

gressive language, one in a slow decline, one in the ascendant as what she and Norbert Elias call “the civilizing process” (19) exerts increasing control over European minds and mores.

Despite its drawbacks, *The Reinvention of Obscenity* has much for readers interested in early modern French print culture. For more in-depth histories of obscenity, especially in Italy and England, pick up instead *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, edited by Lynn Hunt, or Ian Moulton’s *Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England*.

Roger D. Sell. *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000. xiv + 348 pp. \$95.00. *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001. x + 431pp. \$85.00. Review by ALAN RUDRUM, SIMONFRASER UNIVERSITY.

I began to read *Literature as Communication* a short while before September 11, 2001. The events of that day drove me to Robert Fisk’s *Pity the Nation* and related books by Jonathan Randal, Noam Chomsky, and Edward Said. In my institution, a prolonged and rancorous e-mail war broke out, in which any attempt to contextualize 9/11 was treated as anti-American and anti-semitic, as was any suggestion that the incursion into Afghanistan would be no more effective in combating terrorism than the 1982 invasion of Lebanon had been in finishing off the PLO.

The point of this recollection is the relevance of Sell’s project to consideration of “the clash of cultures.” *Literature as Communication* is prefaced by quotations from Stuart Hampshire, Isaiah Berlin, and K. Anthony Appiah, all of which formulate the need for empathy. Hampshire recalls the vision of Heraclitus, that “life, and liveliness within the soul and within society, consists in perpetual conflicts between rival impulses and ideals, and that justice presides over the hostilities and finds sufficient compromises to pre-

vent madness in the soul, and civil war or war between peoples." Sell's two books are of interest to all teachers of literature, since they encourage us to think about the value of what we do and about the ways in which we should do it. They are of special interest to those who teach the literature of past centuries, or in multicultural contexts, or in countries where religious and cultural values are quite different from those of the West. The distance from our own culture that we encounter in literature of the past requires mental and emotional processes akin to those needed to understand cultures of the present which may seem intensely alien and, if only for that reason, threatening. Those of us who are steeped in the language, literature, and history of a particular period need to remember that our pupils are not: good teaching will involve some withholding of what we know so as to create a space in which they can make discoveries, instead of merely being told about things. That can be difficult to do. Indeed a weakness of this interesting book, published in the series *Pragmatics and Beyond*, may be that its author, steeped in the language of pragmatics and of his fellow researchers, sometimes forgets Orwell's rule of "using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning" (*Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, London, 1950: 99-100).

Sell has long taught in Finland, and is therefore familiar with the problems of mediating English literature to students for whom English is not their first language. He will surely read with interest Azar Nafisi's recent *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which recounts how *Lolita* becomes a quite different book when read by a Muslim for whom the girl is not under-age, since in the Iranian version of Islamic law, girls can be given in marriage at the age of nine. To the more pious Muslim student, it is obvious that *Lolita* is a harlot who has seduced Humbert into sin. Nafisi records an encounter with an Islamic fundamentalist student who, inspired by the Qur'an and Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, denounced *Mansfield Park* as an anti-Islamic work that condoned slavery (*The Times Literary Supplement*, July 4, 2003, 36). As the reviewer points out, more attention has been given to who reads books than to where books are read. Temporal distance may result in less dramatic need for mediating

criticism than geographical distance; but I encountered an amusing example after an afternoon spent reading Sell's book. I assume that in 1945 Hitchcock's film *Spellbound*, with its dream sequence by Salvador Dali, may have been taken straight as a psychological thriller. In 2003 it looked like a hilarious send-up of the psycho-analytic enterprise.

Sell views literature within the framework of a general theory of communication, without denying that literary texts may have features of content, form and style not often found elsewhere. Orwell wrote that "no book is genuinely free from political bias" (*Collected Essays*, reprint 1982: 26). Sell would agree, in the sense that he sees communication as generally meant to *achieve* something, to *enact* something in the world. Some readers will recall his distinctive 1987 essay, "The Unstable Discourse of Henry Vaughan: A Literary-Pragmatic Account." It seems appropriate that Vaughan's poem "The Match," clearly addressed to George Herbert, should come to mind: "Here I join hands, and thrust my stubborn heart / Into thy *Deed*, / There from no *Duties* to be freed." Here there are puns on the legal and the non-technical senses of "*Deed*" and "*Duties*." Vaughan is thinking of Herbert's poems both as a legacy and as an act to which he responds by acting himself. This instance, from a writer who is also a reader, supports Sell's view that literary works are acts which may result in transformations in the world. This view has not been universal within the past half-century of literary theory. Paul de Man argued that Rousseau's accusing the servant-girl of a crime he had committed himself was "merely" a piece of language; the fact that unpleasant consequences ensued for the servant girl was due to the obtuseness of the presiding judges who took Rousseau's words as something more than "just" words (50). This example may be especially telling, given what was later learned of De Man's record; but it slotted neatly into the prevalent view of creative literature as a "heterocosm," a world set quite apart from day-to-day communication.

