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that one is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish."

**CAMP GROUNDS: Style and Homosexuality.** Ed. by David Bergman. Univ. of Mass. 312 pp. \$45

"To talk about camp is to betray it," wrote Susan Sontag in 1964. Sontag then proceeded to betray it at length, defining camp as "a certain sort of aestheticism" that elevates objects "not in terms of Beauty, but in terms of degree of artifice, of stylization." Camp offers a chance to be serious about the frivolous (e.g., Tiffany lamps) and frivolous about the serious ("Swan Lake"). Even though "homosexuals . . . constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp," Sontag wrote, "Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste." As a purely aesthetic phenomenon, camp remains "disengaged, depoliticized, or at least, apolitical."

For nearly 30 years, academics considered Sontag's "Notes on Camp" the last word on the subject. But in today's world of cultural studies, gay studies, and women's studies, new interpretations of camp are emerging. Bergman, a professor of English at Towson State University, and most of the essayists he includes in *Camp Grounds*, believe Sontag failed to fully grasp the essential connection between camp and "homosexual culture." Far more than simply a type of aestheticism, camp has a subversive, or even emancipatory, potential: It represents a form of protest against conventional gender roles. Camp works by "drawing attention to the artifice of the gender system through exaggeration, parody, and juxtaposition," writes Bergman.

While the most obvious example of the politically subversive potential of camp remains the drag queen and his/her exaggerated feminine mannerisms, the essays here bring up far more ambiguous instances. Jack Babuscio invokes camp to explain why many gay moviegoers identify not with char-

acters *in* a movie but with the personal lives of the stars themselves: Gays and those who "camp" understand how nebulous are the apparently sharp boundaries between play-acting and "acting normal." Pamela Robertson, writing about Mae West, argues that "camp enabled [her fans] to view women's everyday roles as female impersonation."

*Camp Grounds* is a valuable corrective to the blinkered aestheticism that Sontag's essay encouraged. Not only has camp been a useful political tool for homosexuals, but, as Bergman notes, our culture's "natural" and normative heterosexuality has always been one of camp's central targets. Unfortunately, Bergman and many of his contributing essayists often press their claims too far, ascribing to camp a political simplemindedness that looks suspiciously like the moral (or moralistic) platform of a trendy academic of the '90s. Camp can make a political statement, but it is not merely a political statement. If camp serves as a reminder to the complacent that all chosen roles are, to some degree, theatrical, the lesson should apply as much to the role of serious academic as to any other.

**THE OLD MODERNS: Essays on Literature and Theory.** By Denis Donoghue. Knopf. 303 pp. \$27.50

To many contemporary literary critics, the modernist tradition, with its emphasis on subjectivity and the internalization of images and events, is not only elitist and reactionary but dead, replaced by the more open, accessible, and democratic playfulness of postmodernism. Donoghue, who teaches English and American literature at New York University, begs to differ. The "interiority" of modernist writers, he argues, is an authentic and enduring realm of imaginative freedom: "Thinking, feeling, reverie: the pleasures of these are self-evident, they don't have to be judged upon their results or upon their consequence as action in the world."

In *The Old Moderns*, which contains 17 elegant essays, some previously published, Donoghue defends literary subjectivity on another front as well. Today's critics impose upon literature their own political or philosophical beliefs, often purposefully stifling the voice of the author. In fact, literary theory has hardened into such dogma that there's not much one can do with it except force



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"it upon your poems as if they could have no other desire than to receive such overbearing attention." Donoghue argues that literature should be read as literature—that is, with disinterested aesthetic appreciation, "as practices of experience to be imagined." These practices are related to such areas as religion, politics, and economics, but they should not be confused with them.

Donoghue's own critical restraint begins with his definition of modernism. For the sake of argument he settles upon one particular meaning, but acknowledges that "a different account of it would be just as feasible." Donoghue links the rise of literary modernism to the growth of cities in the 19th century, specifically to the situation of individuals who found their individuality threatened by mass society and the crowd. In response, the modernist mind turned inward, to ponder the validity of its feelings. Modernism was thus the result of writers perceiving "their development as an inner drama, rather than as a willing engagement with the contents of the objective culture."

Donoghue continues to demonstrate his notion of restraint in his close but never overbearing reading of works by such modernist heroes as Henry James, Wallace Stevens, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. In essays refreshingly free of literary jargon, Donoghue succeeds at making the literature more important than the criticism.

Ironically, Donoghue notes, theorists who judge literature by its political relevance undermine the power of art to affect the world: "The supreme merit of art is that it contradicts the version of reality that obtains in social and economic life." Moreover, "introspection is not the puny, self-regarding act it is commonly said to be but an act of ethical and moral bearing by which the mind, in privacy, imagines lives other than its own. The chief justification for reading literature is that it trains the reader in the exercise of that imagination."

**THE KING OF INVENTORS: A Life of Wilkie Collins.** By Catherine Peters. Princeton Univ. Press. 502 pp. \$29.95

No one unnerves quite like Wilkie Collins. This writer of thrillers and mysteries was to the Victorian age what Stephen King and Ellery Queen are to ours. Even today his novels remind one of the

power of words to immobilize and terrify. Collins (1824–89) invented the "novel of sensation," and his acknowledged masterwork, the hugely popular *Woman in White* (1860), has yet to be bettered. The "'creepy' effect, as of pounded ice dropped down the neck," as his contemporary Edmund Yates put it, comes not only from an ability to spring unearthly images on the reader ("the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments"), but from the way these phantasms crop up in the most everyday of locations. Collins is also known for his precise catalogue of the byzantine moral and sexual codes of his era. As Peters's detailed biography suggests, Collins acquired at least some of his expertise from his own spectacularly polygamous life. He spent most of his adult years with two women, Martha Rudd and Caroline Graves, marrying neither and having children by both.

"Keeping" mistresses was hardly novel, of course, and having a double life never got the average Victorian gentleman barred from any club. But Collins's doubling was different. He never undertook to conceal the staid bohemianism of his common-law marriages. And while Rudd and Graves made little headway in the public world, and the taint of bastardy certainly handicapped his children's rise to respectability in later life, Collins was able to circulate freely among the cream as well as the dregs of London's society.

Unfortunately, Peters is reluctant to make any explicit connections between Collins's life and work. She never asks how an author whose best work depended on titillation, terror, and transgression managed to create for himself a space of unparalleled domestic tranquillity (in fact, two such spaces) outside social boundaries. But Peters does explain why Collins's writing took a nose dive after 1868. A mere 45, he was apparently at the peak of his powers, having produced since 1860 not just his two most famous novels (*The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*) but also such gems as *No Name* and *Armadale*. Most likely, his best work was done during the decade he spent being tutored by and collaborating with Charles Dickens. After his mentor's death in 1870, Collins yielded completely to his penchant for pedantic explanation. Worse, he seems to have forgotten how to combine social analysis with spine-tingling *frisson*.

Collins concluded an 1888 magazine article with