

Book Reviews

Walter E. Meyers. *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980. pp. xii, 257. \$16.00.

The thesis of this highly interesting, though imperfect, study appears on the first page: "... Communication, with language as its chief discipline, is centrally important to an enormous portion of science fiction, and crucial to its understanding. Why this should be so is the subject of this book." Unfortunately, it has as well a second and more limited aim, also stated on the first page: "to survey the uses, whether sound or unsound, to which writers in the field put linguistics." The book hovers between these two objectives. In consequence, both the material covered and the author's insights are remarkably miscellaneous — so much so that it is puzzling to find it all in one place. A more precise focus might have led to a more tightly unified, and in some respects more profound study.

Most of this work is just such a survey as Meyers promises. He discusses science-fictional treatments of language change, decipherment of dead languages, machine speech, communication with animals (especially primates and cetaceans), invented languages and methods of communication, problems of establishing communication with extraterrestrial beings, automatic translators and "magic decoders", and telepathy. The last three chapters turn to a closer inspection of a few works in which languages and linguistics play a crucial role. Here Meyers discusses Tolkien's construction of Elvish, Jack Vance's use of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in *The Languages of Pao*, various authors' use of Korzybski's General Semantics, Samuel R. Delany's uses of a variety of linguistic concepts, and Ian Watson's use of transformational-generative theory in *The Embedding*. The last chapter deals with language in utopian and dystopian fiction, taking James Cooke Brown's *The Troika Incident*, B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, and Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* as its test cases. There is much exposition of rather elementary linguistics throughout.

Meyers demonstrates an extensive familiarity with Anglo-American SF of the last thirty years — the area explicitly emphasized in this study — but his range includes SF of other times and other traditions as well. The main conclusions, however, are negative: we see how trivial, misconceived and muddled the linguistic content of most SF really is. Some of the most respected authors in the field — Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, James Blish, and others — are open to criticism on these grounds. Indeed, Meyers' critique of Delany shows that while his works are not valueless as explorations of linguistic themes our admiration for them should be qualified by an awareness of limitations. On the other hand, it is interesting that Edgar Rice Burroughs, Raymond Z. Gallun, Jack Vance, and Chad Oliver deserve more credit than they have received for their handling of linguistic themes.

Many of these insights are incidental rather than central to the book. Some chapters never rise even to a general conclusion, and some that make the attempt have nothing new to tell us. Meyer's examination of stories dealing

with first contacts between humans and aliens convinces him that most SF is optimistic about the possibility of communication. His survey of language learning techniques exploited in SF is linked to a modest survey of popular science articles on such techniques. These chapters serve only to confirm a reader's general impressions of SF, although a confirmation based on purposeful examination of the evidence may prove useful.

A few chapters achieve something more significant. The detailed studies of particular works offer us at least some valuable information on backgrounds and sources, and on occasion they afford real literary insight. Also on occasion, Meyers deals with issues of importance to the genre as a whole. His discussion of automatic translation gadgetry grows into a solid and enlightening critique of the much-touted requirement that SF be scientifically plausible, and his examination of Korzybski's *General Semantics* serves as the focus of a discussion of what Norman Spinrad has called "rubber sciences" in SF. Finally, his account of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that linguistic structures are influences on or determinants of our view of the world is important not just to Vance's novel, but also to much that is valuable in the last three chapters and to many works of SF and utopian fiction that Meyers does not touch on. Most of the book's contribution to our understanding of SF is located in these sections.

Meyers is rather self-indulgent in places: he digresses to criticize John C. Lilly's work with dolphins and Frank Drake and Carl Sagan's Pioneer 10 message plaque. While these matters are not irrelevant to SF, and are interesting in themselves, there is no compelling reason for including them here. Even more striking is Meyers' inclusion of a section on Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*. His analysis of Elvish is enlightening and shows Tolkein's sophistication, but his argument that linguistic content makes this SF is very weak — magic rings, Black Riders, orcs, ents, and elves are far more important than any "science" we may find here.

Despite a variety of faults, however, this is a worthwhile book. Meyers' linguistics is generally sound, although his appeal to glottochronology, a now-discredited method, is dubious. His comments are intelligent and insightful, even when they contribute little to the work as a whole. His prose is unfailingly clear and occasionally witty and elegant. The bibliography will prove very useful to anyone who wishes to pursue this topic farther. Meyers has already shown some of the directions that pursuit should take.

Jānis Svilpis

William C. Spengemann. *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1980. pp. xviii, 254. \$19.50.

