

## Book Reviews

K. M. Elisabeth Murray. *Caught in the Web of Words*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977. pp. 386. \$15.00.

K. M. Elisabeth Murray is no Boswell, but then the subject of her biography, her grandfather, J. A. H. Murray, is no Dr. Johnson, though in one of the two instances in which Murray is recorded as having told a humorous anecdote, Murray sees himself as the improbable successor as a dictionary maker to the great doctor:

He liked to tell the story of a dream he claimed to have had of Dr. Johnson. Johnson was speaking of his Dictionary and Boswell, in an impish mood, asked 'What would you say, Sir, if you were told that in a hundred years' time a bigger and better dictionary than yours would be compiled by a Whig?' Johnson grunted. 'A Dissenter,' Johnson stirred in his chair. 'A Scotsman.' Johnson began, 'Sir . . .' but Boswell persisted — and that the University of Oxford would publish it.' 'Sir', thundered Johnson, 'in order to be facetious it is not necessary to be indecent.'

But to *insist* on the wholesale comparison of Murray with Dr. Johnson, as R. W. Burchfield does in the preface to this work, especially if the purpose is to enhance the reputation of the nineteenth-century lexicographer at the expense of the great eighteenth-century polymath, is both foolish and unproductive. Elisabeth Murray, wisely, is content to let her grandfather's reputation rest on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. To have planned the whole and actually written more than one-half of the *OED* over 35 years of intense scholarly labour is monument enough. Spurious comparisons are unnecessary.

The record of Murray's great labours in Chapters VII to XVI of the biography is clear, vivid, dramatic and compelling. Undoubtedly, Murray's conviction that as editor of the *Dictionary*, he was an agent of the Divine Will sustained him in these labours. Nevertheless, the task was genuinely Herculean as the initial struggles to get the project under way, the resistance to the sustained badgering of the Delegates of the Oxford University Press, and the constant necessity to balance scholarly principles and financial exigency abundantly demonstrate. One feels, however, that any man who could take on and defeat in intellectual battle and in the battle of university politics the redoubtable Jowett at the height of his powers and then make him a friend had all the qualifications necessary for the task. Unfortunately, Murray was left with a permanent sense of martyrdom which surfaced especially at moments of stress.

Though assisted by the intrinsic drama of Murray's struggles, Elisabeth Murray's technique is superb as she provides accounts

of personalities and details of background exactly attuned to the narrative. The result is a treasure trove of details and anecdotes as well as a succinct analysis of the procedures by which the *Dictionary* was compiled. The contributions of the great nineteenth-century language scholars — Herbert Coleridge, Furnivall, Skeat, Sweet and Gibbs — are outlined as are those of the thousands of individual collectors of words — the schoolteachers, the clergymen, the gentleman amateurs. Elisabeth Murray pays tribute, welcome though belated, to the contribution of hundreds of Americans to the *Dictionary*. The interest of this middle section of the biography would, however, have been heightened further by the inclusion of at least one example of Murray's actual struggle to work out the origin and meanings of an individual word from the hundreds of slips before him. Here we get only tantalizing hints which never develop beyond a description of a dining room table or a floor littered with paper.

In the initial chapters, as in the final one, Elisabeth Murray faces the challenge of describing the life of a man who is interesting for what he accomplished rather than for what he was. Certainly an account of Murray's early life is desirable but one more integrated with his life's work and more relevant. The mystery of how Murray acquired the knowledge and skill to edit this greatest of dictionaries is never convincingly solved and the biographer's self-imposed limitation on speculation about character and personality does not draw the initial information into any organized pattern. One senses both a lack of sympathy with and a lack of real understanding of Murray's childhood and young manhood. The concluding chapter illustrates even more vividly the principal fault of the biography. The biographer has relegated to this chapter the details of the life of Murray and his family during the 32 years of work on the *Dictionary* at Oxford. The perspective on the man one obtains from the last chapter alters considerably the attitude one has already formulated in the previous sixteen chapters. The account of his personal character, his temperament and his eccentricities tempers any view one might have of a cold, aloof and remote pedant.

