

Neuromancer

Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, eds, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, Continuum, New York and London, 2002. 246 pp., £16.99 pb., £55.00 hb., 0 8264 6021 6 pb., 0 8264 6020 8 hb.

Benjamin Studies Volume 1: Perception and Experience in Modernity, ed. Helga Geyer-Ryan, Paul Koopman and Klaas Yntema, International Walter Benjamin Association, University of Amsterdam/Rodopi, 2002. 225 pp., €46.00, \$51.00 pb., 90 420 1285 4 pb.

Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2001. 317 pp., £45.95 hb., £15.50 pb., 0 8223 2784 8 hb., 0 8223 2794 5 pb.

Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002. 462 pp., £26.50 hb., 0674 00896 0 hb.

In Friedrich Schlegel's famous fragment, the philosophical radicalism of Fichte's system is compared to both the artistic experimentalism of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and the politically emancipatory force of the French Revolution. The Romantic project as a whole was prototypical for Benjamin in its willingness to align just such political, historical and aesthetic phenomena with the metaphysical developments of post-Kantian idealism. Friedrich Schlegel's personal transition from youthful radicalism (the *Athenaeum* fragments, *Ideas*) to a mature, unashamedly messianic conception of language and temporality (as in the remarkable but much less well known 1820s lectures on *The Philosophy of Language*) simply was that contradictory, tensed, form of manifold experience that provided the impetus for Benjamin's early epistemological investigations. However, as the editors rightly point out in their introduction to *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, Benjamin's 1919 dissertation thesis 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism' was not simply an exercise in scholarly historical research – indeed, it may be seen as a failure on this level – but neither was it motivated by mere identification with the Romantic writers. Rather, this work aimed to 'potentiate' the poetic-philosophical terminology of the Romantics – 'criticism', 'reflection', 'sobriety' – in determinate contrast to the mystical interpretations of the protégés of Stefan George. Thus the work on Romanticism should be read as a foundational project of what Benjamin called his 'German period' (from around 1915 to the 1928 publication of *One Way Street* and the book on Baroque *Trauerspiel*) in which the more well-known reflections on language, violence and critical methodology take preliminary form. It is

a period which has long deserved thorough analysis, and the editors, Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin, have collected in this first in a series of *Walter Benjamin Studies* a dozen essays, both old and new, on Benjamin's dissertation and related works on Goethe and Hölderlin.

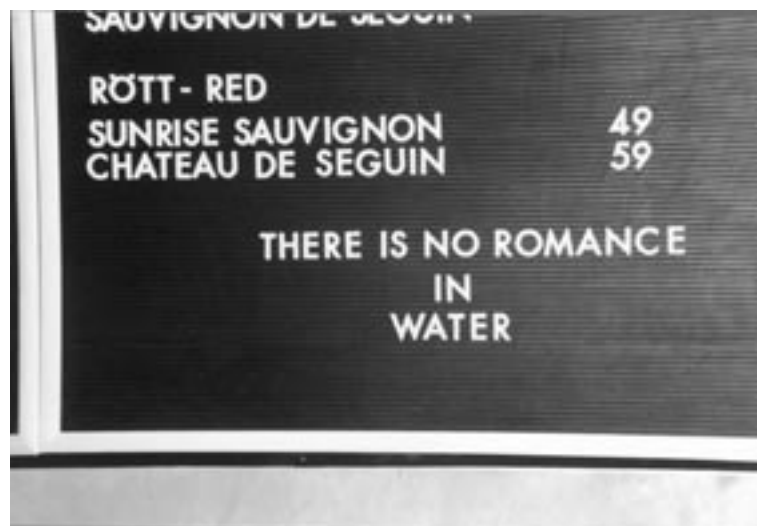
Winfried Menninghaus's 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection' and Rodolphe Gasché's well-known essay 'The Sober Absolute', both included here, were the first to point out how Benjamin's argument, as it develops between Fichte and Novalis, rests upon 'numerous and grave' factual and interpretive discrepancies, which imply that Benjamin's antipathy towards conventional scholarly exactitude (as Menninghaus perceives it) actually undermines, or does 'marginal violence' to, his broader project. This is fine as far as it goes, but, as other contributors point out (particularly Fred Rush, in his excellent essay 'Jena Romanticism and Benjamin's Critical Epistemology'), for Benjamin this was already a problem of the *limits* of the academic form – precisely those limits that the Romantic conception of the criticism and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* sought to upset. Hence the more successful essays here concentrate instead on etymological work at the limits of translatability – itself, of course, the most central of Benjaminian concerns – which Anthony Phelan's '*Fortgang* and *Zusammenhang*' and Bettine Menke's "'However one calls into the forest...': Echoes of Translation' provide very well. Bettine Menke also shows how Benjamin's 1925 work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is the place where the *disjunction* of sound and meaning within the modern era is embodied in the baroque theatrical work: here, 'Echo' and 'reverberation' are

more than mere tropes of translatability, but highlight a continuous concern of Benjamin's throughout this period with the experiential, acoustical and above all historical-material structure of profane language itself.

Benjamin's earliest reflections on language, in the 1914/15 essay 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin', are analysed at length in two excellent essays, Beatrice Hanssen's "'Dichtermut" and "Blödigkeit"' and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's 'Poetry's Courage', both of which again focus on the problem of translatability, specifically around the Goethean term *Gedichtete*. Whilst Hanssen, almost alone among the contributors, does some useful and original work in analysing the wider and less familiar German sources of Benjamin's terminology, Lacoue-Labarthe makes a tentative comparative reading of both Benjamin's and Heidegger's responses to Hölderlin, examining the 'theological-political' aspects of Heidegger's 1930s interpretations before returning again to the problem of *Gedichtete*. Where Hanssen (and the editors of the *Selected Works* in English) has this as 'poetized', Lacoue-Labarthe refigures this concept as 'dictamen', which, as *Gestalt*, is a 'figure of existence', or, in Benjamin's own words, 'a sphere akin to the mythic', such that 'life in general is the *Gedichtete* of poems'. This formulation (and the simultaneous French-German etymological play between *Gedichtete/dictamen*) allows Lacoue-Labarthe to extract from Benjamin a theory of myth and experience which neither (ideologically) subsumes one under the other, nor 'mythologizes' life itself under the rubric of history (which is what Heidegger's Hölderlin interpretation is accused of doing here), but rather allows for these 'mythic attachments' themselves to be reassessed from within the all-important 'sacred sobriety' of the critical relationship.

It says something for the recondite nature of Benjamin's thought in this early period that the twelve essays in this volume, although generally useful, do not exhaust all that can be said on this topic. Also left unexplored are a whole series of broader affiliations with Romanticism that appear throughout Benjamin's work, such as his reliance on the literary and philosophical works of Jean-Paul, Ludwig Tieck, Karl Ritter and K.W.F. Solger, or his involvement with *both* Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel's later systematic works on literature, language and historiography. The historical-philosophical problems

of language in Benjamin are always rooted in an immanent understanding of the dramatic, poetic and novelistic phenomena in which they emerge, a point that is too easily lost in English-language commentaries. For this reason alone the transitional period between Classicism and post-Romanticism and the work of authors such as von Kleist, Friedrich Hebbel and Büchner was of utmost importance to Benjamin. Of related importance, and still relatively unexplored in the secondary literature, is Benjamin's ambivalent attitude towards Hegel, who in one sense was the silent yet always present 'third party' in his dialogue with Romanticism. Finally, on a methodological level, there is the persistent danger that the prevalent form of the modern academic essay does a great disservice to the unique linguistic *force* of Benjamin's writing, and, indeed, may on some level be radically incompatible with Benjamin's later deliberately non-academic, interventionist critical methodology. Benjamin, even in his early work, *performatively* utilizes the transfigurative, allegorical force of language, quotation and exegesis. Thus writing about Benjamin is always difficult, and



it is too easy to miss what is at stake in the work altogether by 'interpreting' it into modern academic-speak, as some of the essays appear to do here.

