

Rebellion, or, analysis

Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2004. 309 pp., £44.50 hb., £15.25 pb., 0 7914 6189 0 hb., 0 7914 6190 4 pb.

Tina Chanter and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, eds, *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2005. 217 pp. £40.81 hb., £13.50 pb., 0 7914 6567 5 hb., 0 7914 6568 3 pb.

Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva and the Political*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005. 157 pp., £60.00 hb., £17.95 pb., 0 415 21365 7 hb., 0 415 21366 5 pb.

When, in 1973, the Bulgarian-born Julia Kristeva published her vast *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she had already been a highly significant figure on the Parisian scene for some years. Her earliest work had helped to make Bakhtin's dialogism and theory of the carnivalesque familiar to a French audience, whilst the closely related concept of intertextuality made a huge impact by demonstrating that a text is never a closed system but always an element in a fluctuating network of quotations, reference, allusions, and so on. Kristeva was on the board of the avant-garde literary-theoretical review *Tel Quel* (1960–1983), which, in the 1970s, published material by Derrida, Barthes, Sollers and Foucault and became the focus for some exciting (and often vicious) exchanges between literary-philosophical theorists and the political Left. She is now the author of, at a rough count, some thirty books and the secondary literature on her is constantly expanding. Kristeva's influence has been enormous, both in France and elsewhere, and has had an impact on everything from psychoanalysis to literary theory and gender studies, even though her relationship with feminism has always been both fraught and tenuous. As both Beardsworth and Sjöholm both note, not a few feminists (Coward, Butler, Delphy) have over the years bridled at her tendency to equate femininity with 'nature', 'maternity' or, more recently, 'intimacy', whilst insisting that 'woman' is 'that which cannot be named'.

Kristeva has never been an easy figure to come to terms with, not least because she so rarely sets out to persuade: her usual mode of argument is assertion and she does not respond well to criticism. The Kristevan corpus is now so vast that any discussion of it probably has to be selective to some degree, and although Beardsworth and Sjöholm do cover a lot of material and do provide, almost in passing, admirable 'introductions to Kristeva', the focus is mainly on the

work of the 1990s, or, in other words, on the studies of psychoanalysis and revolt. The net is cast slightly more widely by the ten distinguished contributors (all women and all but one working in American universities) to *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity*, which contains, inter alia, interesting reflections on Kristeva and Arendt from Noëlle McAfee and Peg Birmingham, on abjection from Tina Chanter, and on Kristeva and film theory from Frances L. Restuccia. None of the three books really discusses intertextuality or Bakhtin. Curiously, almost no attention is paid to Kristeva's ventures into fiction, and this silence remains unexplained. This is a pity, if only because it leaves unresolved one of the many intriguing paradoxes about Kristeva: as a theorist, she places enormous emphasis on the virtues of avant-gardism, but her work as a novelist could hardly be more traditional in terms of plot, style and genre. Nor is there much sustained discussion of the recent trilogy on the feminine genius (three volumes devoted to Klein, Arendt and Collette respectively), though Beardsworth is somewhat off the mark when she remarks that Kristeva has 'turned to writing biography'. The trilogy is based largely upon existing biographies (Phyllis Grosskurth's, in the case of Klein) and there is little evidence of primary biographical research. The dusty archives inhabited by biographers are clearly not Kristeva's natural habitat or spiritual home.

Both Beardsworth and Sjöholm provide fine, and overlapping, descriptions of Kristeva's immense project. For the latter, it is 'a systematic displacement of the political from the universal (or public) domain to the singular and intimate space of signification'; for the former, Kristeva elaborates a 'philosophy of culture' rooted in the psychoanalytic view of subjectivity. It was not always so. Kristeva's first work was on linguistics and poetics. *Revolution in Poetic Language* then introduced characteristic themes which, although they have been modified, are still there. Psychoanalysis

becomes a central concern, though it would be another three years before the author qualified as a psychoanalyst. Lacan was of course the dominant figure in French psychoanalysis but, whilst she takes a lot from him, Kristeva rebels against him by challenging the central category of the symbolic (basically, the realm of language and exchange) and introducing the crucial dimension of the semiotic. The semiotic is described as a pre- or sub-symbolic-linguistic dimension revealed by primitive rhythms and primary processes expressive of an untrammelled desire and pleasure principle. Not 'meaningful' in itself, the semiotic is a precondition for language and meaning. Closely associated with the feminine and the archaic maternal, the semiotic is also a source of danger: it is close to the psychotic. According to Kristeva, the semiotic can be tapped into by the practice of avant-garde writers (Mallarmé, Lautréamont), musicians and some painters (Jackson Pollock). Their fracturing and splintering of grammar and syntax reveal something that cannot be contained by the symbolic, but without which the symbolic cannot function. Modern poetics is described, perhaps rather romantically, as an 'experimental psychosis'. Although the semiotic tends to be equated with the feminine-maternal, Kristeva's avant-garde pantheon has always been predominantly male (the Duras discussed in *Black Sun* is a late addition to the pantheon and something of an exception). It is often argued that Kristeva's approach to gender must therefore be flexible (male writers adopting what might be termed a feminine position), but it is hard to escape the conclusion that a crude male-female dichotomy still lurks in the background.

This formidable apparatus is brought to bear in order to demonstrate that political transformations must be accompanied by, or perhaps preceded by, a revolution at the level of subjectivity and meaning. The revolution must in other words also be textual. This was the basis for the textual experiments of Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group. Beardsworth claims that the textual-poetic revolution was *analogous* with actual revolution, but the analogy does not really hold. The historical period covered by *Revolution in Poetic Language* stretches roughly from the 1850s to the 1890s: this was a period of literary experimentation but not, after 1871, of mass political subversion. The repression of the Commune had seen to that. As Beardsworth indicates in her introduction, Kristeva's early methodology was both strangely flawed and surprisingly traditional: the application of a theory (psychoanalysis) was applied to the problem (the bourgeois world) in the belief that work (texts) would change the problem. This

is a very traditional articulation: psychoanalysis is to art as theory is to practice. And as Sjöholm, following earlier critiques of *Sémiotiké* (1969), demonstrates, Kristeva's arguments can be circular: that which she seeks to explain is presumed to exist by the theory that supposedly explains its emergence. Sjöholm quite rightly notes that there is something very disquieting about Kristeva's continued failure to condemn the Chinese Cultural Revolution for the bloodbath that it was, and to accept that it had nothing to do with any textual practice, but Sjöholm, Beardsworth and Brandt (in her interesting contribution to *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity*) tend, if anything, to be overindulgent towards the Maoism of Kristeva and *Tel Quel* in the early 1970s. They also take it rather too seriously. As a lot of observers were all too aware at the time, there was always something almost comic about revolutionary manifestos issued by wealthy individuals operating out of a publisher's office in the rue Jacob. The revolution and the ensuing revolutionary terror were always going to be textual.

There are few criticisms to be made of any of these texts at the level of exposition: the clarity (and the patience) is outstanding. It will be a long time before these accounts of the later Kristeva are bettered. If there is a problem it is surely that the authors and the contributors to *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity* tend, like their subject, to present Kristeva's work as self-generating, self-sustaining and self-contained. A number of basic questions are tacitly ignored and some awkward remarks are overlooked. The most obvious questions are, 'Why psychoanalysis?' and 'Which psychoanalysis?'

