John Donne Journal
Vol. 4, No. 2 (1985)

Cultivation in the Wilderness: A Review Essay

Linda Palumbo

Albright, Daniel. *Lyricality in English Literature*. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1985.

Sacks, Peter M. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985.

Sale, Roger. *Literary Inheritance*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

The three books under review are part of a larger effort to find a way to perform text-centered criticism by combining the resources of traditional scholarship and contemporary theory. None of these authors is interested in overturning the canon, literary or theoretical, but all three take seriously the critiques scholars and theorists have been offering each other in recent years. Roger Sale suggests a way to write literary history without narrow periodization or comfortable doctrines of influence, on the one hand, and without anti-intuitive obscurantism, on the other. Daniel Albright engages in a genre-study which crosses traditional boundaries of genre, organizing poetry, fiction, and even film according to anti-mimetic impulses. Like Sale, Peter N. Sacks is interested in literary history; and, like Albright, Sacks is interested in genre-study which moves beyond mere description of devices. He combines Freudian mythopoeic analysis (refined by such theorists as Lacan and Kohut) with modern scholarship on the derivation and history of the English elegy. All three authors spend much time on close readings designed to elucidate theory as well as to understand particular texts. These readings inevitably display the merits of and problems with the methods at hand.

Like the heirs who are the subject of *Literary Inheritance*, critics write in the face of loss, Sale argues: "Insofar as literary theory attempts ahistorical formulations, literary history must resist theory; we can make the past present in some way only if we acknowledge the many ways in

which it remains past, lost" (p. 2). He seeks to replace T. S. Eliot's view of literary history as composed of "existing monuments" with a more Freudian emphasis on discontinuity, loss, and compensation. The sons, heirs, articulate themselves through and against the interposing systems of language presented by the previous generation of fathers. Sale begins his history with the seventeenth century, when, he states, the issue of inheritance became self-conscious for the first time. Sale departs from Freud (and from such theorists as Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom) in believing that this process need not involve a crisis in which identification shifts. Carew's inheritance was "enabled": he could "compose" Jonson and Donne as Samuel Johnson could not compose Pope (although he thought he could) and as Shelley and Keats knew they could not compose Wordsworth. The chapters on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries are followed by a discussion of James's anxious relationship to George Eliot and a speculative last chapter on the way in which history looms more largely over contemporary writers than any individual precursor does.

What Sale means by "compose" is not always clear. Sometimes it means to recapture and sometimes to understand essential characteristics. Carew could, as an act of will, write just like a precursor, according to Sale's close reading. Johnson could not understand Pope's true greatness. Shelley's "Peter Bell the Third" displays a true understanding of the shape of Wordsworth's career. What it is to be Donne or Jonson or Pope or Wordsworth is immutable and tied to a quality of greatness Sale treats as if it were a theorem he could codify once and for all. The historical sophistication Sale brings to his abstract discussions of inheritance is impeded by this priestly intervention. Sale is kinder to poets than to poems, which he will not credit with having a career worth respectful attention. That Pope's poetic greatness could be as historically specific as the political significance of his grotto does not occur to Sale, whose close reading may demonstrate Johnson's "flatness" compared to Pope's exuberance without convincingly demonstrating that such flatness represents a failed effort to compose Pope. However, when unhampered by assumptions of transcendent value, Sale's analysis is complex and richly suggestive. In his *Dictionary* Johnson did face the task of composing Pope: Johnson bequeathed definitions of Pope's words which Sale shows to have been sometimes partial or unjust; Johnson chose to quote many lines from Pope, paying a tribute which Sale shows to have been sometimes critical (Sale beautifully "reads" a selection of quotations as if they were stanzas organized, as they no doubt were, to make a moral-aesthetic statement) and sometimes cut off so as render Pope's usage confusing.

