BOOK REVIEWS

Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xii + 260 pp.

Rather than the volume of literary criticism one might have expected, Geoffrey Hartman's most recent book offers an "intervention" (a term Hartman employs following Adorno's usage, 229) in the fuss surrounding the rise of cultural studies to curricular dominance. The book's thirteen essays address the possibility of authenticity in a world flooded by simulacra and develop the analysis of this question into a counterstatement on the institutional hegemony of what Hartman describes as "aggressively pragmatic" cultural studies (213). The "norm of inclusiveness" (197) and "ethos of cultural retrieval" (198) in this discipline, the argument goes, fail to temper an ineradicable reality hunger and thus counterproductively provoke a purgative political nostalgia for an allegedly more real past. Against this, Hartman's plea for an aesthetic education stakes the authority of the whole of his *oeuvre*: the theoretical statements on textuality, making up the book's third and best part, rework the conclusions of the readings dominating Hartman's works till, roughly, *Saving the Text*, his 1981 engagement with Derrida, while the overall analysis derives its grave "cultural and political urgency" (viii) from the investment in Holocaust remembrance that has accompanied his increasingly ethical criticism since then.

The problematic of survivor testimonies occupies the whole second part of the book and, for two interrelated reasons, constitutes the most dramatic application of Hartman's cultural analysis. First, our postmodernity confronts an increasing derealization of the world due to the overkill of simulacra. The corollary of this is an unsatisfiable reality hunger exemplified most distressingly by a "memory envy" aimed at Holocaust survivors, because of the second and third generations' "lack of something more collectively defining" (79). Second, this derealization is crucially brought on by the "mediaturn," that is, by the media's claim to being "a medium rather than a mediation" (68), while it is on these media that the survival of the testimonies depends. Both issues urge the question of authenticity, and although this is the least theoretical part of the book, it is the only one in which Hartman ventures beyond the reticence marking the subtitle's implicit double negative.

Throughout the second part of the book – but especially in the essay "Testimony and Authenticity" – Hartman articulates the urgency of these issues drawing upon his own experience as founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive. "Testimony and Authenticity" is an important essay that collocates Hartman's very concrete remarks on his own approach with a critique of the work of Giorgio Agamben, whose dominant reliance on abstract theoretical reflection fails to do justice to the uniqueness of the Holocaust. "By substituting an eloquent generalization for close, empirical study," Agamben's position neglects "thousands of survivor testimonies that actually exist" (90). This insistence on the urgency of the issue at hand is characteristically followed by the most theoretical part of the book, the essay "The Letter as Revenant," which offers a remarkable dehellenization of Hartman's important article "From the Sublime to the Hermeneutic" (in *The Fate of Reading* [1975]), in advocating a now emphatically Judaic "lettrist" (cf. 116) refusal "to go into exile from the word" (117). I find it Hartman's most cogent articulation yet of one of his abiding concerns, and a remarkable twist in his vision of literary history. The dechristianization of this imperative to resist an "imperious spiritualism" (106), which Hartman earlier situated in Hegel, signals one of the book's more implicit themes, the impatience with a "Christian ideology," both in its aggressive absolutization of the opposition between spirit and letter and in its survival in postmodern discourses of a hypocritical "weak thought." This essay is followed by the reprinted Tanner Lecture "Text and Spirit," which offers a first example of what a more spiritual "lettrism" might look like. This splendid text shows Hartman, in the dialectical movement between a meditation on the use of the word *ruach* in the Bible, Fortune Cookies, and Emily Dickinson, closer than ever to the ideal of a broadly humanistic philology he so admires in Erich Auerbach.

The movements between different essays I have just suggested reflect the observation that the dialectic nature of Hartman's writing is no longer confined to individual essays but spans the book as a whole. The first of its four parts opens with fragmentary juxtapositions of illustrations of our present reality hunger and tentative envisionings of art's ability to moderate that impatience, the latter warranting the urgency of reconsidering the "authenticity" and the "spirit" in the book's title as "a way of linking ethical talk to art once more" (48). After the further substantiation of its timeliness in the second part, and after the articulation of a theoretical alternative to the medial ghosting of reality in an enriched notion of textuality, the last part of the book confronts the affirmative identity politics of cultural studies as we know it head-on: cultural studies contribute to our "visceral feeling of identity lack" (x); by providing ever unreal simulacra, they "incite . . . a concern about value relativism and national disintegration. A reactive cultural politics . . . may try to resimplify the past and tame diversity once more through a moralistic, self-affirming overview of an age or nation" (197). The alternative to this, then, is allaying that desire for the real by insisting on a (textual) "rich darkness or non-transparence" (52) which it is the task of an aesthetic education to teach.

Contributing most to the book's overarching narrative elegance and argumentative thrust is the closure provided by the epilogue; its title, "9/11," serves as the label of the ultimate confirming application of the preceding analysis – by both naming an event inspired by the fear of "the *real presence* of falsity" (235), which fosters the illusion that spectacular acts can convey agency or self-identity, and by itself performing a "rhetoric of specificity" that serves as America's "emotional stopwatch," punctuating life "with traumatic or near-apocalyptic effect" (232). It might equally appropriately have been called "QED."

