Book Reviews

Frank Kermode. *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. pp. xii, 169.

Frank Kermode's distinction in the field of English literature is already well established; his new book, the published form of his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, should establish further his reputation with respect to Biblical literature. *The Genesis of Secrecy* is concerned with interpretation, particularly with the problems of interpretation as they are presented in narrative. Kermode takes as his narrative substance the Biblical literature and brings to that narrative his insights on the nature and difficulty of interpretation as it applies to all literature, indeed to the world itself.

Although he touches on the Biblical literature as a whole, it is primarily the narrative of the Gospels that forms the foundation of Kermode's study; and of the Gospels, it is Mark more than the other Synoptics, or John, that is the focus of his analysis and argument. This is in some ways an appropriate choice, for Mark's Gospel explicitly refers to the problems of interpretation and implicity embodies in its narrative the substance of the difficulties as such.

Kermode develops his themes and perspectives by referring in each chapter to modern literary works and then examining the related issues in the Biblical literature. Thus he moves from a parable in Kafka's *The Trial* to the problems of secrecy in the Markan parables. The "Man in the Macintosh" in Joyce's *Ulysses* leads to an examination of the "Boy in the Shirt" in Mark's passion narrative. Henry Green, Henry James, and other modern writers are drawn into the exposition, illustrating not only problems in the interpretation of narrative, but the specific nature of the issues as they appear in the Biblical literature.

The themes of this study are far-reaching in their scope and implications. The interpreter is driven to the interpretation of texts, though the task is virtually impossible. The narratives are obscure and contain no simple or single interpretation. The difficult relationship between narrative and history neither illumines narrative nor reveals history. Ultimately, interpretation is the practice of

divination (a pregnant term in Biblical studies!) and its end is disappointment. And that is true, not only of literature, but also of the world. Kermode, who has already written a book on "endings," finishes this work on a note of which Ecclesiastes could have been proud: "... our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us."

For one professionally engaged in the study of Biblical literature, Kermode's book brings sparkle to a field that is too often dreary. When the ancient Hebrew scholar wrote that "of making many books, there is no end," he was almost certainly anticipating New Testament scholarship (I write as a diviner!); yet it is not only the quantity, but also the weariness of those books, that is a continuing bane. Kermode is not weary, so that whether or not one agrees with his directions and insights, his book is a most welcome addition to the scholarly literature. He writes well, perhaps an unnecessary remark to English scholars, but very pertinent to Biblical scholars. And his wide grasp of literature as a whole, no less than his solid competence in the literature of biblical criticism, lends his work a freshness and vitality rarely found on the Biblical side of his subject. Biblical scholars have been venturing beyond their field for decades, whether to folklore studies or the latest intricacies of structuralism. But there are fewer literary scholars who do the opposite and of those who do, few succeed. C. S. Lewis brought marvellous insight to the Biblical literature, but he wrote as a theologian rather than a critic. Kermode enters the field perceived strictly as literature and brings his broader insights to bear successfully in this somewhat specialized domain.

In the context of Biblical scholarship, Kermode's book should prove to be influential; few other works, for example, reflect so clearly the issues of interpretation in Mark's Gospel, or are so suggestive, as *The Genesis of Secrecy*. And few scholars, whether in this field or beyond, have grasped so well the massive secondary literature and seen the whole forest, not merely the redactional trees and structuralist shrubs! But inevitably there must also be debate. The focus on Mark, it might be argued, is directed to an atypical work, and while that observation does not negate the insight developed, it raises difficulty for its broader application. Again, the Biblical canon differs from a classical English literary canon, say that of Shakespeare. In whatever fashion the latter was formed, the former clearly has a theological, rather than a literary, base. And to an extent, the very existence of a theological canon must raise difficulties in principle with an interpretation of the kind undertaken by Kermode.

Kermode is fully aware of the secular nature of his venture into the sacred texts, though in North America this is not so remarkable as it might seem in England. ("Show me a New Testament scholar," a colleague once commented, "and I will show you an atheist!") The secular inquiry is fully legitimate and has been undertaken by numerous scholars over more than a century. But in terms of method, the secular approach to interpretation inevitably raises fundamentally different sets of questions. Those who would study the texts as religious literature (whether or not they are committed to the substance) must seek a different perspective. Modern biblical criticism stems from the work of Spinoza, as Kermode rightly observes; the texts must be studied with the consciousness that they are written by humans. And yet the essence of the theological canon, as distinct from the literary, is precisely the conviction that the texts are not just the writings of human beings. Thus Spinoza clearly stands at a divide in Biblical interpretation: the interpretations of narrative proposed by Augustine and Calvin differ fundamentally from those of Rudolf Bultmann or Frank Kermode.

