

BRIEF MENTIONS

ROBERT PATTISON

The Child Figure in English Literature

Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978. Pp. 190. \$10.50.

In the Preface of this book the author states that he began to examine the child in English Literature with the object of understanding the Victorian interest in pre-adolescence. The comment is telling. The most solid and engaging sections of *The Child Figure in English Literature* are those devoted to Victorian Literature, especially Victorian prose. When discussing Dickens, Gosse, George Eliot, and James, Pattison is on sure ground. His insights are astute and stimulating and his grasp of individual works is firm and certain. Unfortunately, Pattison is less adept at handling pre-Victorian writers like Marvell, Fielding, Wordsworth, and Blake. Here his comments are frequently vague and commonplace and his reading of individual texts occasionally careless and misleading. The result is an uneven book in which sound criticism coexists with sloppy and uninspiring interpretations.

The weaker section of this book (Chapters I-11) discusses the treatment of the child in literature from Homer to Blake. Largely neglected in the writings of Classical antiquity, the child becomes more important with the emergence of Christianity and occupies a central position in the Scholastic debate between Pelagius and Augustine on the nature of Original Sin and man's fallen condition. The gist of Pattison's argument is that this debate substantially colors subsequent attitudes toward the child in English Literature. Augustine's orthodox view of the child as a flawed innocent has by far the greater impact on the literary imagination, though Pelagius's stance (the child is spiritually perfect) does surface sporadically in "heretical" writers like Rousseau and Wordsworth and, to a lesser extent, George Eliot and John Stuart Mill. The premise is interesting and Pattison is careful to explore its many nuances and implications with references to specific works.

But general thematic studies of this sort should do more than successfully apply their premises. They should illuminate the works they discuss; at the very least they should stimulate the reader to rediscover these works. Pattison does neither in his opening chapters. His comments on individual poems are cautious and unprovocative. It is hardly revealing to hear that the *Pearl* poet sees in the baptised child a priceless innocence towards which the adult dreamer of the poem strives, or that Traherne in "The Return" and Vaughan in "The Retreat" regard the child as a symbol of man's forfeited spiritual perfection. Nor is it revealing to learn that Marvell responds ambiguously to childhood, admiring the child's innocence but also accepting corrupting maturity as a stage through which the child must travel to achieve a renewed innocence. All this has been said elsewhere. Rehearsing it may serve to define the extent to which early Christian arguments on the Fall and Original Sin determines the various uses of the child figure in English poetry, but Pattison does very little for the poetry itself. This is often hurriedly dismissed.

Perhaps the hasty and premature dismissal of central ideas and works is excusably inherent in a study of this scope; the hasty and inattentive reading of literature is another matter. One can overlook Pattison's scant and tantalizing references to Locke and his inexplicably brief discussion of *Tom Jones*, a novel which he claims marks a turning point in his study since Fielding's treatment of the child looks back to the seventeenth century and forward to the Romantics. But it is not easy to overlook his distorting comments on Wordsworth, Blake, and others. To argue, for instance, that in *The Prelude* Wordsworth regards childhood as an "end in itself" and a "self-contained, mystic unit buried in the individual's past" simply misses the essence of a poem unrivalled in its treatment of the child. As Pattison himself suggests in his discussion of the "Intimations Ode," Wordsworth's concern is with growth and the vital continuity between the child and the adult; it is certainly not with the child as a self-contained creature remote from the adult world. The comments on Blake are equally misleading. To assert unequivocally that the devil is disguised in the Innocence of Blake's

Songs obscures the very point of this volume—Innocence contains as much goodness as evil and, in Blake's system, is one of the contraries necessary for progression. Maybe the devil lurks behind the ironically presented philosophy of Tom Dacre in "The Chimney Sweeper," but one wonders what Pattison would do with the non-ironic poems in *Songs of Innocence*, "Laughing Song" for instance.

My purpose here is not to interpret Wordsworth and Blake but to insist that thematic studies like this devote as much attention to the literature as to the development of theme. There is a difference between an argument whose boundaries are established prior to the composition of a book and one whose boundaries are discovered and clarified during its actual writing. The first tends to impose itself on literature whereas the second is more likely to emerge from a sensitive and conscientious response to it. Pattison's argument too often seems imposed. Too often he regards poetry as the servant of his theme rather than as the master capable of defining its boundaries and implications.

Despite the above reservations *The Child Figure in English Literature* is a useful study. As noted, the premise is interesting and Pattison is undoubtedly correct in stressing the central influence of Christian doctrine on the uses of the child in literature. His examination of the social and philosophical forces responsible for shaping the different views of childhood is illuminating and reaffirms the important connection between literature and its intellectual milieu. And finally, his discussion of Victorian prose (Chapters IV-VI) is consistently more detailed and stimulating than his earlier comments on poetry. (His comments in Chapter V on the importance of childhood perspective in autobiography are especially astute and could be expanded into a much needed study of this subject.) Pattison is definitely at his best when addressing prose, arguing here with a contagious enthusiasm which prompts one to reexperience the literature. One cannot ask more of criticism.

Like the other aspects of this book, the style is uneven. Pattison's use of language is at times loose and affected, evident in phrases like "thunderous silence that envelops the idea of childhood" in Classical antiquity (the point of this paradox is not clear), "theme of ambiguity" (is ambiguity normally a theme?) and "theme

of innocence" (will not the more common innocence do here?) At other times loosely selected diction combines with awkward syntax to produce indecipherable sentences like the following: "The sentiment of innocence [is innocence a sentiment?] that childhood evokes in Shakespeare is a felt response to the brutal condition of fallen man, and this sentiment is as strong as the fallen state against which it reacts is shown to be corrupt." Fortunately, such stylistic lapses are rare. Pattison's prose is generally clean and, unlike many critical books, refreshingly readable. I would like to see his obvious talents employed on a more focused and detailed, if less ambitious, study of this subject.

Roger Ploude

MARK SPILKA, ED.
*Towards a Poetics of Fiction:
Essays from Novel: A Forum on
Fiction, 1967-1976*
Bloomington: Indiana University
Press, 1977. Pp. 359.

This collection is almost as good as having a complete run of the journal *Novel* on one's shelves, and, in some ways it is even better, since editor Mark Spilka has arranged his selections from the early issues in thematic order. There are six main sections to his book. The first, entitled "Towards a Poetics of Fiction," which gives its name to the collection as a whole, is clearly the most important, since it consists of six essays written expressly for *Novel* and a seventh which has a direct bearing on the subject. These essays are by now required reading for any serious student of fiction theory: they are "An Approach through Structure" by Malcolm Bradbury, "An Approach through Language" by David Lodge, "An Approach through History" by Frank Kermode, "An Approach through Narrative" by Barbara Hardy, "An Approach through Genre" by Robert Scholes, "An Approach through Time" by Eleanor N. Hutchens, and bringing up the rear, "The Problem with a Poetics of the Novel" by Walter L. Reed, who takes