Sell begins *Mediating Criticism* by sketching the history of the rise of professionalism in literary studies, with its analogy to the rise of Modernism in literature, and points out problems that may

arise when we lose touch with "what non-academic readers experience as reality." The essays in this book are meant as practical demonstrations of the concerns discussed in *Literature as Communication*. Sell's aim is to have Saintsbury's "energy, enthusiasm and breadth," while taking into account, and having positions on, "more than a century of intense theoretical discussion" (13). His subjects range from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. The book is divided into three parts. The first ("Empathizing") calls for reconsideration of the novelist William Gerhardie and the poet Andrew Young. The second ("Recognizing Achievement") deals with T. S. Eliot, Henry Vaughan, *Dombey and Son*, and Robert Frost. The third ("Responding to Hopefulness") looks at Frost and Dickens from a different perspective and ends with an essay on "Fielding's reluctant naturalism." Not everybody would think of juxtaposing Dickens and Vaughan in the same sentence, but Sell does so very effectively (16-17). "The impoliteness of *The Waste Land*" is of special interest to readers of this journal, given Eliot's influence on seventeenth century studies, through his essays on Milton and on the Metaphysical poets.

Most of us, perhaps the majority, teach outside our specialism. It can be difficult to find time to take stock of what we do and why we do it. I enjoyed these two books because they took me to authors I had not read, or had not read for some time; and I enjoyed too writing my own version in my head as I went along. The chapter on Vaughan might profitably have taken into account more of the work published in *Scintilla* in the past ten years or so; the account of the deixis of "I walked the other day" (160) comes a little too close to the mathematical permutations in Beckett's *Watt* which most of us skip on a second reading. The reading of that poem would have gained from reference to Peter M. Sacks's splendid book, *The English Elegy*. More generally, attention to Gadamer is good, but why so little to E. D. Hirsch? If "modernist gloom," has a bracing effect worth writing about, why not say more about Samuel Beckett and the more recent example of bracing gloom in the work of J. M. Coetzee? If one accepts Sell's view of literature as doing work in the world, how do we think about the widening

of the canon of literature in English? It answers to legitimate concerns, but is it cost-free? Does it make for a more or a less cohesive society? One might ask a similar question about the abandonment, in liturgical contexts, of the Bible in the King James Version. Because both these books positively invite such participation and such questions, both are good “machines for thinking with.”

William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe. *Alchemy Tried in the Fire: Starkey, Boyle, and the Fate of Helmontian Chymistry*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xiv + 344 pp. + 8 illus. \$40.00. Review by LUCIANO BOSCHIERO, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

Historians of science have often questioned the practices of the early modern alchemists; what type of experiments, if any, did they carry out? Precisely what literary sources did alchemists use during the Middle Ages and the Scientific Revolution? And what influence did alchemical studies have on the history of science? With the help of some important manuscript sources, Newman and Principe offer some enlightening answers to these questions. Through the laboratory notes of seventeenth-century American alchemist, George Starkey, these authors provide a rare insight into the field of alchemy. In the process, Newman and Principe also claim that they hope to dispel traditional myths and misconceptions about alchemy/chymistry (Newman and Principe interchange the term “alchemy” with “chymistry”, as if they were synonymous), including the notion that chymists were interested only in finding occult qualities and spiritual harmonies in nature. According to Newman and Principe, this position mistakenly assumes that alchemists offered nothing of value to the emergence of “new science” in the second half of the seventeenth century, since a break supposedly occurred in that period, in which scholastics and alchemists were replaced by experimenting mathematicians.

In 1650, George Starkey moved from America to England in order to meet and work with others interested in alchemy and