

The Anatomy of Silence

**The Dismemberment of Orpheus:
Toward a Postmodern Literature,**
by Ihab Hassan, *New York: Oxford
University Press, 1971. x + 297 pp.*
\$8.50.

IHAB HASSAN remarked in an essay published in the Winter 1970 *Virginia Quarterly Review*: "Finally, criticism, weighted by its own skepticism, lags still behind the literature of its day." He went on to point out how much critics—especially academic critics—remain tied down to the concepts of organic form and fail utterly to manage any "sense of discontinuity." Hassan has tried very hard in the past few years to come to terms with the critical performance, to make it accommodate the radical changes experienced in the arts. Thus he goes so far as to suggest that criticism "should offer the reader empty spaces, silences, in which he can meet himself in the presence of literature."

In some of his more recent essays Hassan has begun to experiment with a form which he has labeled paracriticism. There is something narrative and dramatic about it as well as didactic. It comes dangerously close to being discontinuous and to rivaling the condition of art. Hassan remarked in the "Prologue" to his 1967 book, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* that the critical act should "endanger itself, as literature does, and . . . testify to our condition." This is what paracriticism is all about. Hassan uses it to superb advantage in his *Virginia Quarterly*

piece (which not only uses the form of discontinuity but also explains its poetics) as well as in his contribution to a volume he recently edited, *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Wesleyan University Press, 1971).

The Dismemberment of Orpheus is written in the spirit of paracriticism but eschews its unorthodox form. Hassan enjoys one stylistic quirk which attracts our attention very early: the curious use of the present tense, especially in offering biographical insights. Thus we are told about Hemingway:

He is born in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, on July 21, 1899. His father is a doctor, a man of the Michigan outdoors, sharper in sight than a bird of prey; he will commit suicide.

The prose seems gently to slip and slide on the page. How different it is from much of the American academic criticism we are accustomed to! As I read Hassan, I am reminded of an impressionistic tradition in French literary criticism which goes back to the poet Baudelaire, carries through Jules Lemaitre and Anatole France (with his famous assumption that criticism is a voyage of the soul among masterpieces), to Jacques Rivière and Charles Du Bos. (Du Bos called his seven-volume collection of essays *Approximations*. Hassan seems content also to give us only approximations; he knows that final statements cannot be made about literary works.)

The Dismemberment of Orpheus studies a literary climate which starts with the Marquis de Sade ("an avant-gardist *manqué*") and carries through Samuel Beckett. Hassan devotes complete chapters to Sade, Hemingway, Kafka, Genet, and Beckett; he offers two lengthy "Interludes," the first of which starts with the 'Pataphysics (the science of nonsense) of Alfred Jarry and makes its way through Surrealism and Dadaism, the second of which considers the Existentialism of Sartre and Camus and the "Aliterature" of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Hassan's

insistent concern is with the "resonances" of silence. He listens in on a literature which tends to distrust its very being and to work toward its own annihilation. Samuel Beckett, the last link in Hassan's genealogical chain, in a series of dialogues published in *Transition forty-nine* devastatingly expressed this despair about writing:

Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road . . . The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.

Beckett's latest novel, *Comment c'est* (translated as *How It Is*), gives, better than any work I know of, this sense of futility about language and yet the urgency of continuing to write, "the obligation to express."

In a remarkable opening chapter called "Prelude: Lyre Without Strings," Ihab Hassan gives us the artistic and critical ambience of his subject. He goes a different—although somewhat parallel—route from the one chosen by Edmund Wilson in his 1931 study *Axel's Castle*. Wilson used as his working metaphor the figure of Axël in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1890 Symbolist drama. Wilson views the whole movement in Symbolist literature as coming out of Axël's suicide pact with Sara, with its famous pronouncement, "Live? our servants will do that for us. . ."¹ Hassan chooses the classical Orpheus for his metaphor and reaches back into the eighteenth century for the beginnings of "the assault by a man of letters on letters." He passes lightly by the nineteenth century on his way to linking Sade with the moderns.²

As well as discussing the backgrounds of his subject in literature and the other arts, Hassan introduces certain of the critical movements which have looked at literature in somewhat the way he views it in

The Dismemberment of Orpheus. He gives particular attention to Americans and Anglo-Americans like John Cage, Norman O. Brown, Susan Sontag, and George Steiner; to the French critics, like Maurice Blanchot, Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski, and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who are linked to the Geneva School or to Structuralism. All of these critics, at one time or other, have acknowledged the importance of silence to the modern literary consciousness.

