

the author's stunning realization that people occasionally die—some deservedly, others unjustly.

Machine Dreams will perhaps have brief appeal for those readers looking for hostile portrayals of America. When her brother dies in Vietnam, Danner remarks: "I felt betrayed by my government but I'd expected betrayal; I just hadn't expected betrayal to such a degree." But like a typical dream—a succession of images and half-formed ideas—this book will soon be forgotten. ∞

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The Cult of Personality

by Gary S. Vasilash

Roland Barthes: *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*; Hill & Wang; New York.

Roland Barthes: *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*; Hill & Wang; New York.

The life of Roland Barthes will never be serialized on *Masterpiece Theater*. Born in 1915, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis as a young man (1934), and spent part of his life in sanatoriums.

Barthes's education was conventional enough: he received a license in the classics from the Sorbonne, participated in the foundation of the Groupe de Théâtre Antique, and achieved a graduate degree in Greek tragedy. At one point, Barthes was a pre-med student (his main interest was psychiatric medicine), but he did not complete his medical studies. For the most part, Barthes was an educator: he taught in Rumania, Egypt, and, of course, France. In 1980, four years after being appointed to the Chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France, Barthes was hit by a van and fatally injured.

Barthes exists for us only as a presence in his books. Today, there are 19 books signed "Roland Barthes" available in English. *On Racine* was the first available in the States; it appeared in 1964. It didn't cause much of a stir here, but it did in France after it was published in 1963. Barthes was attacked in 1965 by a Sorbonne professor, Raymond Picard, who answered *Sur Racine* with *Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture*?

Picard's attack on the 50-year-old upstart resulted in a new vibrancy for the image of Barthes: remember, this was the 1960's, those heady days when even a literary slap at the establishment could result in popular acclaim. Barthes answered Picard with the concept of a structuralist "science of literature," in which the language and levels of meaning would be of real value; the

reading room would become a sterile laboratory; fecundity would be limited to a petri dish. The death of the author was heralded, for each reader would have the possibility of constructing his own meaning from the constituent elements of the text. Or, more fundamentally, the death of *authority* was announced.

But there still remained a difference: the structuralists usually had undergone rigorous academic training and so had internalized the methodologies that they claimed to oppose. Their texts—and those of Barthes are excellent examples—tended to be even more mystifying than those which they were in revolt against, those which they said covered the *real* nature of writings with a thick frosting of bourgeois ideology. Structuralist writings for the "people" or the "masses"? Hardly.

This paradox is evident in *The Grain of the Voice*, a collection of interviews with Barthes, and in *The Responsibility of Forms*, a collection of his essays on "Music, Art, and Representation." In *The Grain of the Voice*, an interviewer for a French fashion magazine says this to Barthes about his *The Fashion System*:

One expects to read incisive commentary . . . or else a sociological analysis. It's nothing of the kind. Your book is in fact a scientific work, very austere, containing many pages which reminded me (to my annoyance, I admit) of the algebra textbooks and grammatical analyses of my childhood!

Algebra textbooks and grammatical analyses, so far as I know, have never caused people to man the ramparts—or at least not in this century.

Typical of Barthes's mystifying language and tortured construction is this passage from "Rhetoric of the Image" in *The Responsibility of Forms*:

The connotators do not fill the entire lexia; reading them does not exhaust it. In other words (and this would be a proposition valid for semiology in general), all the elements of the lexia cannot be transformed into connotators; there still remains in discourse a certain denotation without which, in fact, discourse would not be possible.

Which *seems* to mean that a language requires explicit meaning. But straightforward formulations just don't do: Barthes apparently relished textual density.

AMERICANA

Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myth by Stephen B. Oates; Harper & Row; New York; \$12.95. A sympathetic look behind the Sandburg hagiography at a complex man obsessed with death and madness, ambitious for high office, and just as willing as the Radical Republicans to use military force in preserving the Union, eradicating slavery, and reconstructing the South.

Lincoln Dictionary; edited by Ralph B. Winn; Philosophical Library; New York; \$5.95. An alphabetized anthology of quotable Lincoln statements on everything from "Abolition" to "Young Men."

Jack Tars & Commodores: The American Navy 1783-1815 by William M. Fowler Jr.; Houghton Mifflin; Boston. In this stirring sequel to *Rebels Under Sail*, the American Navy proves itself in the Barbary Wars. Fowler manages to combine a sound grasp of technical detail with a narrative art that makes some chapters read like Kenneth Roberts.

The Confederate Governors; edited by W. Buck Yeams; University of Georgia Press; Athens. A revolution for states' rights inevitably put an enormous burden on the governors. This much-needed study is an important step toward understanding the significant role played by the chief executives of the Confederacy.

No Chariot Let Down: Charleston's Free People of Color on the Eve of the Civil War; edited by Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark; University of North Carolina Press; Chapel Hill. William Ellison, a slave who obtained his freedom in 1816, was the wealthiest free Black in South Carolina. At the outbreak of the War, he owned 63 slaves. These letters, written by family members, are a good portrait of the Black bourgeoisie and its anxieties in 1860.