Kristeva often seems, especially in her later work, to operate with a pure drive theory, supplemented by her own concept of the semiotic. Very few psychoanalysts do this. The psychoanalytic notion of the 'archaic' is slippery, especially when articulated with that of 'drive'. A drive (*Trieb, pulsion*, but unfortunately rendered as 'instinct' in standard translations of Freud) refers to a dynamic process in which pressure directs the organism towards an aim (satisfaction and the reduction of tension). The drives are normally conceived in dualistic terms: sexual, self-preservation or, in later formulations, sexual (life) and death drives. Enormous emphasis is placed by Kristeva on the death drive, seen not in Freudian terms as an urge to revert to an organic state of inertia, but in neo-Kleinian terms as the privileged mode of expression of something archaic, indestructible and immortal. For Klein, this drive originates in the angry frustration of the pre-linguistic infant. For Kristeva, it appears to

be an innate expression of the semiotic. Given their importance in Freud's metapsychology, drives are surprisingly difficult to define or locate. They are said to operate at the frontier between psyche and soma, which is also the realm of Kristeva's semiotic. Freud initially described the drives in quasi-metaphorical terms derived from hydraulics and thermodynamics, but later refers to them (in the *New Introductory Lectures*) as 'mythical entities, magnificent in their indeterminateness', which does little to clarify their status. A similar indeterminacy surrounds the notion of the 'archaic', usually used by Kleinians to refer to the 'primitive' emotions of the infant. At times, Freud uses the term in that sense, but he also uses it to designate mythological or quasi-historic events when he speculates that ontogenesis is a recapitulation of phylogenesis. The classic Freudian example of primitive emotion is the guilty pleasure felt by the brother-sons after their murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo*.

The fluctuating meanings of 'drive', 'archaic' and related notions go some way to explaining Kristeva's characteristic exploration of a timescale that is so immense as to be almost cosmic. The exploration of otherness in *Strangers to Ourselves* involves long excursions into the Greeks' treatment of foreigners and into biblical studies. In her examinations of the origins of 'the political' (but not politics), Kristeva turns to mythology and foundation myths in which 'the social' is founded upon the violent exclusion of the scapegoat, and from there into theories of the sacred. She goes in search of what René Girard calls 'things forgotten since the foundation of the world'. The ambiguities here are legion. Is the murder of the father a myth, a matter for speculation or an underlying historical reality? Is the archaic, devouring mother a childhood fantasy (as it tends to be in Klein) or a real figure from the depths of time? Kristeva sometimes appears to be indulging in a speculative comparative study of mythologies. Her etymological forays into the 'original' or 'primal' sense of words are, like those of Heidegger and Derrida, equally ambiguous. These are the things that the structuralist revolution, with its emphasis on synchronic systematicity, was *against*.

Revolution in Poetic Language was a call to arms. Over the twenty-three years that divide it from *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, the emphasis shifted towards an analysis of structures of subjectivity, and the analysis of literary works and paintings

became surprisingly conventional. Although Kristeva introduces major concepts – notably abjection – her approach to textual analysis betrays many of the classic flaws of so much psychoanalytic criticism: the text is there simply to exemplify and confirm the theory. The landscape described by Kristeva from 1996 onwards is more politicized, but it is also quite familiar: we live in a disenchanted world dominated by the society of the spectacle and by industries that churn out a robotic 'culture'. The avant-gardes have been co-opted or recuperated (shades of Marcuse here) and it is true that the surrealists and the situationists have ended up in the museums and galleries. Revolt, seen as a psychic necessity, appears to have become impossible. This is an age of Nietzschean nihilism. Beardsworth in particular provides a vivid account of post-Nietzschean



nihilism: not so much 'belief in nothing' as the impossibility of believing in anything after the collapse of all values and authority. In psychoanalytic terms, even Lacan's symbolic father proves to be a hollow idol with feet of clay.

Kristeva's proposed antidote is what she terms 'revolt culture'. From the 1980s onwards, Kristeva argues that the pathologies of modernity (including nihilism) are forms of resistance against the dominant discourse. Psychoanalysis is privileged because it is at once a symptom of modernity and the key to its understanding. Once more, the avant-garde (Mallarmé, Artaud, Bataille, Céline, Proust) is invoked as the bringer of revolt but there is no call for textual-political revolution. Revolt is now described as 'intimate': intimacy is that which is most profound and singular within us, and this alone can provide the basis for a revolt that will promote new forms of intersubjectivity grounded in love. Intimacy will, it is claimed by Kristeva in *Intimate Revolt*, show the psyche the road to 'infinite recreation' (*une infinie récréation*). It is

probably no accident that *L'Infini* is the title of the successor to *Tel Quel*.

Revolt culture appears to be grounded in a culture of great literacy and sophistication. It may well be the case that listening to, say, Berg, is still, as Adorno might have argued, a good antidote to commodified music, but those who do not have access to Kristeva's 'revolt culture' appear to be doomed. In *Sense and Non-Sense*, it is explicitly stated that, when they have no access to it, the 'excluded (so broadly defined as to include unemployed youth, the suburbs, the homeless, the unemployed and foreigners) must content themselves with 'retrograde ideologies' (and not least religious fundamentalisms) and tend to become *casseurs* ('wreckers', 'rioters'). There is, it would appear, little or no hope for the wretched of the earth. *Casseurs* is a very loaded word. The *loi anti-casseurs* adopted in 1970 (and abrogated twelve years later by Mitterrand) introduced, on rather dubious legal grounds, the notion of collective responsibility (and, by implication, punishment) for all acts of violence committed during demonstrations. It was directed primarily against the Maoists of the day. They were supposedly *Tel Quel's* comrades, though the journal's brand of Maoism rarely involved anything but verbal violence. Kristeva has indeed come a long way.

The thesis that, because it works at the juncture of psyche and soma and on the most basic processes of signification, psychoanalysis provides a basis for revolt becomes rather less credible if one glances at the actual pronouncements of the psychoanalysts who so often voice their opinions in the pages of *Le Monde* and elsewhere. Few of them have had anything positive or helpful to say about the sexual abuse of children, adoption, same-sex partnerships or violence against women. Many of them fear the 'feminization' of society and fret about the creation of a society of siblings in which there will be no parental authority. Few French psychoanalysts, and certainly no Lacanians, display any interest in the neurosciences and many tend to dismiss them on the grounds that they are behaviourist (and, of course, American). Kristeva does not appear to be the happy exception to the rule. Passages in *New Maladies of the Soul* do indicate that she takes a more tolerant view of drug therapies than many of her colleagues, but she also reverts to the stark choice between 'speech and pills'. It is probably not true that the antidepressants we consume in such vast quantities 'cure' clinical depression, but they do allow sufferers to function. Like the Lacan who was nostalgic for the great hysterics of old, Kristeva seems almost disappointed that her

patients do not present with the classic psychoanalytic symptoms. She is of course right. We do not seek out analysts and therapists because we display the symptoms of conversion hysteria. We do so because we have problems with our relationships, with our children and with our work, or simply because we are depressed. The clinical implications of the semiotic or abjection have never been spelled out by Kristeva herself, and they are not spelled out by any of the texts under discussion here.