This contrasts with two other ways of approaching Benjamin and Romanticism that have recently appeared. It is a sign of Benjamin's current academic stature that we now have the first volume of *Benjamin Studien*, featuring essays in German and English, based upon the papers given at the First Congress of the International Walter Benjamin Association in Amsterdam in 1997. However, in a publication that aims to bring together the divergent and (according to the editors) 'hostile' factions of Benjamin scholarship, there is little dissent and more than a little hagiography.

George Steiner, for example, seems to be attempting to take over Gerhard Scholem's mantle as chief 'protector' of Benjamin's reputation by proposing twelve prerequisites for anyone wishing to enter their imaginary Benjamin seminar (including a thorough historical knowledge of post-enlightenment Jewish emancipation, and the ability to read Benjamin's complex German). Whilst one can appreciate Steiner's fear in the face of what he calls the 'current plethora, the explosion of secondary material' on Benjamin, and his wish to have some sort of control over it, one can only intuit that such attempts at 'defamiliarizing' Benjamin were thoroughly undermined at the conference by having a discussion panel with Benjamin's two granddaughters and his nephew Michael, where they answered questions about the family's postwar fortunes and no doubt fed the audience's appetite for just that kind of personal 'hearsay' Steiner would probably hate.

There are, however, some important essays included here, such as Werner Hamacher's 'Jetzt: Benjamin zur historischen Zeit' (included in German, although a translation has already appeared in *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, ed. Heidrun Friese, Liverpool University Press, 2001) and Martin Jay's 'Walter Benjamin, Remembrance and the First World War'. Susan Buck-Morss's 'Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde' and Samuel Weber's 'Between a Human Life and a Word: Walter Benjamin and the Citability of Gesture' are interesting but only occasionally add anything that is truly original to Benjamin scholarship. Perhaps a more specific theme than 'Perception and Experience in Modernity' would help *Benjamin Studien* stand out in the future.

Meanwhile, Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre provide an object lesson in how *not* to address the complex issues of Romanticism in their book *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity* (a translation of their 1992 book, which was more intriguingly entitled *Révolte et mélancolie*). Beginning by stating that Romanticism may be an 'undecipherable enigma', the authors go on to spend two lengthy chapters attempting to offer both a 'typology' and a 'sociology' of Romanticism's 'ideal types' before concluding that it is *any* cultural phenomenon – from 'any position on the political spectrum' – which 'rejects' modernity and embodies an anti-technological, nostalgic world-view. Thus, Romanticism is to be found not only in Balzac, Ruskin, Dickens, Hugo, but also in Weber, Marx, Oswald Spengler, Paul Valéry, surrealism, the events of May 1968 and even, finally, the film *Star Wars*. The authors match this definitional woolliness with a polemical tone, and are routinely dismissive of much

of the more sober scholarship on literary and political Romanticism. Benjamin's dissertation gets no mention at all, whilst Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's seminal *The Literary Absolute* gets mislabelled as *simply* an 'anthology' of Romantic texts. The authors' basic premiss – that Romanticism *constitutively* opposes modernity – unfortunately demonstrates little or no understanding of the way in which the foundational moments of the Romantic project emerged out of the German Enlightenment itself – the Jena Romantics being the perfect case in point.

Both Friedrich Schlegel and Goethe make significant, if circuitous, appearances in the latest volume of Benjamin's *Selected Works* in English, which covers the period 1935 to the middle of 1938 (the final volume, covering the remaining years up to 1940, is published in June). Like the previous volumes, it collects the work chronologically, alongside fragments and shorter unpublished writings, and this allows the reader to engage with the work as a continuum, or as near as possible. This time, the editors appear to have retained a higher proportion of the shorter fragments from the Suhrkamp *Gesammelte Schriften*, many of which were frustratingly left out of the previous editions of the *Selected Works*, particularly Volume 1, which included, for example, only around 60 per cent of the important works from 1916/17. Whilst essays here on Brecht, Kafka, Johann Jakob Bachofen and Eduard Fuchs offer important explicit formulations of Benjamin's late theoretical position, he continues to employ different strategies of narrating personal and collective experience: autobiographical pieces and allegories such as 'Rastelli's Story' and 'Conversation above the Corso: Recollections of Carnival-Time in Nice', both of which introduce the now familiar hidden-dwarf motif. In the latter case this is done via Goethe's novella *Die neue Melusina*, a work about which Benjamin planned unsuccessfully to write a full-scale treatment from 1921. This carnivalesque play of scale, seduction and illusion not only serves as an image of the German situation at that time, but relates to just those historical transfigurations *of* and *in* narrative experience which are discussed here in 'The Story Teller'.

This is, of course, the period in which such ongoing analyses of the deceptive, allegorical power of language were extended by Benjamin to include those equally revolutionary transformations of experience determined by the material-technological developments of modernity. The two important works in relation to this in the volume are 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility' – included

here in its substantially longer 1936 version – and ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, which was the ‘pivotal moment’ in the development of *The Arcades Project*. No doubt the opportunity to reassess these works will create a new torrent of secondary literature on Benjamin in English, but for now it is worth pointing out how there is a strong symmetry here between that mammoth task of collection found in *The Arcades Project* and the briefer yet more directly subversive 1936 project *Deutsche Menschen* (‘German Men and Women’). Here, Benjamin’s alter ego, Detlef Holz, compiles and introduces twenty-five obscure personal letters from philosophers and literary figures from the period 1780 to 1830 – again, that important transitional period from Classicism to late Romanticism. Ostensibly an exercise in unabashed patriotism, and passed by the Reich’s censors, this amazing book (Adorno famously called it a ‘Jewish Ark’) sold well in Germany for two years before its true intent was spotted and it was placed on the Index by the German Ministry of Propaganda.

Its subversion works on two levels: first, it forms a more-or-less subtle critique of totalitarianism via the letters’ contents, which discuss apparently marginal personal events and relationships but accrue into an image of national identity which contrasts strongly with that which was so disastrously demanded of Benjamin’s generation; second, each of the letters can be read as an autobiographical motif, as if Benjamin, exiled in Denmark, was smuggling himself pseudonym-

ously back into German literary life. The letter writers here act as (in Benjamin’s words) ‘representatives of a more understanding posterity’, and therefore hold a weak yet palpable redemptive power that Benjamin appears to be utilizing to construct a sort of thematic, vicarious, autobiography: divorce and the pain of conjugal deception, estranged fathers and brothers, political exile, the question of translation, the conflicts of religious and political commitment, the privations of literary life. Even the most idiosyncratic of Benjamin’s passions are represented: children’s books and toys, theories of colour, graphology. The last letter is from Friedrich Schlegel, marking the final break with Schleiermacher over the non-orthodox religious content of the *Ideas*: ‘If my writings cause you only to wrestle with the hollow spectre of comprehension or incomprehension, put them aside ... chattering about them can achieve little.... Or do you believe that dialectics can make crushed flowers grow again?’ It is not difficult to see why these century-old tensions between metaphysics and experience occupied Benjamin in his own last years. Perhaps the task remains, whether we are attempting to read Benjamin *or* the Romantics, to be mindful of the distance between this ‘chatter’ of incomprehension and the power of critique itself.

Nickolas Lambrianou

The anxiety of returns

Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London and New York, 2002. 250 pp., £40.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 1 85984 674 2 hb., 1 85984 450 2 pb.

A ‘major new interpretation of the problematic’, asserts the rather excited back cover of Fredric Jameson’s latest publication. Unfortunately, the product doesn’t quite live up to the sales pitch, and not only because this supposedly new intervention includes passages lifted, with minimal paraphrase, from earlier essays. More crucially, what presents itself as a brave new interpretation of modernity turns out, in the end, to be all about that other old favourite, postmodernity; a ‘postmodern thing’, as Jameson himself might say.

