

of curiosity which is fundamentally sexual), and of the close links between the novel and pornography, and in how Sterne implements a variety of techniques to arouse, defer, and finally satisfy the curiosity he has excited. The fourth lecture, "A Bird Was in the Room," is devoted mainly to the enigmatic work of Franz Kafka, whose attitude to life and literature was so pathologically hesitant, so utterly lacking in self-confidence, that he left a significant part of his work unfinished. Although Mr. Josipovici also discusses such central documents as *The Metamorphosis* and the famous *Letter To My Father*, the chapter is chiefly concerned with the random notes and jottings that Kafka committed to paper during the final weeks of his life in a sanatorium. (According to Max Brod, he had developed tuberculosis of the larynx and was not supposed to speak at all.) In this lecture, the body moves into a particular prominence, not only because it is a source of intense and constant pain and is approaching its own extinction, but also because the imminence of death confers a special authority on whatever is said in one's last moments—or, in Kafka's case, on whatever is written down.

Quite apart from the degree of disappointment that the general reader may feel over the possibility of ever coming in terms with so impenetrable a topic, *Writing and the Body* is nevertheless a valiant and fascinating effort to widen our understanding and sharpen our awareness of how close the relationship is between the process and the organism. If that relationship is ultimately inexplicable, one must nevertheless give high marks to a writer who addresses the question anew with such courage and intelligence.

A final note: the Princeton University Press is too prestigious a publisher to have to content itself with careless proofreading.

Curtis White

HERETICAL SONGS

New York: George Braziller, 1981. Pp. 122. \$4.95

Reviewed by: Donald Wolff

Heretical Songs is composed of four short stories and a novella, each set in a different cultural milieu but all focused on the same subject—an ironic treatment of the romantic sensibilities of Gustav Mahler, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Claude Debussy, and the sixteenth-century heretic Pietro Carnesecchi. Mr. White employs historical circumstances, literary figures, and the theme of love to explore the way language shuttles back and forth promiscuously between fact and fiction.

The third story, "Rossetti's Blessed Lady," is a good example. Here the author uses several voices to study the interpenetration of idealized love and common sexual desire "revealed" in the domestic vicissitudes of Rossetti's life. The story opens with some of the loveliest prose in the book as Rossetti attempts to weld the image of his girlfriend Nora Guggums to the ephemeral idea of love he seeks to maintain in the face of the abyss: "She stood outside God's house on a rampart built over the giddy depth where space begins. Leaning out, she peered into the deep, holding some lilies in her hand, keeping God's gold railing between herself and a gulf into which, should even the moon fall, it would curl and flutter like a little feather. She ungirt her robe from clasp to hem. Yes, her bosom bared, next in brightness to God's own unbearable eye! She must have made that bar against which she leaned warm. The little lilies lay there as if asleep or nursing along her bent arm. A nice place" (p. 22).

The passage is ironic, but nonetheless delicate for that. And the story makes room for another theory of love, less ephemeral and more heretical than Rossetti's. This theory is furnished by Rossetti's friend Swinburne, who attacks the former's idealizations of love and art: "A love of love as an absolute, unrelated to human conditions, is a love of death. If in place of this love I seem to suggest something mad, let madness stand for us as a code word for life. And as for art, art is well when it suckles with piglets on one day, and admires a beautiful woman briefly on the next. And then moves on!" (p. 45).

Part of the fun of the book is the irreverence shown both for the sacred cows of literature and for precious conceptions of love itself. This theme receives a final and fully-developed treatment in the novella that ends the collection. In "The Heretical Singing of Pietro Carnesecchi," the narrator, named in the title, is a sixteenth-century Florentine monk, functionary in Cosimo d'Medici's court, songster, patron of the arts, homosexual, poet, intriguer, child molester, and heretic. Carnesecchi is the archetypal unreliable narrator, whose greatest sin is to believe in his own fictions. As might be expected, there is another voice in the story, that of Lorenzo Poppi, court lutanist and figure of perfectly sweet innocence. Lorenzo's wife is abducted by Cosimo, so Carnesecchi attempts to retrieve her for the lutanist, all the while seeking to seduce the young Lorenzo. But Carnesecchi eventually suffers the fate of all heretics who are discovered. He is finally trapped by the songs he sings of poor Lorenzo and the fate of true love, songs which must appear duplicitous, if not absurdly hypocritical.

The way language doubles back upon itself is the central impetus to the book's form and all the tales are concerned with the way language slips and slides in and out of truth and lies, history and fiction, time and timelessness. Where language is capable of such duplicity, and sometimes triplicity, anything is possible, and where anything is possible, there is much to enjoy and contemplate.