

## Book Reviews

*Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism.* By Herbert F. Tucker. Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard UP, 1988. Pp. xiv, 481. \$37.50.

Herbert F. Tucker's study of "the power, the process, the deep music of doom" in Tennyson's poetry from the juvenilia to *Maud* (1855) is the most valuable study of this major Victorian poet since Dwight Culler's *The Poetry of Tennyson* (1977) and W. David Shaw's *Tennyson's Style* (1976). With compelling subtlety, Tucker draws out the "fascination with inevitability" manifested in Tennyson's fondness for depicting liminal perspectives and curiously passive questers who obey an authority outside themselves, in his "passion of the past" and characteristic tone of elegiac lament, and in his descriptive rather than narrative concentration on the atrophy of action and the annihilation of the subject. "The great moments in Tennyson's poetry," Tucker writes, "occur as sight drowns in darkness and the object world is whelmed in a tide of sound that moans round with many voices, voices that merge—as in the long run Tennyson's precariously achieved personae merge—into the roar or pulse of an inevitable, unutterable power." Part One of Tucker's study, exploring the works preceding the famous "ten year's silence," is directly concerned with this "unutterable power" of doom.

Embodied in mysterious forces beyond the self in the juvenilia, Tennysonian doom increasingly springs from the depths of self in the 1832 *Poems*, which explore the perils of "self-embowering" isolation and desire. Tucker reads the ominous "curse" in "The Lady of Shalott" not as an externally imposed doom, but as a metaphor for the lady's fatal desire to live in a world of illusions—a desire not shattered but ironically perpetuated by her surrender to the glamour of Sir Lancelot, himself a dazzling illusion, the "simulacrum of presence." But it is in treating less well known poems from the 1832 volume and from the juvenilia that Tucker's argument and approach is most original, most notably in the illuminating readings he offers of "Timbuctoo," "Recollections of the Arabian Nights," "Mariana in the South," "Oenone," "Fatima," and "The

Hesperides." Indeed, Tucker's analysis of the last may be the best close reading to date of this enigmatic and powerful poem. Curiously, however, "The Kraken"—the 15-line sonnet that might seem to epitomize Tennyson's fascination with an apocalyptic power of doom—receives no more than a passing mention.

It was the doom of history that Tennyson, following the great Romantics, inevitably experienced the anxiety of poetic belatedness. But Tucker argues that "if Romanticism was his doom, his work was also the doom of Romanticism." Although Tennyson's intensely allusive early poetry seems haunted by echoes of his Romantic predecessors, Tucker emphasizes that the allusions are revisionary, not imitative. If Tennyson adopted Romantic motifs to a greater degree than is commonly recognized, he also transformed them. Thus, the allusions to Keats's "Ode to Autumn" that Tucker detects in "The Hesperides" constitute a "strategy of negative allusion": Tennyson evokes the images of natural mutability that Keats's poem so memorably unfolds, but he evokes them principally to function as the sinister minor key in an uncanny web of verse that celebrates ripeness even as it unrestingly resists change.

Not all of the "allusions" Tucker detects—and he points to many that have gone unnoted—are equally persuasive. A few, like the allusions to "Kubla Khan" and to the "Ode to a Nightingale" he finds in "The Hesperides" or the allusion to the "Intimations" ode he finds in "The Lady of Shalott" seem at best possible echoes, or shared cultural tropes. What *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* lacks is a fully articulated theory of influence, acknowledging the difficulty of distinguishing unconscious echoes and widely disseminated tropes from conscious allusions. But Tucker provides rich material for such a theory in the ingenuity and sensitivity with which he tracks the transformation of Romantic traces in Tennyson's texts.

