The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections by Richard Poirier (review)

Stuart Moulthrop

Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature, Volume 42, Number 4, 1988, pp. 249-250 (Review)

Published by Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association

depth or crescendo effect that do not characterize the book as a whole. As a *published* collection, the book has some major flaws, particularly its lack of internal coherence and the uneven quality of some of the essays.

In their very brief introduction, the editors state that "the literary works studied herein . . . pursue a common goal: an expression of the self through the powers of language" (xi). This might have been a point of departure for a significant "open" feminine dialogue, but the editors withdraw from the process at this point and too many of the papers in the collection seem to be based on the premise that, because a work has been written by a woman, it is inherently significant as a feminine or feminist text. The editors lament that "what the reader will not experience is the stimulating discussion which took place at the end of each session" (xi). Indeed the reader cannot experience this and the editors provide neither compensatory background nor theoretical or thematic integration. A new collection of papers from the 1986-1987 conference is now in preparation. Stimulation of an internal dialogue through more creative juxtaposition of essays and a fuller introduction or a concluding editorial essay would give to this next volume a more fertile intertextual energy and depth.

DEBORAH GAENSBAUER

Regis College

RICHARD POIRIER. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. 256 p.

Among the various "renewals" Richard Poirier undertakes in this provocative study is an attempt to install Ralph Waldo Emerson in the position of centrality from which, Poirier holds, modernist writers and critics have excluded him. Poirier accordingly sets out to read an extensive body of literature (Austen, Wordsworth, George Eliot, the brothers James, T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Pound, Stevens, Frost, Mailer, Pynchon, Foucault) through his own version of Emerson. Without exception these examinations live up to Poirier's stated criterion for excellence in literary thinking: that it is "most successful when it creates still more work, when it leads . . . not only from density into clarification but out of clarification into still other densities" (116).

The chief "density" here belongs to Emerson; and it is this quality, Poirier contends, that makes Emerson "now and always essential." Emerson, as Poirier sees him, is the grand master of "trope," the exercise of distortion and reappropriation writers undertake in order to avoid being at the mercy of a language formulated by their predecessors. The idea of antithetical "troping" is common enough in post-modern and modernist criticism alike, but Poirier is at pains to separate his Emersonianism from both traditions. Emersonian troping is not to be confused with "deconstruction" because the poet's exercise of a self-negating language is both conscious and volitional. At the heart of the Emersonian poetic character is a deliberate will to refigure language and a canny understanding of the negative capability that this entails.

Poirier departs from this position into a critique of modernism, which he accuses of dishonestly attempting to justify its poetic revisionism as a response to unique and apocalyptic historical conditions. Poirier insists that

in the Emersonian view, no generation can make such a claim. *Every* poet attempts to cancel and displace the work of his precursors, and hence every literary movement suffers such treatment, no matter how hard it tries to portray itself as the last hope of civilization. As Emerson put it: "Criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral & easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance" (*Journal*, May 18, 1840).

This proposition leads to Poirier's boldest and most questionable set of speculations: that literature properly entertains, not merely its own disappearance, but the effacement of the human subject. At the start of his final chapter Poirier challenges the reader: "HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO DISAPPEAR?" Genuinely Emersonian writing, he insists, assaults the idea of "mankind" more thoroughly than Nietzsche or Foucault ever dreamed possible. But Poirier repeatedly insists that this "erasure" of mankind does not imply the literal extinction of the species. To misread him in this way is to forget "that writing and reading should be regarded as one kind of experience among many and that for most people a number of other experiences are far more frequent and affecting" (190). Since literature is such a safely unaffecting enterprise, we are not to infer anything as nasty as a genocidal politics from Poirier's transcendental post-humanism.

But a reader who refuses to accept these instructions might assail Poirier's position with the same critique that Terry Eagleton has applied to deconstruction, namely that it represents "a hedonist withdrawal from history, a cult of ambiguity or irresponsible anarchism." Indeed, evidence to support this charge can be found in Poirier's own analysis of the contest between literature and technology. "Literature," Poirier argues, "can show what it is like for People to live under the aegis of media other than Literature. What Henry Adams half suspected in *The Education*, Thomas Pynchon projects as a saturnalia in *Gravity's Rainbow*" (123). Literature can comment upon the horrors of the technological state, and it can also mimic in its own forms the processes of that state, for as Poirier tellingly observes, "[l]anguage itself is a particular form of Technology" (128). In fact, the affinity of language and technology is so strong that literature can become "a form of cultural and imaginative imperialism" (165). Presumably these "imperialist" tendencies are not manifested in properly Emersonian writing; and though Poirier's failure to demonstrate why this should be so raises serious questions about his argument, his study manages nonetheless to "renew" the history of modernism in original and challenging terms.

STUART MOULTHROP

Yale University

KENNETH J. RECKFORD. *Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy*. Vol. 1: *Six Essays in Perspective*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. 567 p.

This is a long book but, to paraphrase (and invert) Dr. Johnson's remark on *Paradise Lost*, no lover of Aristophanes would wish it shorter. Every chapter, every page gives new insights, new delights to the reader, to the specialist no less than to the novice barely familiar even with the titles to the eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes, those only surviving works of