Continuities, Echoes and Associations

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Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction, by Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989. 213 pp. $39.95.

Promising to explore "how the experience of political and historical events has shaped the novelist's perspective," *Reminiscence and Re-Creation* traces a continuity that connects the decline of the Old Left, the period of reassessment in the 50s exemplified in the work of Norman Mailer, and the pivot into postmodern openness present in the writings of Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. So we have four chapters: one on the special attraction of Marxism to a culture immersed in Puritan millennialism, then single chapters on Mailer, Pynchon and Barth. Together, Olster argues, these three writers inscribe an arc from the misbegotten millennialism of American Marxism to the open-ended affirmation of postmodern fiction.

Evidently Olster wanted to produce something large and encyclopedic like Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad*. (Her bibliography includes sections titled "1500-1800"--that contains Cervantes and Machiavelli as well as Bradford and Winthrop--and "1800-1900.") Like Bercovitch's study, this one attempts to chart a story of American obsessions with roots in the "Puritan Self," but unlike Bercovitch, Olster argues that American postmodern writers have outgrown the reflexive millennialism that has fueled American utopianism and dooms-dayism. In her reading, American writers following Mailer have "transcended negation" and given "personal responsibility a historical directive." Postmodernism's contribution to American representations of "history," Olster concludes, is the view that narrativized history is inevitably subjective, but that without such narratives we have no access to history at all. "Subjective historicism," she says, "is the term that best describes the approach that informs the efforts of these post-modern authors" (139).

This sketch or blueprint is developed most effectively in the first chapter, "A Disruption of Sensibility," in which Olster argues that Communist utopianism appealed to American intellectuals because the future "toward which communism saw history evolving was hardly different in qualities from the New Heavens and Earth with which the first Americans saw history culminating" (19). Olster offers resonant

quotations from essays and speeches that vividly recall this period of our literary history, and so she is able, at the level of discourse, to show the "integration" of Puritan and Marxist vocabularies. "Because the course of America's destiny had always been argued in religious terms in the past--most obviously in the Reformed Christianity that compelled the Puritan mission--writers could suggest the Americanism of Marx's vision by expressing it in familiar religious terminology." This argument is supported with compelling reference to the discourse of Michael Gold and James T. Farrell, among others.

Olster then argues that this parallel fell apart with the decline of American radicalism in the 40s. Partially under the pressure of anti-Communism, the millennial point of view reached its own self-evident and destructive conclusions, and writers found it difficult to imagine the future. In Mailer's work, however, Olster argues, this temporary suspension during the 50s was an incubation period which produced a redefinition of historical possibility. Because the postmodernism of Pynchon and Barth--whose perspectives on "history" are open-ended, non-millennial but affirmative--emphasizes "the idea of the historical process itself," their work shows that "history holds out the prospect of hope for post-modern writers" (144).

This blueprint is not a particularly new way of figuring postwar literary history, for its basic lineaments reinscribe the stories told by Jerome Klinkowitz, Morris Dickstein, Ihab Hassan and others; nor does it successfully integrate history and fiction, in part because Olster isn't sure what she means by "history." In her preface, Olster promises that she aims to pursue "an integration of American literature and American history" (x), but the book fails to provide either a sustained contextual argument which would demonstrate the causal relation between contemporary writers' perspectives and contemporary history, or an intertextual argument which would demonstrate contemporary writers' perspectives (toward or about history) to be expressions of contemporary historical discourse. What she provides instead is the relation between literature and literary ideas of American eschatology--a far different and more familiar subject.

The term "history" and the act of writing history have been transformed under the poststructuralist pressures of Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and Clifford Geertz, to name but three prominent theorists who have questioned the methodological assumptions of narrative claims to objectivity--whether in literature, history or anthropology. Further, these thinkers have not simply dismissed such claims as "subjective," but have suggested differing and specific views of what we can mean by "history" and how one might write it. The influence of Foucault's "archaeology" and Geertz's "thick reading," for

example, informs much of the new historicist scholarship upon which Olster could have drawn.