Part Two of Tucker's study shifts away somewhat from the doom motif as he explores Tennyson's alternation in his 1842 *Poems* between the "binary genres" of the lyrical dramatic monologue and the domestic idyll, the former a vehicle for intense Romantic subjectivity, the latter an instrument for exploring and confirming public, middle-class values. The chapter on the idylls, offering close readings of "The Gardener's Daughter," "Dora," and "Morte d'Arthur," is among the most fascinating in the book, in part because of the pattern of "idyllic allusiveness" Tucker explores, in part because of his penetrating analysis of the ideological context and agenda of the English idylls. On the dramatic monologue, Tucker is less persuasive and more controversial. Approaching "Ulysses" and "Tithonus" through the lens of "Tiresias" as lyricized dramatic monologues, devoid of the "contextualizing devices" typical of the genre, he presents readings of these poems that stress their Romantic aspiration but not their ironies. Interpretations of "Ulysses" that emphasize the ironic

deflation of the speaker's egoism and irresponsibility are described as "moralistic," and the Dantean source of the poem, leading readers to view Ulysses in a sceptical light, is not considered.

Tucker's final chapter approaches *The Princess*, *In Memoriam*, and *Maud* as examples of the Romantic *Bildungspoesie*, "the verse narrative of a central figure's progress from self-division and cultural alienation, through stages of therapeutic encounter, to a hard-won goal of inner and outer reconciliation." But his principal focus in these works is the generic alternation between "lyrical dismissal" of social contexts in favor of the self's commerce with the cosmos, and "idyllic acceptance" of social contexts and accommodation to their authority. In *The Princess*, Tucker chiefly discusses the three famous lyrics, "Tears, Idle Tears," "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal," and "Come Down, O Maid." All three are "poems of the puzzled will," he suggests: "chants invoking some impersonal power that floods up from unfathomable psychic depths to engulf the conscious self." Tucker's close readings, attentive to details of imagery, diction, and syntax and to Tennyson's intricate allusiveness, are here, as always, rewarding. He offers a particularly rich analysis of "Tears, Idle Tears" as an example of "extreme and decontextualized" Romantic lyricism enacting the disappearance of the individual subject. The other two lyrics "work hand in hand with the tactics of idyll," he plausibly argues, although "Come Down, O Maid" calls seductively for a dissolution of the individual in the social group that paradoxically resembles the dissolution of the solitary subject in "Tears, Idle Tears." Tucker notes several Romantic allusions in these lyrics, although not the apparent allusion to *Alastor*, lines 570-98, that occurs in "Come Down, O Maid" when Tennyson uses the same image of mountain streams spilling into a chasm and wasting in air that Shelley uses so powerfully in his poem.

On *In Memoriam*, Tucker's analysis of the mixture of lyric with idyllic elements sometimes results in an illuminating approach to poetic sequences within the work. But his approach to *Maud* is more far-reaching in its originality and persuasive force, and also more closely related to the thesis he foregrounds in his book's title. Despite the intense introspection that Tennyson depicts in *Maud*, Tucker argues that the poem enacts "the doom of culture," or the hegemony of cultural values. This is true not only in the controversial conclusion where the speaker embraces British jingoism as "the purpose of God, and the doom assigned," but throughout the poem, as we see the speaker shaped by class prejudices, and by social codes of romance of duelling, despite his caustic social satire and apparent anarchism. Here we encounter Tennyson's "familiar vision of doom," but presented "with a degree of mimetic realism and cultural specificity that is without parallel in his work," Tucker observes of Tennyson's poetic response to the "condition of England" novel.

Tucker describes himself as a "textualist" rather than a "contextualist" in his "Introduction." "Given the choice between Victorian context-setting and exegesis of the poems Tennyson wrote, I unhesitatingly embrace exegesis," he declares. But in his discussion of *Maud*, as elsewhere in his study, he combines the merits of both approaches with great success to reveal Tennyson's greatness as a poet even as he acknowledges the Laureate's limitations as a Victorian representative of bourgeois space and values. His scholarship is impressively thorough and wide-ranging, although there are a few curious omissions: Ralph Rader's distinction between the "mask lyric" and the dramatic monologue, for instance, which has some bearing on Tucker's category of the "lyricized dramatic monologue." *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism* is also written in a richly allusive and subtly convoluted style that is nevertheless clear and cogent. Indeed, so permeated by echoes of Tennysonian verse is Tucker's style, and so effective is his own strategy of allusion, that one is reminded of the doom that attends anyone who reads Tennyson closely and widely: the doom of being haunted by the psychic murmur of his innumerable memorable lines. Perhaps that is because no poet rivals Tennyson in fusing inner forces of doom with outer forces, the beat of the blood with the beat of the stars, the pulse of the mind with that of the cosmos: "Aeonian music," measuring out "The steps of Time—the shocks of Chance—/The blows of Death."