Indeed, the very first words of *A Singular Modernity* are: ‘In full postmodernity...’ The formulation is significant. For just as ‘postmodernity’ rarely appears in this book without a preceding ‘full’, so too ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ characteristically come drag-

ging a ‘proper’ behind them. And as Derrida has noted, in a rather different context, the use of such ‘apparently redundant’ qualifiers functions much ‘like a warning light’ which always ‘signals an uneasiness that demands to be followed up’. Explicitly at least, the source of such uneasiness in this book derives from an anxiety about returns, the ushering back in of ‘all kinds of old things’ carried out ‘to the very sound of windows breaking’. More implicitly, it would seem to derive from a perceived threat to the contemporary critical standing of the concept of postmodernity itself – as designating, ‘when properly used, our own present’ – with which the fate of Jameson’s own theoretical project is now clearly entwined. It is against this background that the rationale for the book

as a whole is defined in terms of a need 'to consider some final return or reinvention of the outmoded in full postmodernity, a recurrence ... of the very concept of modernity as such, which we had all naively assumed long since to be superseded'.

The main theoretical objections to Jameson's conception of the postmodern are no doubt well known to readers of this journal – several of them could be developed in relation to the problems surrounding the use of the term 'outmoded' in the preceding citation – and, pertinent as they remain, I will try not to repeat them here. Nonetheless, given these long-standing arguments, Jameson's rhetorically inclusive 'we' is, at the very least, a mite presumptuous. If it is hard to believe that he doesn't know this, it is not so hard to see why, as a means to mastering anxiety, it is necessary. For it is essential to the argument of this book that any contemporary discourse of modernity be regarded as simply a reactionary 'revival', rather than as a legitimate philosophical and political challenge to the concept of postmodernity which has accompanied it from its very first emergence in the intellectual marketplace. As such, any talk of modernity can, as the book's preface, 'Regressions of the Current Age', makes clear, be safely dealt with by presenting it as an 'ideological' phenomenon which may only work to justify the unchecked march of global capitalism.

With its ultimately rather orthodox model of ideological analysis (which can apparently never become 'outmoded'), Jameson's supposedly new intervention is, thus, in its central argument at least, actually little more than an updated version of Perry Anderson's well-known Marxian critique of the category of modernity outlined in his 1984 *New Left Review* essay 'Modernity and Revolution'. Significantly, Jameson ends *A Singular Modernity* by proposing the 'therapeutic' exercise of 'substituting capitalism for modernity in all the contexts in which the latter appears'. This might just, I suppose, be a plausible 'substitution' if it were restricted to the limited context defined by the 'political discursive struggle' in which the likes of Anthony Giddens have presented themselves as being on the side of 'modernization'. However, while this is indeed the primary reference point given in the introduction, the main body of the text casts its net considerably wider, and to rather less plausible effect.

In fact, Jameson's book is divided into two halves – one on 'modernity' and the other on (artistic) 'modernism'. The first part is organized around what Jameson proposes as four 'maxims' of modernity. Probably the most interesting of these (the third) centres on an argument, developed through some insightful readings

of Descartes and Heidegger, that 'consciousness and subjectivity are unrepresentable'. This looks like it might be an engagement with recent debates around subjectivity and reflection, but, if so, there are no references given. At any rate, if Jameson has some interesting points to make in relation to such debates, the ultimate conclusion they seem designed to elicit is dubious to say the least. For while it may be true that 'consciousness and the subject are representable only by way of the indirection of the object world' – as in fact the likes of Schlegel knew very well – this hardly justifies the stronger claim that, therefore, 'no theory of modernity in terms of subjectivity can be accepted', or that any attempt to elaborate such a theory will necessarily end up 'as so much ideological fodder'.

Actually, Jameson is, somewhat typically, less concerned with confronting the kinds of philosophical questions that the emergence of a new discourse surrounding subjectivity (from the eighteenth century onwards) involves, than he is with displacing them through their rewriting as misrecognized issues of narrative or rhetoric. Hence, the primacy he accords to the second of his 'maxims of modernity': 'Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category.' I confess that I am unsure why the two should be viewed as opposed in this way, but the reasons why Jameson might *want* to present them as such are, once again, very clear. This is confirmed by the link evidently envisaged between the first of his maxims, 'We cannot not periodize', and the last: 'No "theory" of modernity makes sense today unless it is able to come terms with the hypothesis of a post-modern break with the modern.'

Now, one can accept that 'narrative' – including its periodizing forms – is not so easily repudiated as some might suppose. But this does *not*, in itself, justify the argument that modernity only has meaning as a 'projective' framework for so many 'storytelling possibilities'. To reduce modernity in this way is simply to ignore what is so fundamental about it as a concept – yes, a concept – that is, its distinctive modes of temporalization. That Jameson is partly aware of this – and aware of the problems it might create for his own critical project – is evident in his anxious acknowledgement of postmodernism's dependence on 'essentially modernist categories of the new'. However, rather than engaging this 'contradiction' at the 'conceptual' level it requires, his solution is to dissolve it into a question of rhetoric which leaves the dogmatically asserted primacy of the (still essentially chronological and homogenous) time of narrative untouched.

The second part of the book, focused on artistic

(mostly literary) modernism, continues from where the first leaves off, if not without some awkwardness. While the argument involves a not unpersuasive defence of the unavoidable use of 'general concepts', against the nominalism of 'the present age', the critical possibilities this might allow are undermined by an inability to imagine that such 'larger concepts' could take anything other than a 'generic-periodizing' form. The novelty here is to see the 'general' category of modernism itself as a 'belated construct' which can thus be revealed as an ideologically motivated retrospective projection carried out from the Cold War perspective of a 'late modernism'. (This will, in turn, be used to justify the counter-intuitive prescription that the category of modernity should also be 'applied exclusively to the past ... [as] a useful trope for generating alternate historical narratives, despite the charge of ideology it necessarily continues to bear'.) This leads on to a rather familiar story concerning art's 'autonomization'. And clearly there is considerable truth in this if one thinks of Greenberg or the New Critics. It is, however, far more problematic when, as usual, this is extended to the likes of Adorno, Blanchot and Beckett – all of whom, in their very different ways, are anything but concerned with the ideological search for 'certainties and reassurances' – and when it is implicitly contrasted to some supposed postmodern overcoming. Moreover, it misses, once again, the possibility that, as Peter Osborne has argued, the key to 'unifying' a general concept of modernism might not be as period style, but as a distinctive form of temporality in its own right which unsettles Jameson's narratological terms. This would allow us to think the differences and similarities between, say, Adorno and Greenberg's positions in a quite different way.

How far the complexities surrounding the terms 'modernity' and 'modernism' have been illicitly reduced becomes clear with the two names that Jameson invokes in his conclusion, as embodying the promise of a 'wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia': Walter Benjamin and Ezra Pound. A very fashionable coupling, of course, but frankly perverse in this context. For it is hard to think of two figures whose distinctive philosophical and literary projects are more intimately connected to a certain fundamental conception – and not simply 'narrative category' – of modernity. (To Jameson's conclusion that 'the modern' is a 'one-dimensional concept', one would have to counterpose Benjamin's emphasis on what he calls the 'kaleidoscope' of the modern). Even beyond this, there is something seriously problematic about Jameson's articulation of the very 'desire called

Utopia', given that, as Calinescu reminds us, the shift from spatial to temporal 'implications', which gives such a 'desire' its charge of futurity, is itself dependent upon its intersection with emergent ideas of modernity and new forms of time-consciousness.

