

immediacy. One thinks especially of T.S. Eliot, whom Jarrell considers the best critic of the century and who, without losing the experiences of poems, pulls those experiences into a conceptual shape. In these essays we move through thirty years of our rich and terrible history and of our even richer and equally terrifying literature. We see it all in Jarrell's words, but we never see it whole. The major writer even in an age of fragments, "among the ruins of the lost cultures," discerns patterns which embrace and redeem the chaos. Yeats, Eliot, Auden—the writers, save Kipling whom Jarrell most admires—saw such patterns and transcended experience. Jarrell's criticism would ultimately be more rewarding if he showed us what he found with Frost "at the cold root of things."

Reviewed by HAROLD L. WEATHERBY

Deconstructionalism Dismantled

Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society, by Gerald Graff, *Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. 260 pp. \$15.00.*

The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion, by Grant Webster, *Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. xvii + 381 pp. \$22.50.*

IT ALL BEGAN when the Romantics concocted the doctrine of the autonomous imagination: artists or poets apprehend higher truths than those furnished by mundane or discursive reason. A century later the New Critics laid stress on the autonomy of the literary text, whose meaning is more elusive and oblique than that of ordinary expression. Both groups, made up mostly of traditional humanists, were hoping to preserve the dignity and consequence of

literature against the condescension of positivism on the one hand and the contempt of philistinism on the other. But both helped to sunder art from life and, inadvertently, to raise doubts about the nature and validity of artistic "truth." Does the poet merely impose on existence his own subjective visions (or "fictions" in the current jargon)? Is the New Critic, ex-cogitating his seven or seven-times-seventy types of ambiguity, merely playing at an intellectual's game? And so both movements prepared the groundwork for the present congeries of poststructuralist, deconstructionalist critics, the New Nihilists for whom all literature, all criticism, is but the projection of private thoughts on an irrational cosmos. For them, there is no core of meaning in a literary work. Indeed, such works are "self-consuming"—*i.e.*, they advertise their own fictiveness, deconstruct their own supposed truths, and so fortify our sense of our own subjectivity. Traditional critics, contending that literature says something about reality, are reactionaries, apologists for the oppressive and exploiting status quo. To be truly liberated man must be totally autonomous, free to create his own reality and unafflicted by any reality (for this is merely a bourgeois fiction) "out there." Thus essentially conservative aestheticians like Wordsworth or Coleridge, Cleanth Brooks or J.C. Ransom, made easier the way of left-wing solipsists or deconstructionalists, for whom language is a self-contained, closed system of signs, arbitrary and impressionistic. Far from fulfilling the lofty aims of traditionary humanism, language and literature are little more than a highly sophisticated and intricate evolution of vermicular lip-clicks.

Such is the thesis plausibly expounded by Professor Gerald Graff. Modern, deconstructionalist criticism, hopeful of salvaging literature in a dehumanized society, is in fact further detaching it from life and, by denying all normative meanings, trivializing it. Graff's able rebuttal of this school can only be sketched. Two points are obvious enough: most writers, even poets, really are trying to say

something significant about external reality; and a solipsist earnestly preaching his belief is a self-contradiction. If there is no ultimate truth or reality, why should these sages' views be any more imperative than those of Augustine, Marx, or B.F. Skinner? Yet these critics tend to be humorless and authoritarian, assuming a trifle portentously that all sophisticated readers will agree that language is a self-contained system of signs and that literature is "self-consuming." They have thus united the most depressing aspects of solipsism with the most morose traits of the true believer. They are also illogical, perpetrating the genetic fallacy: because the ideas in a work may have been reached by intuition or swayed by a regnant ideology does not, as the deconstructionalists pontificate, straightway invalidate their possible truth. These critics fail to explain why, if language-systems and values are independent of "reality," some ways of approaching things and some views of life seem clearly superior to others—is there not in such instances at least a furtive reference to a reality out there? The deconstructionalists are behind-the-times, for the capitalist ethos which they demonize has come in fact to share their despoliation of the past, their commitment to constant change and individual fulfillment. They are also psychologically obtuse, unable to see that the need for an objective truth is itself a central part of human experience and that the belief that all beliefs are fictions affords no very exhilarating liberation. Finally Graff notes that the current criticism is understandably popular since it requires neither student nor teacher "to bring with him a large body of inherited information and culture." For the same reason, it makes publishing rather than perishing so much easier. Since these important people are often prompt to impugn the motives of traditional humanist critics—who are called careerist lackeys of the status quo and so forth—it is just that they too should be shown as playing the market, that they are as "self-serving" as they are "self-consuming."

The trouble with deconstructionalism,

aside from its pointlessness, is that its relativism, though promulgated as emancipating, in fact affords no grounds or principles for opposing oppression, injustice, "untruth." It is inane and defeatist, and since deconstructionalism probably represents a more general malaise in our society—since in any event it is commanding respect in academic circles—it is worth at least one thoroughgoing demolition, for which Graff is to be thanked.

Professor Grant Webster's *Republic of Letters* may have a longer shelf-life, however, for *Literature Against Itself* is very much an *ad hoc* work. Webster's thesis trenches slightly on deconstructionalism: that a study of the variety of critical schools in the twentieth century will teach us to be content with partial truths rather than to seek solace in a definitive critical approach; he hopes his book will "cause a revolution" in the history of literary criticism. But this thesis is as jejune as Graff's is compelling, and in fact the book rises above its thesis, is more substantial than just another "revolutionary" study of this or that. Hayden White applauds it on the jacket as a comprehensive reference work and a "hard-hitting, judgmental history of American literary criticism." Its judgments are not really very intrepid or startling, but it is an excellent survey of the major American critical schools after the Neo-humanists, detailing intelligently their genesis, development, and salient principles. Webster dilates on the New Critics (he calls them Tory Formalists), especially T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, R.P. Blackmur. He also has good sections on the New York intellectuals: Alfred Kazin, Philip Rahv, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, *et multa alia*.

Trifling lapses are to be expected in such an enterprise: Webster includes *Harper's* among magazines making money, but it has not, it transpires, enjoyed that capacity since 1967; he repeats in passing the vulgar error that there were witch-burners in Salem; and he has a strange penchant for "in re," a locution best exiled to bureaucratic memoranda. His commentary is competent, sometimes even shrewd,

occasionally insipid. When some of the New York intellectuals censure the exhibitionism and immorality of the 1960's, he concludes: "It would be hard to find a clearer expression of the state which every generation comes to—that of being set in its ways, of preferring the old habits to the new experience." A bold suggestion that the sixties may have *deserved* the reproof, or that the reaction amounted to anything more than Old Fogeyism, might have made this study more "hard-hitting." Webster promises us a sequel, which will take up, among others, the critics dissected by Graff, so no real comparison between the two present volumes is practicable. Webster is apt to be a shade more friendly to the deconstructionalists than Graff, and I suppose one should not look for polemics in an encyclopedist. But one must wait and see. After all, Webster has spent a great deal of time now on modern critics for whom, quite obviously, language and literature is more than the inconsequent chatter of lip-clicks. Not even an encyclopedist, surely, could write with equal admiration of the Tory Formalists and the New Nihilists.

Reviewed by R.D. STOCK