

DePauw University

Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University

English Faculty publications

English

7-2008

Seeking a Usable Past: Review of *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* by Heather Love.

Meryl Altman

DePauw University, maltman@depauw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.depauw.edu/eng_facpubs



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Altman, Meryl. "Seeking a Usable Past." Rev. of *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* by Heather Love. *The Women's Review of Books* 25.4 (2008): 17-18. Print. Article obtained from JSTOR with permission of the author and publisher and in compliance with JSTOR's terms and conditions.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.

Seeking a Usable Past

Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History

By Heather Love

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 196 pp., \$39.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Meryl Altman

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.

—Robert Hass, “Meditation at Lagunitas”

if it makes you happy
it can't be that bad
but if it makes you happy
then why the hell are you so
... sad

—Sheryl Crow

Has success spoiled queer theory? No. But we're in an odd place with it. It's like somebody who was expected (who half expected herself) to be a teenage suicide waking up to find herself middle aged, reasonably solvent, and apparently envied by others; or like someone who was diagnosed with AIDS in the eighties and is still walking around. It's awfully good to be alive; but rather disappointing to find out that the world has meanwhile been going on with its business more or less as usual—consumer capitalism, racist wars, world hunger, nothing good on TV.... To be sure, the queer welcome in Bushworld remains tenuous, and we have to resist the temptation to smugly celebrate our success—since not everyone shares it, and it could vanish quicker than you can say “assimilated European Jewry between the wars.” But we should also resist the temptation to romantically exaggerate the dangers, which are currently lived mostly by those who are poor, young, sexually marginal, unlucky. It feels indecent to be depressed when “we have come so far”; but it also feels indecent (and impossible) not to be.

Heather Love's *Feeling Backward* is among the best of a recent spate of books that attempt to speak to this situation, as it manifests itself both in academia and in the wider political world. “Backwardness,” Love explains,

means many things here: shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame. I describe backwardness both as a queer historical structure of feeling and as a model for queer historiography.

Thus, her title refers to a wide range of texts and contexts: Walter Pater's diffuse, pre-identitarian erotics; Willa Cather's antimodernist ethic of

friendship; Radclyffe Hall's failure to anticipate the liberationist agendas of lesbian feminism; and activists mobilizing around “queer shame” who parade with placards reading, “Depressed? It might be political.”

Love opposes the tendency of some critics to exclude the most negative texts of our history on the grounds of bad ideology as well as that of others to reinterpret and “save” them in a way that minimizes or erases their power. But while she disavows attempts either to criticize queer cultures of the past for failing to meet our standards for “positive images” or to redeem them by assimilating them to our more sophisticated agendas, she is nevertheless engaged in the search for a “usable past” and in questions about how “we” should use it (whoever “we” may be, but never mind).

She does a beautiful job of articulating the problem:

A central paradox of any transformative criticism is that its dreams for the future are founded on a history of suffering, stigma, and violence. Oppositional criticism opposes not only existing structures of power but also the very history that gives it meaning.... Critics find themselves in an odd position: we are not sure if we should explore the link between homosexuality and loss or set about proving that it does not exist.

Her own project manages neither to bury queer melancholia nor to praise it; and she is gently critical of the recent “turn to ‘affect’” within queer literary studies. She is helpfully critical as well of the tendency to romanticize the margins:

The meaning of modernist transgression—of crossing the line—depends to a great extent on which way you are headed: it is one thing to light out for the Territory and quite another thing to live there.

Considered as a theoretical polemic, *Feeling Backward* is a tour de force, both incisive and moving. Considered as a work of literary scholarship, it is somewhat less satisfying, if only because it refers to a mere handful of texts, which have often been discussed before, and does not stay with any of them long enough to say much. (By literary scholarship, I don't mean anything especially pedantic, merely the implicit claim of any book of literary or cultural criticism that “I can help you understand X better than you could just by

reading or watching it on your own.”) After the ambitious set-up of a double introduction, the payoff in terms of deepening and broadening our understanding of the texts is frustratingly small; and many works whose relevance seems obvious are missing.