But Sale is less interested in particular inheritances than in the general processes by which inheritance takes place. Here, too, he is both enlightening and frustrating. Problematical is his notion that until the Renaissance inheritance was a matter of a present author looking at a timeless past or at predecessors who could be worked easily into past patterns. Sophocles did not simply inherit the method of Aeschylus—in many ways Sophocles reacted against it. Because Dante pays tribute to Virgil's language, are we to conclude that Dante faced the workings of Virgil's imagination with none of the ambivalence Shelley reveals in facing Wordsworth? It is not the purpose of the present discussion to argue with Sale over ground he has not chosen to cover, much as one might wish for more from him on earlier writers. Still, Sale is sometimes overly simplistic regarding the inheritance of writers he does discuss, particularly the generations of fathers. It is not true, for example, that Wordsworth inherits "almost nothing" (p. 108) or that he ignores Pope, Johnson, and Gray (p. 128). Wordsworth may assert that his relationship to language is natural rather than literary, but we do not have to believe him. How does he define his language except as one literary standard taking priority over another? As for Wordsworth's forebears, the innovative techniques of the poetry should not render invalid the direct engagement with inheritance Wordsworth expresses in the prose or the subtle infusions of such engagement in the verse. Reacting in the "Essays on Epitaphs" against modes of characterization favored by Pope and Johnson, Wordsworth indirectly involves those modes in a dramatic interplay with his own technique in *The Excursion*, published with the essays.

When discussing Shelley and Keats on Wordsworth, Sale is more alive to repression and indirection. This dark side of inheritance, where it depicts not just disjunction but disabling disjunction, occurs when one inherits not a way of seeing a world we all share (enabled inheritance) but a way of being oneself that is tied to that individual self. For Sale, Wordsworth's important contribution to the history of inheritance was in showing that the child is father to the man. This way of being one's own heir changed literary history in three related ways: it meant that literary biography would have to account for the shape of a writer's career; it bequeathed to the novel an expansion and sophistication of psychological realism Sale explores in detailed discussion of Dickens, Eliot, and James; it generated a craving after originality among writers, a sense of struggle of new against old. In his conclusion Sale suggests that modern writers have found a way out of this disabling pattern, a liberating and eclectic use of history. Sale believes that critics can be liberated as well, by becoming historians ourselves now that traditions are in flux.

Sale the historian is interested in joining as much as distinguishing boundaries, investigating communities of readers and writers over time. His idea that inheritance can be enabling, not merely crippling, provides a useful tempering of modern critical enthusiasms, even if he is occasionally insensitive to the conversion of felt disability to a different kind of strength or the masking of crisis with a tone of confidence. His ability to think generationally and to cross genres grounds his readings in history while freeing his history from obvious narrative structures.

In *Lyricality in English Literature*, Albright grounds his readings not in history but in features of the lyric mode which operate across history; he consciously places selections (usually extracts) from authors separated by time and interest together to demonstrate this very point about lyricality. Like W. R. Johnson, Albright believes that lyricality is the most stable of all generic impulses. Like John Hollander, Albright associates the lyric with musical patterns. For Albright, the musical qualities of literature are tied not just to patterns of sound but to patterns of meaning, which can function as sound when their internal relations take priority over their denotative function. This need for priority makes the lyric a mode which cannot exist except in contrast to another form of discourse. Albright whimsically calls this other, referential, discourse the mode of Prospero, who is the governing principle in such a poem as "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Lyricality is antimimetic and sometimes operates in the mode of Ariel, the movement toward striking, unearthly perfection (bones turned to coral, eyes to pearls), and sometimes in the mode of Proteus, the transformative refusal of all stability. Albright sees in lyricality the meeting of opposites registered (but not worked into a general theory) by T. S. Eliot: temporality and atemporality create an anthology of standing nows; the personal becomes transcendently impersonal; absolute structure is poised on the edge of amorphousness; agitation and anesthesia leave the lyric hovering between expression and inexpressiveness.