Elisabeth Murray combines some eccentricities of her own with other peculiarities common to many English biographers. She accepts too readily and without authentication the claims to superhuman physical accomplishments of nineteenth-century Scots who have ever been fond of pulling the wool over the eyes of the English. Her trust in premonitions and manifestations of direct supernatural intervention reflects, perhaps, lingering non-conformism. Her very English rejection of the germ theory of communicable disease finds expression in the notion that Herbert Coleridge's premature death was caused "by consumption brought on by a chill caused by sitting in damp clothes." Her partiality to her grandfather is more readily understood: the principle of "nil nisi bonum" is rarely violated and then only in a passing phrase, most notably in the incredulous revelation that some people found the eminent Murray "somewhat of a bore."

The style of the biography is simple and straightforward. Elisabeth Murray attempts few flights and the prose rarely

soars; it is, however, save in one or two instances of inconsistency and solecism, always competent. Proofreading has been good with no more than four misprints evident from a close reading. The references are full enough for most scholarly purposes, though end notes are, as ever, distracting and frustrating reminders of publishing parsimony. Through a puzzling set of short forms of reference for people, published and unpublished letters, manuscripts, manuscript collection, books and articles, the notes are rendered more difficult to use. The index, on the other hand, is ample and convenient and, as far as spot-checking can tell, accurate.

W. M. Lebens

P. J. Aldus, *Mousetrap: Structure and Meaning in 'Hamlet'*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977. pp. 235. \$15.00.

In this book P. J. Aldus has delved deeply into *Hamlet* in his attempt to unearth the quintessential mystery of the play. In the process, he causes many of the canonized bones of critical tradition to burst their cerements, since his task is to break the ground accumulated around the play's mystery by critics who treat the play as if it were mainly fictionalized fact. He wants to disinter the real enigma of *Hamlet*, which for him is the intricate interplay of metaphor, ritual and myth which like the old mole calls out for recognition.

The first part of the book is entitled "Tools". Here Aldus brandishes the implements of Platonic myth and Aristotelean form, old but reliable aids to labourers in literary fields. Starting with the Platonic notion that particulars must be subsumed in the image of universal truth made tangible in the creation of particulars, Aldus makes strong claims for the "essential unity in diversity" which he sees in *Hamlet*. He notes that the play is "peculiarly marked by multiple repetitions in protean forms." The implications of viewing the play in this way emerge clearly later in the book when Aldus insists that there are "more than twenty narrated, acted, metaphoric, or ritual versions" of Hamlet's story in the play. But Aldus does not depend simply on Plato to uncover the holism of the play ("Everything in *Hamlet* is part of Hamlet, or image of the whole of Hamlet . . ."); he also depends on Aristotle's conception of tragic form, emphasizing in particular the importance of teleology in Aristotle's statement: "So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing." Aldus imputes unusual significance to this idea, because it later allows him extraordinary latitude in collating and conflating moments in the play that are usually treated as discrete entities. In no sense does Aldus regard a plot as existing in time, although Shakespeare writes in several places of the canon about the temporal constraints upon the traffic of the stage. Rarely does he try to interpret *Hamlet* as the play must be received in the theatre, that is, scene following scene. Moreover, he succumbs repeatedly to what J. Dover Wilson calls

"the fallacy of regarding separate episodes of the play, especially episodes early in the play, in the light of . . . knowledge of the whole" (*What Happens in Hamlet*). Altogether, we hear too much of ends that are beginnings and *vice versa*, and not enough about Aristotle's "middle".