Similar caveats must surely apply at the political level, where the gap between grand theory and what used to be called the concrete analysis of concrete situations yawns even wider. Most of Kristeva's work is at the level of 'the political'. This proves to be a realm in which there is no state, no classes and, above all, no economy, but when she does address immediate political issues, some disturbing features emerge. This is no doubt because, like most of those associated with *Tel Quel*, she has followed the familiar path that leads from verbal Maoism to verbal support for Giscard d'Estaing and now Chirac, via some positively embarrassing eulogies to de Gaulle. The anti-Gaullist slogans of May '68, which Kristeva chanted along with everyone else, are now described as 'rabid and patricidal'. So far, so banal. Yet some of Kristeva's remarks are almost alarming. It is, for instance, quite unclear whether the 'foreign other' of *Strangers to Ourselves* is a foreign national or a 'racial' other, but the fact that the first signifiers of his or her difference are 'eyes, lips, cheekbones and skins' strongly suggest the latter. This is dangerously close to the terminology of the teacher who describes the non-white children in her class as 'foreign'. In her 'Open Letter to Harlem Désir' of 1990 (Désir was the charismatic frontman for the 'SOS racism' group; it was a sad surprise to learn that it is not his real name), Kristeva suggests that relations between 'immigrants' and 'hosts' should be based upon a reciprocity of recognition, and the notion of a polyphonic nation is indeed attractive. She then goes on to suggest that 'immigrant populations' should be asked why they have chosen the 'French community and historical memory' as their host country. Many North African 'immigrants' would be perfectly entitled to reply, 'Because a government employment agency recruited my father from his village in Algeria, and I have French nationality anyway.' Thousands of black 'immigrants' could, like Fanon and Césaire (writing in the 1950s), reply 'I'm from Martinique, which is, or so I have been told, an integral part of the French Republic.' This is not an individual failing or damning evidence of commonplace racism, but it does suggest

that Kristeva cannot escape the confusion that surrounds the entire French debate about citizenship and nationality. All too often, it is forgotten by politicians, journalists and cultural critics alike that in many cases the offensive ‘Muslim woman in a headscarf’ is, and has from birth been, a French citizen. Very few of the defenders of ‘Republican values’ point out or even remember that the Third Republic – which, between the 1880s and the final separation of church and state in 1905, made secularism the central national value and constructed a republic that recognizes equal citizens but not women, Jews, ethnic minorities, and subsumes

particularisms under an abstract universalism – was also a regime that assumed the right, or even the duty, to conquer and colonize the ‘inferior races’ of northern and sub-Saharan Africa in the name of its self-defined civilizing mission. The school textbooks published by the universal republic abounded in racist stereotypes. French republican discourse is now struggling, and apparently failing, to deal with a problem with the ‘other’ that was there from the beginning. Revolt culture does not seem to offer much of a solution.

David Macey

Critique of pure politics

Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London and New York, 2005. xii + 276 pp., £26.00 hb., 1 85984 651 3 hb.

On Populist Reason reveals a fundamental fact about Ernesto Laclau’s research programme to which many, including the editors of the recently published *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (Routledge, 2004), remain blind: that populism, as both concept and historical experience, constitutes the centre of gravity of his work as a whole. Laclau’s contributions to the reconfiguration of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and his account of radical democracy (co-authored with Chantal Mouffe) are unthinkable without his historical experience of populism in Argentina and his subsequent attempts first to conceptualize it and then to generalize its logic to politics as a whole. Hegemony, or, better, what we might call a *performative principle of hegemonization*, is the mechanism of this generalization. Populism also underlies Laclau’s more recent philosophical meditations on ‘universality’ and his forays into post-Marxist critical thought. This is Laclau’s intellectual project: the translation of ‘populism’ into ‘politics’ via ‘hegemony’. *On Populist Reason* is a summary of this project so far.

On Populist Reason restages the critical account of populism Laclau first rehearsed almost thirty years ago in *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977) – a stunning work in 1970s’ Althusserianism. Populism was characterized there as a ‘synthetic-antagonistic complex with respect to the dominant ideology’. Laclau’s theoretical language may have shifted, as has his view of the kind of object populism is (no longer a mere ideology, but a discursive practice, confusingly conceived as ‘material’ because constitutive), but it is clear that what is involved is a theoretical development rather than a complete change in perspective.

Antagonism remains fundamental. It is ‘the foundation of an internal frontier separating the “people” from power’, he writes in *On Populist Reason*. Synthesis, or the production of the ‘people’ – ‘an equivalential articulation of demands’ – is equally so. This is the ‘hegemony’ side of populism, which first emerged in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It is in thinking ‘articulation’ that the development in Laclau’s thought is most visible: from an original critical engagement within Marxism to its rapid abandonment.

In *Reading Capital* Althusser presents the notion of articulation as the theoretical means through which what ‘makes the whole a whole’ may be thought – synchronically and structurally, rather than dialectically. It accounts for the relations established between instances of the social that are defined by their relative autonomy, for which ‘regional theories’ might be devised to determine their specific logics. Laclau attempts such an account of the politico-ideological superstructures in *Politics and Ideology*, where he asks, ‘what does the form of an ideology consist of?’ Not in the class-‘belonging’ or literal contents of an ideological discourse, he maintains, but in ‘the principle of articulation of its constituent interpellations’. Nationalist ideology, or the popular interpellations Laclau analyses in his original accounts of fascism and populism (which are fundamental to any successful socialist movement), cannot be derived from class position or ‘the economic’ (that is, as an expression of the contradiction between forces and relations of production).

The traces of this early Althusserianism are still visible in *On Populist Reason*, especially in its stubborn anti-Hegelianism. In its account of populist

hegemonization, for example, it argues for a political dynamics of 'partial objects' (or particularities) that refuse dialectical subsumption (universality). Articulation remains fundamental here as a means for thinking totalities, although these are now understood to be purely contingent and always incomplete. It is from Althusser's attempts to escape the spectre of economic determinism and to develop the theoretical consequences of the idea of overdetermination for history that Laclau's own theoretical and political concerns emerge. These trace the parameters of what will become his later post-Marxism, and they generate problems about the prolongation of conjunctures into histories that are more than diachronic series, that involve change rather than a mere succession of states of affairs. In this respect, Laclau's deployment of the idea of articulation furnishes the theoretical content of his formalism.

To underline the relative character of the autonomy of superstructural instances (as well as his commitment at the time to a Marxist science of history), in *Politics and Ideology* Laclau resorted to the idea of a 'double articulation' in which the non-class or 'popular' aspect of a social formation's relations of domination is brought into a definite but overdetermined relation with class and the relations of production, without being derived from them. Here, class struggle is carried out on the terrain – and in the ideological medium – of the relations of domination, characterized by a 'state–people' opposition. On the one hand, the idea of a double articulation theoretically secured the presence of 'economic' determination in the understanding of politics and ideology, whilst, on the other, reconfiguring the modalities of its effects. This is what disappears in Laclau's subsequent analyses in which class becomes just one more element among a multiplicity of elements to be given form through political articulation. Relations of production are subordinated to relations of domination: class contradiction is subordinated to contingently produced political antagonisms.