The lyric mode, then, is literature at its most exclusively literary, its least mimetic and least referential. Albright could do more to clarify the specific characteristics of anti-mimesis and anti-referentiality, gestures he usually treats as one. The argument de Man makes in "Forms of Lyric" that there is never *no* referentiality is not fully addressed by Albright. If formal logic is just a game in the lyrics of Donne (for whom, Albright says, x can equal y for any x and any y), why can we not regard the resounding moral reinforcements of "The Vanity of Human Wishes" as equally lyrical? Why can Albright dismiss the moral with Marvell (p. 251) and not with Johnson? It is not a matter of taste, not insufficient melodiousness (the flatness Sale discusses), but types and degrees of referentiality, which Albright sometimes recognizes and sometimes does not.

Although he states that lyricality can exist only in relation to nonlyrical discourse, he sometimes slips into reliance on his extracts as if they contain immutable properties of lyricality simply by virtue of the subject they treat, such as that of the bard, or by virtue of the feeling Albright gets when he reads the selection. Sometimes Albright may go too far in refusing to look at devices. However, Albright is usually careful and convincing in discerning how tropes are more or less referential, especially when he is historically sensitive, as in his discussion of the sublime. And his readings, juxtaposing unexpected texts as they so often do, are invariably fresh and engaging. Making a transhistorical argument about lyricality, Albright may be right to be flexible about what constitutes an anti-mimetic impulse. Wishing that he were more often self-conscious about his process is only to wish that he would do more of what he already does well.

Albright's chapters are organized thematically, which allows him to range freely over periods and (traditionally understood) genres. Thus Joyce and Addison can appear on one page, Fellini and Swift on another. Albright frames general discussions of lyricality, "Lyricality as a Mode" and "Music and Metaphor," with chapters on "The Bard," "Natura Lyrica," and "Lyrical Society." A discussion of lyrical ethics, which one might expect to appear in "Lyrical Society," appears instead in "The Bard." Albright's reasoning is clear: the lyrical seems to provide no ethical guidance but does, just as the bard is both apart from and in culture. The ethic of the lyric is the ethic of the bard, who teaches by means of wonder and unearthly transformations. Women are discussed as a division of lyrical society. All the artists in this section are men; Albright makes no effort to locate women writers in lyrical society, although elsewhere the book contains a sprinkling of brief references to women writers. There is no category for lyric men. In lyric society women are loved objects who mirror (always male) the writers' poetic impulses. To the extent that the mode is lyrical the women are deprived of individuality, at best taking their place, as does the mistress of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, among a panoply of literary conventions. As Albright says, "zero and infinity are always intimate with each other" (p. 218). Albright's one-sided treatment of women in lyrical society results not simply from his submission to historical prejudice against women writers but also from his lack of interest in history. An understanding of lyrical society one could call historical would have to grant attention to women writers, at least to contemporary women writers, if the issue of gender were raised at all. To Albright lyrical society does not operate historically; but his own role of Prospero binds him to history. Ironically,

when he avoids history Albright can be more victimized by his priorities than he is when he faces it.

Albright does not disguise his antipathy to historical articulation. Comparing Proteus and Ariel, he writes that "Proteus is for the purposes of this discussion a low avatar of Ariel, an Ariel slumming in the material world, helplessly mired in it and struggling to escape" (p. 47). The goal interests Albright more than the origin, the view of success more than the prospect of struggle. He recognizes, as Shelley did, that lyricality (Shelley's "poetic language") erodes into ordinary knowledge, but Albright is not interested in the processes by which this transition occurs, either across generations or among contemporaries. It is not fair to treat the word "Fancy" or the role of the bard as if they were the same for Dryden, Collins, and Blake. Ostensibly charting "The Death of Fancy" and then its "rebirth," the most extended historical gesture in the book, Albright provides little more than a set of meditative close readings which would benefit from historical refinement. But if Albright's method occasionally weakens him, it more often strengthens him. His erudition and daring act together to make sense of a genre which has always defied lucid critical discussion. Picking up the suggestion by Longinus that the contemplator of the sublime feels he has created what he contemplates, Albright can unite radically Romantic discussions of the sublime (as a property of mind) with the traditional sublime encounter between mind and nature. Albright offers a corrective to the kind of historical analysis the lyrical mode has always resisted. He gives us a place to start reinstating history.

