

inoculate ourselves against panic at the real horrors loose on the earth....” Leatherface as preferable to anthrax or other terrorist attacks?

Wilson’s value for me is both general and personal. Interweaving his views with those of James Sanders, Dabney sees Wilson as “a ‘grand explainer’ who ‘better understands and expresses what the reader thinks,’ a ‘mirror’ insofar as one’s experience is refracted ‘through his sharper mind.’” To put it another way, Wilson often makes the reader feel more intelligent and sophisticated than he or she can possibly be.

My personal debt to Wilson stems not just from reading the essays on Waugh and Firbank which helped to validate my decision to study them but also from the antidote his style provided to the sober, sometimes leaden prose of scholarly articles and books we ingested in doctoral programs in the late 1950s. (To do them justice, they were written, most of them, in recognizable English.) Wilson, like Orwell and Dwight MacDonald, was not just useful but interesting, and I often read far more than the parts necessary to my work.

Moreover, Wilson’s remorseless energy and intelligence gave some of us at least the glimmer of the idea that we did not have to be expert on everything to be able to write for readers who hadn’t gone through a Ph.D. program but could read a book or a discussion of it with profit and pleasure.

The biography and the Library of America volumes don’t give us all of Wilson—his travel writing, his analysis of the literature of the American Civil War, Canada, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the iniquities of the Internal Revenue Service could not be included. Nor could the letters or the augmented notebooks from five decades. Nor, though there seems from what Dabney quotes little reason to regret this, could his plays, poetry, or fiction. But even on this far from modest showing, Wilson’s industry, curiosity, and intelligence put him in the line of great critics from Samuel Johnson through Matthew Arnold. We can only hope that he has successors.

### **Other Peoples’ Dyschronia**

*Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel*, by John J. Su. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 226 pp. \$80. Reviewed by Jonathan Pitcher, Bennington College.

John J. Su’s admittedly diminished enterprise belies its grandiose title. Convinced that nostalgia is now eschewed by liberal post-secularism as an essentialist “*bête noire*” (Jackson Lears; qtd. in Su 2), associated with fascism as of the first page, paling in comparison to the more overtly biased mnemotechnia of personal memory, he attempts to rehabilitate it as a key resource in the postcolonial oppressed’s access to “lost or imagined places of origin” (173), which is then coupled to “the impetus to struggle for a more utopian future” (88). This methodology already leaves the book in the ungainly position of fending off potential critiques from more intellectually honest postmodernists, who would at least claim to have binned nostalgia’s apparatus some time ago, and from reactionaries who would prefer a coherent, openly constructed past and the establishment of a more rigorous ethics. At the same time, Su simply and disingenuously reimposes the commonplace paradigm of revolutionary memory (dissatisfaction with the present = invented genealogy = reimposition of the primal origin of that genealogy in the present), while passing it off as something new, though it was and is arguably the only anamnestic paradigm modernity ever devised, regardless of politics. On a similarly less than original note, much effort is expended in persuading the audience that the past can indeed affect the present, even if the past in question is nostalgic, and that even history is not synonymous with objective truth, which may become irksome to readers prepared to stipulate to the immediate relevance of fictionalized memory from the off. In the absence of lengthier analysis of the history of ethics, Su becomes the product of his own recognition of our ruined, post-Enlightenment memory, enabling him to trawl through contemporary Anglophone literature, Levinas-driven morality in hand, gradually becoming the Edward Said of nostalgia, a counter-nostalgist if you will, merely finding examples of the aforementioned paradigm and

lamenting its impasse without ever defining his own ethical ground or risking the suggestion of viable counter-projects.

The front cover of the book is dominated by Bob Lescaux's neo-surrealist oil painting, *Cronos*, in which a presumably bourgeois type in a suit has climbed a ladder through white, fluffy clouds in order to "fix" a clock. This may be a commentary on displacement, on the artificiality of time, on its arbitrariness, and our devaluation of nostalgia. My point is that we never discover exactly how or why it is being fixed. In the examples that follow, my concern is not that these characters and often their authors are indeed the victims of fractured pasts that may only be reinterpreted through fragments of memory, that loss and yearning do define us, but rather their attitudinal reduction within the context of this book. It is surely not the finding of such memories that counts, but rather the strategies employed to recall them, their content, that content's effects on the present, and how we respond to those effects. Even if we accept Su's temporal *modus operandi*, the recollections remain dependent on our definition of the ethical, and his mediation of them, much like the painting, is too *laissez faire*.

The fetishized events in question include *Beloved*'s intermittent, shifting recalling of the Clearing, rewritten as if such shifting were an ethical end unto itself, *Black Dogs*' rejection of child abuse that even Su characterizes as "rather uncontroversial" (39), *The Unbelonging*'s identification of a misappropriated, idealized Jamaica as a "primal place" (49), *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s imaginary reconciliation between Antoinette and Tia that allows Antoinette "to describe her experiences and relationships in ways she had previously been unable to do" (66), *The Mimic Men*'s "recognition of the ways in which fantasies are structured by colonial discourse" (70), *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*'s yearly celebration of messianism, with Su deflating the potential of such content by confirming that "the novel does not even claim that the solidarity achieved during carnival has an enduring quality" (84), *House Made of Dawn*'s fixation on Rainy Mountain which Su again rejects as a possible "narrative of healing" (98), and the wholesale dismissal of Marxism since apparently it operates "without first rethinking and redefining how the past is experienced" (174), even though this is exactly what it does, through precisely the same paradigm of nostalgia that Su idolizes.