When Aldus applies his tools in the main part of the book ("Exhumation"), he too often strikes wide of his aim. The exercise begins with consideration of the last bit of Act V which, as the end, assumes particular importance as index, according to Aldus, of what is "really" happening in other parts of the play. Aldus discovers some intriguing parallels between V.ii and I.i, but he also forces his argument unconscionably. Given his hypothesis, Aldus is puzzled, for example, that Hamlet, who is to be borne "like a soldier to the stage" at the end, is not seen at all in I.i, and indeed "appears nowhere in the play directly as a soldier." Aldus extricates himself from this critical predicament by suggesting that the Ghost, who is a soldier, and Hamlet, who is not, are in fact one dramatic character. Similarly, since a poisoned sword is conspicuous in the dénouement, the sword on which the oaths are sworn early in the action "must be poisoned in some sense: the rich ambiguity of the final scene must be implicitly present." What starts as a hypothesis becomes too frequently a categorical imperative.

The book succeeds to some degree in realizing the complexity of and the ironies in Shakespeare's use of parallels, foils and mirror scenes. There is a fuller analysis than one usually gets in discussions of *Hamlet*, for instance, of angling, hawking and hunting metaphors which together with images of bait, snare, net and, of course, trap raise tantalizing questions about just who in the play are the real predators. But even when Aldus seems to be hitting on something new and valuable, he presses too hard and blunts the point. In exploring the nuances of several plays-within-the-play, Aldus forces into the guise of playwright anyone who writes anything — Claudius and Hamlet, for instance, because they compose letters. An interesting section on Hamlet as "director" falters because Aldus protests too much, referring to Hamlet "in his purely rational form as Horatio" and Hamlet in his soldierly form as Fortinbras and then claiming that both give directions at specific places in the play and thus contribute to a composite picture of Hamlet as director. Furthermore, Aldus sees "prologue-like scenes and statements . . . without end," but this is predictable when "everything is prologue to what follows." In paying tribute, then, to "Shakespeare's extraordinarily comprehensive powers of imaginative synthesis concentrating on a multiple-imaged unity," Aldus neglects Shakespeare's ability to discern, to discriminate, to perceive differences.

This oversight is especially noticeable in Aldus' treatment of Hamlet's multiple identities. Virtually everyone in the play becomes a surrogate, or an *alter ego*, or a *doppelgänger* for "Hamlet," if we can continue to think of him as an ego with some dramatic stability. Typical of the way Aldus writes about characters is this: "Laertes/Hamlet, Polonius/Hamlet and Hamlet have all warned Ophelia about a sexual hunter — Hamlet. . . ."

Or this: ". . . he is compelled by King/Father/Laertes/Self to kill all these his own identities at once. All that he is, and all his 'travels,' end in a death shared by the Queen/Mother/Woman in a journey to hell at the centre of the Globe, Elsinore." True, Aldus apologizes for resorting to "cumbersome terminologies," but he nonetheless goes on to explain that these are better than "simple 'literal' names" and that one would need a "composite name stretching its length a third of a page" to describe accurately the profusion of Hamlet's identities.

It is obvious many times in this book that Aldus is trying to express the inexpressible. Even though uprooted from an elaborate context, a passage such as this will serve to suggest the style the reader will encounter: "Specifically, both larger and smaller, through Hamlet's eyes (just as the whole pattern is in Hamlet's mind) we see the total view of what is illimitable in the third diagram: 'infinite space' and 'the Everlasting.' The extremes are co-equal, microcosm-macrocosm." Similar examples of wild and whirling words abound.

By the time the reader arrives at the short "Inhumation," he will have become aware that this is not a scholarly work, nor even a truly perceptive piece of literary criticism, in spite of the author's allusions to Jesse Weston, Gilbert Murray, Lyte's *Herbal*, Aristotle, Plato and eminent Shakespearean critics, and in spite of some flashes of insight into the profundities of the play. Rather, it is a work which has put the tools of criticism and scholarship to the service of a much too fanciful imagination.

Ronald B. Bond

E. H. Mikhail, ed., *W. B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*. 2 vols., London & Toronto: MacMillan, 1977, pp. xiii, 426. \$19.50 per volume.

