
transition entails Calasso traces through his random (but artfully so) disposition of the text, and that apparent randomness comes to mirror the disconnectedness of modern consciousness itself, which Calasso believes has severed all ties to a larger sustaining realm.

Calasso builds much of his case around Charles Maurice de Talleyrand (1754–1838), the French statesman who leaped from regime to regime and from era to era with a cat's ease. Before the French Revolution, Talleyrand was a very worldly Catholic bishop, and he later observed that those who never knew the ancien régime would never know the sweetness of life. Yet Talleyrand went on to support the Revolution and then to serve the Directory, Napoleon, and finally the restored House of Bourbon. Talleyrand presides as master of ceremonies here because he achieved a wholeness despite historical ruptures and discordancies; even his deathbed reconciliation with the church managed to round the circle of his various life interests.

In addition to Talleyrand, Calasso's cast includes—and this is a mere sampling—French kings and Vedic seers, Plato, Marx (Karl, though Groucho might easily have found a place), Jeremy Bentham, Hegel, Max Stirner, Charles Baudelaire, Pol Pot, and Cecil B. De Mille. The list suggests a larger degree of playfulness than the book generally manages. For Calasso writes in a tone of icy and ironic omniscience that one might call Olympian but for a suspicion that he would prefer something a bit higher. Himalayan, say. Consider: "If we really must find a distinction between what can be said of the Modern and everything that we encounter in previous ages, might it not perhaps be a certain ability . . . to ignore limitations even when explicitly defending them—to invade every off-limits area, perhaps on the pretext of guarding it against all violations?"

This is pure Calasso. The observation is striking (and may even be true), and the pair of hedging *perhaps*'s is entirely in character. But the sentence only finally appears on page 293 of a book that has labored mightily, up to that point, precisely to find a distinction between the modern and what came before.

Under the circumstances, the "If we really must" is maddening and provokes an exasperated "Well, whose idea was this anyway?" No matter: the reader who takes to the extraordinary mind will readily forgive the manner.

THE WESTERN CANON: The Books and School of the Ages. By Harold Bloom. Harcourt Brace. 578 pp. \$29.95

A reader could grow hoarse talking back to this book—at times in annoyance, more often in admiration. Bloom teaches literature at both Yale and New York universities, and *The Western Canon* is his summation of a lifetime of reading great literature as well as watching what he considers its growing debasement in the universities and schools.

Bloom has always been a critic provocateur. As such, he attaches three appendices that identify what's canonical down through the 19th century and a somewhat diffident fourth appendix about the 20th century that he calls "a canonical prophesy." It is these lists, which go on for 36 pages and are, by turns, traditional, quirky, and tentative, that have made the book controversial. They also have diverted attention from *The Western Canon*'s larger achievement.

For the Greeks a *kanon* was a rod or bar used to keep things straight. Today, the word *canon* has been stripped of its original and all subsequent meanings but one: the body of work that has kept the study of literature fixated on the writings of dead, mostly white, mostly European, mostly male authors. Antagonists of Bloom's idea of a canon now command the academy—feminists, Marxists, Afrocentrists, New Historicists, Deconstructors—all of whom he ridicules for their insistence that literature must serve political and social ends. "One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength," he argues, by "mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction."

In the beginning and concluding chapters, Bloom mourns the current loss of concern for preserving a tradition of great literature.

These two elegiac chapters serve as bookends for 21 essays on individual authors whom Bloom believes most important "for both their sublimity and their representative nature." By focusing on individual writers, Bloom can put into practice his famous theory of literary influence. Indeed, what is best about *The Western Canon* is the way Bloom reads the writers against one another—ingeniously, persuasively, implausibly. Writers go at each other in these pages head-to-head like sumo wrestlers. The most powerful figure with whom they all must contend is Shakespeare—for Bloom, "the largest writer we ever will know," his hero, idol, god, the Western canon all compact in a single vessel. This book is Bloom's homage to Shakespeare, and one likes to imagine the playwright responding in kind: "Here is a reader! When comes such another?" When indeed?

Philosophy & Religion

NET OF MAGIC: Wonders and Deceptions in India. By Lee Siegel. Univ. of Chicago. 455 pp. \$60 (hardback); \$19.95 (paper)

Twice as sonorous as "abracadabra" is the invocation that begins an Indian magic show: *yantru-mantru-jalajala-tantru*. In India the changing phenomena of daily life are considered to be "maya" or illusion, and so a book about the profession of illusion, or magic, promises to be a rather revealing affair. *Net of Magic* indeed makes a good introduction to contemporary India because it captures so zestfully that country's noises, odors, sensory feel, tumult, and contradictions. Siegel, professor of religion at the University of Hawaii and the author of *Laughing Matters: Comic Tradition in India* (1987), describes, for example, riding out to the Delhi slum where street magicians reside, and his prose rhythms duplicate the swelter and back-and-forth rocking of the taxi: "The hot and dusty breath of the earth, the pant and moan of it, and the hot and rude rub of the sky, the growl and grunt of it, were inescapable."

The book has no shortage of magic. Small boys are decapitated and their heads grow

back, mango trees spring up instantly from dust, pigeons turn into pigs. But for those who want to believe in a world of wonders—bad news. Asked by Siegel if there was *real* magic, one magician answered, "No, but I shouldn't ever say it. I earn a living only if people believe... at least in the possibility of miracles. But there are no real miracles, and all the holy men and god-men, Sai Baba and Jesus and other men like them, are just doing tricks, tricks that I can do, that I can teach you to do." This relation between magic and miracle, between staged spectacles and genuine religion, is at the heart of Siegel's investigation. When Paul Brunton wrote *A Search in Secret India* (1934), that country was synonymous in the Western imagination with everything mystical, mysterious, occult. A half-century later, *Net of Wonders* makes India seem the last place to look for religion, a country where, for foreigners, religion is a tourist attraction—with Hinduism as India's Disneyland—and for Indians, a set of mundane rituals without epiphany, without *frisson*.

Siegel's argument, however, is that, while the miracles of religion and the allure of magic may be false scientifically, they can be "true" aesthetically, in their emotional appeal. He



wants to recreate that emotional experience of Indian magic for Western readers, and his approach resembles Robert-Houdin's *Confessions of a Prestidigitator* (1859), in which the famous magician wrote, "My audience shall be my reader, my stage this book." Like a good magician, Siegel also keeps changing per-

spectives, from analyzing ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts to reporting his own travels with Indian magicians to writing fictional short stories about their inner world. "As I leave the plane and make my way toward the counter—Indian Immigration and Customs," so his narrative starts, "I sense that the magic show is