Such an observation is not intended to reduce for a moment the validity of Kermode's enterprise; it raises rather the questions of context and perspective. Why and how should one study Mark's Gospel or the New Testament? Should it be viewed as an ancient religious text or as a work of literature? Is it really a work of art, or simply a source for both antique and contemporary religion? Most would agree that Mark's claim to distinction does not lie in any literary merit (though Kermode's analysis may contribute to a reexamination of such a view), but in his gospel's significance as a document of the faith of a religious community. And its preservation was ensured precisely because its substance was thought to be clear (albeit a position undermined from within!) and to reveal that which must be known. Thus, though Kermode ventures from the study of English literature to that of Biblical literature, his insights still pertain to the study of literature in general; he would claim no more. And yet the Biblical literature is most commonly studied for other reasons, for its literary merit, taken as a whole, is not self-evident. It is studied not only by the theologians (the committed, that is), but also by the students of religion, those who would seek to understand a given faith in terms of its own sacred texts. And at this point, Kermode is of less assistance. It would be unfair to criticize him for not doing what he did not set out to do; but when all is said and done, *The Genesis of Secrecy* is of more value to the study of literature in general than it is to the study of the Bible as a religious document.

Yet Kermode is doing what others have set out to do and he has done it with considerably more success. And even for those who

would study a scripture as a religious document, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, the preliminary steps must involve the interpretation of narrative. For all such, *The Genesis of Secrecy* contains its own "perceptions of a momentary radiance." But the substance of the ancient texts, whether Torah or Testament, albeit obscure and opaque, was clearly believed by both writers and preservers to open a door, rather than to end finally at the closed door of disappointment.

PETER CRAIGIE

Alexander Welsh. *Reflections on the Hero as Quixote.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. pp. 244. $15.00.

In this study of the novel, Professor Welsh takes up the somewhat battle-scarred question of literary realism, but he does not proceed the usual route of an analysis of novelistic mimesis. Consequently, he avoids the critical problems of an approach which insists that the realistic novel must be judged according to its representation of a unified and pre-formed extraliterary reality (Lukács's *The Historical Novel* might be a good example here), and that antagonistic but complementary deconstructive analysis of representation which attempts to demonstrate on the level of semiotics the utter impossibility of a "realistic" depiction of social life. Instead, Welsh takes up a historically and formally diverse collection of English, American, and European realistic novels, and studies them according to what he sees as the defining theme of realism: resistance to injustice. He proposes we stop thinking about literary *realism* and start thinking about two literary *realisms* with markedly different approaches to the problem of injustice. The first of these, "historical realism," was the ruling mode of nineteenth-century fiction, and was closely tied to the form of the *bildungsroman.* It was concerned not so much with an accurate representation of social reality as with the literary emplotment of the life of the hero according to a secularized vision of sacred history. In historical realism, an idealistic adolescent hero or heroine is typically educated away from his or her naiveté and urgent quest for social justice toward a "realistic" view which sees justice as the deferred but inevitable result of progressive history. The individual quest for justice turns into a socialized faith in the ultimate benevolence of history and institutions. Here, Welsh continues his study of Scott as the founding father of historical realism in *The Hero of the Waverly Novels,* and argues succinctly and convincingly for the pervasive influence of Scott upon nineteenth-

century novels as diverse as *Les Misérables*, *Daniel Deronda*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*.

The second sort of realism, and the centre of Welsh's interest in this book, is a marginal but recurrent literary tradition he calls "quixotic realism," which he traces from the fountainhead of Cervantes' great work through *Joseph Andrews*, *Tristram Shandy*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *The Idiot*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and several other novels. The quixotic hero is usually older than the hero of historical romance, and so cannot be recaptured by the social order merely through his maturation and marriage. He has a "vocation outside of marriage" which is the quixotic challenging of instances of injustice which exist between, in spite of, or because of social institutions. His heroism is enacted on the fringes of society, and quite often in prisons, because it is an anti-synthetic force of negation which resists historical realism's accession to history and social institutions, and its postponement of hope for justice. He puts himself into the fray, defending victims of social oppression or victims of circumstance. From Don Quixote's freeing of the galley slaves on the grounds that the law has no right to limit any man's freedom, to Mr. Pickwick's defence of his fellow prisoners, to Joseph K's quest for justice in *The Trial*, the quixotic hero constantly questions the judicial authority of the state.