Jameson, Terry Eagleton writes on the back cover, is a theorist 'whose writings sweep majestically from Sophocles to science fiction'. Yet, of course, one person's majestic sweep is another's avoidance of the 'labour of the concept'. To be fair, there are elements of both in *A Singular Modernity*. Jameson is, as always, equally infuriating and entrancing, never short of illuminating juxtapositions or entertaining insights. Nonetheless, if, as Jean-Jacques Lecercle has recently opined (in *RP* 109), the concepts of modernity and modernism are indeed 'hopelessly confused' and 'much in need of clarification', sad to report, Jameson's 'new intervention' does little to rectify the situation.

David Cunningham

Syndrome

Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003. 178 pp., £37.95 hb., £15.50 pb., 0 8047 4560 9 hb. 0 8047 4561 7 pb.

'George Steiner', a friend observes, 'is the Stuart Maconie of high culture.' The equation of the canon-guarding mandarin with nostalgia TV's chief talking head is intriguing, not least for the thought of Maconie's nervous dismissal of old fads ('All those people wearing leg-warmers – all I can say now is, what were they on?') finding its Steinerian counterpart ('Pound and Heidegger – what *were* they thinking?'). It also serves to unite the two areas in which Andreas Huyssen has done his most significant work: the dialectic of high and low culture, and the growing importance of public memory. While *After the Great Divide* (1986) skilfully framed the history of debates over the twentieth century's structures of cultural value, *Twilight Memories* (1995) broke a different path, pondering the growth of memorialism in the 1990s. *Present Pasts* now gives a wide-ranging summary of the modes of memory which have confirmed its cultural centrality. The Holocaust, Huyssen notes, has dominated public discussion, along with many other traumatic discourses – AIDS, slavery, recovered memory. But there are also architectural pastiche, national heritage sites, a proliferation of museums, 'retro fashions and repro furniture', 'the mass-marketing of nostalgia', memoirs and confes-

sional writing, 'the spread of memory practices in the visual arts', and many more. Huyssen also points to an international politics of memory, notably visible in South Africa and Latin America. Little doubt, then, that this remains promising ground for a sequel.

Present Pasts extends the previous book's interests in architecture and urban environments, focusing especially on post-unification Berlin. It deals too with sculpture, comics (Spiegelman's *Maus*) and postwar German literature. Huyssen demonstrates his international range and his readiness to write about different classes of object; he also reminds us of his profound familiarity with German culture and history. But the essays do not really answer the expectations aroused by the book's early stages, in which a general theory of the dialectics of contemporary memory seems on the cards.

Huyssen's most arresting interventions arrive within the first thirty pages. Amid a survey of the field, he writes with particular persuasiveness of the limits of trauma as the major mode of memory: while it has been 'all too tempting to some to think of trauma as the hidden core of all memory', 'to collapse memory into trauma ... would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering and loss'. The point is indisputable, but still salutary. Huyssen also ventures towards a nagging paradox of contemporary memory, posited by Fredric Jameson two decades ago: the alleged coexistence of a 'culture of amnesia' with what *Twilight Memories* dubbed the 'memory boom'. What, he asks, 'if both observations were true, if the boom in memory were inevitably accompanied by a boom in forgetting?'

The rhetorical question hints at a substantial answer. But Huyssen's clear awareness of these issues does not lead him to the sustained meditation on them that we might now expect. His best guess seems to be that memory grows in importance as it is threatened by an amnesia which is itself produced by a memory overload: 'we are trying to counteract this fear and danger of forgetting with survival strategies of public and private memorialization'. But still he insists on asking, 'why? And especially: why now?' The state of the media is one answer, and Huyssen notes that 'the power of our most advanced electronics depends entirely on memory' – a worthwhile observation, though it elides the presumably considerable differences between the way that human and computer memories work. He then offers a more hard-bitten view: it is 'the profit interests of mass marketers' that are 'pertinent in explaining the success of the memory syndrome. Simply put, the past is selling better than the future'. That's plausible – but it still begs the question why the past should be

so popular, not to mention the denser questions raised by *particular* revivals and waves of retrospection. If there is a final general explanation, it seems to boil down, or up, to 'a slow but palpable transformation of temporality in our lives'), notably linked to new technology and in particular the Internet.

This tour of the issues continually raises pertinent points – but it does not quite cohere into a new level of understanding. We may hope that the following chapters will be case studies that will focus all these floating notions. They are, but they don't. The Berlin chapters are informative reports on 1990s Berlin; chapters on Latin America remind us of some lesser-known



Maus convincingly steers a subtle course for mimesis beyond the 'Holocaust sublime' of which Huyssen is cannily suspicious. But all this and more does not meet the considerable expectations awakened by the first chapter.

Present Pasts contains many local diversions: moments meriting their own scrutiny or acclaim. Thus Huyssen's creative notion of an electronic-age 'monumentality of miniaturization', in which size no longer matters, could cast a different light on the whole concept of the memorial. On the other hand, his commentaries on particular cityscapes are vitiated by a heavily subjective quality which remains hesitant and half-stated. Corporate developments in the heart of Berlin, Huyssen complains, 'will engage and confine their visitors'. That sounds like wishfully negative thinking. Maybe the Berliners who don't feel engaged and confined will feel uncaged and unconfined, and

wonder where to go for a coffee. Predicting strangers' feelings is a risky basis for such a sober analysis as this. The perceptual gap becomes manifest when Huyssen declares that the new Potsdamer Platz is 'rather appalling', 'a two-storey drab shopping mall stuffed with mini-boutiques and fast-food units, [which] resembles the inside of a prison more closely than a consumer paradise'. In the next sentence he graciously admits that 'the public seems to accept it with open arms'. Not that this, or anything, should be the end of the debate, but it is a reminder of the sandy foundations on which Huyssen has elected to build his arguments about architecture – arguments which take up almost half the book. In a discussion of Times Square, Huyssen himself remarks that '[In] city culture particularly, the resisted new is bound to become the basis for another glorified past' – an overstatement, but a wise enough note of caution against making long-range generalizations from one's own resistances.

The problems of subjectivity also arise in an opposite fashion. Huyssen insists early on that 'too much of the contemporary memory discourse focuses on the personal'. In so far as this view is based on a reluctance to get involved with psychoanalysis or with narcissistic confessional writing, I can sympathize. But an account of memory which eschews the personal does sound a little like a mountain climber with a fear of heights. Memory, like most subjective processes, is culturally determined and collectively conditioned. It is also, we might hazard, an individual experience before, or perhaps after, it is anything else. Huyssen's deliberate neglect of this results in a book which has rather little to say about the actual activity of memory – activity to which modern literature, for instance, could give us a lot of pointers. Huyssen's interest in externalized memory – in monuments, memorials, sculptures – is understandable, given their reassuring solidity and visibility. But he more than once quotes Robert Musil's remark that nothing is as invisible as a monument – an aphorism whose implications he does not pursue. Presumably an invisible monument is a forgotten one: an object intended to be ceaselessly obtrusive, which routine has nonetheless flattened into background. Habit, notes Beckett's Vladimir, is a great deadener. If this is the fate of all monuments, are they all condemned to failure? Where does this leave 'public memory' and our desire to locate it in a spot we can walk around? My real doubt is not so much about monuments as about public memory as such. In one sense, the term seems to denote a plausible entity, a concept we need; in another it must surely have the same shady status as the 'collective unconscious' to

which few now refer. Public memory, if it exists, must have a lot to do with countless private memories. To note their daunting transience and inaccessibility is to suspect the challenges that a theory of contemporary cultural memory might involve, and how much any analyst will be forced to omit.

Such a theory must be indebted to Huyssen's work in the field. But it might try talking about kinds of reminiscence that go unexamined here – for instance, *happy* memories. Huyssen, making his case for the centrality of memory, sees a single process at work in the twin booms of trauma and nostalgia; but he has little to say about the latter. It does seem possible that an eruption of troubling and repressed memories is subtly connected with a delighted fascination with the past – that, let alone George Steiner, some subterranean bond links Art Spiegelman and Stuart Maconie. But just what the connection might be – what perverse dialectic might bind pain and pleasure, nasty and nice, murderers and *madeleines*, terrorism and 'Tiger Feet' – is a conundrum that *Present Pasts* never seeks to solve.

