

Sprawson, Charles. *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. Pp. 307. Photographs. \$23.

Seduction demands willing participation. *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* is about seduction and is itself a seduction. Charles Sprawson has managed to convey an historical, literary (largely masculine), love affair with water, from the opening chapter, which describes his own

rapture with the substance, through an Anglo-centric version of modern-day swimming. This amorous vision finds its zenith in Matthew Webb's unsuccessful attempt to swim the river below the foot of Niagara Falls, in the Greeks' and Romans' romance with water, and in a description of Germanic, Japanese, and American swimming traditions. It is a genealogy of swimming as seduction. Its method depends upon mostly literary documentation, which reads as a timeline of cross-cultural attitudes, all flowing back to their ancient Greek source.

For example, Sprawson casts Yukio Mishima's samurai stance, especially in *Sound of Waves*, as a direct descendent of convergences between the mind and body in ancient Greek attitudes. However, he links both Germanic and English writers' sensibilities and their fascination with Hellenistic bodies of knowledge—and these prove more convincing. He traces a direct route back to Greco-Roman water adoration:

And so in the image of the diver and swimmer the Germans have expressed the spirit of war and adventure, their yearning for Faustian depths of knowledge, for spiritual and physical perfection. Through swimming they were able to recover contact with the mythical past, both Greek and their own (p. 220).

Sprawson cites such varied artists as Goethe and Riefenstahl to prove his case, but his citations for the English swimmer are much more profound and substantial. More deeply felt. The waters embrace Bryon and Shelley alike (though in much different ways), enrapture such disparate British souls as Arthur Hugh Clough, Charles Lamb, Charles Kingsley, and George Borrow. Tracing the Greco-Roman roots of modern-day Occidental views toward water is, whether intentionally or not, somehow more ideologically satisfying than looking at the roots of contemporary Oriental views. Sprawson's use of the Japanese seems highly imperialistic, what Edward Said terms "Orientalism." For example, to term Mishima's fascination with things Greek and Roman as more significant than his Japanese-ness becomes highly problematic. In attempting a certain symmetrical closure over the theme of international attitudes toward water, I think Sprawson has erred in favor of an ethnocentric, and probably Anglocentric, view of the world.

But allowing for this deliberately subjective gaze, this insertion of authorial biography into the text, the text itself serves as seduction, embracing this reader with evocative images of water—swimming and bathing—which both tantalize and mesmerize. At times, I found myself remembering my initial impulse to swim—and I swam competitively for 17 years. Bathers and swimmers, as well as willing readers, suspend disbelief, and may be seduced.

It is a powerful work, written by a writer who painstakingly undergirds his arguments with scholarly, anecdotal, popular, and personal accounts of attitudes toward water through time. Yet the book transcends its subject

matter, and comes to represent. among many motifs, a metonymy of historical themes toward utility (using water), recreation (being with water), scientism (mystifying over water), and consumption (superiority through water) of, with. and for this liquid medium.

This is a history of swimming as seen through the eyes of a rabid swimmer, of one who knows not only the sting of chlorinated pool water but also the comforting embrace of natural water (and distaste for modern-day pollutants which threaten it), the ebb and flow and cadences of being and of becoming with water. It is a love affair with swimming, produced by a most-certainly involved participant-observer.

Sprawson's technique, in the main, is to have "devoured book after book" (p. 7), about swimming, and the tale is told with extensive quotations, but without notes. It is as if the whole overwhelms the part, and even if the citations are not accurate (which is unbelievable, in part given the extensive inter-textuality), the points he makes are still "authentic" and "true," ringing with Geertzian "reason" or Denzinian "verisimilitude." In this book, Sprawson has created a world which closely mirrors his love for water and swimming. As John Gardiner writes,

A fictional element can be appropriate or not by only one of two standards: It is appropriate to the work as an art object without reference to reality. or it is appropriate as we test it against our sense of the actual. (Gardiner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on the Craft for Young Writers*, 1991, p. 79)

Likewise, "factual" writing, no matter its degree of closeness to experience, must be tested against our very real "sense of the actual." This, then, is the mark of *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer As Hero* as accurate historical text: it passes Gardiner's test. Its evidence convinces—usually.

It is when Sprawson ventures into causal claims (predominant in what I think is his final and weakest chapter, "The Japanese Decade") that he perhaps overextends his conceit, tying literary creatures to swimming. For example, to say of Yukio Mishima,

In his final summer before his dramatic suicide by hara-kiri, as *if* to prepare his body for this last "beautiful" Samurai ritual, he went swimming every day for a month at Shimoda, in the pool in the morning and the sea in the afternoon, wearing a brief black cotton costume with large brass buckles on the thighs. It was his belief that a romantic death requires a "strictly classical body as its vehicle." [italics added] (pp. 296–97)

Mishima was a swimmer; swimming tones the body while enervating it. It may be that Mishima was savoring the sensory appeal of water before extinguishing his own sensory apparatus. Or, as Sprawson postulates, perhaps the narcissistic Mishima saw swimming bodies as appealing, and emulated them. Maybe he just liked swimming—as a diversion. There is no delineation

of the truths presented.

Thus, while Sprawson's work is stimulating, its truths variously flutter, mystify, haunt, and stumble the reader. Sprawson is using a literary device to tell the tale, and must be judged by literary standards (which closely mirror any of the humanities' values). As Gardiner writes,

Telling the truth in fiction can mean one of three things: saying that which is factually correct, a trivial kind of truth, though a kind central to works of verisimilitude; saying that which, by virtue of tone and coherence, does not feel like lying, a more important kind of truth; and discovering and affirming moral truth about human existence—the highest truth of art. (Cardiner, p. 129)

Sprawson, in *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, achieves all three levels of truth, albeit unevenly. It is a seduction, but a seduction accomplished simultaneously by stealth, barrage, force, and complicity. All in all, it is not a bad accomplishment for an informational cataloguing of swimming cross-culturally through the ages.

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