Quixotic heroism also typically includes a more passive element, for novels of quixotic realism, despite their formal diversity, narrate one sort of incident with remarkable regularity: the hero's endurance of practical jokes. These jokes help the novelist to extend not only his episodic plot, but also his meditation on justice. They may be played by human agents, as in the second half of *Don Quixote*, or by a more or less personified force of circumstances, as in the series of unpredictable mishaps which befall Walter, Toby, and Tristram Shandy, but they are almost always *demonstrative* jokes — jokes aimed not at any vengeful retribution or satiric correction of quixotic idealism, but at the demonstration of the inevitable injustices of human existence. The quixotic hero's endurance of such jokes brings him a "knowledge of perspectives," a realization that all seemingly permanent human and material relationships can be altered. These episodes focus on the hero's identity rather than his social situation: "The vital thrust of realism is to define the heroism of the victim of circumstances rather than to describe the circumstances. . . . "

The major problem with this explanation of the relationship between quixotic realism and justice lies here, in its relatively underdeveloped discussion of injustice. If the theme of realism is the resistance to injustice, and if injustice itself is a historical entity

produced by various cultures at various times, then a study of realistic novels should note carefully the specific problems of injustice that realistic novels work with. But Welsh seems to equate injustice with a quality of existence — with pure, Sartrean contingency. Although he argues that modern novels by Hardy, Conrad, Kafka, and Gide show an increasing sense of this contingency, he does not show the relationship between this existential situation and the specific modern codes and theories of justice which produce it. By too sharply setting off the quixotic hero's quest for identity from the contingency of social and institutional life, and by failing to analyze the constructed quality and historical complexity of the latter, he tends to impoverish his analyses of quixotic heroism itself: because the contingency which these heroes oppose and suffer from seems so much the same contingency, the sense of identity they form through their opposition seems too much the same identity. But the injustice which Don Quixote and Sancho suffer in the palace of the Duke and Duchess is not the same injustice that Vicar Primrose and his family suffer at the hands of Squire Thornhill; the injustice of English penal codes and prison life which Dickens takes up in *The Pickwick Papers* is not the same as the injustice of American slaveholders and their brutal fantasies of neo-feudal chivalry which Twain takes up in *Huckleberry Finn*. And while Tom Sawyer's elaborate practical joking in the final chapters of that book — his superfluous attempt to free the already freed Jim — may be a "rehearsal for loss and defeat, a preparation for accommodating many realities," the sense of identity which he helps to create for Jim here is distinctly unsatisfying: Jim's problem is not one of maintaining his identity in the face of existential contingency, but of maintaining his freedom in the face of the concrete legal fact that, in his new identity as a freedman, he risks being made a slave again if he lingers too long in a slave state.

Still, Welsh shows that there is a sense in which all quixotic heroes attempt "to transcend the ethical," to adopt an individualistic stance of complete opposition to all social institutions by turning themselves into legal test cases in an effort to effect some change in those institutions, and there is nothing in this study which would preclude a more historical study of quixotic realism. Further, the largely non-historical and "reflective" form of *Reflections on the Hero as Quixote* makes possible a convincing argument for a close thematic and even generic relationship among realistic novels about quixotic heroes, from Cervantes' knight errant through all his modern descendants.

JAMES ROSS HOLSTUN

Peter J. Manning. *Byron and His Fictions.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978. pp. 296. $15.95.

That much of Byron's poetry fictionalizes aspects of his life and character has been common knowledge since it was first published. Using the insights of Freud, Winnicott, Erikson and other psychologists, Manning relates the characters and plots of Byron's narrative poetry and drama to what is known or can be surmised concerning the poet's psychological makeup, most of it stemming, according to Manning, from his feelings about his parents. Thus the poet's supposedly fearful memories of his irresponsible father, "Mad Jack Byron," who, having run through his wife's fortune, spent his declining years on the Continent and died when the poet was three, give rise to such threatening father-figures as Lambro in *Don Juan* and God in *Cain.* Similarly the poet's ambivalent feelings toward his mother help to account for two types of women who recur in his poetry, the "nurturing female presence" and the woman who threatens the hero's desire for independence. Sometimes, as in Julia and Haidée in *Don Juan,* the two types are combined. As a result, too, of Byron's feelings about his parents, his plots, according to Manning, exhibit a recurrent triangular situation involving "hero, important woman, and dominating older man."