Joe Brooker

What radicals want

Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, Verso, London and New York, 2002. 172 pp., £40.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 1 85984 725 0 hb., 1 85984 267 4 pb.

If we can speak of a European 'people' or identity, how are we to conceive of its character, and what would constitute 'European citizenship'? Could there be a communal identity or polis without borders? What, in any case, counts as a 'border' and why? And what is the role of power and the violence of power in its maintenance? These questions, apt enough before, but made even more so by recent global events and the foreign policy schisms they have created within the European Union, are at the heart of Balibar's latest collection in English.

With none of these topics does Balibar break new ground, these essays being an extension to earlier treatments in French and American editions. One should add too, perhaps, that they were written before 9/11 and left unrevised – although in this case it only goes to confirm the mistake of fetishizing that date, since there is little here that is not of relevance to those events and their aftermath. What is distinctive about these essays is their organization around an anti-Hobbesian analysis of violence as 'post-institutional':

as not preceding the imposition of 'civil society' but as its effect and well-nigh ineradicable accompaniment.

What we have to accept today, says Balibar, after the 'dialectics' of revolution and counter-revolution, fascism and anti-fascism, decolonization and neo-colonialism, the neoliberal 'empire' and its opposition, is that extreme violence arises as much from institutions as it does against them. The only way out of the circle is to introduce a 'politics of violence' – to embed the idea of violence and the means of countering it within the concept of the political itself, rather than seeing politics as either the negation of violence or its legitimate use. If, moreover, we want to deal with the less predictable and intelligible aspects of violence, we must locate and scrutinize its 'other scene', a term taken from Freud which Balibar uses in reference both to the repression of information (and its consequences) in the 'information age', and to the historical method or interpretative strategy which focuses on the overdetermining and material effects of the political 'imaginary'. With the former is linked the failure of agents to comprehend the determinants of their actions and the invisibility (misrecognition) of 'enemies' and victims. What the latter looks to unveil are the motivating forces of the 'infrastructure of the infrastructure', in a kind of inversion of the Marxist penetration of 'real' (economic) relations beneath 'surface' (ideological) relations that yet avoids (or seeks to avoid) any idealist imputation of efficacy to ideas alone. For Balibar what is at issue here is the interface or interference between the respective logics of the ideological-imaginary and the economico-social; the secretion of the 'other scenes' of mass impoverishment, suicidal and exterminist policies that emerge in conjunction with extreme institutional violence; the impact of a capitalist logic that 'must' neutralize or destroy what might otherwise prosper and come to oppose it; the cycle of attack and retaliation that marks the New World Order.

Balibar, then, is clearly responsive in these out-of-joint times to the summons of a spectral ontology that complicates any straightforward application of historical materialism, although he comes to it from within a much longer and deeper engagement with Marxism than some others, and without the Derridean rhetoric. Another obvious comparison and contrast – alluded to at a number of points – is with Foucault, since Balibar contests any theorization of power exclusively in terms of the 'construction' of subjectivity, subjective resistance and the 'aesthetics of the self'. What the Foucauldian framework overlooks, Balibar implies, is the extent to which the violence exercised through power *exterminates* subjects (as when the world market

abandons 'excess' populations to pandemics, 'natural' catastrophes, genocidal warfare, and the like), removing in the process any potential for these victims to present themselves as offering resistance in some recognizable political discourse of 'rights' or 'emancipation' (or in any form of 'self-styling', come to that).

In a further series of counter-Foucauldian qualifications, Balibar argues that power, although certainly never stabilized and centrally located, is nonetheless complexity-reducing by virtue of the 'tautological' ideality upon which it relies for its legitimacy (*God is God, the Law is the Law...*). He also insists at the same time, in a Lacanian inflection, that there is always an unlocatable 'third' to the dialectics of power and counter-power, namely the 'cruelty' which seeks and takes enjoyment (*jouissance*) in the exercise of power and which, unlike the violence wielded in the name of legitimating principles or ideals, has no symbolically mediated relation with reality.

In essays more specifically addressed to the European situation, Balibar explores the dialectic of violence and counter-violence as manifested in, on the one hand, narrowing conceptions of identity, exclusionary policies on immigration and growing racism, and, on the other, the potential for a new, more genuinely democratic politics of 'civility' based on recognition of the ambiguities of 'identity' and the fictive nature of organicist conceptions of nation and ethnicity. An intensification of racism in Europe is acknowledged, but analysed as a reaction to arrested social development and the impact of neoliberal economics and presented as a process that is not yet beyond the control of democratic forces, provided these face up to the initiatives needed at local and transnational levels. These would include the promotion of trans-cultural movements of a kind that would both cut across existing cultural borders and at the same time reach beyond the viewpoint of cultural identities. If we can speak meaningfully of a European 'identity' or 'citizenship', Balibar argues, it can only be in an understanding that identity is always both individual and other-dependent, a matter of representation; and an understanding of 'citizenship' that is no longer nationally rooted, but 'open'; based, that is, on the convergence of groups originating from all parts of the world on European soil.

Some of this is based on an assessment of the present state of social movement politics that seems questionable or inconsistent. Anti-globalization campaigns are not discussed, and although at one point Balibar recognizes the attempts of the ecology and peace movements to build a transnational momentum,

he elsewhere suggests that any politicization of youth that we see in Europe at the present time is absorbed in proto-fascist agitation. His treatment of key concepts, on the other hand, is generally impressive, precisely because of its informed attention to detail and dialectical insight (qualities which tell against any adequate reproduction here).

Balibar is not the most lucid or accessible of theorists. But he is in many respects the kind of commentator a radical wants at the present time: a materialist fully wised-up to Marxism's limits and aporias, a thinker keenly attuned to the dark sides of the European situation – its lurking forms of apartheid, the possibilities of fascist revival; and an intellectual pessimist whose optimism, such as it, is not wholly a matter merely of will (or wishfulness) but based on sensible estimation of political realities. Balibar is not dreaming of utopia, yet neither is he without a hope for the emergence of new forms of agency, a solidarity against any renewal of fascism.

If, however, there is a problem with these essays, apart from their congested expression, it is that they are almost too scrupulously descriptive of their 'scenes', too little given to specification of the institutions or forms of action or future political imaginaries that might take us beyond them. At times, too, one has a sense that we have been here before, that Balibar's reformulations are all very well but do not necessarily advance the understanding much further than it has reached in other sensitive post-Marxist accounts. This is not to deny the sophistication and seriousness of his engagement, only to suggest that there is a weariness that comes from academic balance and scruple itself where this is so remote from the centres of political influence and action. It is as if phenomenological exposure is all that is left to the radical intellectual. To unmask the 'other scene' is also to expose the impotence of those with the understanding.

Kate Soper

Habermasochism

Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002. xi + 210 pp., £26.95 hb., £11.95 pb., 0 8014 3814 4 hb., 0 8014 8678 5 pb.

Jodi Dean's book tackles a world steeped in information sources. This is the world of Internet and chat groups, of satellite television and digital radio stations, media info-bites and online factfiles. Much of this new 'technoculture' can, at least theoretically, be accessed globally. These formats and forums promise endless commentary and analysis; in effect, unlimitable access to facts, opinions and influences. It is a world that recently revealed itself dramatically in the Gulf War conflict. Various sources of information were locatable, from BBC and ITN to CNN, European media to Al Jazeera and Indymedia and the group of Russians in Iraq posting on aeronautics.ru. Airtime was even given to the extravagant briefings from the Iraqi Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed Al Sakhaf. The war was fought across these media fronts as openly as across any other. As harvest of all this official infotainment, myriad public opinion polls were updated regularly. These too played their part in legitimizing and delegitimizing the war. (As I write, today's poll on a London radio station asks whether Saddam Hussein should be put to death, if found alive. The text message voting for Yes stands at 69 per cent.) Immeasurable

information and copious opportunities to express opinions – this, say some, is the contemporary meaning of democracy. That everyone can add to a publicly mediated *mélange* of opinion, however qualified to speak, is the conundrum that interests Dean.