Gossip has its attractions, especially when its subjects are those we normally revere. When James Stephens, a minor Irish poet, remembers that

Yeats and I, however, were very well-mannered with each other. There is always a point of distrust between two men who have any manners at all in private. Still, I'm inclined to believe that Yeats and I were the only poets with good manners that ever lived. When he had finished a poem I always asked him to say it again and when I had finished one he as scrupulously invited me to repeat *the last verse*

we respect his arrogance, his humility, and his malice. Stephens is one of many minor luminaries of the twentieth century who remembers Yeats, but unlike the majority of his fellows in this volume he is not overwhelmed with having touched the hem of the great man's robes. As a result his writing has some of the easy familiarity we require in gossip, even in literary gossip about a great poet.

One day — this was in Paris — I asked him what he did about books that were sent to him for signature. He became quite thoughtful about this, and then he became very happy. And then he told me this story:

He was dining once with Thomas Hardy, and as they were finishing their coffee he asked Hardy the very same question: 'What do you do, Hardy, about books that are sent to you for signature?'

'Yeats,' said Hardy, 'come with me, there is something upstairs I want to show you.' At the top of the house Hardy opened a door, and the two poets entered a larger room. This room was covered from the floor to the ceiling with books. Hardy waved his hand at the odd-thousand volumes that filled the room — 'Yeats,' said he, 'these are the books that were sent to me for signature.'

Stephens relates how, when he visited Yeats at work, he was shown the proper method for writing during an Irish winter. Yeats was in bed, a writing pad on his knees:

He was fully dressed under the bed-clothes, and had a dressing-gown on over his ordinary clothes. But it was his legs that delighted me. 'There,' he said, 'you can't get cold feet if you wear these.' He had on a pair of huge rubber fisherman's boots that reached to his thighs. 'Inside these,' said he cunningly, 'I have on a pair of woolly slippers, and I'm as warm as toast.'

Unfortunately, most of the pieces in these volumes never achieve this sort of freedom. V. S. Pritchett's reminiscence is typical of the majority:

When I was 22 I had my first encounter with literature in person. I met my first great man. Until then I had been safely in the shellac trade but now . . .

This is merely amusing, but I am not certain there is an adjective to describe some of the writing in these volumes. There is for instance, the mawkish sentimentality of a Miss Brigit Patmore who was, so the editor informs us, the wife of Coventry Patmore's grandson John:

Yeats — the sound of the name pulls one up short — it is imperative or questioning. He was unique: How write about him? True, D. H. Lawrence was unique, Ezra Pound is unique, but one can gather up the golden strands around them and weave a small pattern, but Yeats's darkly sportive imagination is awe inspiring.

The reason that Yeats' imagination was awe inspiring (and darkly sportive) was that Yeats was a Celt. Celts are cruel. Not, Miss Patmore says,

that I ever saw any cruelty in Yeats, and his courtesy was unfailing. What gave me confidence in him was the

unconscious pride that pierced to his very bones. The kind of pride noble animals have and *they* never fail one.

One is informed that this model of intelligent prose was discovered by the editor in *The Texas Quarterly* where, but for scholarship, it might have remained.

Miss Patmore's bad prose is equalled by the two lengthy extracts from the wanderings of Sean O'Casey. However, his attitude to Yeats is as vicious as Miss Patmore's is servile. His would be the weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth, if there were twist or tooth at all.

There are few extracts of any real value. C. M. Bowra, Mary Colum, Edmund Dulac, L. A. G. Strong, and Richard Eberhart are sometimes entertaining: But they have no real talent for gossip. They felt honored to know Yeats. They record their reverence for him. Indeed, they should have been pleased; the reader, inevitably, is bored.

Must we have books like these? What possible justification is there for their production? It can't be their value as gossip, since they are so very dull. Anyway, who would expect more than four hundred pages of good gossip about one man? No, so long and expensive (\$39.00) a treatment must be justified as scholarship. Dr. Mikhail's short introduction pompously informs us that:

The present collection of interviews and recollections is a small effort to contribute to Yeats scholarship. It is hoped that it will constitute an added source of material for future biographical research.

