

disagree with . . . But I do worry about printing what I dont [sic] understand'" (505-06).

Nor is Carpenter afraid to offer his own interpretations of some of Pound's most difficult poems. Nor should he be afraid, as his critical summaries show that he is familiar with contemporary criticism of Pound. Only in a few rare moments does Carpenter seem to follow the crowd and praise Pound for making his poems almost totally incomprehensible. In describing one of the "Pisan Cantos," Canto LXXIX, he says that the fragments of the poem "ha[ve] few discernible meanings (though some are attractive enough in themselves)." What attracts the bewildered author is left to the reader to ponder.

Pound is certainly an influential figure in our age. Many of his correspondents, including T. S. Eliot, unconsciously adopted a Poundian tone, vocabulary, and spelling in their correspondence with Pound. Some scholars, after studying Pound's ideogrammic method, which came to mean juxtaposing random materials without bothering to supply connections, began themselves to write ideogrammically. (Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, for example, though a book of value, reads like an ideogram). But as much as I, a native of mainland China, like ideograms, we can all be glad that Carpenter was not taken in by Pound on that one, and did not write this biography in ideograms. Even delicious obscurity should have its limits.

FAN SHEN

Mary Bittner Wiseman. *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. pp. xvii, 204. \$51.95; \$18.50 pb.

This book belongs to a monograph series on critics of the twentieth century, edited by Christopher Norris. Mary Bittner Wiseman ably fulfils the interdisciplinary objectives of the series by treating Barthes's *oeuvre* as a philosophical project rather than as literary criticism, although Barthes's work is best known within the narrow boundaries of university departments of literature. She attempts a larger assessment of Barthes's contribution to twentieth-century thought within the contexts of the contemporary French reception of Hegel and Sartre, the historical concept of modernism, and human subjectivity.

Even so, a certain amount of technical exposition of semiology and structural linguistics is unavoidable in her book, since Barthes bases his larger philosophical claims on an analysis of Saussurean theories of the sign. For Barthes, as well as for many other literary intellectuals, modern linguistics and semiotics lead to a basic philosophical shift from an expressionist vocabulary, which views literary style as an act of personal commitment as in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), to a critical discourse that participates directly in figurative playfulness

and textual decoding, as in *S/Z* (1970) or *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). Figurative language and semiotics indicate a transformation of human expression common to all contemporary intellectual discourses. Wiseman does not dwell on linguistic theory *per se*. She rightly indicates that Barthes's writing has little or no scientific importance; he makes no substantial contribution to linguistics or for that matter to academic scholarship on Racine or Japanese culture in some of his other books. She aptly puts Barthes's position thus: "The [semiotic] rules of language govern not only phonemes, words, and their syntactical combinations; the whole stratum of discourse is subject to 'rules, constraints, oppressions, regressions', including all those passions and actions, states of mind and patterns of behaviour, out of which active language is made" (57). So from the outset, the semiotic/textual project concerns itself with deep revisions in our central concepts of autonomy, agency, and eros. It is indeed a bold philosophical project, which cannot be about "play" or the "sign" in any trivial sense of these words. It is not Wiseman's responsibility to justify Barthes's writings on the plane of high philosophy. That would have been Barthes's own responsibility. Wiseman, however, finds unusual opportunity within the narrow confines of a critical monograph by showing the best case that can be made for reading Barthes philosophically. Along the way, she also manages to add quietly some of her own original commentary on modern art and architecture, specifically a rich discussion of a controversial exhibition on primitivism held at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1984. She thereby acknowledges the active influence of Barthes in shaping her own views of modernity.

Wiseman gets down to philosophical matters very quickly by focusing her survey of Barthes's work on three related definitions of freedom that Barthes himself developed: literary form as a challenge to "language's power of subjection"; textual interpretation as a creative action that amounts to a speaking subject claiming her own place in social discourse; writing, in its material aspect, as a utopian project that surpasses humanism and the depersonalization of structuralism by recasting human identity as a pattern of material traces, a somewhat weird blending of photographic and genetic imprinting, as in a late work of Barthes like *Camera Lucida* (1982). I am not aware of any other attempt to link Barthes's work to a systematic investigation of autonomy. In fact, Wiseman distances herself from other commentators on Barthes, such as Culler, Lavers, Thody, and Ungar, through her direct concern with Barthes's effort to "redraw the conceptual boundaries" of the speaking subject. As I have said, her book wants to make the best case for Barthes. Well, then, where does that leave Barthes today?

I believe that Wiseman's philosophical approach succeeds in show-

ing open-minded readers that Barthes's apparently literary themes like textuality, figurative expression, the discourse of lovers, and autobiographical narrative, deserve serious consideration within the larger context of debates about identity, social oppression, the whole cultural sphere of meaning production. Too often, big questions about the value and function of literature and the arts are put in apologetic terms, as if they refer to or reflect "real" historical events without being given an actual role in shaping these events themselves. Literature and the arts and literary criticism, no matter how sophisticated, are disarmed from the outset as somehow of less real worth than socio-economic world historical events. Or else, they draw their intellectual substance from already accepted explanations of human action in neighbouring disciplines. Wiseman's approach is strong and non-apologetic; it is sustained indirectly from analogous projects in the world of English-speaking philosophy. In the work of Cavell, Rorty, Taylor, and earlier in Oakeshott, literary language becomes a form of life, a way of enacting institutional norms, or attuning our knowledge of each other, or creatively redescribing the contingency of the self. Feminist theory's attack on essentialism and monism is another major source of support for the project Wiseman outlines in Barthes.

But making the best case for Barthes does not prevent Barthes's readers from posing further questions. Throughout this difficult book, I was struck by the stark contrast between literature as liberation and literature as enslavement. The repetition of this theme seems at times to absorb and stunt some of the most complex transitions in Barthes's thinking. Must literature work so hard against the inherent oppressiveness of society that words in their stark singularity are forced to stand apart from their social context (27)? Is the algebraic movement of the signifier the achievement of pure freedom (32)? Is it really possible to drop all self-examination in the name of some infinite plurality of speaking voices (135)? Wiseman's analysis of Barthes's writing reveals the seriousness of his literary playfulness but also a quixotic tendency to tilt against spectres of entrapment.

GARY WIHL

Susheila Nasta, comp. and ed. *Critical Perspectives on Sam Selvon*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1988. pp. 285. \$25.00; \$15.00 pb.

Bringing together a variety of materials — articles, reviews, interviews, radio transcripts, and even pieces by Selvon himself — Susheila Nasta attempts to bring some order to the wide-ranging (and often contradictory) critical response evoked by Sam Selvon's writing during a literary career that spans some thirty years. Not content with