The notion of articulation is thus Janus-faced. It is central to Laclau's formalist accounts of populism and fascism, as well as to the related theoretical attempt to overcome economic determination 'in the last instance' and so endow politico-ideological practices – particularly hegemony – with a substance of their own *qua* the production of subjects of social transformation. This ideologism was subsequently deployed by many on the Left in the UK to account for a Thatcherism misconceived as an example of 'authoritarian populism'. In *Politics and Ideology*, Laclau already suggested that the famous 'peculiarity

of the English' – that is, the power of the landowning aristocracy within British capitalism – reveals the *ideological power* of the bourgeoisie rather than its economic weakness. Similarly, from this perspective, the rise of fascism is symptomatic not only of a crisis of bourgeois hegemony in the transition to monopoly capitalism, but also of the capacity of the institutions of the working class to generate popular, democratic and national interpellations.

The inadequacies of the Communist movement's reductionist analysis of fascism, especially in its Third Period, stands in sharp contrast to Laclau's own experience of the articulatory power of Peronism in Argentina from the 1940s and 1970s – as described in both *Politics and Ideology* and *On Populist Reason* – and the emergence from within it of a powerful left-wing movement. In such cases, articulation (the synthesis or 'condensation' of interpellations), and not reduction, is the key to understanding the formation of new power blocs. Articulation is what comes to define political practice for Laclau, and it is because of the absence of such considerations that in *On Populist Reason* he charges Hardt and Negri's conceptualization of the 'multitude' as paradoxically lacking in politics. It is too religious. By way of a reply, however, Hardt and Negri would insist on 'exodus', arguing that the articulatory politics of hegemonization championed by Laclau is a sovereign and thus a statist one.

Thinking political 'exception' against the grain – that is, as normal – has been crucial to Laclau's reflections on fascism and Peronism, to his conception of politics, and to the questions he has posed to Marxist orthodoxy. These questions have their origins within the Marxist tradition, specifically in the political Marxism inaugurated by Gramsci's reflections on the politico-cultural significance of the Bolshevik Revolution (a revolution 'against *Capital*'), on the one hand, and the emergence of fascism in Italy (the 'national question'), on the other. What these historical processes have in common is the perceived effects of uneven development, one of which is crucial: the historical tasks conventionally attributed to the bourgeoisie in historicist Marxism (for example, nation-building and democratization) may be taken over by another class ('permanent revolution'). Once again this exemplifies the non-class belonging of particular ideologies. This experience is the crucible of Gramsci's concept of hegemony – as well as related notions such as the differences between 'war of position' and 'war of manoeuvre' – whose anti-reductionist genealogy Laclau and Mouffe traced in *Hegemony and Socialist Practice*. It is also the historical source of criticisms

of Laclau's appropriation of Gramsci: he privileges the production of political subjectivities over social institutions in his uses of 'hegemony'.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is the text in which Laclau took his leave of Marxism – into 'post-Marxism' – through the door opened up by 'hegemony'. It is the work in which class loses its privileged articulatory power and the work of ideology is materialized as 'discourse' (that is, as a materialism of the subject). Finally, it is the place in which Laclau and Mouffe upend economic determination of the social to argue instead for its political – that is, hegemonic – institution. *On Populist Reason* continues in this vein. It poses important questions in its criticisms of Marxism: for example, concerning its Eurocentric and productivist positing of a privileged subject of emancipation and all that such conceptions exclude. Yet it fails to provide historical answers to these questions, answers that would move beyond the continuous present of a diachronic or serial conjuncturalism grounded, by and large, in linguistic structure: metaphor and metonymy.

Like the early essay 'Towards a Theory of Populism', in *Politics and Ideology*, *On Populist Reason* begins with an account of the inadequacies of existing theories. For most of these populism represents a form of political irrationalism or exception, whilst the term itself is generally considered fuzzy and inoperable because its field of reference is so wide as to defy clear definition. But not only is there reason and a logic to populism, according to Laclau (a 'logic of equivalence' grounded in antagonism), its very lack of determinate content is crucial to its identity. Laclau's approach is both rigorously formalist and performative: as it crystallizes into particular forms, populism is resistant to pre-given conceptual determinations. It is as such that it is understood as exemplary for a non-reductionist thinking of politics in general. Why is 'populism' so apparently indeterminate a concept? Laclau's answer is: because it describes a process of hegemonization in which particular 'claims' (demands which have been rejected by the state and thus reformulated via antagonism) are fused into an oppositional unity across social sectors ('totalized through equivalence') without losing their particularity. The populist subject is, therefore, not only always already dislocated – and thus also 'open', like all subjects for Laclau – it is also defined by multiplicity. But this means that it is always threatened from within by the particularities that are contained within its synthesis. 'Corporate' particularity remains untouched by the universalizing tendency of populist totalization.

It is the fusion of demands reproduced through antagonism and equivalence that constitutes the performative dimension of populism for Laclau, whilst his formalism is evident in the 'articulated' subject (or 'identity') that results, rather than in the literal or social contents of the claims. In other words, as long as they are antagonistic to the state (and thus 'democratic', suggests Laclau), producing a potential 'popular' subject in their fusion, these claims could in principle contain *any* demand whatsoever, including, of course, fascist ones. Laclau thus brings *On Populist Reason* to a close by insisting that 'we can only begin to understand Fascism if we see it as one of the possibilities inherent to contemporary societies.' This warning is yet another instalment of Laclau's polemic with the Communist movement's inability adequately to analyse – and thus to confront – both fascism and populist movements such as Peronism. He suggests that it is still in thrall to 'emotionally charged fetishes' which cloud its judgement, such as 'class struggle' and 'determination in the last instance by the economy'. Laclau's criticism in *On Populist Reason* of Žižek's Hegelian politics is devastating in this respect: in his dismissal of all "partial" struggles ... Žižek cannot provide any theory of the emancipatory subject... One is left wondering whether he is anticipating an invasion of beings from another planet.' In an otherwise uncharacteristic moment of enlightened self-fashioning, Laclau at this point evokes an ideal of 'obstinate rigour' in thought, which it is clear he thinks a 'fainthearted' Left has failed to live up to.

The performative dimension of populism is certainly a historically important one: the figure of Eva Perón in Argentina or the fascist aestheticization of the political come immediately to mind. Yet Laclau has very little sense of the importance of cultural form for political movements. Rather, in his view, performance ties populism directly to affect. This is where psychoanalysis enters into Laclau's account: no longer in the top-down form of interpellation but now through cathectic investment, binding subjects driven by 'demand' (political desire) to an '*objet petit a*' (Lacan's 'little other' or 'bit of the Real' located, as maternal principle, within the Symbolic Order). This 'surface of inscription' stands in here politically for a kind of reconciliation in common that looks beyond the multiple particularities gathered in equivalence – very much like little utopias (although, following Joan Copjec, Laclau himself refers to the 'breast value of the milk') – as well as for a popular identity, 'the people', that represents and totalizes the equivalential chain of demands as a whole. This is the work of what Laclau calls an

‘empty signifier’ (in contrast to ‘floating signifiers’, which emerge when the internal frontiers of social antagonisms shift, producing competing struggles for hegemony). Empty signifiers, Laclau insists, can never be conceptualized, or read off from pre-given political or historical contents, but are *embodied* and ‘named’ retrospectively.

