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## REVIEWS

### Emollient Schisms

*Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature*, by Paul Giles.

Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 419 pp. \$150. (Paperback, 2009, \$45).

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‘What a lot of ivy you have,’ she said. ‘It covers the churches and it buries the houses. We have ivy; but I have never seen it grow like that.’

G. K. Chesterton, “The Riddle of the Ivy” (94).

This book pluckily confronts the cultural ataraxia of canon formation. Within the first three pages, as you wait with ears half-cocked for the revolutionary cry of “O Captain! My Captain!” Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse*, his *Oxford Book of English Prose*, F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* and Raymond Williams’s *The Long Revolution* are upended for their all too telluric Englishness, soon to be followed, *inter alia*, by the phony diversity of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Jonathan Bate’s restrictively nationalistic preface to the *Oxford English Literary History*, and most English departments. Before allowing the words “Foucauldian exercise” (9) to set in, the fear of yet another book that has apparently recognized the atavistic reduction of the canon, a recognition that is surely atavistic in and of itself by now, Paul Giles ambitiously diverts the impending *tabula rasa* through “a certain kind of methodological approach” (11), with England and America, from the Reformation to Caryl Phillips, serving to expose each other’s latent differences in a mutually inclusive yet antagonistic relationship.

The revisionist counter-project is neatly documented, contextualized, and unafraid to read history through religion, albeit schismatically. Rather than ripping down England’s ivy and either leaving it strewn across the cemetery or replacing it with plastic plants, Giles looks for the gaps in the foliage, a transatlantic *aphanisis*, in dogged fashion, as his vocabulary confirms. On emigration, “Johnson’s writing is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by this vision of disorder” (21), Wilde’s disjunctive America is emblematic of “a country which many English Victorians felt an intense attraction to and repulsion from simultaneously” (144), George Gissing is the enemy and beneficiary of American copyright law, “both attracted and repelled by the idea of transatlantic mutability” (156), and after his move to the West Coast “Huxley becomes simultaneously attracted to, as well as repelled by, his abstract landscapes of technological futurism” (227). To a degree, therefore, Giles re-inhabits the tactics of the Reformation, a typically modern maneuver, with his own book mirroring its content, in the sense that America

tends to create a series of supersessive ruptures within the colder heart of English institutions, thus leaving the authors in question awkwardly straddling their newfound, contingent, transatlantic status. Rather than replacing this paradox of attraction/repulsion with one or the other, or indeed doing away with them altogether, there is no neo-Freudian cure. Giles's own means, the quivering between the security of tradition, "a known world" (127), and a potentially purer, "more dangerous, unknown one" (127), however ungainly, become the end. It is a *modus operandi* that is laudably intended to question the divide between English and American Studies, and one that is difficult to argue against, in that yet more awkward straddling, more extreme attraction and repulsion, is required to supersede the previous incarnation of the paradox within the logic of its own terms.

Although dependent on schism, exactly how novel this supposedly newfound parabiosis becomes via Giles's readings is questionable. Yes, plausibly, the American West's alterity "served to reconfigure the parameters of British culture" (110), Thoreau's Anglophobic "American relationship to the land" (87) follows suit, along with Wilde's ambivalence, T. S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic order is left to paper over the cracks, and in the more contemporary dénouement Rushdie "represents an altogether different kind of English literature" (331). Even when couched in the discourse of transculturation, however, these are canonical figures hitched to standard assertions, and a pervasive sense of *enantiodromia* lingers throughout. There are intermittent, if tacit, admissions that somehow the sorry state of the English canon's entelechy is not quite as sorry as at first assumed, that it is in fact capable of less jingoistic evolution, with or without Giles's overarching transatlantic critical apparatus: "The pressures of globalization have uncoupled the idea of 'English literature' from the wider notion of literature in English and have consequently repositioned the home-grown English literary canon as one of many competing discourses within a post-imperial framework" (346-47). Such admissions should mean success, but of course granting explicit license to that thought would in turn obfuscate the need for the book itself, since at best its methodology would become a *fait accompli*, and at worst the purported atrophy of English endemism, the cornerstone of a now buckling thesis, would seem contrived. Denise Levertov is perhaps the success story of the piece. She married an American, emigrated in 1948, took U.S. citizenship in 1956, was "influenced as a young woman in England by the work of T. S. Eliot" yet "found herself becoming increasingly unsympathetic to his conservative critical ideas" (262), "readily assimilated American dialects" (265), "worked self-consciously to refashion herself as an American poet" (265), and, in her own words, was "genuinely of both places" (266). She seems to have pre-read this book, even within its pages, but more emolliently (to use Giles's recurrent, negative term), sans repellent attraction or vice versa, and receives fewer pages than any other individually named subchapter.