Not all readers will accept Manning's Freudian assumptions without qualification. Nevertheless he conducts his discussion with sensitivity and perception, and the book has more breadth and subtlety than a brief summary can suggest. Manning is at his most stimulating when he relates particular features of the poetry to the author's psyche. Thus in the style of *Beppo* he finds "strategems of dissociation" that enable Byron "to confront his obsessions while allaying the anxieties they cause."

In the fact that the portrait of Donna Inez in *Don Juan* is based on both Byron's wife and his mother, Manning finds a profound significance. "The presentation of himself as simultaneously the son and husband of this woman suggests that at some not wholly conscious level Byron descried at last the shadowy motives underlying the extraordinary behavior he exhibited during his marriage and the anguish of the separation. He seems in his analytical division of himself to intuit that the crisis of his relationship with Annabella grew out of much earlier psychic conflicts with his mother, and thus brings to the surface the true nature of the dilemma at which in 1816-1817 *Manfred* had only hinted." Of the four chapters that Manning devotes to *Don Juan,* one — and for me the most satisfying — reaches out beyond Byron's personal situation to embrace his use of history and allusion. Suggesting that the poem may be read as the history of a consciousness moving from an innocent past to "the ambiguities and temporal self-consciousness of the modern era,"

he throws considerable light on Byron's use of the past, including that which is contained in myth and literary allusions.

As with some other studies that approach a large subject from a special perspective, Manning's results in some imbalance. Perhaps inevitably he devotes more space to works that are well adapted to his thesis than to those that are less so, irrespectively, one sometimes feels, of their merits. To *Werner*, for example, he devotes twelve pages; to *Beppo*, less than two; while *The Vision of Judgment*, Byron's most brilliant narrative satire, is mentioned only in passing.

Manning's preoccupation with the deeper psychological implications of Byron's poetry sometimes results in overreading. A case in point is his declaration that Haidée's pregnancy "reveals her essentially maternal nature," which, of course, is nonsense: it no more reveals it than it shows Juan's paternal one. Again, in what is surely an overreading, Manning goes on to observe that Haidée's death without giving birth "emphasizes that the nurturing feminine qualities that make the island a paradise are also inhibiting." Manning exaggerates when he writes that Byron's portraits of aristocratic and upper-middle class women in the later cantos of *Don Juan* are "the wonderful consequence of his gynophobia." A contradictory but more balanced judgment occurs a few pages later when he speaks of Byron's "deep and lasting ambivalence to women."

The discussion of Juan is marred by inconsistencies. On p. 193 he refers to Juan's "increasing self-reliance" and his "fitful progress toward autonomy"; but elsewhere, as on pp. 220 and 224, he refers to the "fixity" of his character; and on p. 179, discussing the presentation of Juan's boyhood, he tells us that his "arrest is permanent." Sometimes he sees Juan as permanently passive — e.g., on p. 251, "he is as passive as ever," and on p. 256, "the passive Juan." But on p. 193, apropos the harem scene in Canto V, Juan "now becomes active," capitalizing on his feminine disguise to approach Dudù secretly and successfully. Here, too, "for the first time," Juan displays "the traditional masculine initiative," exploiting his sexuality with "wit and skill."

Yet despite such flaws, *Byron and His Fictions* is one of the most illuminating studies of the poet to have appeared in the past twenty years. Manning supports most of his points effectively and his book is well documented.

J. SAYRE MARTIN

P. R. King. *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction.* London and New York: Methuen, 1979. pp. x, 256. £3.50.

When I first received this book for review, I had strong and immediate reservations from simply reading the back cover and the table of contents. The book, claims the blurb, "provides close critical studies of a selection of those major poets who have significantly affected the direction of post-war British poetry . . . ," and that "together they represent the most interesting figures in the contemporary literary scene." Heady stuff. But the contents reveal no chapter on "the direction of post-war British poetry," and the list of poets to be discussed seems slightly odd — Philip Larkin, Charles Tomlinson, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Douglas Dunn, Tom Paulin and Paul Mills. If the book is to examine "major poets," then what are Paul Mills and Tom Paulin doing there? And can Sylvia Plath be genuinely considered British? Where are the Scots poets, apart from the well-Anglicized Douglas Dunn? Where are R. S. Thomas, Donald Davie, Geoffrey Hill, Brian Patten, Derek Mahon, Peter Porter, the Fullers, D. J. Enright, Kathleen Raine? Etc. Etc. From this quick glance, I was prepared to condemn this book roundly and argue strenuously with Mr. King about his premises and choices. However, he is a slippery customer and the short preface is a marvellous and courageous piece of disarming self-justification. One cannot help but smile at the way the author nimbly sidesteps initial critical obstacles, like mine, which he is well aware will be placed in his path.