The chapters on individual writers which follow offer biography and literary history as well as close study of texts. All of them, including the "Interludes," end with some lyric reference to Orpheus. These endings serve as leitmotifs, as poetic refrains. Thus the chapter on Hemingway concludes with this sentence: "Naked, Orpheus enters the great, empty spaces of violence." The chapter on Genet borrows another figure from mythology: "Meanwhile, Orpheus and Narcissus embrace in a black pool." This practice is a way of bringing criticism closer to literature, of allowing it to share its textures and verbal experiences. (Using words like prelude, interlude, and postlude in chapter titles is another way of shortening distances between the two.)

The Dismemberment of Orpheus, except for the chapter on Hemingway and some five pages in the postlude surveying the recent American scene, is a book about European literature. The inclusion of Hemingway in the company of Sade, Breton, Apollinaire, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, Genet, and Beckett might strike one as a bit odd—Hassan is the first to admit this—but the case for his use of an "anti-style" and his addiction to silence is made eloquently and convincingly. Hassan tells us: "Silence is not only a metaphor of Hemingway's work; it is also the source of its formal excellence, its integrity." Other recent critics of Hemingway have indeed begun to see these ingredients in his work. Richard Hovey advised us in his *Hemingway: The Inward Terrain* (1968) to pay special heed to the silences and Richard K. Peterson in *Hemingway Direct and Oblique* (1969) spoke

of "Hemingway's underlying distrust of words." The tendency of late is to see a new sophistication and assurance about craft in Hemingway's work and to place it more squarely in an international context—precisely what Ihab Hassan has done.

Hassan admits to a certain arbitrariness in his selection of writers: "The line that I trace from Sade to Beckett is hypothetical. Other lines can be traced, other authors named." He himself offers a somewhat different lineage in his essay in *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*:

But the tradition of silence is really deeper in reach and wider in scope. It may go back to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Sade's *Justine*, include certain Romantic and Symbolist poets, notably Lautréamont and Rimbaud, who drove language berserk, and erupt finally in the modern avant-garde: 'Pata-physics, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, etc.

Tristram Shandy is never mentioned in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* and Lautréamont and Rimbaud are only mentioned in passing. For Ihab Hassan criticism is open-ended; there is nothing inevitable about it; the best we can hope for are approximations.

The great value of *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* is in the careful and often original assessments of a group of writers who behave quite similarly in working toward a "vanishing form" and toward silence. There is perhaps a deceptive easiness about Hassan's method which makes us think at first that glibness has taken the place of scholarship. It is rather that Hassan wears his scholarship more lightly and ingratiatingly than many of his colleagues. He has read widely and intelligently and has made good—if muted—use of what he needs. His choice of secondary texts is particularly instructive. In the case of Robbe-Grillet, for example, he keeps returning to Bruce Morrisette—who is by all odds the most reliable authority. He refers to a variety of crit-

ical studies on Beckett because nobody has as yet written on this Irish-born writer with the finality that Morrisette has written on Robbe-Grillet.

The Dismemberment of Orpheus comes as close as possible to avoiding artificial boundaries set up between criticism and literature. Hassan's words seem, at every turn, to (in his own language) "touch the fringes of literature."

Reviewed by MELVIN J. FRIEDMAN

¹See my "A Revaluation of *Axel*," *Modern Drama*, February 1959, pp. 236-243.

²Hassan in no way rejects the nineteenth century but his avoidance of it reminds one a bit of the French critic Léon Daudet's arrogant dismissal of it as "le stupide dix-neuvième siècle."