It is exciting to be at the extreme: it can even be lucrative. In an essay written in 1973, Barthes notes of a favorite artist, "Réquichot did not exhibit his canvases (they are still widely unknown)." He even quotes the then-dead painter as having said at some point: "What I make is not made to be seen," yet Barthes goes on at length, on, about, and around the painter and his works. Why? Because the painter was an outsider.

Barthes became what he opposed: he became the establishment. Certainly, the establishment in which he participated was of a different order than the old guard, but it was no less selective. If Barthes exists today as a presence in his 19 books, the personality which emerges from the interviews, such as those in *The Grain of the Voice*, cuts a more impressive figure.

The author is not dead. Barthes's continuing success proves that beyond a doubt. The author—still no less an authority figure—has simply absorbed new attributes, those brought on by the interest in the type of pen that he uses and in his work habits: all of those types of biographical tidbits that structuralism was to get rid of. Obviously, even Barthes couldn't accept that. Obscurity reaps rewards only in relation to the degree to which it becomes public. cc

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Passage Back From India

by Betsy Clarke

Ruth Praver Jhabvala: *In Search of Love and Beauty*; William Morrow; New York.

Identifying the patterns of life, tracking the process of modern thought and action, requires an author who knows a big idea from a little one, a tall order in a day of moral relativism and cultural confusion. Ruth Praver Jhabvala appears to be such a writer. She is German born, of Polish-Jewish descent, British educated, a long-time resident of India, and a part-time New Yorker, giving credence to her ability to write with some authority on a variety of cultures. The troubling question is whether she damages her piercing observations by overstating her case and whether her aim is directed at the proper target.

In 1975 Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*, a

novel set mostly in India, won England's Booker Prize for the best novel published in England that year. *In Search of Love and Beauty* returns to the themes of *Heat and Dust*: personal identity, moral disintegration and lack of direction (especially in modern youth), sterility and reproduction, and the burdens and effects of time and ancestry. But the author's most recent effort is no improvement on its predecessor. In place of the previous preoccupation with the faith and traditions of India, the new novel takes us to the Academy of Potential Development, a psychospiritual center accepting the money and presence of "a motley crew with motley problems of sex, drugs, nerves, religion."

Some of the characters seem to have been plucked from *Heat and Dust*, but they have been twisted in a more sinister direction here. The fixation on shocking sexual behavior and the absence of normative characters makes for a depressing book. Even when the author reverts to Indian settings, the theme remains decadence.

Jhabvala does succeed in demonstrating that people are the creators of their culture rather than the innocent victims of it. Her subjects are three deracinated German immigrants who bring to New York their language and their furniture, but absolutely no moral or evaluative sense. They socialize with other "German and Austrian refugees who had managed to get their money out but felt bored and stranded." Their "search for love and beauty" is superficial and filled with unresolved contradictions. No one is in pursuit of truth. Preying on these rootless people is the notorious Leo Kellerman, a man "into human nature" who—first through theater and then through the Academy—encourages self-obsession. "Self-centered here wasn't a bad word, it was an aim, an ideal," the author explains. Kellerman, of course, has his own agenda. He seduces and lives off wealthy women, takes over their apartments for his classes, and humiliates

them and his other patients through his degrading speech, action, and Academy policy. His clients, nevertheless, hunger for more. A typical follower scorns her parents for being "so proud of being liberal agnostics"—even as she complains that her son has ruined his chance to become a marine biologist by joining a Hare Krishna community.

Family roles and sexual obligations are helter-skelter. Successful marriages are nowhere to be seen, and homosexuals are coming out of every closet. The novel does not label homosexuality as a perversion, but at least it is honest about the disgusting desperation of the aging homosexual man and about the incessant appetite of gays for young boys. By stressing the fact that fathers were absent from the early homes of these deviants, the author even suggests a cause for their frenetic and sterile sexuality.

Disintegration of moral standards, a self-obsessed citizenry, and cultural disease are timely subjects. And the range of the novel is impressive, contrasting sharply with most modern fiction about this or that middle-aged adult finally deciding to grow up. The problem with extending a story of boredom and anxiety over three continents is that the numerous characters fail to take on sufficient importance—they seem to be mere objects of curiosity. There is more to American civilization than self-improvement czars and their willing victims. There is illness, but there is also recovery and health. What this novel needs is less restless anomie and some of the more gentle, concentrated scenes found in the author's earlier work. cc

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BOOKS IN BRIEF

Women Clergy: Breaking Through Gender Barriers by Edward C. Lehman Jr.; Transaction: New Brunswick, NJ; \$24.95. An enthusiastic report on experiments with women clergy now being promoted in the Presbyterian Church by enlightened church bureaucrats in Washington and New York and resisted by the unregenerate locals who (used to) fill the pews. If women preach in the style of sociologists, it's no wonder that the Protestant "main line" is reduced to a trickle.

Red, White and Blue Paradise: The American Canal Zone in Panama by Herbert and Mary Knapp; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego; \$16.95. An insider's look at the fascinating history of the Canal Zone and at the lies told by those who gave it away.