Publicity's Secret opens with the historical and philosophical connections between the public sphere and democracy, as voiced by Jeremy Bentham. Bentham promoted the idea of a powerful public tribunal that collates 'all the wisdom and justice of the nation' and 'decides the destiny of public men'. This Dean tags 'the public-supposed-to-know'. At issue are not the contents of knowledge, but the very authority invested in the public – that it actively and constantly makes it its business to know. Set against this is Bentham's other public, labelled by Dean 'the public-supposed-to-believe'. This is a public easily influenced, unable to judge in the welter of conflicting opinions. What it takes to be true are the opinions of others, the convictions of men it trusts. The public-supposed-to-know, a small group of the privileged who have time and inclination for immersion in public affairs, is reliant on publicity or information, so that it might judge

responsibly. If publicity is freely available to them, they may make rational decisions that the public-supposed-to-believe will trust. The public is split, then, according to whether it has the capacity to know and judge.

Having established a historical context, Dean's argument turns to deconstruction. She finds nestling at the heart of Bentham's notion of publicity the idea of the secret.

The secret fills out the gap and conceals the inconsistency between the public-supposed-to-know and the public-supposed-to-believe. It holds open the reassuring possibility that the judging public will judge correctly, the possibility in which the believing public needs to believe. The secret marks the absence necessary to sustain belief in the public-supposed-to-know.

This is the key twist of the book, a deconstructionist paradox: inherent in the notion of publicity is its 'other', secrecy. Dean endorses Reinhart Koselleck's work on John Locke and freemasonry in *Critique and Crisis*: its key stance being that the emergence of the public consecrates the transfer of an auratic and mystical power from the monarch to society via the arguments of critics. The idea of the secret allows Dean to reject Habermas's sunnily optimistic notion of the public sphere as a self-transparent realm of universal reason, rationality and the law. However, Dean discovers a secret Habermas inside Habermas. Habermas does indeed admit the 'constitutive place of the secret'. The secret was not only crucial to sovereign power, notes Habermas; secret societies too, such as the Freemasons, were indeed proto-publics. Thus 'secrecy becomes a condition for the publicity of reason'. However, it is not a reading that Habermas sustains or takes seriously enough for Dean. Instead he turns to the literary public and the domestic sphere, as constituents of a burgeoning public sphere. Habermas's legacy is a faith in the public sphere as a place of discussion and exposure. Enlightenment seeps out. Critical debate is assumed to convert the public-supposed-to-believe into the public-supposed-to-know.

On this point, Dean's critique of what she terms 'Habermasochism' kicks in. Habermas's historical account of the formation of an enlightened public sphere may be tenable, but as contemporary desideratum is wanting. Within contemporary 'technoculture' there is only a vast pool of information sources, opinions and data. This has not led to transparency and the possibility of judgement, but rather the opposite – a fragmented 'public-destined-to-be-sceptical'. Everybody demands knowledge and everyone is entitled to an opinion. This is consecrated in contemporary clichés, mouthed from politicians to cyber-boosters to

advertisers and publicists: the right to know, the duty to get informed, knowledge as power.

Dean traces the development of excess publicity. Inasmuch as publicity bears out Habermas's promise of a democratic realm of informed citizens, it also locks us into other sinister networks – insidious commercialism, surveillance society, and ultimately super-scepticism, amidst the welter of ideas. As scepticism, 'the realization of publicity turns into its opposite'. Or if scepticism is not the product, then it is the flight into banalization as bulwark against information. Dean admits her own fascination with Monica Lewinsky's sex acts with Bill Clinton, an episode that she found more riveting than the 'boring Whitewater investigations'. Her attraction to gossip made her feel guilty, until she realized, via the good services of Slavoj Žižek, that the whole notion of a public sphere, operating according to principles of critical reason, is a fiction. There is another public – the 'public-supposed-not-to-know' – and the secret that it must not know most of all is that it does not exist, and that all the opinion polls that claim to be its voice are 'nothing more than buttresses for already particular claims'. (Update: the text message voting now stands at 70 per cent Yes. Each vote costs 20p plus charges. You can vote as many times as you like.)

And so the book's concerns are set up, and the chapters that follow twirl around the ideas of publicity and secrecy in various guises. Habermas is bashed now and again, and Žižek is promoted, despite some dissent regarding the conception of democracy. One chapter is on conspiracy theory, the subject of Dean's previous book. Conspiracy theorists are prime examples of the suspicious citizens typical in an age of media overdose (though the founding moment of the USA – the Declaration of Independence – is shown by Dean to be based likewise on identification of a conspiracy). Conspiracy theory 'marks the decline of symbolic efficacy, the sweeping, disarticulating power of publicity to reflexivize everything and destroy any reference point'. Attraction to conspiracy theory is identifiable even in those closest to power. Dean examines Hillary Rodham Clinton's evocation of a conspiratorial conservative plot to destroy her husband's presidency. The Web – the place that 'realizes the fantasy of the public' – is analysed as a forum that incubates conspiracy explanations, as a result of its untrammelled access to opinions. (A JPEG has just arrived by email, revealing the toppling of Saddam's statue in Baghdad to have been a 'carefully staged media event' laid on by the US Army in conjunction with Ahmed Chalabi's Free Iraqi Forces militia.)

The following chapter delivers a history of the Internet and its publicity, updating the metaphor of Big Brother to one of little brothers (derived from Žižek's appellation for Bill Gates) 'who thrive in the excesses of the information economy'. Theories of post-ideological technocratic society are examined through Habermas and Marcuse. Those debates are disarmed by an insight from Žižek on radical distrust and disagreement as the actual output of any collective decision-making process such as might be favoured by advocates of liberal civil society. The next chapter deals with 'celebrity', here interpreted as net presence – for example, the search for ever more information (indeed secrets) about stars and other 'others', or 'ego-surfing', one's own personal tally of Google hits. Here the focus is, again via Žižek, psychoanalytical, organized around the 'drive' and notions of self and other, or the questions 'Am I well known enough?' and 'Are my secrets being revealed far and wide?' As with conspiracy theory, celebrity as a 'mode of subjectivization' connects to the fact that



there are no stable reference points any longer and so 'we see accompanying the endorsement of an absence of authority, a longing for authority'. (An email has just arrived from InstantDemocracy.co.uk asking me to choose between some preset options on 'What Next for Iraq?')

The book closes with an examination of 'neo-democracy'. Here the argument turns briefly to economics: the fact that the World Wide Web and other networked communications have developed under the impetus of neoliberal market-oriented policies. This converts the ideology of 'the public's right to know' into an alibi for structures of commercial gain. After all this, though, Dean makes a final push in favour of the Web as a potential crib of democracy, inasmuch as it held to be a conflictual space. The arguments are laid out in a Now/Then attribute table comparing old-style 'public sphere' to new style 'neo-democracies'. The Web replaces the

nation. Contestation replaces consensus. Credibility replaces rationality. And so on.

