance are one" in the law, or rather in the production of social narratives adhering to the highest standards of justice. Taking Benjamin Cardozo as an exemplary jurist, Weisberg argues that the law's "aspiration toward justice" can be enabled only by texts that recognize an inseparability of the legal narrative from the ethical standards it aims to promote. His central argument to the consequentiality of rhetoric—"the law *means*; it does not simply exist"—will hardly be controversial for most literary scholars; what may create difficulties is an intermittent failure to conceive "rhetoric" as a signifying system with its own laws of exposure and concealment, an insight that Weisberg's *auteur* theory of the production of justice virtually necessitates. Even readers sensitive to the excesses of contemporary theorizing about the production of meaning will want a clearer version of the link Weisberg aims to forge between the good legal text and the civic good, between the text *per se* and truly just reading.

Such readers may also be troubled by a recurrent assumption that the "good" at the back of successful legal and literary narratives is immediately, transhistorically recognizable. This assumption poses particular problems in Weisberg's highly original readings of such epic texts as *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Roe v. Wade*, both of which, he argues, will fail to survive

precisely "because neither opinion fully expressed its central core of justice." By softening a "poignant focus" on the "fate of individual black people," by failing adequately "to enter . . . into the specific, directly conveyed experience" of women's choice, *Brown* and *Roe* fail to realize in the law the forms of justice they aim to secure. Here, Weisberg clearly wants to avoid reading the ethical content of such juridical performances as mere accidents of political discourse or civil rights history. But surely a "poethical" reading of such landmark American texts should be prepared to acknowledge with consistency their situatedness, their need to accommodate and revise historically specific thinking about personhood and agency—as Weisberg elsewhere does, with great cogency, in his attack on intentionalist legal positions that conceal the law's interpretive designs.

On occasion, Weisberg's provocative readings fail to do justice to their own insights because they avoid hazarding a consistent theory of representation. This is an important omission, given that Weisberg himself argues passionately that professional communities "must fight to understand what is meant by textuality as apart from any reader or group of readers," to avoid the ethical failures that result from interpretive activity without "disciplinary rules." The absence of such a theory might itself be read as a declaration of sorts, in favor of the "probative value" of an ethical formalism and against the specifically "postmodernist" nihilism that results when literary and legal texts are disprivileged in favor of "unanchored" talk (as promoted by Stanley Fish) or arbitrary and impersonal talk (as conducted by Richard Posner) about them. Weisberg's withholding of a positive "text" theory of his own does promote supple response to local issues, but it also leaves him free to join a generic attack on "the disastrous hermeticism" of theory and its "turning away from the texts," even as he reminds us that he has "been trained in literature" by Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman.

Of most immediate interest to scholars of twentieth-century literature will be Weisberg's arguments concerning the canon and his readings of the Great Books that constitute the ethical-hermeneutic tradition he defends. Although his claim that this tradition is our best source of "*radical* understanding" involves to some degree the creation of straw men (or rather, straw feminists and poststructuralists), Weisberg cogently argues for the self-undermining character of these texts, which proffer "iconoclasm" rather than "reverence" and take as their "true target" their own canonical authority. One might argue that this way of reading the canon is itself historically conditioned, and that the *Unwertung der Werte* it accomplishes, *pace* Weisberg, has depended in part on precisely the kinds of readerly politicizing he derides. (Thus the suggestiveness of a footnote in which Weisberg thanks a colleague for discussing Toni Morrison with him and thereby obviously enabling and enriching—rather than foreclosing on—precisely the canonical wisdom he so powerfully defends.)

There is no doubt, however, that Weisberg's poethical interventions in theoretical debates produce supple, richly informed, even startling interpretive passages that speak to the ethics of reading and the reading of ethics with

intelligence and care. In his authoritative treatments of Shakespeare's negotiation of the Christian ethics of mediation vs. Shylock's ethics of bond in *The Merchant of Venice*, of *Billy Budd* and the crisis of legalism, and of the legal and literary rhetoric of collaborationism under the Vichy regime, Weisberg is at his eloquent, provocative best, combining scholarly rigor with an appealing interpretive freedom from disciplinary trends. His essays will be invaluable for the literary scholar who seeks to enter the law and literature fray, or to recontextualize the canonical logic and consequences of familiar fictions. Above all, Weisberg brings a sense of mission to the revaluation of literary texts; he thus does high justice to the critical traditions he seeks to honor and revise.

Sara B. Blair
University of Virginia