In this litany of fragmentation, now collected under the white, fluffy clouds and refashioned as a supposedly healthy moral solipsism of which the author of the study himself is barely persuaded, there are occasional glimpses of chinks in the paradigm, when instead of merely finding possible examples of a quasi-viable nostalgia, the material turns on itself. Towards the end of Chapter 2, Jamaica Kincaid is enlisted to assert that, even if we assume it to be possible, "Such a strategy risks reinstating patriarchal ethical norms that preexist the influences of colonialism and discourses of Western modernity" (qtd. in Su 80), and the fifth and final chapter rehashes Wole Soyinka's preexisting misgivings regarding Chinua Achebe's use of tactics similar to Su's, though even Soyinka's own imagined community in *Season of Anomy* is then subsequently critiqued, since "readers have fairly little concrete information on how the ethical values associated with the village shape its social organization" (169). In the concluding pages we wind up with a vague, ambivalent endorsement of Salman Rushdie's equally vague "set of universal ethical norms" (178).

Although several of the arguments and some of the vocabulary relating to disjointed times, sacred places, and lost traditions may be applied to Evelyn Waugh, Su's general glossing morphs into synecdoche in the form of the stately home in *Brideshead Revisited*. The chapter on Waugh and Kazuo Ishiguro is, predictably, the counterpoint to the rest of the book, with *Remains of the Day* serving as a mild corrective to *Brideshead Revisited*'s naïve endorsement of "genuine Englishness" (122) even within that chapter. It begins, alarmingly, as if some *a priori* decision were made to conflate the two that requires no further explanation, with an epigraph by Margaret Thatcher, extolling the "sterling qualities" (119) of Britain in the wake of the Falklands conflict, and proceeds to equate Thatcher's nationalist, "Victorian values" (122) not only with Waugh the man but also with the novel. In the midst of this continued reduction, Su "moves away from the tradition of reading *Brideshead Revisited* as a Catholic novel" (126), because of course if the Catholicism were not at the beck and call of the nationalism then all of a sudden he would have to confront simultaneous yet different complexities, not to mention a

system of thought that does not conform to his own paradigm of nostalgia. There may be a double standard here, in the sense that Thatcher's own invented genealogy receives rougher treatment than those to the left of the political spectrum, but more significantly Waugh would no doubt have found this allusion to "Victorian values" distasteful at best, and at worst the novel renders it inaccurate. Here, the drawing room and the fountain are symbols of past nationalism, substantiated by Charles Ryder's reminiscence, and his "discovery of the chapel as the true heart of the estate allows him to merge Catholicism and Englishness" (127), to connect drawing room and chapel. If we are to rely on the novel itself, however, as opposed to Su's synopsis, the chapel is a rather tacky extension to the estate, "a monument of art nouveau" (32), and therefore less obviously representative of English essentialism, particularly of the Thatcherite variety. The strategies, context, and effects of the memories are qualitatively different. I first read *Brideshead Revisited* as one of Thatcher's children, and far from interpreting it as government propaganda, it left me with a pervasive sense of defamiliarization. Perhaps it's such good propaganda it works by osmosis, or perhaps Su needs it to be.

### Works Cited

Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited*. 1945. New York: Knopf, 1993.

### More Genius than Talent

*Nancy Cunard: Heiress, Muse, Political Idealist*, by Lois Gordon. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 447 pp. \$32.95. Reviewed by Robert Murray Davis, University of Oklahoma.

Nancy Cunard was clearly all the things claimed by Lois Gordon's subtitle and a good deal more—she had a great many of what are now called catch-and-release liaisons, a fair number with leading lights of modernist literature and art; she was a loud and often violent drunk; and she had paranoid fantasies, though to be fair she had sometimes been persecuted.

Much of the book reads like an over-researched and over-crowded historical novel or like the overheated verse drama in Max Beerbohm's "Savonarola Brown," where, at the end of one scene,

*Re-enter Guelfs and Ghibellines fighting. SAV. and LUC. are arrested by Papal officers. Enter MICHAEL ANGELO. ANDREA DEL SARTO appears for a moment at a window. PIPPA passes. Brothers of the Misericordia go by, singing a Requiem for Francesca da Rimini. Enter BOCCACCIO, BENVENUTO CELLINI, and many others, making remarks highly characteristic of themselves....*

The difference between parody and life—not always easy to discern in any age—is that in this case major writers like Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Louis Aragon, Pablo Neruda, Aldous Huxley, many minor ones, and dozens of non-literary types passed through Nancy Cunard's life and bedroom, and many drew on her for fictional, poetic, and visual representation. Students of Waugh should remember the passage in *Unconditional Surrender/The End of the Battle* in which, to give his assistants a sense of Virginia Troy/Blackhouse/Crouchback, Everard Spruce quotes the passage from Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay* about Myra Viveash "placing her feet with a meticulous precision one after the other in the same straight line as though she were treading a knife edge between goodness only knew what invisible gulfs." Everard adds that "the type persisted—in books and in life. Virginia was the last of them—the exquisite, the doomed and the damning, with expiring voices...." Gordon mentions Waugh's novel, but apparently she does not realize that Waugh is humanizing, de-mystifying, and finally sanctifying Virginia.

In 1955 Waugh looked back at *Antic Hay* and said that women of 25 seemed like moody children. I'm older than Nancy Cunard was when she died, and one look at the cover photo and other illustrations would be enough to send me running in the opposite direction toward the