Like Paul Fry writing on the ode, Albright and Sacks see writing in a genre as the way in which poets explore what it is to be a poet. The elegy differs from the lyric in having a clear history and set of conventions, so Sacks's task is not to describe the genre but to interpret it. He sees in the movement from loss to consolation a repetition of the child's Oedipal resolution, in which the entry to the symbolic emerges from an originating sense of loss: death stands between the subject and a prior love object, desire for which must be deflected into a trope. Thus consolation reworks the reluctant submission to language itself when the mourner accepts not just a particular substitution but the principle of substitution. Sacks draws on Freud's distinction between the mourner, who successfully moves through these stages of resignification, and the melancholic, who cannot accommodate loss. Such conventions as pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity, repetitions and refrains, contests, the temporary indulgence in anger, the procession of mourners, and images of resurrection perform this work of mourning or fail to perform it depending on their use by individual writers in specific

times and places. Sacks traces the cultural origins of this process to the Greek *aulos* and Ovidian myth. Apollo, for example, had to convert grief over lost Daphne into the consolation of the laurel wreath, sign of poethood. In tying figuration to loss, Sacks draws on biographical and historical detail to elucidate individual texts and larger literary movements. By regarding the intertwining of emotion and rhetoric as both an event and a structure, Sacks hopes to account for subjectivity without sentimentalizing it or remystifying language (p. xii). The working through of this interpenetration is one of his great achievements in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats.*

Sacks sees the self as paradoxically interactive and developmental, as Sale wants to see it but often cannot because of his monolithic attributions of value. A case in point is Percy Shelley. For Sale, the belatedness of Shelley and of Keats is like a physical deformity: it is a thing which makes their poetry inferior to that of Robert Frost. Pointing to a sense of belatedness by close reading of the poetry, Sale points as to an object. For Sacks, on the other hand, Shelley's narcissistic composing of Keats in "Adonais" is an action. Mourning and melancholia struggle for primacy as Shelley does indeed "compose" Keats, creating a character of Keats largely in Shelley's own image. The ambiguous ending of the poem, in which Shelley seems to make a literal rather than a figurative identification with the consolatory image, brings the genre to the brink of its own ruin (p. 165); but the issue of the poem's humanistic value is irrelevant. Freudian and rhetorical analysis join in Sacks's reading of the poem and placement of it in literary history. The mourner must detach libido from the lost object and reattach libido to a new object outside the self; the melancholic either refuses to detach or detaches only to move inward. Connective tropes of metonymy or synechdoche, as in Urania's inability to turn from the dead poet, enact melancholia. Shelley works through this moment on his way to composing Keats and himself.

After an initial chapter in which he discusses the derivation of the genre, Sacks focuses mainly on individual authors arranged by periods: Spenser; Kyd and Shakespeare; Milton; Jonson, Dryden, and Gray; Shelley; Tennyson; Swinburne; Hardy; and Yeats. In an epilogue he examines the English elegy after Yeats and looks briefly at the American elegy. Some of his choices may seem idiosyncratic, both because of traditional elegies that are left out and because of unexpected appearances. Johnson's "On the Death of Robert Levet" is passed over in favor of Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," hardly an elegy at all, despite Sacks's bold and insightful analysis of Gray's not wanting to be a mute inglorious Milton himself. But Sacks is interested in the elegiac, not just in elegies; in melancholia, not just in mourning. The most surprising