This performative aspect of populism is an attempt to account for its Jacobin enthusiasms and its affective contents, which are the ontological ground of politics for Laclau – the result of a ‘democratizing’ appropriation of Freud’s various attempts to analyse the constitutive tie between leader and social group. In Laclau’s populist version, the former is no longer the authoritarian Father but just another brother, one among equals, and, as a model for thinking the hegemony of one equivalential claim among others, it is the means through which populist political identity is produced.

In Laclau’s new analysis, the ‘popular’ form is thus full of desire, a desire that defies reason. Yet surely such affect is always already mediated, either by cultural form – in the sense that, for example, Eva Perón makes of the Peronist state a melodramatic media event – or by the rationality that the formulation of particular claims – as rejected demands – requires for their totalization. Similarly, it is never made clear why the subject so produced is a ‘popular’ one – that is, a ‘people’. Why this ‘name’? *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* offered a ‘genealogy’ of the idea of hegemony; *On Populist Reason* is marked by the absence of a history of ‘the people’ – of the kind

hinted at by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* in which, over a couple of brief pages, he sketches the historical difference between a ‘sovereign people’ and a people biopolitically conceived.

At this psychoanalytic point, Laclau’s argument begins to wear a bit thin. It relies too heavily on a legitimating critique of economic reductionism. Having proclaimed (contra Žižek) the incompatibility of Hegel and Lacan, Laclau hails a moment of identity in the work of Gramsci and Lacan:

The logic of the I and the hegemonic logic are not just similar: they are simply identical. This is why, within the Marxist tradition, the Gramscian moment represents such a crucial epistemological break: while Marxism had traditionally had the dream of access to a systematically closed totality (determination in the last instance by the economy, etc.), the hegemonic approach breaks decisively with that essentialist social logic. The only possible totalizing horizon is given by a partiality (the hegemonic force) which assumes the representation of a mythical totality. In Lacanian terms: an object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing.

The formalist principle of articulation between autonomous domains breaks down here in performance, and an identity is posited between libidinal economy and political formation, in which Gramsci’s theoretical invention is reduced to Lacan’s proto-science. The rejection of an oversimplified reductionist ‘dream’ provides the cover for a new reductionism of Laclau’s own making.

John Kraniauskas

Nowhere ahead?

Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870–1900*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2005. 214 pp., £39.72 hb., 90 04 14296 7.

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London, 2005. xvi + 431 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 84467 033 3.

‘So admirably had the revolution been organised that, by noon, London was entirely in the hands of the social democratic party.’ Matthew Beaumont quotes this sentence from *Looking Ahead!*, an anti-utopian novel of 1892, whose conservative author here conjures up a scene many on the Left have liked to imagine. The utopian idea of a moment of transition, at which a new era will be definitively inaugurated, seems central to the socialist political imaginary.

Whether or not socialism took over old utopian (and millenarian) dreams, some have argued that its

advent made them superfluous. Marx’s disapproval of speculations about post-capitalist society is well known: Beaumont quotes a letter of the 1870s in which Marx disparages German workers for ‘playing with fancy pictures of the future structure of society’. Fredric Jameson, drawing a Coleridgean distinction, claims that socialism’s advent ‘dramatically simplified’ the task of cultural imagination in projecting new worlds. Once capitalism was recognized as a systemic whole dominating the historical epoch, ‘its one great alternative – socialism – ... also emigrated from the

world of utopian fantasy to that of practical politics'. The socialist framework of the transformed society was from now on 'posited in advance', leaving the projector's fancy with the 'extraordinarily complex' but secondary role of elaborating the shape and tenor of daily life there.

Jameson seems to be invoking, behind Coleridge's imagination and fancy, the Marxist distinction between base and superstructure, with the implication that law, politics and culture are subsidiary spheres. Many socialists, however, have regarded the extension of civic and political freedoms and the promotion of cultural self-development as integral to the socialist project. Most would agree that the governments and parties that claimed to practise something like socialism in post-World War II Europe – Communist in the Soviet sphere, social-democratic in the West – never fulfilled the great hopes placed in the socialist idea: an idea invoked here not as historically instantiated 'practical politics', but as a regulative ideal or utopian horizon. How but in envisaging a future world (whether by imagination or by fancy, and in defiance of Marx's veto) can we give content and meaning to a notion of true socialism which effectively defines it as being still unrealized? The question remains, however, as to whether the utopian genre, and the assumptions it is based on, are valuable or pernicious in the kinds of vision they encourage.

Both books touch on these large questions of utopia's relation to a practical politics of the Left, and suggest they are posed anew by globalization and resistance to it. The 'new forms of political agency' that can be expected to arise against the seemingly all-encompassing reach of capital are not yet in place (writes Jameson in his Introduction), and in this hiatus we need utopian thought for its attempts to 'conceive alternate systems' and because 'Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference'. Only a renewal of the fading utopian impulse can preserve us, he later says, from falling into 'the helpless position of passive accomplices and impotent hand-wringers'. These pro-utopian claims are by no means self-evident; but their directly political address is welcome. The theme certainly invites a more public and engaged kind of argument than specialist cultural-historical research can usually aspire to.

However, neither book attempts a systematic discussion of utopianism's legacy for contemporary left politics. Beaumont's reflections, published in a series entitled 'Historical Materialism', are confined to the period indicated by his subtitle. He argues that late Victorian literary utopianism was generated by 'mani-

fest historical tensions between dominant and emergent class forms', and characterizes most utopian authors as 'reform-minded intellectuals' whose work, offering an imaginary 'solution to the social contradictions they encounter[ed]', was 'the perfect expression of the petty-bourgeois reformist's political consciousness'. This applies especially to state-socialist utopias, of which Edward Bellamy's very successful *Looking Backward* (1888) is the best known, not least because it prompted William Morris's riposte, *News from Nowhere* (1891). Beaumont turns then to feminist utopias, taking as the 'most compelling and comprehensive example' of the genre *Amazonia*, by Elizabeth Corbett (1889). Amazonia is inaugurated following the settlement of Ireland by selected morally and physically superior Englishwomen: Beaumont's summary makes clear that this is explicitly conceived as a remedy for Ireland's unruly state, which threatened the Empire. This is 'a eugenicist fantasy as well as a feminist one', Beaumont notes, built on a 'dilapidated essentialist conception of racial and sexual identities'. Jameson points out that the genre often posits, as in More's original *Utopia*, an inaugural moment of quasi-colonial settlement. Beaumont might have paused to reflect on the generic licence that allowed Corbett to turn Ireland, on the eve of a decisive phase in its anti-colonial struggle, into Amazonia. Trollope's *The Landleaguers* (1884) is a conservative work largely motivated by hostility to the Irish agrarian movement, but the disciplines of literary realism would always have secured a novelist like Trollope against imagining Corbett's absurd neo-Plantation. Jameson and Beaumont show how utopian writing opens up the historical field to radical reconfiguring ('anamorphosis', form made readable by optical transposition, is Beaumont's figure for this); but the genre also readily accommodates historical stupidity. It is a frustrating limitation of both books that neither author offers sustained critical discussion of the relations between utopian and futuristic fictions and their realist and modernist antitypes. Jameson's asides about the 'modernist reader' are no more than provocations, and his claim that both modernism and realism are 'exhausted' (in the reprinted essay 'Fear and Loathing in Globalization') is stated rather than argued.

