

"Review of Curtis White's *Heretical Songs*," (New York: The Fiction Collective, 1980); 122 pages; hardcover \$9.95; paperback, \$4.95. [Distributed by Flatiron Book Distributors, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010]. Review published in *The Pikestaff Forum* #5 (Spring, 1983), 30

The jacket describes Curtis White's *HERETICAL SONGS* as "a book of historical fictions by an author with an admitted aversion to historical fact." Friends of Gustav and Alma Mahler, D. G. Rossetti, William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy, Claude Debussy, Algernon Swinburne, and Erik Satie—principals in the first four of these five stories—are well forewarned: they might otherwise be shaken or appalled at White's irreverent portraits of them presented here. The "historical" protagonist of the fifth and longest story, Pietro Carnesecchi, will probably have no friends at the outset, since he is an obscure Dominican monk—rogue, trickster, scholar, magician, and rampant homosexual—tried and executed for heresy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence of Cosimo de Medici; but friends he will have, I'll wager, by the end of the story, when readers have shared his schemes and sufferings and watched him run afoul of the politics of Church and State to be burned as "the one condemned heretic who really did deserve his fate." (*Why* he deserved his fate, the true reason for his condemnation, is not what one would expect; and I'll not spoil the reader's surprise by revealing it here.)

The other four stories—"Mahler's Last Symphony", "The Poet's Sister", "Rossetti's Blessed Lady", and "Claude"—respectively purport to treat, among other things, the peculiar relationship of Mahler with his wife Alma and a tertium quid; the sexual tensions in the relationship of Wordsworth and his sister; D. G. Rossetti's tortured quest for self-understanding and the fulfillment of his notions of ideal love; and Debussy's realization (through the agencies of a fetishism gone sour, and his own absurd and pathetic death) of the inevitable gulf between the ideal and the actual (Claude thus coming to allegorically symbolize Everyman).

The fictions are complex, audacious, stimulating, and *funny*—with now and then a dash of the horrific and the macabre, White's humor is everywhere apparent, working simultaneously on many levels: situation comedy, bizarre and ludicrous juxtapositions, social satire, ironic understatement, verbal hi-jinks, and self-aware playing with the conventions of story-telling. Indeed, the stories are permeated by White's spirit of play. He clearly had fun writing them.

White's delight in playing with language is one of the volume's chief features—whether it be in the skillful manipulation of sentence rhythms,

variations on syntactic themes, bold metaphorical leaps, or sly and probing use of puns. He has an excellent ear for the cadences of English, and tells his tales in a beautifully, cleverly, wittily crafted prose which, because of its subtle orchestrations and concentration of metaphor, frequently borders on the poetic.

By design, the narratives possess a “post-modern” self-consciousness; while telling entertaining stories, White continually reminds readers that he is presenting fictions; that the stories are viewing themselves *as stories*. Narrative structure and mode are frequently manipulated to symbolically reinforce, parallel, or mimic thematic development and to further the revelation of character. “Mahler’s Last Symphony”, for example, is structured to approximate the instrumental unfolding of the symphony itself. “The Poet’s Sister” is told in part through diary entries—presenting the sister’s point of view in counterpoint to that of the omniscient narrator. At the end of “Claude” we learn, to our surprise, that the story has been told by a distinct narrative voice—that of a 45-year-old Swiss disciple of Debussy’s—and not by the omniscient narrator we had supposed; this discovery invites us to read the story a second time to see how the narrator’s personality may have colored the events described, and whether we should modify our initial impressions or understandings on the basis of this new information. “Rossetti’s Blessed Lady” is in the form of a rambling confession; “The Heretical Singing of Pietro Carnesecchi” is presented in a variety of modes, with surrealistic elements and frequent shifts in point of view and narrative voice.

White’s spirit of play, and his desire to present his fictions *as fictions*, lead him, in establishing personae and advancing the narratives, to exploit and sometimes parody a variety of literary conventions: dream vision, parable, inset stories, philosophical digressions, apostrophes, asides, and direct addresses to the reader.

The effect of all this is to produce another of the collection’s distinguishing features: its quality of providing continual surprises—all within the controlled structure of an elaborate game. Nothing is predictable. Finding themselves continually surprised, readers will feel compelled to read on out of curiosity to see what happens next.

For all of their entertainment value, the fictions are not glib or “easy”; close reading and attention to detail are required. Though serious themes are treated by implication, for me *the experience of the reading* is far more important than what of thematic substance I am able to carry away for later recall. (I find I have more a general *impression* of what I’ve read than any

body of detailed specifics.) This is in no way to denigrate the stories, for I think their design is to provide immediate pleasure; their charm is in the telling, and the reader's chief reward is in the reading. (And with regard to what they provide by way of retained specifics, they don't compare unfavorably with the bulk of "realistic" fiction that has comprised the staple diet of twentieth century readers.) In sum, it seems to me that *HERETICAL SONGS* is closer in spirit to *Moby Dick*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Huckleberry Finn* than to *The Great Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Arms*, or *Revolutionary Road*. White's stories are so structurally diverse, their language so finely and wittily textured, that they require more than one reading to be fully appreciated. With each subsequent reading, more of the subtle complexities become apparent.

A final observation: one of White's most striking skills is his ability to create believable personae to "tell" his tales; to imaginatively project himself into highly diverse and eccentric characters and present them so convincingly that we never doubt, never question them, and (despite their exotic or bizarre qualities) we find ourselves disturbed by their intimate familiarity.

*HERETICAL SONGS* is the first book-length collection by a gifted and potentially important writer. Readers who hear the lilt of Curtis White's seductive Panpipes luring them down into the wild valleys of his antic imagination and who choose to follow will, in all probability, be glad they did.

Copyright © Robert D, Sutherland, 1983