choice is that of the revenge tragedies. The chapter on Kyd and Shakespeare discusses *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Hamlet*, all written during a period when the traditional elegy was on the decline. Sacks argues that these plays (except *Hamlet*, which resolves the problem) fail to accomplish the work of mourning by remaining in the angry, vengeful stage—a part of every elegy. Sacks explains this turn in literary history by appealing to Renaissance skepticism over the efficacy and reliability of justice, heavenly and earthly. Through revenge, "the violence suffered is returned, paid back; the griever has shifted the burden of loss and anger to another bearer, thus, by some strange arithmetical tally, canceling out his sense of violation and passivity" (p. 67). Sacks connects this motif to Durkheim's observance of tribal funerary practices, where a ritual of revenge often occurs. The release of rage in such traditional elegies as "Lycidas" enact revenge also, as a temporary indulgence beyond which the mourner must progress. Hamlet progresses to belief in the authority of language; Laertes remains mired in melancholy revenge. Sacks provides more than yet another close reading of Hamlet's soliloquies. Rooted in social and literary circumstances, disciplined by explicit methodological rigor, Sacks's readings blend formalism with anthropology, psychoanalysis, and historiography without losing the threads of each system. Even where he is less innovative, as in his chapters on Tennyson and Swinburne, he makes sense of massive existing scholarship, making those chapters among the best single essays available on *In Memoriam* and "Ave Atque Vale."

Sacks is unabashedly selective and text-centered, but his use of history allows him to be adventurous without lapsing into ungrounded speculation. For Sacks history is sociological as well as literary. The twentieth century's erosion of the elegy's consoling power, for example, results as much from the ways in which death has become meaningless (collosal genocide, clinical concealment) as from the tendency of contemporary poetry to subvert traditional poetic goals (p. 29). Sacks is self-conscious about his use of history and its consequences, but he sometimes does not live up to the standards he sets for himself. In a work of this scope he inevitably falls back on truisms, as when he calls Jonson and Dryden "Augustans" (p. 132), a category considered inappropriate by many scholars of the period. However, such lapses, transgressions of tact if not of truth, are rare. *The English Elegy* raises larger problems for writers of literary history and criticism. What, for example, is the role of a selective study in canon-making? How does method promote hegemony? Sacks's unease in these areas reflects the discomfort of the larger critical community, most of whom choose between trying to restructure the canon and trying to make the issue go away. It is to Sacks's credit that

he does neither: while writing mainly on major works by major authors, he recognizes the need to reexamine traditional categories, if only to defend them.

A clear case of Sacks's contribution and unease is in his handling of the troublesome matter of the female elegy. In the first chapter, which serves as a general introduction to the study, Sacks discusses the phallocentrism of his psychoanalytic rubric (pp. 12-17). He argues that the work of mourning, its requirement that the subject accept substitution, is essentially the same for both genders. But the displacement of the father by a male totemic figure is not the same, as Sacks also realizes, involving as it does either a different process of identification or a different (female) totemic figure. Sacks briefly discusses a passage from Emily Bronte's "Remembrance" and promises a detailed discussion of Amy Clampitt's "A Procession at Candlemas" in the Epilogue. This detailed discussion, however, is all of four pages long; and Amy Clampitt receives no lengthy quotations of the kind granted to such regularly anthologized poems as "Lycidas" and "Adonais." The chapter titles, from which Clampitt and all women are excluded, read like a procession of males mourning their power threatened on both sides: framed as it is by short and half-suppressed discussions of the female elegy, Sacks's catalogue of great men seems uneasy in its own role as a participant in literary history and sociology. His analysis of Clampitt seems elliptical and conflicted, as if he has much more to say than he puts in print.

All three of these books are "enabling," to borrow a term from Sale. They demonstrate ways in which formalism, history, and critical theory can respond to each other. All are learned without being ponderous, individual without being merely self-validating, responsive to current trends without being overwhelmed by them. If Geoffrey Hartman is right to suggest that the possibilities of criticism have expanded to include every topic, these writers suggest ways in which such expansion can be organized. All three of our authors are ambitious: Sale wants to make theory responsible to history; Albright wants to organize recalcitrant impulses; Sacks wants to reconcile rhetorical analysis and subjectivity. All three work mostly with familiar primary sources and easily available secondary sources. They do not dig around in special collections; they dig around in ordinary libraries. In that sense they practice literary criticism as literary art. Their sound scholarship and responsible dedication to the needs of the critical community may feed us in the wilderness.

University of Tulsa