Firstly, he includes "only those whose literary reputation has been established since 1960," (a little late for Larkin and Hughes, I would have thought), and those who published their first collections since 1945. This, he argues, is justification for excluding "poets like Dylan Thomas and Edwin Muir whose work was first published before 1945, although some of their important poems appeared after that date." (I would suggest that many or even most of their important poems did.) Secondly, he includes only those who "published first with English publishers" — a very sneaky way to justify the inclusion of Sylvia Plath and perhaps the exclusion of some Scots and Welsh poets. Further, Mr. King quite charmingly adds two more principles of selection which are clearly designed to spike critical guns. He has only selected poets "who seem to me to have appealed to a fairly wide reading public and whose work is, to some extent, appreciated by sixth-formers." This allows him, he claims, to omit a major poet such as Geoffrey Hill, "because of the allusive and complex nature of his poems." But then, in case he hasn't covered all the bases, he confesses, quite openly, that he has only chosen poets he likes, or, in his words, "about whom I have something to say. Negative criticism seems to me to be a trivial occupa-

tion." This argument is used to explain the exclusion of the "so called pop-poets (such as Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten) who enjoy a wide readership." Then, as if all those somewhat confusing disclaimers were not enough, he makes the defiant, irascible, and, admittedly, superbly refreshing comment that "This is not a scholarly academic work and makes no pretence of originality."

All well and good. Honest, open justification for writing the book he wants to write and damn the torpedoes. But questions remain. The book is clearly designed for British sixth-form and first-year undergraduate levels, yet it contains a chapter on Charles Tomlinson, who is not an easy poet if we consider the complex transatlantic influences in his work, and nothing on the much more accessible and widely read R. S. Thomas. Twenty-three pages are taken up with statements and an interview with Mills, Paulin and Dunn, even though the first two are certainly not "widely read," and whose comments on their own work seem premature in a book of this nature. Dunn might have had a short chapter to himself, especially as his remarks on the use of traditional and free forms make fascinating reading, but again not at the expense of Davie, Porter, Hill, Thomas, etc., etc. Why nothing at all on the "pop-poets," even though Mr. Hill, with some justification perhaps, does not like them, when they are so widely used in sixth-form teaching? But, above all, why no introductory chapter surveying the development of British poetry from 1960 to the present, pointing out trends, approaches to form and language, poetic stances towards private and public experience in a restless, troubled and declining nation? Such a chapter would have been of great help to the sixth-formers Mr. King wants to help by providing a context for the individual essays. Certainly this book is highly personal in choice of material, and, for all its disclaimers, questionable in its choices.

However, having said all this, I must confess to a liking for Mr. King and his book. The author is a solid, no-nonsense critic, whose greatest strength is to synthesize critical opinion and present it, with his additions, in a genial and robust manner. Usually his judgments are sound, his treatment orthodox (and free from trendiness) without being uninteresting, his analysis of individual poems valuable, if not spectacular or innovative. The book is an introduction, but one which will give added insights to those who are familiar with the literature.

His typical method is to concentrate on one or two aspects of a poet's work, use a few examples and lead to a general critical evaluation. He is more comfortable with some poets (Larkin, Plath, Hughes) than with others (Tomlinson, Gunn, Heaney), but there

are good things about all. As an example, consider his summary of Tomlinson's sense of man's relationship with place and time:

> In his poems concerned with history Tomlinson demands the same humility before the facts of time, a realization of the consequences of all our arts, that he called for in considering man's relationship with place. Both demands are consequent upon his belief in the need to accept the realities of what is outside man and to try to capture their exact forms without covering them with the secretion of our own precious essence.

Mr. King brings only part of Tomlinson's work to critical scrutiny, but what he does examine allows us entry into the poet's often difficult world through new doors and into rooms filled with more light than usual.