At its core, this is a book about three lesbian writers—Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner—who refused to tell happy progress stories or project identitarian utopias and who therefore trouble the waters of queer triumphalism and homonormativity in ways that I agree are instructive. It took me a while to see that, though, because Love makes so many sweeping claims and asides toward other critics and theorists (including the now-obligatory genuflection to Walter Benjamin's “angel of history,” who stares at the wreckage of the past while being hurled into the future.)

The strongest chapter is called “Spoiled Identity: Radclyffe Hall's Unwanted Being.” Basically, Love argues that hating *the Well of Loneliness* is a bit like shooting the messenger who brings the bad news. To be queer is still, on some level, to be an outcast—but without the comforting fantasy of a better life with the other Others somewhere over the rainbow, or a transformed world where people couldn't treat “us” like that. For one thing, there is no “us”; and for another, “reverse discourse”—“claiming an identity they taught me to despise,” as the title of Michelle Cliff's 1980 memoir put it—has a way of biting back. Hall's lesbian protagonist, Stephen Gordon, doesn't want to identify with the sad queer in Alec's bar who reminds her of a hunted fox, cornered and desperate—she recoils when he calls her “ma soeur”—and we don't want to identify with Stephen, either. But god, we'd better, because it's not like we don't have a little Stephen in us. *The Well* may still be so sad because it is still so true: as Nora in Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* realizes to her confusion, the worst moments of real life tend strangely to resemble the trite clichés of melodrama. This is the painful sore Heather Love keeps touching when she points out that gay pride did not put an end to gay shame, and that analyzing trauma does not (and in a way should not) do away with trauma's effects.

Surely, though, a full account of lesbian modernist melancholia would require a reading of *Nightwood*, which would have made it possible to speak about different kinds of sadness and belatedness, and perhaps about different sorts of readers who would be differently moved by them, and different traditions or strands to which they have given rise, as Carolyn Allen has discussed in *Following Djuna* (1996). Multiple divergent strands, and complex identifications and disidentifications, might actually be something to celebrate, since not every lesbian is the Lesbian Reader, let alone the Queer Reader, or “us.”

But a fully historicized account in that sense is not what Love means by “history.” Her weakest chapter is on Pater, whose sadness she reads as an “allegory” of his own historical positioning just “before” homosexuality became a social category—a positioning he of course could not know. Her intention, she says, is to “draw... a link between his aesthetics of failure and his experience of bearing a marginalized sexual identity.” This may be right, but she simply doesn't bring forward enough about Pater to ground her interpretation. I ended up wondering, do all these writers really belong

together, and if so, why? I also think that to discuss men and women together, without saying anything about how “structures of feeling” may differ because of power differences, occludes something pretty important.

Also missing is any discussion of anger, the transformative moment between shame and pride. Judith Butler has argued convincingly that melancholy appears when desire is blocked, but we also know that depression appears when anger is blocked. Might anger be blocked in the present moment not only because it isn’t nice, or tenurable, but also because it feels dishonest to continue protesting when “we” are better off than we were, while others are less well off than “we” are now?

I agree with Love that “the turn to affect” has gone too far, making it impossible to see the past on its own terms. Instead, we ask greedily, “What does this book, this writer, say to me,” to “us.” Of course, it’s always easier to spot someone else’s “wounded attachments” than to let go of your own. The attachment an older generation felt to an idealized past or an imagined future community may have been replaced

by identification with a present-day, equally imaginary, cutting-edge “we,” labeled “queer theory.” One reason to be clear about your own attachments is so you can see around them to what is actually on the page. This is Love’s argument, in sections such as “Against Identification,” “Against Consolation,” and “The Politics of Refusal”—but she doesn’t entirely act on it in her own critical practice. For instance, she cites “the historiographic method of Michel Foucault” as “exemplary in its resistance to the temptations of identification and mirroring.” I agree, but draw a different lesson. Rather than either praising or allegorizing Foucault’s call for a “return to the archive,” perhaps we should actually go there, not in search of ourselves, but in search of something different: the concrete variety of experience. In other words, I’m suggesting that we conceive of “the archive” not metaphorically but literally, as in, the dingier part of the library, where our colleagues from the history department are still finding unopened boxes.

