

Arts & Letters

IMPRESSIONISM: *Reflections and Perceptions.*

By Meyer Schapiro. George Braziller.
359 pp. \$50

As a professor of art history at Columbia University for many years, the inimitable Meyer Schapiro dominated the field with an approach that was at once erudite and personal. A mythic talker, Schapiro was famous for his brilliant lectures, his performance art with slides. When he died in 1996, he was in the midst of reworking a series of his lectures on Impressionism for publication. Now, thanks to the efforts of his widow and his editor, the manuscript has become a handsome hardcover book with 100 color plates.

Schapiro explains that the term *Impressionist* originated with Claude Monet's *Impression, Soleil Levant* (1872). In titling the painting, Schapiro observes, "Monet was saying that the picture was not just an image of the



Haystack at Sunset (1891) by Claude Monet

dawn" but "an effect of the scene on the eye," a perception "with its own validity." The word *impression* alluded to "the reality of the unclear and atmospheric in nature." Having seen the painting, art critic and playwright Louis Leroy began describing the style as Impressionist.

Though Schapiro recognizes "great differences" among the individual painters—he compares Paul Cézanne to a dramatist and Monet to a lyric poet—he has no qualms about treating Impressionists as a group. "All of them were devoted to an ideal of modernity . . . in opposition to the then-current official taste for history, myth and imagined worlds." All had, like the nondoctrinaire Marxist Schapiro himself, "radical aims." The author gives Monet, "the clearest and

most far-reaching in accomplishing certain broadly shared goals," a chapter to himself. Other painters come up for discussion as the historian zooms in from a high interdisciplinary altitude, tracing the influences of nature, the city, the railroad. Schapiro goes on to show how the Impressionist cast of mind extended beyond the visual arts to literature (the prose of Henry James), photography, science, and history. A polymath and, like the British historian Paul Johnson, very much a connector of dots, Schapiro comfortably moves from realm to realm, epoch to epoch, macro to micro.

For the author, context—the historical, philosophical, and political realities within which people struggle to define their lives and ideas—is everything. Art, in his view, is much more than the dry confines of the finished canvas. Where the late critic Clement Greenberg sees formalism and a precursor to Cubism in the work of Cézanne, for example, Schapiro sees deeply repressed sexuality, an all-too-human art.

The author was fond of quoting the 18th-century poet Edward Young, who observed that we are born originals and die copies. Meyer Schapiro, who began life as just another Jewish immigrant off the boat from Eastern Europe, did the reverse.

—A. J. Hewat

THE BIRTH OF BEBOP: *A Social and Musical History.*

By Scott DeVeaux. Univ. of California Press. 572 pp. \$45.

When did jazz become *modern jazz*? "Such a question," writes DeVeaux, a professor of music at the University of Virginia, "is typically parried with mystification—'If you've got to ask, you'll never know.'" Fortunately, there is very little mystification in this thoughtful and meticulous study of a pivotal period in American culture: the early 1940s, when a coterie of dance band musicians created the demanding style of modern jazz known as bebop.

DeVeaux scrutinizes the two "master narratives" that are commonly used to explain the origin of bebop. The first is the "evolutionary approach," preferred by critics and musicologists. It acknowledges the disruptive originality of such figures as Charlie Parker,

Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, but defines it as one more development in the century-old jazz tradition. The second master narrative is “the trope of revolution,” brandished by those who find in music “evidence of broader social or political currents.” In this view, bebop is both a radical break with the musical past and the prelude to Black Power, “a rebellion by black musicians against a white-controlled capitalist hegemony.”

DeVeaux tests the “lofty abstractions” of these master narratives against the “quirky contingencies” of biography. The result is a rare hybrid: a scholarly book about jazz that does justice both to the music and to the forceful personalities involved. This is no dry musicological treatise, although DeVeaux’s transcriptions and analyses are careful and precise. Nor is it a typical jazz bio, gushing enthusiasm at the expense of ideas. Rather, it is an intellectually informed account of how a remarkable group of people coped with the triple challenge of being distinguished artists, ambitious professionals, and African Americans. If the book contains no blinding revelations about bebop’s how and why, it does offer welcome confirmation of Ralph Ellison’s observation that the makers of this extraordinary music were less interested in becoming avant-gardists or in overthrowing the system than in coming up with “a fresh form of entertainment which would allow them their fair share of the entertainment market.”

—Martha Bayles

HEMINGWAY AND HIS CONSPIRATORS:
Hollywood, Scribners, and the Making of American Celebrity Culture.

By Leonard J. Leff. Rowman & Littlefield. 255 pp. \$22.95

In 1960, newspapers around the world erroneously reported that Ernest Hemingway had died in a plane crash in Africa. One obituary claimed that he had been trying to reach the site of his story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” The author may have been amused by the media efforts to link his life and his art, but he had no reason to be surprised.

Leff, a film professor at Oklahoma State University, shows that Hemingway came along just as publishers were learning to promote authors like movie stars, a marketing shift that resulted partly from Hollywood’s transformation of popular books into even more popular films. From the outset,



Hemingway recognized the conflict between celebrity and art, writing to his mother shortly after the publication of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) that he wanted to “write as well as I can, with no eye on any market.” Still, a part of him reveled in the attention. In a letter to his editor at Scribners, Maxwell Perkins, concerning a planned media campaign, he enthusiastically offered “all the pictures you want.”

After the failure of his novel *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), Hemingway remarked in a letter that he was “getting pretty well rid of a good lot of unsought popularity.” Soon after, though, Paramount released *A Farewell to Arms*, complete with a publicity campaign likening Hemingway to the courageous protagonist (played by Gary Cooper). The movie was a smash, and the novelist became more renowned than ever. According to Leff, this new measure of fame marked the end of Hemingway’s greatest creativity. For the rest of his life he remained first and foremost a celebrity, more interested in polishing his image than polishing his prose.

Who’s to blame? Leff implicates Hollywood, Scribners, the news media, and the culture, but he never lets us forget that the death of the artist, like the death of the man, was a suicide.

—Forrest Norman

THE END OF THE NOVEL OF LOVE.

By Vivian Gornick. Beacon Press. 165 pp. \$20

This slim book of intelligent linked essays is not well served by its sweeping title. Gornick, whose previous books range from a memoir of her mother to a meticulous sociological study of women in scientific careers, believes that the quest for love has lost its status as a central literary metaphor for transcendence and fulfillment, that “to-