When asked how he would feel if a critic construed a poem of his in a way he didn't mean it, Philip Larkin replied: "I should think he was talking balls." Mr. King is safe from the castigation of Larkin's testicular thoughts as his treatment of the poet is safe, efficient, loving and quite comprehensive. What he fails to discuss are the poet's humour — a significant aspect of his work — and his direct social commentary, such as we find most clearly in "Going, Going." This chapter deals proficiently with the well-mulled themes of time, deception, love, death. Without exploring Larkin's craftsmanship, he demonstrates shrewdly his general methods and tackles head on the question of whether Larkin's poems can, and should, depress us with their bleak apprehensions of time's cruelty and their sudden violent urges towards nothingness, towards the denial of consolation. "Church Going" is particularly well handled, as Mr. King examines the unresolved tensions between scepticism and the desire to believe.

Seamus Heaney is defended against the change that he is merely a descriptive poet. The problem here is that Mr. King sets up a straw man. No critic of note has seriously proposed that Heaney is simply descriptive and the chapter suffers because of the author's over-vigorous attempts to clear the poet of unlaid charges. *Field Work* was published too late to be included in this discussion, which is a pity, because Heaney is treated with less depth than some of the other poets in this book and his latest collection might have forced more vigorous criticism and certainly something beyond the quiet appreciation he is accorded here. Heaney's importance is by now obvious, but downplayed, I feel, by this somewhat disappointing chapter.

The analysis of Plath's volume *The Colossus* proves to be the strength of Mr. King's discussion of her work. A careful and responsive study, this shows the often neglected collection as much more than choked, repressed, academic juvenilia. The important poems from *Ariel* are also well treated, showing how the fear of relation-

ships is central to their impulse, but there is nothing here on *Winter Trees* or *Crossing the Water*, which disappoints.

Ted Hughes, in his more recent primitivist shamanistic work, is a very difficult poet. He has moved from the apparently simple excitements of *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* to poetry which draws its references from many obscure sources, including Eastern religion, folk-lore, anthropology, European literature, "to explore in symbolic terms the divided nature of modern man's soul and the need to reconcile the inner and outer lives of man. . . . " Mr. King tries very hard to provide simple and sensible commentary on *Crow* and *Gaudete*, and, on the whole, does quite well. Some previously unpublished remarks by Hughes will help the puzzled reader of *Crow*, and the "provisional" treatment of *Gaudette* is by no means simplistic. Without the benefit of Ekbert Faas's interview with Hughes about *Gaudete*, (see *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*) he comes to the interesting conclusion that "Here Hughes seems to be creating his own myth (or reinterpreting a forgotten one) and exploring a way of combating the Crow-experience." Hughes is on a lonely path, trying to create "a body of poetic myths that will stand for our unique late twentieth-century experience," and is certainly the powerful and exciting poet Mr. King claims him to be, however far he is moving away from many of the readers of his early work.

The Thom Gunn chapter is perhaps the weakest here. What is said is accurate enough — the obsession with posing, the tough-guy image, the wrestling with new forms — but there is a lack of depth and resonance, a diminishment of freshness and vitality, as if the chapter had been written out of duty more than from real response. The flimsy summary perhaps testifies to this: "Gunn's poetry is the account of an existential quest, a pursuit of a sense of personal identity and meaning in a world where the traditional supports for life's meaning are being questioned." It is to be hoped that those sixth-formers will not emulate such tired clichés which point to a lack of real engagement between critic and text.

The central problem with this good introductory study is that the author never pulls his thoughts together. British poetry since the war has been a fascinating battleground for civilities and barbarities, retrenchments and attempts to shake free from gentility and meekness. A discussion of these tensions might well have been incorporated into this book. We can forgive, up to a point, the author's slightly eccentric and annoying choice of material, but the lack of context seriously weakens the usefulness of the individual essays. So, in passing, do the occasional misprints in quoted poems. "Fissure crutch" instead of "a fissured crotch" just will not do. But, all in all, this is a sensible and useful book in spite of its problems. It is

not criticism in depth, nor was it meant to be, but a strong, competent overview, well documented, of some recent poets. If it lacks profundity, it covers much ground in limited space. I recommend it, with the regretful knowledge that it might have been better. It is hard to dislike the work of a critic who demonstrates so strongly his response to poetry and individual poems and wants very much to share that with his readers.

CHRISTOPHER WISEMAN

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