Beaumont turns from Amazonia to anti-communist 'cacotopia' (Greek: *kakos*, 'bad'). This flourished in England after the Paris Commune of 1870, and *Looking Ahead!* was one of several novels in which insurrection was imagined to have crossed the Channel. His final chapter is on *News from Nowhere*, which he distinguishes from other utopias of the period by the

fact that Morris conceives the present historically. The novel is laid open to Benjamin's messianic 'time of the now' by the character of Guest, the time-travelling protagonist from the late Victorian present. 'Guest is a ghost', who haunts both the utopian future and 'old London', to which he must eventually return and where his vision, or dream, must inspire everyday political action. This Benjaminian criterion usefully draws a qualitative distinction, and works both formally and politically. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which provides the quotation rounding off Jameson's 'The Desire Called Utopia', also has a structure in which present-day human actions determine whether the utopian future will ever come to pass. It is odd that Jameson devotes far more space to Ursula Le Guin than to Piercy, when the latter's work seems more directly and interestingly related to the politics of eco-



logical and feminist activism. Beaumont's silence on the conservative ideas of gender entailed by Morris's medieval-ruralist utopianism is odd too. It strengthens one's impression that Beaumont has exempted Morris from full critical-historical contextualization, and is himself nostalgic for the imaginary possibilities of late-Victorian socialist utopianism, even though he acknowledges that the 'objective conditions' for social revolution were lacking.

Archaeologies of the Future, tied to no particular historical 'conditions', ranges very widely over the utopian landscape. It is a snip at £20: you get, what-

ever else, a bibliographical-thematic treasure trove, an anthology of utopian visions, positions and critiques, with Jameson's own voice counterpointed by many others – Ernst Bloch (several of the most thoughtful quotations are from his *The Principle of Hope*, 1959); Brecht; B.F. Skinner; Le Guin... Part Two includes a short, previously unpublished tribute to Philip K. Dick, plus eleven essays that originally appeared between 1973 and 2003. 'Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?' is particularly interesting, and covers ground that Jameson skates over rather too lightly in Part One. (Other essays on utopia by Jameson, not included here, are in *The Seeds of Time*, 1994, and *New Left Review* II 25, 2004.)

Alongside the reprinted pieces are 235 pages of almost entirely new material. These make up the book's first part, 'The Desire Called Utopia', on which I focus here. Given Jameson's long-standing engagement with utopianism, one approaches this extended essay hoping for a carefully framed definitive argument. What one gets is provoking, in good and bad senses, but in the end exasperatingly digressive. The presentation is not chronological, and there is no clear thematic ordering. As Jameson turns at will to the broadest conceptual and temporal horizons of his topic, the trees of history often disappear in the forest of the *longue durée*. He throws out too many asides designed more to stimulate than to illuminate. For example, apropos of Skinnerian behaviourism we are told 'we may well argue that programming is the very essence of childhood pedagogy and formation'; we may well argue, however, that a pedagogy quite distinct from 'programming' is both possible and desirable, and has even been practised, this side of utopia.

As one reads, the underlying drift becomes perceptible. It is typified by a passage in Chapter 12 where Jameson posits 'the family' as a common topos of Aristotelian political theory, of Jane Austen's middle-class novels, and of nineteenth- and twentieth-century utopian fiction. This seems like a provoking conflation of social forms that have little in common. But the essential point is that, despite change, we remain stuck with reproductive arrangements rooted in affective individualism. Jameson quotes Gide's *Familles, je vous hais* ('Families, I hate you'), implying that this is the properly utopian slogan. Some kind of family, alas, persists, but utopia persists in opposing to it some unrealizable alternative: 'It is as though Utopian form itself ... repeated Gide's famous cry ... a cry of impotence, rather than the declaration of a war that could be won.' What many would call progress – the greatly more complex kinds of intimacy and

affiliation that surround growing children today – is here counterposed, as its mere opposite, to unrealized utopian ‘difference’. Presumably Jameson intends as a compliment his claim that ‘modern feminism is only the latest Utopian effort to bypass the bourgeois family in the direction of group marriage or single-gender systems’: feminism (and queer politics, though this is not mentioned) getting credit not for cultural and legal changes that have happened, but for a libidinal revolution that still lies over the horizon.

This same utopian option for ‘radical difference’ is the connecting thread between disparate statements (or refusals) of value. Noting that it ‘would not seem particularly necessary, after Nietzsche, to argue [the] regressiveness’ of ethics, Jameson nonetheless takes the trouble to dismiss them in a short paragraph, reminding us that Freud thought the ‘opposition between heroes and villains’ betrayed an ‘infantile spirit’ – as if Freud, or anyone, thought that ethical discrimination depended on that kind of fantastic binary. Discussing utopian figures derived from ‘the life-world of the peasantry, of growth and nature, cultivation and the seasons’, he suggests that these live on in ‘the industrial or post-industrial era only in the mocking remnant of “birth, copulation and death”’: a rather opaque formulation, awakening a suspicion – half-confirmed by other passing comments – that Jameson thinks we are already in a ‘posthuman’ world where ‘growth and nature’ should have stopped mattering. Along, perhaps, with ethics and pedagogy.

The same commitment to ‘difference’, the same reluctance to entangle utopian projection in history and immanence, perhaps determine the two most striking choices Jameson makes in the focus and scope of the argument, his ‘resolute formalism’ and the extensive readings devoted to works of fantasy and SF. These genres do not have a straightforwardly lineal relation to the utopian tradition founded by More (or by Plato, as some argue) and exemplified in Beaumont’s texts. In this tradition, as Jameson notes, fantasy of another world combines with reference, perhaps implicit but more or less constant and deliberate, to matters of political contestation in the present. Jameson gives a substantial account of the generic relations between SF and fantasy in Chapter 5; here and there in the reprinted essays (especially in ‘Progress versus Utopia’), he indicates why he regards SF as a privileged genre for telling some kinds of truths about the contemporary. But nowhere does he deal systematically with the generic distance of both SF and fantasy from the politically focalized, immanently directed fictions of the older utopian tradition.

‘Resolute formalism’, or ‘perverse formalism’ as Jameson also calls it, is found rather strikingly in the several diagrams that decorate the text, Lacanian ‘Greimas squares’, offering to schematize psycho-semantic coordinates of the utopian impulse. Formalism operates more strongly in a negative sense: the decision to explore the generative matrix of utopian writing is a decision to downplay its content, the dimension which most obviously refers us back to lived experience. It is hard not to register this as an evasion of politics. Stalinism, neo-imperialism, globalization, ecopolitics, feminism: all figure, but contingently, as they come up in relation to texts and speculations. This would matter less if ‘resolute formalism’ delivered striking insights. Jameson himself, as much as any critic, has been able to show how narrative form translates dimensions of political (un)consciousness. But in ‘The Desire Called Utopia’, formal analysis of any sustained kind is a casualty of the compulsively digressive exposition. The dizzy reader may note down one or two stabilizing generalizations: the utopian text is especially adapted to ‘registering... signals from the past and the future and bricolating them into cultural representation’; ‘Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space.’ What is claimed here might with equal or greater justice be claimed for good realist and modernist novels. Hardy and Gissing (to return to Beaumont’s period) remain readable long after almost all their utopian fellow-writers, partly because their fictions of the present day were historically perceptive whereas most futurological speculation turns out to be historical bunk. Those who think we do need to imagine the future, but doubt the value of literary utopias in helping with that task, are unlikely to have their minds changed by either of these books.