Although this questioning of "history" and "narrative" has been one of the central developments in literary criticism of the past fifteen years, even a contextual study of American writing since the Second World War would be welcome--one that situated recent writers more fully in the events of their time. Olster does inject a number of interesting facts into this account, as when she cites the history of United States funding of the Indochinese war from 1950 on in her discussion of Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Armies of the Night*. Though important, this reminder is arbitrarily dropped into Olster's discussion, like a leaflet from History infiltrating the conservancy of literature. Olster apparently hasn't thought much about what it might or should mean to "integrate" literature and history. Does literature *refer to* "history" as if writers stood outside history? Is literature *constituted by* "history"? Just *how* are art and social history connected, and how may that connection be demonstrated?

Failing to consider such questions sufficiently, Olster's book too often reproduces the terms in which the writers of this period have represented themselves. We get thematic paraphrase rather than interpretation. For example, Olster accepts Mailer's use of "ambiguity" as a critical term signifying Mailer's difference from an exhausted liberalism. Early in her chapter on Mailer, she cites his desire "to discover ourselves by an exploration through our ambiguity"; and at the beginning of the Pynchon chapter: "Experiment was conceived to protect the scientific artist from ambiguity" (73). In drawing upon such quotations, Olster sets up "ambiguity" as an adversarial term--a concept that contributes a new progressive wrinkle to the stalemate of postwar technological culture. Of course, this is how Mailer himself presents "ambiguity," but Olster does not question him. Instead she uses the term as a bridge to Pynchon and a new postmodern dispensation: "the basic structure that underlies Pynchon's fiction restores an unavoidable ambiguity to both scientific and aesthetic thought" (73).

But "ambiguity" is neither adversarial nor progressive. As Alexander Bloom, Gene Wise, Russell Reising, Mark Walhout, Alan Wald, Donald Pease--none of whom is listed in Olster's bibliographies--and others have shown, "ambiguity" was a central term in the discursive system of a conservative postwar criticism. The term is not Mailer's, nor can it be a token of Mailer's critical distance from the culture which made that term a descriptive key to human nature, historical process, and perfectly made poems. Similarly, the critical terminology of the "ambiguity" and "ideas of order" that have been

ascribed to Pynchon's work arose from that same milieu: the cultural discourse of conservative Modernism and Cold War hostility to ideology.

Even for those students of Pynchon who have no interest in theorizing the relations of art and social history, Olster's chapter on Pynchon offers little new. Olster makes brief mention of Pynchon's 50s background, but quickly moves on to what is more properly eschatology, the study of ends, comparing Pynchon's balancing of "sacred history" with an "entropic theory of history" (91). Olster must be the fortieth or fiftieth Pynchon scholar to trot out the relation between Pynchon's paranoia and Puritan reflexes. She concludes this chapter with the now familiar view that "Pynchon restores a life of ambiguity" (105).

While this study will satisfy few readers as literary history and contributes little to the ongoing definition of postmodernism, the nooks and crannies, the by-ways of this book, have much to recommend them. Olster's readings of passages from *The Naked and the Dead* are illuminating, and the chapter on Barth provides an extended and instructive analysis of *Letters*. Further, her ambition to situate recent literary history within the full arc of the American procession allows Olster to include lots of stimulating echoes and parallels, such as Joel Barlow's prophecy that "the spirit of commerce" would open "an amicable intercourse between all countries" (78). Olster demonstrates an admirable familiarity with high, low, and middle culture alike, citing as evidence of exhaustion in the 40s not only the standard examples but also Norman Cousins' *Saturday Review* editorial "Modern Man Is Obsolete" (41). While her use of this material is a bit wild--Daniel Defoe and D. H. Lawrence and Jonathan Schell all appear within paragraphs of one another--the continuities, echoes and associations Olster establishes have great variety, and recover quotations, themes and figures which are new or often forgotten and which will help subsequent students of this period fashion their own narratives about the fiction of our time.

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