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Manifesto: A Century of Isms (review)

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**Caws, Mary Ann, ed. 2001. *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. \$35.00 sc. xxxvi +
713 pp.**

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The nineteenth-century drive to collect and name new species is, apparently, alive and well in Mary Ann Caws, idiosyncratic, infuriating, mesmerizing taxonomy of modernist aesthetic manifestos. Like all taxonomies, the one Caws constructs in *Manifesto* is both compelling and fragile; in the end, there is no cohesive argument in this book, no reliable principle of organization beyond basic addition. As Caws says in her headnote to Part 27, “Thresholds,” the documents she assembles “were chosen for their differing styles and not for the contingents of which they might be seen as token texts” (604). Those contingents themselves, the movements into which Caws marshals her texts and the headnotes in which she describes each movement, are at best unevenly illuminating: pithy and expert at the heart of the book (Dada, Surrealism, and especially the various Futurisms), but so uninformative as to be mysterious when lesser-known movements appear (e.g., the Italian Scuola Metafisica). At their worst, Caws’s movement-categories are blatantly and happily factitious, as in the case of “Thingism,” which Caws invents out of whole cloth, and Poe’s “The Philosophy of Furniture.” But, then, she warns us at the outset that taxonomy is elusive, not to say delusive: “Many appellations of recent date do not refer to established schools or movements, sometimes simply to the determining elements that seems to permit the coherence of the rest around them” (xxiv). I can’t go on, *Manifesto* claims; I’ll go on.

“*Manifesto* is duck. What it wants to sell is itself” (xxv).

Manifesto is the logical consequence of Mary Ann Caws’s entire career: her engagement with surrealism (and, by extension, other modernist movements) stretches back to the 1960s, her work as a translator of primary and secondary texts of French modernism to the early 1970s. Twenty-five years before *Manifesto*, she published a foreshadowing article titled “Notes on a Manifesto Style: 1924 Fifty Years Later.” Her immersion in the stylish, stylized verbal and visual modes of modernism’s war on the bourgeois, the safe, the commonsensical is as complete as anyone’s could be. Only total immersion could have produced the quirky, uncured museum collection that *Manifesto* turns out to be. And only total immersion—to the point of identi-

fication with the manifesto-writer's own disdain for explanations and compromises—could have produced *Manifesto's* disorienting lack of annotations, glosses, and even consistent translations. A matched pair of examples: Guillaume Apollinaire's "Bleuet" is offered in a facsimile of its original typography (and language), on page 128; Apollinaire's "The Little Car," so titled, is offered in English translation and in a facsimile—I assume it is a facsimile—of its original typography, on pages 129 and 130. Caws's acknowledgments of her sources offer only bibliographic information about the versions of these texts that she prints: no clue to her reasons for printing one in French and the other in translation; no clue to her construction of a reader for this multilingual, multigeneric smorgasbord of texts; no clue to her ultimate reasons for assembling these manifestos in this particular way. Except, of course, for the *ultimate* ultimate reason: because they're there.

"The plain reader be damned" (Eugène Jolas and others, "The Revolution of the Word" 1928, 530).

I began with the metaphor of taxonomy, Victorian natural history's attempt to explain the world. It's too clear, too would-be-scientific. Try this metaphor instead: the pillow-book, a private text assembled from fragments with some private significance, filled with private jokes, meant for private meditation. And inaccessible, it almost goes without saying, to any outsider. Caws takes the imagery of isolation further than this, in her introductory essay: "At its most endearing, a manifesto has a madness about it. It is peculiar and angry, quirky, or downright crazed" (xix). The word "endearing" is telling, here—but so is "madness." And so is the note of nostalgia that emerges a little later in Caws' introduction: "If the First World War put an end to that poetic shout of the Great Age of the Manifesto, the form is still extant, but changed. Manifestos will be written subsequently but scarcely in the same high spirit" (xxi-xxii). The purpose of *Manifesto*, then—can it be?—is T. S. Eliot's "these fragments I have shored against my ruin." In the face of change (and, she implies, decay), as a memorial to the lost energy and optimism of modernism, Mary Ann Caws gathers what fragments she finds at her fingertips, and arranges them in a hermetic pattern, one that can reveal its full meaning only to her. For those of us lacking Caws's intimate knowledge of the literary and artistic movements behind the manifestos, she seems to have ensured that the value and the pleasure of her collection can only be in its fragmentariness.

Something like this happens. Leafing through the pillow book, wandering aimlessly through the natural-history museum, I pause at a striking phrase, a vivid image, a shiny self-contained object:

"You might, at least, keep quiet while I am talking" (Mina Loy, "The Artist and the Public," 1917, 333).

Surfing the Internet, it becomes equally impossible not to pause at another shiny object, a new one, the manifesto of the Dogme 95 filmmakers: "The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby . . . false!" (http://www.tvropa.com/tvropa1.2/film/dogme95/the_vow/index.htm). The tone sounds almost too familiar. So *that* was the point of *Manifesto*—to teach the grammar of the genre. And, sure enough, Caws knew it all along: "There will always be other manifesto styles, even in what seems a post-manifesto moment. Someone will come along, alone or in a group, to invite us, loudly, to some new way of thinking (xxix)."

Bellin, Joshua David. 2001. *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. \$49.95hc. \$24.95sc. 274 pp.

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Finding the intersections of cultures and determining influences is not an easy task but one that Joshua David Bellin undertakes in *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature*. In his "Introduction" he promises "to examine how processes of 'mutual acculturation' manifest themselves in American literature" (3). The "demon" is the real or imagined Native American whose literary and cultural interactions with whites from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries Bellin analyzes. Or, perhaps, the "demon" is the Euro-American misperception of Native Americans or that border area where the cultures mix and absorb one another. The nuances of these interactions and influences are painstakingly and thoughtfully presented to challenge notions about how we can determine "mutual acculturation."

Bellin introduces "conversionism" to represent the often failed project of assimilation of native peoples to Euro-American culture. He redefines "noble