Martin Ryle

Dossier for the prosecution

Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005. 312 pp., £38.00 hb., £15.50 pb., 0 226 00785 5 hb., 0 226 00786 3 pb.

For many months now, British newspaper columns have been saturated with shrill calls for secularism, ominous warnings that a sizeable contingent of the Left, whipped into an anti-imperialist frenzy, is suc-

cumbing to some kind of ‘appeasement’ vis-à-vis the reactionary religious forces of ‘Islamism’ (or, in more combative quarters, ‘Islamofascism’). *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* might be construed as ammunition for these ideological quarrels. As its subtitle intimates, it examines Foucault’s infamous reports on the revolution (undertaken for the Italian broadsheet *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1978–79) as an object lesson in how a certain Western intelligentsia could be led to uncritical support for what the authors depict as an archaic (at best) or totalitarian (at worst) theo-political project. The motivation for this archival operation becomes glaringly evident in the conclusion, where Afary and Anderson anchor their plea for ‘strategic universalism’ in a dubious analogy between Foucault’s ‘seduction’ and the respective responses of Jean Baudrillard and Noam Chomsky to the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Characteristically, the authors ignore the myriad ways in which these three authors are politically and philosophically incommensurable (recall Baudrillard’s *Forget Foucault* and the 1971 Chomsky–Foucault debate), preferring to reduce their interventions to simple effects of a shared anti-Western anti-liberalism. In so doing, like many of their ‘liberal’ peers, they obfuscate what might be at stake in unravelling the historical and ideological ties that bind capitalism, imperialism and the emergence of religious anti-systemic movements.

About a third of *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* is taken up by an appendix collecting the totality of Foucault’s texts on Iran, together with contemporary polemical replies, related documents and two valuable texts by the Marxist scholar of Islam Maxime Rodinson. This material should be of considerable worth for those interested in the ‘Western’ reaction to the Iranian revolution, in Foucault’s sole foray into what he baptized ‘the journalism of ideas’ and, not least, in examining the links between religion and revolution. There is certainly cause to revisit and reactivate these debates today, for instance as concerns the Left’s abiding tribulations over how to address the hijab and the role of women in Islamic political movements and societies.

Yet for all of their righteous Habermasian criticism of the Left’s relativist, irresponsible drift – which retraces the steps of Mark Lilla’s fatuous tirade against ‘the reckless mind’ – it is difficult not to conclude that Afary and Anderson have succeeded in producing a book which, at the formal level, is nothing if not postmodern. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* is the dossier for a prosecution carried out in a court where all standards of argument, evidence and rhetoric have been strangely scrambled, if not wholly

mis-laid. To draw the requisite lessons from Foucault’s ‘case’, Afary and Anderson provide us with, among other things, a compressed (and hackneyed) account of Foucault’s theories of power and discipline, an interesting if tangential treatment of Iranian ‘passion plays’ (the Ta’ziyeh), a meandering chapter – combining anecdote and conjecture – on Foucault’s perception of Middle-Eastern homosexuality, a chronology of women’s role in the Iranian Revolution, and an account of the debates and recriminations in the France around Foucault’s articles. Much of this is interesting, and episodically erudite, but the result is a book neither about Foucault nor about Iran. What’s more, it is certainly not a book about Islamism – a many-sided political phenomenon that is here dealt with in a cavalier and unenlightening manner.

The authors’ strategy is to try to account for what James Miller has unhelpfully called Foucault’s ‘folly’ – his enthusiastic reception of the ‘political spirituality’ at work in the Iranian Revolution – by embarking on a set of seemingly disconnected lines of inquiry. Thus we are told that Foucault’s infatuation with this mass, anti-systemic revolt derived from his obsession with death as an ethical limit, from his misconceptions regarding the practice of homosexuality in the Middle East, from his androcentrism, from his misplaced ardour for all things non-Western, from his interest in non-verbal technologies of the self, and so on. Foucault, in short, is a ‘Heideggerian Orientalist’. As epithets go, this is a diverting one, but it rests on a perfunctory understanding of Foucault’s philosophical practice and outlook. In brief, Afary and Anderson contend that Foucault was primed for Islamism’s seduction by his ‘binary worldview’, goaded by a pathological hostility towards modernity and a romantic valorization of its mad, Oriental or traditionalist ‘other’. A couple of points of criticism will suffice here. First, it is doubtful whether the very opposition between the modern and the pre-modern is in any way receivable in the ambit of Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge. Though authors such as Giddens have co-opted some Foucauldian insights about discipline and docility into a mainstream sociology of the modern world, the notion of modernity is, for better and for worse, not operative in Foucault’s major works – indeed, these might be seen to suspend its very validity as either a descriptive or a normative category. Second, Afary and Anderson’s claim that Foucault is captivated by a nostalgia for the pre-rational (a claim that might be seen to impel Derrida’s instructive polemic with Foucault’s *The History of Madness*) fails even to contemplate the possibility, central to Foucault’s methodology, that

there may exist different regimes of rationality. Viewed through the prism of works such as *The Order of Things*, Foucault's thought is a potent antidote against the postulate of a unitary 'Western reason' that we could either defend or condemn.

Is this to say that Foucault's position is beyond criticism? Not at all. If we take this 'Iran dossier' not as an appendix to the prosecution's eclectic case, but as an object of investigation in its own right, I think we will gain far greater insights into Foucault's own stance and into our present predicament than Afary and Anderson are capable of providing. Though the question of 'the West' does have a certain prominence in Foucault's reports and interviews on Iran (how could it not, given the discourses of Khomeini or Ali Shariati?), the Manichean anti-modernism by means of which Afary and Anderson pigeonhole Foucault and hold him up as a warning to today's Left is far too coarse a notion – albeit one which is instrumental in bolstering the claim for an elective affinity between his 'post-structuralism' and the phobic Islamism of the Ayatollah. Leaving aside Foucault's occasionally egregious errors of political judgement and his ignorance regarding the politics of Iran and Shi'ism (which led him to discount the possibility that Khomeini might take power despite the latter's theorization, ever since 1943, of clerical rule), what *theoretical* commitments underlie Foucault's 'Kantian' enthusiasm for the Iranian Revolution?

Far from being explained by the anti-modernist amalgam offered by Afary and Anderson, Foucault's texts are remarkably coherent, if problematic, in their estimation of the singularity of the Iranian Revolution. Instead of castigating Foucault for his undeniable insensitivity to feminist concerns, we would learn more by interrogating Foucault's fascination with the Iranian 'spiritualization of politics'. Having identified the Shah and the 'modernization–corruption–despotism series' as the object of the uprising, Foucault asked himself whether the very idea of Islamic government was to be regarded as a reconciliation, a contradiction or the threshold of a novelty. His suggestion, in the midst of the unfolding events, was that the supposed absence of a classical political programme driving the mass opposition was matched by the manifestation of a unified political *will*, 'the collective will of a people'. Strikingly, he spoke of 'an abstraction in political philosophy encountered for the first time in the flesh'. But Foucault appears to conflate this idea of a finally embodied Rousseauianism with the provocative notion that such an appearance of the popular will in a religiously articulated uprising constituted 'a

general strike against politics'. In other words, that it demonstrated the desire not to allow for politics as ordinarily understood within the uprising. It is ironic to see someone who, as Afary and Anderson indicate, never looked on the French Revolution with any great sympathy, here formulating the 'alternative' modernity heralded in the streets of Tehran in the classical terms of revolutionary politics.