Dalhousie University

Marjorie Stone

***The Gospel of Wealth in the American Novel: The Rhetoric of Dreiser and Some of his Contemporaries.* By Arun Mukherjee. London: Croom Helm, 1987. Pp. 229. \$19.95.**

Arun Mukherjee's most general critical concern in his study of Dreiser, *The Gospel of Wealth*, is the importance of establishing that in any discussion of literary meaning it is necessary to have a full understanding of the social context within which both canon and pamphlet are created and then received by their original reading public. Mukherjee maintains that, in the case of Dreiser, the failure of critics to appreciate fully the language that is common both to the Horatio Alger myths and to various manuals for entrepreneurial success, and that conditioned contemporary attitudes towards business, can severely limit our understanding of how Dreiser condemns this version of the American dream as both self-deluded and finally inhumane. In the language of these "cookbooks" for success, which ostensibly distil the wisdom of such figures as Andrew Carnegie and Jay Gould, Mukherjee identifies a number of rhetorical

strategies, all of which share in the myths of quest and pilgrimage and appropriate the religious overtones that hint of divine sanction and telic necessity.

The literary-critical foundation of the author's approach is the work of Kenneth Burke, who in *A Grammar of Motives* and elsewhere describes how "imagery" can "favourably identify [a] cause," and that of Hugh Dalziel Duncan, who in *Language and Literature in Society* maintains that "When in power, we must create a magic...to legitimize our position...by usurping symbols already charged with sacred power." (12) Burke and Duncan, then, provide the theoretical framework that Mukherjee requires in order to reveal the link between the discourse bred of economic and social conditions and the ends to which this discourse can be put in the hands of writers like Dreiser, whose social criticism acquires a satirical edge with the inversion of the "sacred" metaphors and myths. Mukherjee also argues that this methodology accomplishes two additional ends. First, it is a corrective to the tendency of literary studies to assume the "formal autonomy of the text." This seems like a rather belated attack on the pure formalism of the legendary but difficult to sight New Critic and although Mukherjee may also have a certain breed of post-structuralist in her sights, she unfortunately doesn't say. Certainly, she seems to believe that the anti-formalist posture merits restating, but her study of Dreiser stands quite well on its own merits anyway. The second claim Mukherjee makes is more far-reaching significance, for she considers that by acknowledging the influence of social and economic factors on "meaning" the variability of interpretations can be limited: "without this context...we not only grotesquely misread the texts" but "I strongly disagree with the reader response critics who claim that multiple and contradictory readings are inevitable...." (2) She thus makes the problematic claim that Dreiser can be reread in a manner that brings us closer to a true conception of single authorial meaning. On the face of it, social consensus ought to narrow functionally the range of meaning, but like Mukherjee's anti-formalism this second theoretical claim merits more discussion than she allows.

In *The Gospel of Wealth* Dreiser's novels are divided into two groups—those whose protagonists participate fully in the process and rewards of the American dream, the Cowperwood trilogy, and those whose central figures do not succeed within the values and beliefs of the businessman as questing hero, *Sister Carrie*, *The Genius*, and *American Tragedy*. *The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic* provide Mukherjee with an abundance of evidence to support her claims for Dreiser as ironist; in fact, the general tendency of critics to downplay or ignore Dreiser's incisive undercutting of capitalist knight-errantry is surprising when, for instance, Mukherjee so effortlessly describes the ironic gap looming between young Cowperwood who sees a famous financier as "a great dynamic soul" and

the narrator of *The Financier* who earlier describes the same figure as a man with the face of a pig. Such ironic distance is also the source of much poignance in the novels that chart the confused struggles of Hurstwood, Clyde Griffiths and Eugene Witla; their lives make dramatically vivid, as the *Gospel of Wealth* makes clear, the failure of American culture to be as socially fluid and as likely to reward the attributes of intelligence and work as the self-lauding propaganda of its monied elite claims and as the Alger myth appears to demonstrate.