Ironically, *Feeling Backward* is itself marked by the need for “progress” that academic institutions impose on intellectual life. Queer theory may be facing the identity crisis academic feminism went

through somewhat earlier: the transition from a loose and roving band of autodidacts to a canon, turf, the need to show gratitude to your elders (and awareness of what they have written)—while still claiming a new “turn” to something or another every fifteen minutes. Thus Love finds herself arguing that “we” have paid inadequate attention to queer melancholy, even as she cites the many critics who have explored the theme. Which brings us back to the opening question: is queer theory any longer a transformative or oppositional criticism? Literary studies *has* been transformed. Queer criticism has fully arrived, and being included as insiders on the basis of our outsider credibility results in an impossible dance. Rather than jostle for position on an ever-shrinking margin, asking earnestly “How do we situate ourselves?” perhaps a better question is, “What can we see from here?”

Where did I read this: “The best cure for depression is to learn something new.” ☹

Meryl Altman teaches at DePauw University in Indiana.

FIELD NOTES

Betrayals of the Heart

By Robin Becker

There is no Truth and Reconciliation Commission for betrayals of the heart. There is only time—and art.

We are betrayed only by those closest to us—partners, beloved friends, family—those in whom we place our trust. Who do we become after that trust has foundered? How do we travel forward? These questions have always occupied writers and continue to do so. In her most recent collection, *Rift* (2008), poet Barbara Helfgott Hyett takes as her starting point the end of a long marriage. From that site, the speakers in these poems explore art, biblical and historical narratives, literature, and myth to excavate and transform psychic trauma.

One of Hyett’s strategies involves examining betrayal from several points of view. For example, a twenty-line poem titled “Mrs. Noah” anticipates a twenty-line poem titled “Noah,” which appears eight poems later. Nameless in the Torah, Noah’s wife, as re-imagined by Hyett, “prays to the animals/ in their untidy rooms.” At the close of the poem, we see her trying to make sense of her predicament:

She
has filled every bowl
to overflowing, as if
rain were a blessing,
as if the name she has
forgotten remembers her.

Genesis recounts that on the 301st day of the great flood, the dove returned with an olive branch, signaling to Noah the approach of land. In Hyett’s recast “Noah,” the speaker has this to say:

By the time the dove
returned he didn’t want it,
pitched it over, rowed on.
He’ll make a sweet story
to cover this,
which is so often
the case when a man
loses heart.

The 124-line title poem “Rift” again examines betrayal from various perspectives. In each of six sections, people find themselves *in extremis*: in the subway beneath the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001; in a war zone among the dead; at the scene of a fatal car accident; before a brutal police

encounter. Hyett offers no easy palliatives. Instead, she concludes the poem with a new origin myth, one that ends on a vision of how we will appear to those who come after us:

“When Science discovers
the matter, we’ll be found,
half-swimming, half-
wallowing at the juncture:
clumsy, vestigial, the apparatus
of a God-forsaken plan.

An eleven-poem sonnet sequence, *Apollo and Daphne*, originates in Hyett’s study of Bernini’s great marble sculpture of the same name in Rome’s Galleria Borghese, and in the Greek myth as conveyed in Hellenistic and Roman stories. Among eleven points of view Hyett imagines Apollo, Bernini, The Chisel, Daphne, Tour Guide, and Laurel. “River God” demonstrates Daphne’s betrayal by her father. Here’s the poem in its entirety:

I saw the overtaking, the sun’s
sweating pursuit. I could have
swept her from earth mildly, flesh
of my flesh, saved by cloudburst,
or the violence of sudden snow.
But I struck my only daughter

mute, made leaves shoot from her
fingers, roots alarm the nail beds
of her toes. Bark swallowed her
sweet skin whole. She was born
elemental. I made her stand,
then, unmoving, insensate
in the old-growth forest. I planted
her. I made my daughter strong.

While individual poems argue for single “realities,” the ekphrastic sequence, in its response to another art form, locates betrayal in a more complex aggregate—prismatic, shifting, partial. What old grief does the river god avenge by making Daphne a laurel tree? I admire Hyett’s sweep here, tackling the story in marble and myth. Once Daphne transforms, the speaker in “The Laurel” proclaims “If love arrives, I don’t need it. / All of my needs are green.” Through Hyett’s declaration, Daphne reclaims some measure of the freedom and independence she’s lost.

The poems in *Rift* reach beyond the self to construct and wrest meaning from the destabilizing experience of betrayal. Hyett describes the natural world in