Dean's book coalesces a number of approaches to the public and publicity, ranging from political theory to psychoanalysis and cultural studies. It identifies a new and consequential amalgam of public and new technologies. It warns of the dangers posed by information overload and generalized scepticism. It discovers the contradictions in the notion of our contemporary public – the 'public-supposed-to-know', with its constant access to information sources. But perhaps focus should be on the 'public-that-presumes-in-the-absence-of-knowledge'. Today's text message poll on the London radio station asks the question, 'Does Iraq really have weapons of mass destruction?' 65 per cent have texted Yes so far. But how the hell do they know – and why do they think that they know the truth in the absence of any real disclosures by those who might just know something about these WMD that 'rogue states' alone are not allowed to possess? This is knowledge as belief, and belief as a matter of intuition and inclination. And such beliefs – acting in this case as retrospective justifications for deeds – are a supplement to nasty real-world effects. But nasty real-world effects are perhaps a little too absent from Dean's world of ideological wrangles where guilt means watching prurient television instead of White House politics and the trickiest moral decisions are whether to shop at the local grocer's or at the supermarket with its mini-discounts exchanged for a consumption-patterns-tracking loyalty card. It's another day, another text message poll. 'Should we go to war with Syria?' 52 per cent say Yes. And so it goes on: the dangerous banality of public opinion, weird hybrid of kneejerkism and half-truths. Some solace – our governments don't listen anyway.

Esther Leslie

Whipping boy

Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, *To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-realization in Postmodern Times*, Verso, London and New York, 2002. 262 pp., £45.00 hb., £18.00 pb., 1 85984 686 6 hb., 1 85984 461 8 pb.

It is ironic that two of the cultural Left's favourite bogeymen, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, were respectively a robust defender of state education who doubted the wisdom of academic English, and a scourge of belletristic amateurism, universally reviled

by the cultural and academic establishment, who was pulled in by the Cambridge constabulary for possessing a banned avant-garde novel and who at one point flirted with communism. Genuine cultural rednecks are hardly so thin on the ground that the Left need waste its ammunition on a hardworking Inspector of Schools who believed that culture should be general to all, and one of the earliest champions of cultural studies.

Both figures, however, are taken to be representative of a sinister beast known as liberal humanism, which is elitist, essentialist and individualist. Though the critics of this doctrine are much given to historicizing, they seem not to have noticed that it began as part of the philosophical baggage of the most revolutionary class history has ever witnessed. One would like to ask these critics why they harbour such an animus against the anti-slavery campaigners, Chartists and suffragettes; for they were, of course, just as much the product of Western humanism as Dante and the EU.

Martin Ryle and Kate Soper's *To Relish the Sublime?* is in no doubt about the deficiencies of liberal humanism; but it is also a timely reminder of that tradition's enduring strengths, and thus the kind of rebuff to absolute, one-sided judgements of it which relativistic, many-sided postmodernists are unlikely to welcome. Understandably enough in the present climate, the book is a little defensive: it advances the claim that some cultural works are better than others with all the self-conscious air of unfashionability of the claim that Cilla Black is a hermeneutical phenomenologist. But the other side of its self-consciousness is a certain courage, as it presses its case for an idea of human self-realization which need not be elitist, essentialist or individualist.

The first section of the book is an admirably compact, lucid survey of philosophical conceptions of culture as self-realization, from Plato to post-structuralism. The critique of post-structuralism is astute, if not heart-stoppingly original. It is also gratifying to be reminded, as we are here, of the more obnoxious political aspects of Nietzsche, in a philosophical milieu which has played this down in the interests of reconstructing him as an early run for Gilles Deleuze. With commendable judiciousness, Ryle and Soper defend a notion of self-realization which is neither dependent on a withdrawal from the public world nor parasitic on the non-self-realization of others. As far as the modern self goes, they remind us that the enlightened eighteenth century was as much preoccupied with cults of sentiment and sensibility as with some whipping boy of abstract Reason, though they fail to note that most of these poets and philosophers of sentiment

hailed, for interesting historical reasons, from the Celtic fringes. Culture is both ideology and utopia – a spiritual reconciliation of social antagonisms which nevertheless exposes the embarrassing rift between its own properly universal values and the inevitable failure of bourgeois society to realize them. It is the bourgeoisie who stand in judgement on themselves, not just disgruntled leftists; and since we disgruntled leftists respect the autonomous judgements of others, having learned a good deal of our trade from liberal humanism, we heartily respect this particular judgement too.

Ryle and Soper are perhaps not quite critical enough of the idea of self-realization. They note that it might indefensibly imply that all human powers should be realized simply because they are there, as in some heady Romanticism or flatfooted naturalism; but they do not attend much to the ambiguity of the concept itself, which could suggest either a pre-existent self which then demands realization, or a self which is constituted in the process of realization. Politically speaking, this makes quite a difference, since the most disreputable kinds of identity politics tend to back the former case, and the more creditable kinds the latter. There can also be something a little too virile and florid-faced about the idea of self-realization, resonant as it is of some tediously vigorous self-activism. We need to take the idea out of the gym. Listening to others or chewing a peach can be instances of it as well. It must not be allowed to squeeze out *Gelassenheit* or negative capability.

Nor does the book really take issue with the potential formalism of the concept. In the lineage from Schiller to Arnold, what sometimes seems to matter is not which bits of yourself you realize, but whether they harmonize with each other. Self-realization here comes with an organicist price-tag. Arnold, for example, finds religious nonconformism distasteful not so much because of its doctrines, but because it is quirky, aberrant, irreconcilable to the cultural mainstream. What matters is being in the swim, whatever the swim happens to be. Such humanism can make a fetish of the consensual as much as postmodernism makes one of the idiosyncratic. In the Anglo-Saxon world, this passes into the criticism of I.A. Richards, the New Criticism and others as the dubious assumption that, in poetry or real life, you can (perhaps must) realize any 'appetency' you like as long as it is compatible with the realization of other such impulses.

The book does a splendid job of making Matthew Arnold sound less like some lily-waving, toffee-nosed aesthete than the usual leftist caricature. There is, even so, a tension in Arnold's conception of culture which

it could well have probed further. Arnold marks the historical point at which, if only for its own survival, the idea of culture must either go social and anthropological or risk going under along with increasingly *passé* notions of class privilege and private cultivation. But one reason why culture must now become an active, material force is to safeguard those rather older aesthetic standards. Unless culture in its broader sense incorporates the militant masses – unless, in a word, culture acts as a form of hegemony – culture in the more timeless, traditional sense (the best that has been thought and said) is likely to perish. Arnold's work is cuspated between two notions of culture, and is interestingly incoherent on this account.

There is another sort of inconsistency here, too, which is already marked in the work of Schiller. Culture is an ideal of spiritual integrity which must have material effects, taking on historical flesh. Yet how can it do so without betraying its own ideals? How can the spirit enter upon material incarnation without self-estrangement? If culture is a question of the whole, then any particular manifestation of it is *ipso facto* inadequate – a case which translates a certain Romantic or Idealist anxiety about the self into social terms. Culture is useless unless it issues in action; yet Schiller, Arnold, the early Thomas Mann and a host of others have recourse to it precisely as a high-minded *caveat* against too-premature or too-disruptive action. And action is always either too premature or too disruptive. Schiller's Aesthetic Man is perpetually ready for anything and able to commit himself fully to nothing. So culture is in contradiction with itself in this sense, too, as well as in the senses that Ryle and Soper valuably stress. It is a clash between Hellenism and Hebraism with which George Eliot, among others, never ceases to struggle.

One can put much the same point in terms of culture as a critique of instrumentalism. Ryle and Soper stress how precious this can be, though they are aware that it can be precious in both senses of the word. But the so-called Culture and Society tradition marks the point where culture needs social transformation just to flourish in its own terms; and that means political agency, which in turn means instrumentalism. How is culture not to be degraded by the very changes which might ensure its own flourishing?

