

BREAK, BLOW, BURN. By Camille Paglia. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005. 242 pp. \$20.00.

*Reviewed by Kevin Clark*

Camille Paglia's *Break, Blow, Burn* is a provocative host of cultural critiques masquerading as New Critical analysis. Purporting to provide explications of "forty-three of the world's best poems," ranging from Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73" to Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock," the performance has its enticements. If you're the general reader (what Paglia terms a "serious reader outside academe") who wants to bone up on miscellaneous English-language poetry, this book might entertain while occasionally sending you astray into dubious tributaries. On the other hand, if you are a "veteran reader" of poetry, you shouldn't expect this book to further your appreciation of the poems discussed. For one thing, some of Paglia's contemporary choices seem to have been made more for the sake of look-at-me marketing than for aesthetics. But each of these five- or six-page ruminations seems to serve well as a soliloquy by an often brilliant teacher who likes to riff on her favorite verse. The most pleasurable way—perhaps the only way—to read *Break, Blow, Burn* is to sample Paglia's myriad associative takes not as if they emanate directly from the poems but as examples of a deliberately intertextual way of reading. She forces us to remember that all poems are to be seen through the culture of the personal.

Virtually every one of Paglia's explications cuts an aperture looking out of the poem at some cultural correlative, usually linked to the visual arts, music, or the movies: for instance, John Donne's "The Flea" has "the grandiloquence and sexual explicitness of Salvador Dali's dream paintings"; William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow is like Duchamp's coal shovels and urinals; Norman H. Russell's "The Tornado" strains language in the way of Ferde Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite*; and Paglia compares two men in Ralph Pomeroy's "Corner" to "gunslingers facing off in *High Noon*."

Although each little essay may want to be structured as neatly as a sonnet, Paglia's renegade voice can't help performing for us like a whip-smart tour guide who free-associates at the drop of a line. Theorists tell us all writing is performance, and perhaps no living critic is more performative than Paglia, whose landmark *Sexual Personae* is an often dumbfounding, often illuminating rant about the relation between eros and literature. In that book she admits up front that she will be outrageous in order to make her points, claiming, "My method is a form of sensationalism: I try to flesh out intellect with emotion and to induce a wide range of emotion from the reader." In *Sexual Personae*, Paglia is an associative, emotive, transgressive rock-and-roller who performs provocation, often making us question the viability of Western humanism.

As if catalyzed by Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, she contends that mores will always be subverted by base impulses, which she aligns with paganism. Institutional ideas—founded, say, on religions that are overly restrictive or on the kind of first-wave feminism that denies the needs of the libido—are problematic for individuals and society. Indeed, most of the civilizing polemics that we inculcate doom us to unhappiness, primarily because they attempt to repress irrepressible urges, especially the sexual. The result is decadent behavior, which must emerge even more intensely in the presence of conventional humanistic mores. *Sexual Personae* intends to validate its thesis with its own critical decadence.

If Paglia had cast *Break, Blow, Burn* in the no-holds-barred, sensationalist attitude of *Sexual Personae*, its excesses might have supported its assertions, but for all its posturing and bluster, the new book is a performance in a much lower register—and therein lies its problem, as it aspires to be small and big at the same time. Since Paglia famously distrusts poststructural theory, we should not be surprised to find that in her introduction she defends New Criticism, “a sophisticated system of interpretation that has never been surpassed as a pedagogical tool for helping novice as well as veteran readers to understand poetry.” A part of her wants to model her essays after old bits in the *Explicator*—yet she just can't hold herself within the constrictions the New Critics placed upon themselves, most of which disallow reference to the author while privileging structure and irony.

A New Critic with attention-deficit disorder, Paglia does her best to work with the theme of a poem, but she's quickly seduced by her own intertextual imagination. She never says so here, but she sees good writing as a decadent act, which is why she is fascinated by authorial issues the New Critics dismissed. (Surely, it's also why she says “Leda and the Swan” may “justifiably be considered the greatest poem of the twentieth century.”) A literary voyeur, she turns to the poet's life almost as often as she widens the interpretive scope of her remarks to Western culture.