Theories of autobiography have existed for centuries but their formal organization has occurred only recently. In the seventies, the works of James Olney, Philippe Lejeune and Elizabeth Bruss are notable contributions. In the eighties, William C. Spengemann has continued that concern with his lucid and readable essay, *The Forms of Autobiography*. Basing his theory on a tripartite, historical paradigm, Spengemann establishes a convincing argument for the evolution of autobiography based on a reading of the quintessential autobiographical text, St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

For Spengemann, the *Confessions* contains all three of the central autobiographical forms that emerge in autobiography from the medieval to modern period. Augustine's pre-eminence is then both formal, in establishing the major structures of autobiographical expression, and historical in that he was the first to make self-reflection the subject of autobiography. Spengemann identifies the dominant modes of autobiographical writing as the historical, philosophical and poetic. He defines historical autobiography as self-explanation or self-recollection, characterized by works that concentrate on "the dynamic process of experience through which the truth becomes known" (p.44). *La Vita Nuova*, *Grace Abounding* and *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* are his three principal examples for the form that dominates the period from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.

Philosophical autobiography, stage two, concentrates on self-analysis, stressing the uniqueness of the individual in his search for transcendent or prophetic experiences previously obscured by daily life. Truth and experience contradict each other for the narrator until he discovers some synthesizing idea or experience, often the creation of his self. Rousseau's *Confessions*, Wordsworth's *Prelude* and DeQuincy's *Confessions* are the major examples. The search for certainty in these works is inner. The final form of autobiographical expression, representative of mid and late nineteenth-century writing, Spengemann calls "poetic". This is autobiography of self-expression where the existence of the self depends not on experience, or inner truth but verbal re-creation or self-invention. The texts for this most problematic category are Sartor Resartus, *David Copperfield* and *The Scarlet Letter*, works that are linked by the fictive creation of self. Consequently, "poetic" autobiography becomes a work about itself: *David Copperfield* is autobiographical only to the extent that the work concerns itself with the realization of Dickens' self, not the identification of biographical details in the work (p. 122). Protagonist and narrator become contemporaneous, marking a psychological not ontological division with the protagonist, in the end, gaining authority over the narrator. *The Scarlet Letter* becomes the fully developed "poetic autobiography" because the autobiographical input lies less in the "fictionally encoded biographical data than in the symbolic uses to which the fictional metaphors themselves are put" (p. 132).

The obvious stress on categories, divisions and schemes in Spengemann's work does not diminish the richness of his commentary. Narration, structure and time in autobiographical writing are all analyzed in original ways. A limitation of the study, however, is Spengemann's stopping short at 1850 and neglecting such essential autobiographies as those by Mill, Newman or Moore in addition to later texts by Henry Adams, Yeats or Gertrude Stein. Unwilling to press his categories beyond the mid-nineteenth-century, Spengemann does,

however, explain in an "Afterward" that contemporary self-expression reshapes itself through efforts to explain, discover or express the self, a restatement in slightly more psychological terms of his earlier three categories. More relevant is a helpful bibliographic essay of seventy-five pages on the current study of autobiography.

The reliance on divisions makes Spengemann's book appear to be more schematic than it in fact is. Repeatedly, his readings of individual texts uncover additional, unexpected levels of meaning and interpretation not anticipated by his categories. His chapter on Hawthorne, the most challenging in the book, illustrates this precisely as he shows that Hawthorne suspected that his autobiography — his 1850 novel — created the very self it revealed. The result was the realization that autobiography was both impossible and unavoidable, impossible because the self cannot exist without writing about it and unavoidable since writing invents a self it also reflects. In many ways Spengemann's historical approach holds no surprises but a consistent series of insightful readings of important texts makes the book a useful study. A clarifying rather than illuminating work, *The Forms of Autobiography* is another step in the direction of a satisfactory and unifying theory of autobiographical writing.

Ira Nadel

Richard K. Cross. *Malcolm Lowry: A Preface to His Fiction*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. pp. xiv, 146. \$12.50.

Richard Cross sets himself a worthy goal in this brief study: to begin striking, as Richard Ellman and A. Walton Litz had done in the case of Joyce, "a proper balance between the representational and symbolic elements" in Lowry studies. Cross sees Lowry as one of the great moderns who, along with Kafka, Conrad, Joyce, Mann, and Proust, manifested both a conscious commitment to symbolism as a fundamental belief in the necessity of rendering realistically the complex relationships between man and his environments. That Lowry joins this impressive company largely on the basis of one novel is perhaps for some readers a sticky point, but Cross without reservation ranks *Under the Volcano* as one of "the few distinguished examples of [the high modernist fusion of symbolism and mimesis] to appear since the 1930s."