But there is nothing of interest here. There are only earnest voices telling us that Yeats noticed them, that his manner was reserved, that he dressed well, that he was short sighted, that he was just as the other voices said he was.

Books like these are the worst product of our contemporary intellectual climate. They are not useful, nor do they entertain.

Robert M. Snukal

Thomas R. Whitaker, *Fields of Play in Modern Drama*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 192. \$11.00.

This book offers valid observations about critical approaches to all drama, a philosophical theory about modern drama in particular, and practical criticism of selected modern plays. It is not for the dabbler who wants light reading on the theatre, nor for the student who needs an easy aid to comprehension of a particular play. Whitaker's *Fields of Play* is no playground for the drama buff, but rather a philosophical gymnasium for the theoretician and an exercise in ingenuity for the serious director. Whitaker assumes that a man is essentially a collection of masks or a player of roles, and thus that the drama is an appropriate medium for man's attempt to define himself. Because the nature

of the individual is essentially histrionic, he expresses his essence in "playing," and this playing is in fact the subject of modern drama.

Traditional dramatic criticism treats a play as an external object, complete and coherent in itself, separate from its witnesses. Whitaker rejects that approach, asserting that the full meaning of any play must include the fact of our participation in it. Acting and witnessing are mutually inclusive modes of participation, for every witness is an implicit actor, as every actor is an implicit witness. Both are players, and the play's meaning, properly perceived, *includes* this shared acting and witnessing.

The argument is developed largely through discussion of thirteen modern plays from various perspectives suggested by Whitaker's contention that the fullest meaning of a play is to be found in the interaction between the play as object ("performed action") and the participation of the witness/actor ("the action of performance"). While a theory developed through consideration of a limited number of plays is always open to the accusation that some pre-determined principle of selection has biased the argument, the variety of Whitaker's choices is reassuring. Other than membership in the category "modern drama," they appear to have nothing in common except for that generally negative view of the human condition which seems to be universally accepted as characteristic of modern literature. This common denominator in the chosen plays does not suggest any limitation to the application of Whitaker's approach to criticism, however; it merely allows him to reach some conclusions about the drama which is typical of our time. His critical methods could be applied to any play of any period.

The critical techniques Whitaker employs are various, as are the degrees of success with which he achieves his two-fold purpose for employing them: to explicate his theory about witnesses' participation in modern drama and, I think secondarily, to illuminate the plays. He uses a dialogue between questioner and explicator, that is, between the traditional critic and himself, to discuss *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *Happy Days* and *Rosmersholm*; the discussion of *The Ghost Sonata* is a sort of director's diary of the shaping of a production; he addresses the witnesses directly on *The Three Sisters*, *Heartbreak House* and *Break of Noon*; dialogue among actors and witnesses comments on *Henry IV*, *The Balcony* and *Endgame*; lines from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Murder in the Cathedral* alternate with the perceptions of "us," the witnesses/actors, complicated in the section on Brecht by a split-page counterpoint between the perceptions of the witness/actors in the auditorium and those on the stage. He concludes with *The Tower*, using a series of statements from the director and seven actors, framed by statements from Whitaker as witness, which, in commenting on the play, restate observations developed earlier in discussions of other plays by way of conclusion.