Though the thoroughness with which Mukherjee documents her case and the consistency of the evidence she gathers from Dreiser's essays, letters and fiction both have the power to convince, they tend to become juggernaut-like. Dreiser undoubtedly was the critic of the Alger-illusion that Mukherjee shows him to be, but he was attracted, nevertheless, to the power and energy of the knights of business. Dreiser commentators F.O. Matthiessen and Donald Pizer, who acknowledge this latter facet of his thought, are criticized in *The Gospel of Wealth* for their portraits of a Dreiser who idealizes Cowperwood, but neither are so completely blind to Dreiser's sometimes contradictory views as Mukherjee suggests. Matthiessen, for instance, grants that Cowperwood is presented as "ruthless and cold" but recognizes too that when Dreiser describes the eyes of the financier as "wonderful...glowing with a rich human understanding" the full ambivalence of the writer's attitude to the central character of the trilogy is made clear. Pizer notes that Cowperwood's "view of life is at odds with the moral cast of the myths of success"—a critical position not so at odds with that presented in *The Gospel of Wealth*.

Mukherjee might better have spent somewhat less time and space recounting textual evidence and instead engaged Pizer and Matthiessen more fully by conceding that their strongest evidence needs to be accommodated within her argument; the complexity of Dreiser's attitude toward the figure of the financier would then have been more accurately represented. Given the plentiful evidence drawn from Dreiser's work and life in *The Gospel of Wealth* and the study's many fresh insights into Dreiser's art, the important task of rereading Dreiser as an accomplished ironist, whose technique presupposed his audience's knowledge of popular capitalist myths, would still have been successfully accomplished but with greater rigor.

***The Storms Below: The Turbulent Life and Times of Hugh Garner.* By Paul Stuewe. Toronto: James Lorimer and Co., 1988. Pp. xiv, 230. \$24.95.**

Hugh Garner holds an unusual, perhaps a unique place in Canadian literature as what Douglas Fetherling once called "the only important Canadian novelist not from the middle class." Much of his writing was churned out to pay the bills and shows it, though his best short stories are in another class altogether, and his novel *Cabbagetown* endures as a kind of Gissingesque portrayal of growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in the Toronto of the 20s and 30s. All the same, Garner has received widely varying treatment at the hands of the critical establishment. Some, like Robert Weaver and Miriam Waddington, have praised his abilities as a writer in the naturalist tradition; others, like Frank Davey and (more recently) John Metcalf, have been very open in their dismissal of what they consider Garner's glaring faults, Metcalf calling him "uncouth" and Davey describing his stories sarcastically as "an enjoyable and provocative reading experience at the secondary school level."

In his biography of Garner, Paul Stuewe vacillates somewhat in his view of Garner's ultimate place in the canon. In the introduction, he states that Garner "deserves to be ranked as one of the major figures of modern Canadian literature"; but in the epilogue, he suggests that "it is still too soon to tell if posterity will admit him to the pantheon of Great Canadian Authors." These statements are not exactly contradictory, though both are qualified by Stuewe's admission that Garner's *oeuvre* is wildly uneven, and the second is supported by the statement that the books "continue to sell," as though that were the ultimate court of appeal. If it were, the great Canadian authors would be Charles Gordon, Mazo de la Roche, and Lucy Maud Montgomery.

Stuewe has done a good job in researching and delineating Garner's life, and given the autobiographical nature of much of his writing, Garner's work is thereby much illuminated, though *The Storms Below* is not a critical biography as such. From his childhood in the impoverished east end of Toronto to his railroad tramps of the 30s, from his service in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War to his time in the Navy during World War II, Garner gradually built up a fund of hard-scrabble experience that made him the writer—and the man—that he was. His pugnacious self-reliance was legendary, and only partly and latterly an effect of increasing alcoholism. Stuewe (and Garner himself in his autobiography) blamed the boozing on his Navy years; but it seems apparent that Garner's classic underdog personality, to say nothing of his being a loner, required the constant propping up that he found in the bottle. But before alcohol took over completely and his health began to decline, he not only supported himself and his family entirely on his work, but wrote some minor classics of Canadian prose fiction.