Cross organizes his book with the general reader rather than the Lowry specialist in mind, though the latter is not neglected: some thirty pages of profusely annotated notes offer such a reader countless opportunities to pursue possibilities raised by the text. The text proper, however, is both chronological in its analysis of Lowry's fiction, and traditional in its exegetical approach, with the result that the reader is led, if not effortlessly, at least logically, into an understanding of Lowry's art. Cross elects to avoid the structuralist and post-structuralist approaches that frequently seem to constitute obfuscations rather than clarifications to an understanding of such moderns as Pynchon and Barth, and demonstrates convincingly that the traditional elements of character and plot can quite profitably be examined in the study of an artist's craft.

Among other benefits of this approach, we are treated to an intelligent analysis of Lowry's first and frequently neglected novel, *Ultramarine*, written long before Lowry moved deliberately into his modernist phase with *Volcano*. If Cross errs here, it is in his concern to evaluate *Ultramarine* chiefly as an apprenticeship exercise, a preparation, as it were, for his magnum opus and his monumentally conceived *Voyage That Never Ends*. It would be convenient to think that Lowry from the outset wrote with his grand design in mind, but the record of his Cambridge days and his stint as a seaman indicates that *Ultramarine* had a far more prosaic genesis. It was simply a first novel, and in my mind a much more successful one than even Cross will allow, that has to be judged on its own merits, and not as an integral part of an unrealized sequence that Lowry saw only retrospectively as a possibility.

Nevertheless, Cross's first chapter demonstrates convincingly the commitment that Lowry felt towards fiction from the very beginning, just as his third chapter concentrates on the continuing frustration that this commitment engendered. In between lies his analysis of *Under the Volcano*, which, perhaps because of the profusion of esoteric studies already performed on this work, serves chiefly to remind us that much can be gained by getting back to a consideration of the text itself. Cross sees this second chapter as "the core of [his] inquiry," and in a sense it becomes this only by reflection, by its juxtaposed position between the other two chapters, which constitute some of the most perceptive analyses I have read of Lowry's early and posthumous works. Cross's analysis of *Volcano*, largely a chapter by chapter *explication de texte*, is competently and intelligently done, and will serve extremely well the reader concerned more with Lowry's text than with the Cabbalistic and other mythical or legendary digressions so avidly pursued by such critics as Epstein, Kilgallin and Markson.

Hallvard Dahlie

Books Received

- BAKER, JEFFREY, *Time and Mind in Wordsworth's Poetry*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980. pp. 213. \$16.95.
- BAKER, SUZANNE DEVONSHIRE, *Artists of Alberta*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1980. pp. x, 97. \$25.00.
- BRADLEY, ANTHONY, *Contemporary Irish Poetry: An Anthology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. pp. xvii, 430. \$17.95.
- COGSWELL, FRED, *A Long Apprenticeship: Collected Poems*. Fredrickton: Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1980. pp. 223. pb. \$6.50
- KEITH, W. J., *The Poetry of Nature*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. pp. xi, 219. \$20.00.
- KENNER, HUGH, *Ulysses*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin (Unwin Critical Library), 1980. pp. vi, 182. \$15.95.
- KERMODE, FRANK, *The Genesis of Secrecy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. pp. 169. \$10.00.
- LANE, M. TRAVIS, *Divinations and Shorter Poems 1973-78*. Frederickton: Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1980. pp. 112. pb. \$5.00.
- LEGRIS, MAURICE, and ROGER MOTUT, eds., *Ordinary Heroes*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1980. pp. xviii, 115. \$7.50.
- SELLS, A. L. LYTTON, *Thomas Gray: His Life and Works*. Winchester, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1980. pp. viii, 293. \$29.50.
- STOW, RANDOLPH, *The Girl Green as Elderflower*. New York: The Viking Press, 1980. pp. 150. \$9.95.
- SUVIN, DARKO, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. pp. xviii, 317. \$22.95, pb. \$8.95.
- WHALLEY, GEORGE, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Marginilia I*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. pp. clxxiv, 879. \$60.00.
- WYATT, DAVID, *Prodigal Sons: A Study in Authorship and Authority*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980. pp. xix, 172. \$12.95.