Another paradox, as with the retrospective historical lacuna of the Reformation itself, is that applying contemporary theory to the past in the name of inclusion also means that all those residual iconodules must be heuristically, almost attitudinally, excluded. They tend to form an

ideologically diverse bunch, but somewhere between contingent America and Olde Englande become surplus to requirements. Among others, and all too briefly here, the excluded are “the emphasis on provincial locality ... in English Victorian fiction” (29), *Moll Flanders* (since Giles’s “point is precisely that after 1783 this rhetoric of dislocation became more associated with American than with English literature and culture” [29]), Wordsworth’s “arch-conservatism” (36), “the canonical tradition of English Romanticism” (47), Dickens as “univocal moralist” (95), Matthew Arnold’s “modernist humanist critique of industrial society” (123), Lionel Trilling’s continuation of Arnold (123), D. H. Lawrence’s dabbling in “medieval Christendom” (186), Orwell’s pervasive “Little Englandism” (203, but see also 160, 195, 204, 209, 241, 290), Christopher Hitchens’s “too simplistic” (222) reading of Wodehouse as satire, Theodor Adorno’s “distaste for what he saw as an unholy collusion between totalitarianism and technology” (240), and Martin Amis’s “conservative moral perspective, something he inherits partly from his father and partly from Saul Bellow,” “since [the latter] understands that ‘being human’ is ‘not a given but a gift, a talent, an accomplishment, an objective’” (322-23). Waugh, predictably, in the same vein as Orwell, “misleadingly acclaimed his friend Wodehouse in 1961 for having created a ‘timeless’ world” (209), thus “repressing the historical contingencies upon which its own claims to eternal wisdom are predicated” (212). The same interpretation is later defined as “theoretically wrong-headed” (219) though also, as a backhanded compliment, “disconcertingly perceptive in the way it identified hostility to Wodehouse with British wartime government propaganda” (219). His opinion that “Huxley ‘never wrote a good novel after *Antic Hay*’” (224) (i.e., prior to American exile) is dismissed as similarly essentialist, *The Loved One*’s “patronizing tone ... mocks American vulgarity from a great height” (226), which then becomes the neo-imperialist foil to Huxley’s presumably more democratizing *After Many a Summer*: “but the effect of this revision is disconcertingly to adduce analogies between the American castle and its English prototype, not satirically to suggest – as Evelyn Waugh would have done – that one is merely a decayed replica of the other” (228). While I gather that we are now treating all such stability, *a priori*, as equally suspicious, since it does not conform to the schema of attractive repulsion, whether the stability (and therefore the suspicion) in question is all the same seems just as suspect. When Giles claims at the end of a paragraph that “Many in Britain shared Orwell’s anxiety that the threat to individual personality posed by technological dehumanization, against which they had fought in Europe for six years, might now infiltrate their island territory from across the Atlantic” (204), I realize that my visceral reaction, my critical elitism, as a fellow Anglo-American still living on the hyphen over two hundred pages in, is supposed to recognize Orwell’s bourgeois, self-absorbed nationalism here, supported and thereby undercut by the nebulous masses, but at the same time I am not entirely convinced, more than sixty years later, of why this fear, regardless of how many Britons were similarly fearful, was misguided. Viably, Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of the Blood* might be seen as another attempt to revise the Oxford English syllabus in order to atone for its occluded racial dimension, to reread the play [*Othello*] as turning crucially on racial difference rather than, as in the liberal humanist interpretation, on jealousy” (354-55), but would it not be less reductive to problematize both? Yes, any overhaul of

the canon is necessarily tendentious, and we're all post-Reformation types, accustomed to glib shock tactics, but all these subtextual nods are not as good as winks, and are hardly an end unto themselves. The final, emblematic lines of the Auden chapter positively suggest that "many critics, even today, remain disconcerted by his refusal to take sides" (285), as if such anonymous disconcertion, a vague yet apparently compulsive accusation, is enough to dispatch the less equivocal.

Given the kaleidoscopic conflation of ideas and history, these sporadic ideological absences, perhaps designed to bolster the equivocation of the content, become progressively less disconcerting than self-defeating. The section on J. G. Ballard opens with an elaboration of postmodernism's "characteristic emphasis on commodification and 'dispersal'" (286), though for Ballard himself, in Giles's own words, "the negative aspect of such commodification is its potential erasure of the alterity of history, the way in which the present can be crucially reconfigured in the light of shadows from other temporal dimensions" (298), at which point the *mise-en-abîme* alarm bell nestling behind the ivy should surely be ringing, for is the study itself not engaged in a similar reconfiguration, though supposedly on behalf of such alterity? Furthermore, having detailed the "confusion of boundaries ... endemic to *Empire of the Sun*" (290), at the end of the paragraph the reader is parenthetically informed that "(There is a marked difference in this respect between Ballard's novel and the subsequent film version made by Steven Spielberg)" (290), which implies that one can have too much of all this transatlantic relativizing, yet we simply move on to more of the same. Similarly, Donald Davie seems to have nailed *Atlantic Republic*'s methodology within its own pages, suggesting that "'whether we know it or not,' ... 'we approach literature with Romantic assumptions and Romantic expectations'" (278). Not only does the caveat pass unheeded, however, thus confirming Davie's misgivings regarding our lack of self-awareness, but his concern that "in Britain 'virtually all the sanctuaries have been violated, all the pieties blasphemed,' so that even 'the bread we eat – chemically blanched, ready-sliced, untouched by human hand – bears no relation to the wheat-ear'" (274) is characterized as "angry, almost deliberately unbalanced" (274). At the risk of sounding disconcerted, as I reach for yet another slice of Sunblest-Bimbo, it is also possible that he has a point.

#### *Works Cited*

Chesterton, G. K. *Tremendous Trifles*. New York: Cosimo, 2007. Print.

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