The second part of *To Relish the Sublime?*, as well as providing some detailed social and cultural history, investigates the search for self-realization in various literary works, ranging from Mary Hays and Jane Austen to Gissing, Hardy, Jack London, H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster and English modernism. These sensitive, non-reductive readings attend to questions of literary form, unlike a good many cultural analyses these days from the political Left. Ryle and Soper are out to challenge what one might call 'identity criticism', which (though they are too courteous to say so) is in some ways simply an updated ethnic or gender-based version of the old-fashioned empathetic criticism of Oxbridge gentlemen. They see that all genuine interpretation is a form of irony, since it involves both positioning and self-criticism, identity and transcendence. Only when you are able to ironize your identity are you truly free. If a good many men and women are not yet in



this privileged position, this is an argument for their coming to be so, not a case against irony itself.

Ryle and Soper certainly stick their necks out. Not only do they have the boldfacedness to believe, along with 98 per cent of the population, that some works of culture are better than others; they also flirt with the outlandish theory that reading fiction is not quite the same as reading a railway timetable; that universality is a shameful rebuke to middle-class society, not just one of its more paranoid fantasies; that cultural self-improvement is not always and everywhere odiously elitist, in contrast to the anti-universalists who consider that it always and everywhere is; and that one of the deepest indictments of our social order is that it holds out ideals of cultural emancipation to people whom it then goes on to deprive of it. Eccentric stuff.

Terry Eagleton

Social superhero

David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001. 336 pp., £50.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 631 19919 5 hb., 0 631 19921 7 pb.

David Goldberg's book represents another twist in the already convoluted tale of the concept of race and its proper place in social and political theory. Recent efforts to get the concept ousted from the lexicon of social science (by Paul Gilroy and myself) have been a response to moves to reinstate it (by Lucius Outlaw among others), suitably restyled, as a valid description of biologically and culturally constituted social groupings. Goldberg takes a different tack altogether, one that seeks to link an account of ideas of race with the development of the modern Western state. Briefly, the central claim Goldberg advances is that 'The modern state ... is nothing less than a racial state.' This claim is not in itself novel; the distinctiveness of Goldberg's work is that he seeks to lay the foundations for a systematic view of the relation between race ideas and state formation. However, integral to this enterprise is an engagement with the meaning of the terms 'race' and 'the state', and a good deal of the plausibility of Goldberg's case rests upon this engagement.

Some idea of the difficulties involved is present from the outset of *The Racial State*. According to Goldberg, a racial state is one in which 'race is integral' to its 'emergence, development, and transformations...' It is not clear what Goldberg means by 'race' in this comprehensive claim, where the term assumes its familiar condition of floating imprecision before transmuting into an independent entity capable, for example, of 'marking and ordering the modern nation-state'. Goldberg, of course, recognizes the factitious nature of races – indeed, the invented character of races is a core part of his larger argument – yet what the term 'race' itself is held to refer to is not explicated. The difficulties generated by this indeterminacy are amplified when the term is connected to an account of the state.

The context for the rise of the racial state, in Goldberg's view, is the development of global capitalism and, in particular, the increasing social heterogeneity this brings about through intensified flows of information, commodities and people. These same processes also challenge the stability and integrity of the local, prompting increasing efforts to enforce homogeneity. According to Goldberg, the racial state is the means by which this modern dilemma is resolved, or at least managed and contained. Through the routine

reproduction of race ideas, concepts and discourses, the racial state offers the means of accounting for the threat and unmanageability of the heterogeneous. Again there is some merit in this claim, although one might wish to question how readily the distinctions between the global and the local can be identified. Goldberg, though, wishes to push the argument further by insisting that the modern state's project of managing heterogeneity in terms of race profoundly shapes the nature of that state itself:

The racial state, the state's definition in racial terms, thus becomes the racial characterization of the apparatus, the projects, the institutions for managing this threat, for keeping it out or ultimately containing it.... So if race matters, it is in good part because the modern state has made it, because modern states more or less, more thickly or thinly, embody the racial condition.

It is this assertion of an identity between contemporary states and 'the racial condition' that is unconvincing. There are essentially two ways in which Goldberg's claim might be understood, which we might call the 'weak' and the 'strong' interpretations. The first saves his argument but only at the cost of making its scope familiarly modest, whilst the second commits him to an exaggerated view of the powers of the state.

The 'weak' interpretation would claim that states are instrumental in inventing races, both as forms of socialization and as technologies of order and control, refining and adapting notions of race for state purposes. This is an established, and important, argument, but unless it limits itself to exploring the formal use of race concepts in government policies and social classifications it risks attributing powers and projects to 'the state' which require much more in the way of historical demonstration than Goldberg makes available.

Such a risk is emphatically evident in the 'strong' interpretation of Goldberg's thesis, the interpretation he clearly favours. Here the state becomes a protagonist of protean omniscience, governing all aspects of social and psychological life and adapting subtle strategies and manoeuvres in order to ensure the persistence of 'the racial condition'. Thus the racial state

could be said to be everywhere. And simultaneously seen nowhere. It (invisibly) defines almost every relation, contours virtually all intercourse. It fashions not just the said and the sayable, the done and doable, possibilities and impermissibilities, but penetrates equally the scope and quality, content and character of social silences and presumptions. The state in its racial reach and expression is thus at once super-visible in form and force and thoroughly invisible in its osmotic infusion into the everyday,

its penetration into common sense, its pervasion (not to mention perversion) of the warp and weave of the social fabric.

This is the state as social superhero, endowed with inexhaustible powers and unalterably committed to its project of ordering social life and defining the modern condition. The sense of who is doing what to whom in this account is entirely opaque, especially since the racial state 'is as much a state or condition of being as it is a state of governance'. This ties what states may seek to do far too tightly to what they actually accomplish, extinguishing the possibilities for resistance. Once the racial state is seen as both an existential condition *and* a form of governance it is hard to place any limits to its reach. However, the problem for Goldberg is precisely that he is committed to challenging the racial state. Yet it is difficult to see on the basis of his analysis who would be foolhardy enough to engage in such a one-sided contest as to take on the racial state (as an existential condition or as a form of governance), or indeed fortunate enough to escape its clutches in order to consider doing so. In such conditions, advocating a 'post-racist cosmopolitanism' in order to loosen the grip of the racial imaginary on the state does not seem a promising avenue of political advance.

Nevertheless, there are valuable insights in *The Racial State*. For example, Goldberg distinguishes between two traditions of conceiving and writing about racial states: the naturalist, which dominated from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, and the progressivist or historicist, which dominated from the nineteenth century and is the dominant mode in the contemporary world. Naturalist discourses were based on claims of inherent racial inferiority and are associated with state formation deriving principally from coercion; historicist discourses are based on claims

about historical immaturity and associated with state formation deriving principally from capital formation and circulation.

Goldberg's account of the shift from modernity's emphasis on naturalist discourses to high modernity's focus on historicist discourses, and its embodiment in the administrative and legal lexicon of modern Western states, is stimulating. Thus the racial state is racial not merely because of racist personnel or racist policies, but 'because of the structural position they occupy in producing and reproducing, constituting and effecting racially shaped spaces and places, groups and events, life worlds and possibilities, accesses and restrictions, inclusions and exclusions, conceptions and modes of representation.' So whilst the racist state (one which pursues explicitly exclusionary policies as in, for example, apartheid South Africa, Nazi Germany, or the Jim Crow Southern USA) may appear exceptional, its possibility is underpinned by the normalcy of the racial state. The seamless connection between the racial and the racist state provides the basis of Goldberg's claim that we live in a world which he identifies as a 'racist world order'. Such an extravagant (and gloomy) identification is possible because of the indeterminate status of 'race' in Goldberg's analysis and his conflation of state practices with the outcomes of those practices. Thus 'the state' becomes a powerfully accomplished social actor, one that calls all the shots and makes all the projects. Objecting to this view does not require abandoning a structural view of the state, but it is to insist that social and political institutions are the complex products of human agency, the result of people doing things in social contexts for which in some measure they can be held accountable. This notion is too often lost in *The Racial State*, which is why it is simultaneously a richly stimulating and a frustrating text.

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