The subtitle of Stuewe's book is accurate, for he has concentrated on "the life and times" and mostly stayed away from psychoanalysing his subject. One would have liked a little more information on Garner's family (his wife Alice remains a rather shadowy figure) and more documentation on Garner's reputation in the Canadian literary world (Stuewe says many times that he was unwelcome in the CanLit club, but does not really elaborate on this contention). These complaints, and the lack of an index, aside, *The Storms Below* is a good first biographical study of a writer whose life was almost larger than any book, including his own, can capture.

McGill University

Bruce Whiteman

***A Soldier's Time: Vietnam War Poems.* By R.L. Barth. Santa Barbara: John Daniel, 1987. Pp. 80. \$8.95.**

R. L. Barth's *A Soldier's Time* is a particularly persuasive realization of a view of poetry more broadly based than the one that now prevails. From Pound and Williams through Olson and Creeley and beyond, poetic intensity has arisen from absences within the text. Characteristically, experimental poets of our century gain poetic intensity through leaving out something, full syntax, paraphrasable meaning, logical organization, abstract vocabulary. The seasoned reader learns to recognize what is not there and then to open his mind and feelings to the kind of experience that results from the absence of what is not there and to the ways in which that absence qualifies and/or intensifies what is there. This procedure of producing significance through absence is present also in Barth's book:

"From the Forest of the Suicides":

The foliage  
blackens  
with night-  
fall,  
dissolving  
to a knotted,  
gnarled  
landscape.

Cold winds  
sough up  
the reverse  
slope.



Like wailing  
 voices,  
 the leaves  
 call us home.

As in the best of Williams or in the early free verse of Yvor Winters, the poem is richly specific; a particular landscape is evoked through a minimalist technique. This is the kind of accomplishment that we expect in contemporary verse, the sharply realized detail set in a kind of conceptual void. The poem is not without meaning, but the meaning is not conceptual. The details are sharp, and the meaning is an evocation. Barth controls the idiom of the poem, and his book would be remarkable if it consisted entirely of poems of this kind. But it would be a different book from the one that he has written. It would be a book of images, nuances, and sensibility. Barth inherits the Modernist tradition, yet his book must seem an odd one to a reader whose expectations are defined by this tradition and its aftermath.

Barth's book is unusual because it has a subject and because it says something quite literal about that subject. In a broad sense, the subject is war, "the reader, held in Homer's mind, / Looks upon Greeks and Trojans fighting yet / Or heroes and footsoldiers, thin and blind"; and in a narrow sense, it is a particular war:

he looks up to see—  
 Not the god-harried plain where Hector tries  
  
 His destiny, not the room—but a mountain  
 Covered with jungle; on one slope, a chateau  
 With garden, courtyard, a rococo fountain,  
 And, faces down, hands tied, six bodies in a row.

The first section focuses on the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, as seen through the eyes of the participants. The second section presents the American war; this is seen through the eyes of the author himself and various participants.

Since Barth has a subject, and a disturbing one, his book produces a complex impression. Some of its power lies in omissions, the clear presence of options not chosen. Barth does not engage in political statement. He does not criticize the French, the Americans, the Viet-Minh, or the Viet-Cong; he does not object to the American presence. We have here absences in the text, but they are not of the sort that produces an impoverishment of the means of expression. These absences are poignant in the context of what he does refer to: Homer, the eternal nature of peasant life, and the conclusion that all wars are very much the same war. So the book is about war itself, but nevertheless a particular war, perceived in all of the distinctiveness of a given time and a concrete set of

events. The absence of political statement foregrounds the parallels with war in general, but we never escape the history of this war.

The presence of a particular war is especially evident in the sequence dealing with the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. For example, the suicide of Col. Charles Piroth, who seems to have assumed direct responsibility for the fatal miscalculation of the French regarding Viet-Minh gun emplacements, is first dealt with directly:

Piroth lay on his cot, stretched on his back,  
One arm across his chest, his lone hand missing,  
Chest and face gone pulpy, flies already

Settling, laying eggs.