Not the least tempting misreading of Hartman's intervention would be to construe it as opposing any form of cultural studies. Actually, his appraisal of trauma studies and the Law and Literature movement as the best instances of cultural studies is fair and sympathetic. Nor can Hartman ignore the fact that an outright misrecognition of certain minorities on a cultural level – which a mere dismissal of cultural studies would entail – is at least as effective a recipe for fundamentalist apocalyptic disaster as cultural studies' ever unsatisfying advocation of them. The fact that this is not mentioned, the overtly polemical make-up of the argument, and the unquestioned adoption of the ideal of social change unmistakably point at the book's ambition to engage cultural studies on their own terms, inspired by the institutional inhibitions pertaining to a happily tenured co-existence of both affirmative cultural studies as we know them and the critical corrective of aesthetic criticism. As these forces dictate a choice between the two necessary components making up what Hartman has called a successful

"Philomela project," restoring voice to inarticulate people, the only hope resides in teaching an "aesthetic virtue of attentiveness" that moderates this impatience for a distinct identity and teaches "to respect a phenomenological blankness or indeterminacy at the heart of things" (142). And as it is Hartman's firm conviction that "there is no other way to strengthen aesthetic education than to expose students to art itself and to those who have written passionately and critically about it" (215–16), the place of cultural studies in the curriculum is called into doubt.

Hartman's adherence to this "face-to-face with the text" becomes most emphatic in the remarkably pointed dismissal of Vattimo's *The Transparent Society*. The exposition of the latter's advocacy of non-transparency initially reads like the envisioned implementation of Hartman's analysis, only to be dismissed for, first, failing to properly distinguish the specificity of "the art in art" in assigning "an ethical and resistant value to popular culture" (146) and, second, for underestimating the proliferating derealization by the media, whose representations of identity can never foster a sufficiently embodied frame for any culture to give up identity politics.

Vattimo's transition from this textual non-transparency to a transparent "media-disseminated multiculturalism" (147) approaches the core of Hartman's analysis, when it allows for the juxtaposition of fundamentalism and postmodern "weak thought":

> It is a mistake to erect these alternatives into sheer opposites. The "darkness" of fundamentalism is often supported by a claim that Scripture has a univocal kind of transparency, and the "lightness" of postmodern thought, while promoting a maximum of political openness, insists on the darkness (nontransparency) of texts. (149)

This sounds too easy, too symmetrical; and it is on the basis of such effects, which the book produces repeatedly, that I want to voice what I see as its main problem. *Scars of the Spirit* derives its motivating urgency from the absence of exposure to "those who have written passionately and critically about" literature. It cannot, therefore, assume familiarity with the complex genealogy of the analysis just quoted in, most obviously, Adorno's reaction to the extremes of positivism and jargons of authenticity, which were, in their turn, reactions to the Kantian problematization of representation. In Hartman's *Easy Pieces* (1985), representation was posited as the "unexcludable middle," and art was attributed the function of teaching that. This analysis has its roots in Hartman as early as *Wordsworth's Poetry* (1964), which advocated this poetry for its insistence on the reciprocal mediation of nature and imagination, a claim which *Scars of the Spirit* invokes (albeit in the discussion of Goethe, whose appearance in the fourth part of the book is almost too Wordsworthian to be adequate). Yet this invocation is not accompanied by the strong readings which used to be Hartman's hallmark. This approach is not convincing in the case of such dauntlingly complex writers as Adorno and Blanchot, to name two of the book's important references; nor is it adequate for the subtlety with which Hartman has credited Wordsworth. So, while Hartman is right to link the present book's concern to that of his first book, *The Unmediated Vision* (1954), by the rules of the game he has decided to play, this is irrelevant. The legitimacy of the plea for aesthetic education relies on Hartman's impressive *oeuvre*, which the book cannot make present to its reader. The book's reception, it is to be feared, will suffer from its assumption that the impressive labor reported in its first three parts suffices to warrant the legitimacy of its concluding polemic: in the academic climate they critique, this assumption cannot be easily sustained. In another borrowing from Adorno, Hartman describes the book's activity as "homeopathic," but it is to be feared that its envisioned antidote will restlessly dissolve in the infinitely tolerant inclusiveness of its target-milieu. Given the strong theoreticization of textuality, the novelty of its modification of literary history, and the beginnings of what may develop into a full-fledged media theory, one can only hope that Hartman's analysis will prove too pessimistic and that the book may yet find the audience it deserves.

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Peter Brown, ed. *A Companion to Chaucer*. Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture 6. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000 (pb. 2002). 515 pp.

This hefty volume will be of use to all those who wish to have a cutting-edge introduction to Chaucer scholarship at the beginning of the new millennium. However, in addition to serving this primary, and relatively small audience, the volume's twenty-nine chapters provide a fine introduction to contemporary Anglo-American medieval literary and cultural studies in general. The twenty-nine different authors (all are listed below) whom editor Peter Brown has commissioned comprise a "Who's Who" in the field of Chaucer and Middle English studies. To be sure, there are more systematic and concise introductions to Chaucer on the market – other "Companions" that proceed work by work, treat general topics such as manuscripts, editions, and critical approaches, and are strictly focused on Chaucer.[1] But no other introduction to Chaucer is so completely up-to-date with respect to contemporary theoretical concerns.[2]

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[1] The three most widely used compendia of general Chaucer criticism (as opposed to the many collections of essays on the *Canterbury Tales*) are the now-dated *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) and *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; with a second edition announced for December 2003); and the three volumes of *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Clarendon): Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 1989; Barry Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1992; and Alastair Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 1995.

[2] Missing (in a book which has something about almost everything else that is relevant to the contemporary study of Chaucer): some notice of the postcolonial Chaucer, studied,