

Paul Metcalf

: A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

by Christy Alexander

PAUL METCALF ONCE COMMENTED, "LIBRARIANS AND BOOKSELLERS don't know where to shelve my books" (Butterick 261). Classifying his more than 20 works is difficult because they generally do not fit the standard definitions of poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. Most contain elements of each genre. Don Byrd addresses this classification dilemma by attempting to formulate an explanation of what Metcalf's collected works actually are: "self-contained, classically proportioned, polished books – very large structures with a perfection of finish which is usually achieved only in short poems" (302). Byrd, too, seems unable to decide whether to shelve them in the fiction or poetry section, but perhaps that is his point. Paul Metcalf's books *are* poetry. They *are* exquisite prose. They *are* dramatic – if often poignant and dark – histories. They *are*, simply put, all of these things.

In light of Byrd's praise, the question that then arises is this: If Metcalf is such an important writer, why is the average reader not familiar with him? Metcalf himself helps answer that question in one interview by saying that "in terms of the reader, there are some difficulties in becoming adjusted to my method. A great many readers seem to have difficulty in dealing with that; several critics recently, even those who have spoken favorably of the work, seem to have to go through the process of explaining the novelty of my method" (O'Brien 245). The problem readers have with his "method," according to Metcalf, is that it frustrates their efforts to classify his works. This discomfort, in turn, alienates them from the works before they allow themselves to become familiar with them.

George Butterick adds another dimension to the Metcalf dilemma:

Some readers will find the facts impenetrable or without savor, the method predictable, mechanistic. . . . Even for the sympathetic, there are questions. Is there any standard by which to measure the selection? What if the material has no life of its own. . . ? Metcalf speaks warmly of the "thrill of discovery." But what if there is none, if the facts, the borrowings, are too dense, the materials too borrowed? (262)

By his own admission, Metcalf realizes the problems critics and readers alike have with his work, yet he does not allow the criticism to hamper his artistic endeavors. In fact, in his own defense, Metcalf explains in another interview that people should not be afraid to stray outside the bounds of conventional literature: "I think it's not a case of being unfair to me," he suggests, "but unfair to themselves as readers that the formal experimentations I make using documentary materials, using unusual juxtapositions, using idiosyncratic typogra-