The incident is then explored in a poem consisting mostly of a monologue spoken by Piroth himself. The language moves from colloquial conversation before the battle,

“Please spare us further mention of Verduns.  
Colonel, what if the Viets *do* have guns?”

Why, if they do, they’ll be on reverse slopes—  
How transport over crests? with men and ropes?  
And such trajectories as they’ll require  
To hit the fortress when they open fire...  
Well, they’ve no gunners with experience.

to the battle described in plain language,

But there’s no sighting, nothing of the source  
Of heavy shells that, smashing crashing, force  
Algerians to ground, shatter the thin,  
Jerry-built bunkers, Legionnaires within,  
And churn the gunpits where Moroccan crews  
Wrestle their 155s through bloody ooze...

to an evaluation of the meaning of what has occurred,

What’s left of my good name?  
Loosely deployed strongpoints, shabby defenses:  
They listen to artillery’s pretenses,  
A one-armed gunner silencing their fears  
As once he silenced Fascist cannoners.  
Guilt’s real, beyond apologies and tears,  
Though generals cover up their tracks, commit  
Nothing to paper that the shrewdest wit...

These two poems are followed by a comment on the incident by the chief medical officer at Dien Bien Phu, Major Paul Grauwint:

A loss of faith? a loss of nerve?  
 A nervous breakdown? That will serve  
 The needs of military fashion.  
 The truest loss is our compassion.

Barth can achieve this breadth of tone and style because his writing is not characterized by the limitations of an experimental technique. It is actually remarkable for the formal variety that it contains: free verse, dry syllabics, and the immense freedom of form and approach made possible through the traditional iambic and the pentameter couplet. The poet speaks in his own voice as he defines a tradition,

You watch with me: Owen, Blunden, Sassoon.  
 Through sentry duty, everything you meant  
 Thickens to fear of nights without a moon.  
 War's war. We are, my friends, no different.

and in his own voice as he might someday speak to his son:

So, when you ask some day to hear war stories,  
 Though I would have you truly understand,  
 How shall I answer you, if not with silence?

He comments on death and identity, "Patrolling silently, / He knows how men will die / In jungles. I am he. / He is not I," and on death as grotesquerie, "Just dead. I check their metal tags / For eight hours, till my duty ceases, / "Body-counting" the body bags. / I do not have to count the pieces." He gives us the striking simile, "Our troops hid in shadows like bad debts"; and he can leap from physical detail to the apt abstraction, "the next vine, leaf, / Branch or arc of sunlight / Erratic as our grief." He catches the jaunty despair of deserters: "Our only motto's *Carpe diem*. / We're pagans deep within / Who waken singing *Carpe diem* / Since whoever might win, / The one thing certain's that we're lost." We hear the meditating voice of Col. de Castries, the commander at Dien Bien Phu and a man trained for a different kind of war:

Observe the plains before the fortress:  
 There's room enough for tactics, to maneuver  
 My tank platoons charging to relieve troops  
 Pinned down. Navarre swore. Surely, I would not  
 Have taken this command to withstand siege,  
 I who've dashed across Europe liberating  
 With General de Gaulle?

And the bitterness of the French commander-in-chief in Indochina, General Henri Navarre:

Betrayal all around; Cogny,  
 America, press, and French ministry.

Strategically, I threw the dice.  
They toppled over the valley's browning rice;  
But all our loss—acceptable  
By any military terms, our goal  
Achieved—became a mockery . . .

And, as a final example, the beautifully quiet diction of "Nightpiece":

No moon, no stars, only the leech-black sky,  
Until Puff rends the darkness, spewing out  
His thin red flames, and then the quick reply  
Of blue-green tracers climbing all about.  
At night such lovely ways to kill, to die.

This flexibility is only made possible by the underlying fixed forms within which Barth writes. The poetry is reductive only in the good sense that it is economical. In every other respect, it is all-encompassing. In this thin book, we hear a variety of voices, and we encounter the best strategies to be learned from our century and the best available in the tradition. And all present in the service of a subject that is at once permanent and contemporary.

*University of British Columbia*

*Grosvenor Powell*