across instead of more than six miles.

A network of solar power satellites, the authors contend, could supply enough electrical power "to satisfy the needs of the human race through the next century." They admit, however, that they have a lot of convincing to do in the United States. Although Japan's Ministry of Technology and Industry has already sponsored the design of a prototype orbiter, solar power satellites were not even mentioned in a recent U.S. National Academy of Sciences study of energy alternatives.

ARTS & LETTERS

The Coward's Art

"Echo and Narcissus: The Fearful Logic of Postmodern Thought" by David Bosworth, in *The Georgia Review* (Fall 1997), Univ. of Georgia, Athens, Ga. 30602–9009.

What are the forces that drive the postmodern sensibility? asks novelist Bosworth, author of *From My Father, Singing* (1989). "Why in our time (to cite just some of the signal shifts in value enacted by postmodern thought) has parody replaced parable, sign replaced symbol, repetition replaced originality, monologue replaced dialogue, and the celebrity replaced the hero?"

Much of the art and thought since World War II exhibits, to one degree or another, "either mechanical mimicry or obsessive self-absorption," Bosworth contends—and these "recall, with eerie exactitude, the fates prescribed for Echo and Narcissus." The nymph Echo, in punishment for deceiving a god, is condemned never to speak an original word again, while the handsome youth Narcissus, as a curse for coldly rejecting the love of others, is made to fall in love with his own reflection. "The one unable to express herself, the other unable to see beyond himself, each is estranged not only from reciprocal love but from any form of intimate exchange," writes Bosworth. "Each is destined to pine away in a perpetually punishing loneliness."

What is now called the "postmodern" sensibility, he notes, emerged during the 1960s with the arrival of pop art. Andy Warhol, the pop art eminence and "most influential visual artist of the last 50 years," chose Echo's imposed fate, Bosworth points out. "The very model of Echo's form of 'servomechanism,' Warhol copies the world and then copies his copy again and again. An exact replica of a soup can becomes a hundred replicas ('100 Campbell's Soup Cans') which then become '200 Campbell's Soup Cans.' A photographic copy of the Mona Lisa is then multiplied into four copies ('Four Mona Lisas') which then become a frame arrayed with 30 copies, six by five."

Warhol provides the most extreme example, but milder versions of postmodern Echo abound and can be found in virtually every area of contemporary culture, Bosworth says. In music, for instance, there is "the rise of minimalism and New Age soporifics with their mechanical repetition of simple melodies and rhythms."

Postmodern Narcissus also has become ubiquitous, Bosworth says. In literature, autobiography and memoir have become more popular than fictional narrative; in philosophy, "an extreme relativity verging on solipsism, the denial that there is a knowable truth beyond one's own thoughts," has become fashionable. In the visual arts, "various forms of exhibitionist self-portraiture" have come into vogue. The internationally acclaimed photographer Yasumasa Morimura, for instance, photographs the figurative paintings of such past masters as Rembrandt and van Gogh; then, through computer imaging, he substitutes his own face for each of the characters' faces within the frame. "I express Rembrandt's theme better than he did," Morimura has boasted.

"The need to make the outside world disappear by masking its existence with reflections of one's Self . . . when considered along with the opposite yet complementary need to make one's Self disappear by reducing one's own expressions to mere reflections of that world (the total self-effacement of Warhol's tape recorder, his *choosing* to become Echo in her cave), would seem to suggest a deep fear of reality," writes Bosworth. "Or rather, a deep fear of *knowing* reality."

"Most of postmodern art's favorite strategies—repetition, collage, opacity, parody—are strategies of concealment rather than conveyance," he observes. "Most of the

claims of the criticism implicitly allied with that art—that language can only refer to itself, that there is no objective reality—are trying to insist that the mind *is* its own place and so, in some sense, safe. . . .

"Yet like echolalia and narcissism, the pathologies it mimics, postmodern logic," Bosworth warns, "can supply only the opposite of what it would advertise: instead of immunity, ignorance; instead of real mastery, the fantasy of triumph that only ignorance allows."

The Eurocentric Error

Michael Lind, a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine* (Feb. 1998), on the sources of post–World War II America's misguided infatuation with European culture:

For a generation of American literary academics, the most influential postwar literary critic was not Edmund Wilson or F. O. Matthiessen, both of whom wrote brilliantly about American literature, but Lionel Trilling. To my mind, it is odd enough that T. S. Eliot, a St. Louis native who had converted himself into a cartoon of an Englishman, and Ezra Pound, an Idaho-born professor who had transformed himself into a Mediterranean fascist, were held up to my classmates and me [at the University of Texas at Austin in the late 1970s]*—in lieu, I suppose, of real Europeans, whose native tongues made them less accessible to American audiences—as the fonts from which all literary wisdom flowed. But Trilling taught a generation to prefer E. M. Forster to Nelson Algren and Matthew Arnold to H. L. Mencken. He offered the children and grandchildren of immigrants to American slums from Dublin, Warsaw, and Salerno the cheap illusion of belonging to the Victorian or Edwardian gentry. He was the Ralph Lauren of American letters.*

O Pioneer?

"The Prosaic Willa Cather" by James Seaton, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1998), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Once put down by modernists as an outdated expression of Victorian genteel culture, the fiction of Willa Cather (1873–1947) is now enjoying a revival. Her chief champions are feminist literary critics, who have been busily reinterpreting her work in terms of her identity as a woman and (putatively) a lesbian.

Though the feminist approach at least has people reading Cather again, it is unlikely, argues Seaton, an English professor at Michigan State University, to long sustain her reputation as the major writer and cultural critic that she is. For Cather's status to be secure, he maintains, "the search for the origins of her opinions must give way to a renewed attempt to understand the significance of the view of the world achieved when those opinions become transmuted into novels, short stories, and essays." Whereas feminists look, for instance, to Cather's supposed lesbianism to explain why romantic love between men and women in her fiction leads to disillusion and death, while friendship nourishes and protects, Seaton sees something else at work, something linked to "her affirmation of organized religion and ordinary family life."

O Pioneers! (1913), a Cather novel set in the Nebraska prairie of the late 19th century, may seem to lend itself to a political reading. Emil Bergson and Marie Tovesky Shabata become lovers, only to be shot a few hours later by her husband, when he finds them asleep together under a white mulberry tree. Yet Seaton says that it is not simply heterosexual attraction that led the lovers astray but an unbridled "spirituality that defies human nature." She, according to the novel, was in search of "perfect love," and he, of "rapture . . . without sin."

"In contrast to such romantic spirituality," writes Seaton, stands organized religion, which, throughout Cather's fiction, figures "as