The array of different critical methods is useful as a reminder that we need not and probably should not confine ourselves to the standard mode of expository criticism. However, the shifting



techniques can be bewildering to the reader who must struggle to keep oriented as Whitaker turns his attention to another play from another critical perspective as another step in the development of his view of modern drama. His success in illuminating the plays is uneven. I found the director's journal on *The Ghost Sonata* particularly rewarding for elucidating the play as coherent process rather than as a collection of parts making up a static whole. The process of the director in his diary moving past the surface of the play to its central meaning matches the process by which the Student in the play and the witnesses of the play are themselves (ourselves) absorbed in the process of "seeing the hidden" in ourselves. Notably less successful is the section on *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The split-page counterpoint between play and participant, between Whitaker's commentary and Brecht's, between "witnesses as actors as witnesses" and "witnesses as actors as actors" is annoyingly coy. Repeated assertions that we are "here" in the action of the play, witnessing and acting, that the play seems to have become ours and we the play's, do not constitute illuminating criticism. They seem to distract from the occasional useful observations about Azdak and Grusha which Whitaker makes simultaneously, though he no doubt intended them to be complementary.

Though the general argument that the real meaning of drama must encompass the witness's act of participation is applicable to all drama, Whitaker focuses on modern drama because of the way in which drama since Ibsen has expressed "the crisis of the self." The traditional, objective view of these plays gives us a negative view of humanity, showing the pointlessness of our efforts, the nonsense of our self-assertions, the insignificance of ourselves. But introducing the witness's participation makes possible a meaning which resides outside the boundaries of the play as object, because experiencing the negative statement of the play should refresh the witness and renew his desire to move beyond the ego to find the true meaning of his own existence in the "fields of play." That both the exploration of non-standard critical techniques and the elucidation of individual plays should be subsidiary to the development of this thesis is unfortunate, but the book has its rewards for the reader who is serious enough about playing his role of critic to come to terms with the way Whitaker plays his role of philosopher.

Susan Stone-Blackburn

## Books Received

- BERGHAIN, MARION, *Images of Africa in Black American Literature*. London and Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. pp. x, 230. \$22.40.
- DILLINGHAM, WILLIAM B., *Melville's Short Fiction 1853-1856*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1977. pp. 390. \$16.50.
- EVANS, MAURICE, ed., *Elizabethan Sonnets*. London: J. M. Dent, 1977. pp. xxxi, 238. £5.50, £2.95 pb.
- FENDER, STEPHEN, ed., *The American Long Poem: An Annotated Selection*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977. pp. 254. £3.95 pb.
- HALPERIN, JOHN, *Trollope and Politics: A Study of the Pallisers & Others*. London and Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. pp. x, 318. \$22.40.
- HARTVEIT, LARS, *The Art of Persuasion: A Study of Six Novels*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977. pp. 152. \$8.00 pb.
- LARKIN, MAURICE, *Man and Society in Nineteenth-Century Realism*. London and Toronto: Macmillan, 1977. pp. ix, 201. \$22.40.
- MILLER, EDWIN HAVILAND, ed., *A Supplement to the Correspondence of Walt Whitman*. The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman Vol. 6. New York: New York University Press, 1977. pp. xl, 124. \$19.50.
- MITCHELL, JEROME, *The Walter Scott Operas*. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977. pp. xiii, 402. \$17.40.
- OLANDER, JOSEPH D. and MARTIN HARRY GREENBERG, eds., *Isaac Asimov*. Writers of the 21st Century Series. New York: Taplinger Publishing; Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern, 1977. pp. 247. \$7.50 pb.
- OLANDER, JOSEPH D. and MARTIN HARRY GREENBERG, eds., *Arthur C. Clarke*. Writers of the 21st Century Series. New York: Taplinger Publishing; Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern, 1977. pp. 254. \$7.50 pb.
- REIBETANZ, JOHN, *The "Lear" World: A Study of "King Lear" in its Dramatic Context*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1977. pp. xi, 142. \$12.50.
- VOGEL, JANE, *Allegory in Dickens*. University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977. pp. xvi, 347. \$12.50.
- WATKINS, FLOYD C., *In Time and Place: Some Origins of American Fiction*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1977. pp. xiii, 250. \$10.50.
- WOOD, HARRIET HARVEY, ed., *James Watson's Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*. Vol. 1. S.T.S. Publications. Fourth Series, No. 10. Edinburgh: The Scottish Text Society, 1977. pp. xiv, 383. £6.50. \$20.00.