Sometimes her speculation can work as insight into the creative process. For instance, she wonders if “Ozymandias” renders the passing of time so well because Shelley “was a wanderer who was to die in exile.” She's less successful when she wonders if the “Disc of Snow” in “Safe in their Alabaster Chambers” was “suggested by a sundial or birdbath buried in Dickinson's garden,” which would have been covered in snow in winter and, thus, a source for “the last line's disorienting whiteout.” Worse, her wandering sometimes seems like the kids' game in which you ask each person to pass along a whispered sentence until eventually it becomes unintelligible. For instance, she tells us that Wallace Stevens grew up “in Pennsylvania Dutch country,” a region “bordering West Virginia, just over the Mason-Dixon line, through which the Appalachian mountain chain drops to Kentucky and Tennessee.” These rather

distant geographic proximities mean Stevens' jar "may also be a jug for moonshine." And—like that!—"moonshine" in turn calls up "moonlight," and for this reason the jar is representative of the "imagination for Stevens." Who knew?

There's no question that Paglia succeeds in finding key thematic kernels embedded in many of her favorite poems. Given her belief in the inevitable eruption of the individual and collective libido, we should expect her to be most informative about the way sex animates many of these poems, especially Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV," Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and Roethke's "Root Cellar." And sometimes she controls her metaphors in keenly summative observations, as when discussing Herbert's "Church-Monuments": "The rigorous curriculum of the crypt puts the body through its paces to 'fit' or prepare it for its fate—the 'fall' that none can escape ever since man's fall brought death into the world."

But Paglia's notorious lack of rigor gets her in trouble too often. As absurd as were her decisions to include a Chuck Wachtel piece with a forty-one-word title—let's abbreviate it to "A Paragraph Made Up of Seven Sentences"—and Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock" lyrics among "the world's best poems," the worst moments in the book turn up in her discussion of Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," where she twists herself into ludicrous entanglements. Paglia asserts that the poet's suicide resulted in her "canonization as a feminist martyr." Trouble is, this sainthood "has been a two-edged sword: on one hand, it gave her near-mythic fame; on the other, it has driven away some readers and stunted literary criticism of her work." But rather than getting down to the business of the poem, Paglia herself goes into a discussion of Plath's well-known separation from Ted Hughes and her "struggling to care for two small children" in Yeats's flat, "where she died." In a nonsensical inversion, Paglia claims that Plath's suicide is actually a symbol *for the poem*: "all that's left is a death camp—an extermination factory symbolized by Plath's real-life asphyxiation when she laid her head in an unlit gas oven." In another bizarre aside, Paglia tells us that the poem's "gypsy ancestress" is "the poet's role model . . . [who] may have bequeathed an ambiguous skin tone—Plath tanned darkly from infancy." The biggest problem with all of the biographical leaping is not that Paglia violates her own New Critical ideals or wastes our time with distracting trivia, but that it obscures her analysis of the poem. She commits the very sin she's complained about, allowing her criticism to be "stunted" by Plath's suicide.

Paglia claims that "Daddy" is "one of the strongest poems ever written by a woman" yet attacks the poet for the poem's moral shortcomings and lack of biographical verisimilitude. Like some critics before her, Paglia resents the Holocaust imagery so much that she loses perspective. Rather than posit the obvious idea that "Daddy" is a myth poem speaking for eons of women skewered emotionally and often physically by a violent, monolithic patriarchy, she asks: "To what degree is it justified for Plath, with her comfortable middle-class upbringing and privileged education, to appropri-

ate the unspeakable annals of ‘Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen?’” And if Paglia weren’t disturbed enough by Plath’s alleged insensitivity, she fails to appreciate the poem’s key connotations regarding the theatricality of suicide attempts. Gripped suddenly by a paralyzing literalism, the woman who wrote *Sexual Personae* becomes remarkably inflexible regarding the poem’s divergence from the facts of the author’s life, peeved that “Plath was eight, not ten, when her teacher father died.” She’s likewise upset about the poet’s treatment of her “patient, cultivated” mother, “who warmly supported her daughter’s literary endeavors,” only to be “thrown into the pack of do-gooders and busybodies who don’t understand her and thwart her deepest desires.” How can it be that a contemporary critic fails to understand that poetry is high artifice, that even confessional poems are ultimately fictive?

But wait. Despite pages of harsh assessment, Paglia nonetheless turns out to be crazy about the poem and its author: “I nominate Sylvia Plath as the first female rocker. . . . [T]he nihilistic wipeout of the last line . . . is also in the fractious rock spirit.” And perhaps Paglia is describing her own transgressive, gonzo-critical approach when she says that the poem’s last line “parallels the smashing or burning of guitars by the Yardbirds, the Who, and Jimi Hendrix.”

Even good readers outside the academy will recognize Paglia’s whiplash inconsistency. Some critics may fashion themselves as superstars, but most of us rely on critical writing to be just that: *critical*. If the logic breaks down in a poem that accounts for the discrepancy—see Whitman—we understand. When the breakdown occurs in an essay, we might feel it’s either a mistake—or just showy.