Rather than anti-modernism per se, then, it was a kind of anti-political politics that ensnared Foucault. The source for this anti-politics is not to be sought in a penchant for irrationalism or Heideggerian Orientalism (or perhaps 'Occidentalism'?), but in Foucault's increasingly prominent anti-Marxism, and his erstwhile alliance with the *nouveaux philosophes*. The plebeian motif of the masses against the state, of an irreducible revolt against a rationalist, and therefore exterminatory, image of revolution, is a theme that Foucault borrowed from his friend André Glucksmann, and the writings on Iran become unintelligible without keeping this very problematic allegiance in mind. In other words, a far more conjunctural reading is needed to explain Foucault's intervention, as well as his project of a 'journalism of ideas' (for which he recruited young Turks like Alain Finkielkraut, who has gained some notoriety as of late for his reinvention of a kind of republican racism). It was Marxism, far more than liberalism, which served as the target for Foucault's acerbic comments on the insipid nature of the Occidental 'explanation' of Iran's religious politics. And it was an allergy to Marxism, portrayed as the dead end of European politics, that led Foucault to disavow the class struggles at work in Iran for a fetishistic portrayal of the classless masses and their monolithic protest against all 'global systems' – as well as to resuscitate, via Furet, the Stirnerian thematic of revolt versus revolution.

Having said that, it is futile merely to censure Foucault's stance and its anti-Marxist bases, since, as the authors admit, Foucault was more perceptive than most concerning the weakness of the secular Left in Iran, and, besides, orthodox materialist explanations of the revolution's unfolding have tended to obscure what we may call the 'relative autonomy' of religious-political discourse. Any critique of Foucault on this count cannot allow itself blindly to reiterate the timeless wisdoms of an immaculate Enlightenment, but must face up to the historical weakness of leftist politics and analysis when faced with the 'spirit of a world without spirit'. Such a critique, which the superficiality and opportunism of Afary and Anderson's criticisms does not even begin to approximate,

would need first and foremost to achieve some clarity about Foucault's conception of politics. After all, contemporaneously with his reports on the Iranian situation, Foucault was involved in a panoramic inquiry into the historical sources and technical modes of liberal governmentality. This research, which has since spawned a micro-discipline of sorts within sociology, was not, as Afary and Anderson contend, aimed at denouncing the modern state as the pinnacle of oppression, for the nostalgic sake of a pre-institutional utopia of alterity. Foucault's painstaking treatment of the European *Polizeistaat*, German *Ordo-liberalism* and the Chicago school is hardly the product of a fanatical anti-statist, revealing instead a thinker of 'political reason' as the production of situated constellations of discourses of power and technologies of subjectivation. Instead of peddling a satisfying, if vapid, picture of Foucault as a dyed-in-the-wool anti-modernist (and liberally bandying about nigh-on meaningless terms like 'postmodernist' and 'post-structuralist') it would be better to consider what allowed for the perplexing asymmetry between his reactions to Iran and his concurrent work on the modern state.

There are two possibilities at work here, both implicated in Foucault's anti-Marxism of the late 1970s. One is that Foucault – without thereby abdicating his work on governmental regimes of truth – regarded Iran as a captivating exception to the European rationalities he was otherwise preoccupied with. The other is that he was attracted to the seemingly incompatible ideas of 'political reason' and the 'spiritualization of politics' to the extent that they both sundered the bond between subjectivity and ideology, allowing for an analytics and a politics of singularities and events. It is such a repudiation of a materialist notion of ideology that, in the case of Iran, drove Foucault into a moralization of politics – the foremost menace that, according to Maxime Rodinson, afflicts politics when it colludes with religion. It is also in this anti-Marxist reflex that we can find the causes for Foucault's peculiar reluctance to apply his conceptual grid to an analysis of political Shi'ism. In order to steer clear of classism, ideology or the 'dead weight of modernization', and to 'respect singularities when they emerge', Foucault, for a short spell, seemed to forsake the impure articulations of power and knowledge. The texts collected in the appendix to this book do provide vital material for anyone interested in the stakes and the styles of intellectual intervention, and for those who do not wish merely to retread the debates on Islam, feminism and emancipation that preoccupied the French intelligentsia in the wake of the Iranian Revolution. They also

permit us to grasp the price to be paid for abdicating on dialectics for the sake of a plebeian and anti-Marxist notion of anti-systemic struggle. But their interest does not lie in the ideological comfort provided by seeing Foucault in the dock for crimes of association with what Rodinson problematically described as 'a type of archaic fascism'. Rather, it is by delving deeper into the disjunctures within Foucault's political thought and by treating Islamism as an object of inquiry rather than either repulsion or fascination that we may learn from this brief, if fraught, intellectual episode.

Alberto Toscano

Uses and abuses of concepts for politics

Frederic J. Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005. 256 pp., £30.00 0 300 10829 X hb.

The blind spots of the title refer to a visual experiment from Wilhelm Wundt's *Grundzüge der physiologischen psychologie* of 1874. A white circle and smaller white cross are situated on a black background such that when one covers over the right eye and stares at the cross from a certain distance the white circle disappears. Wundt's experiment, which reveals the small area of the retina which is not sensitive to external impulses, is employed here to refer to not only the physiological discourses that typographers, artists and philosophers of the Weimar era actively engaged with, but also the way in which the works that have survived this era – Benjamin's and Adorno's in particular – are in themselves subject to a certain blindness, a blindness as to their extra-philosophical origins. Schwartz's thesis is that although the concepts of Critical Theory live on in contemporary thought, the particular debates and terminological sources of many of these ideas remain hidden from view. This is due to the particular academic afterlife of Weimar thought itself, but also – and more problematically – to what Schwartz identifies as some wilful dissemblance on the part of Critical Theory, and Benjamin in particular. Schwartz thus seeks to re-evaluate Critical Theory by tracing key terms and concepts – the expert, mimesis, distraction, fashion – back to their roots in Weimar-era art history, as well as other disciplines such as sociology, architecture and design, and even less discussed pseudo-sciences of the time such as psychotechnics.

Whilst influential figures from early-twentieth-century art history such as Hans Sedlmayr, Wilhelm Pinder and Alois Riegl are no longer as obscure as they have been, their role in determining and shaping the intellectual ground from which Critical Theory emerged remains relatively undiscussed. In this respect, Schwartz, as an art historian, is attempting to remove the ‘blind spots’ not only of Critical Theory but of the historiography of art itself, returning to our image of the Weimar era a sense of the often idiosyncratic but genuinely interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual debate of the day. For example, Schwartz analyses the way in which terms such as ‘fashion’ and ‘style’ became problematic within art history after Wölfflin, and that, as such, they could form the ground for a critical discussion of the new and novelty in the subsequent work of Adorno and Horkheimer. In Schwartz’s



reading, it is modern art history’s attempts to overcome the shortcomings of *Kulturgeschichte* which reveal the ‘double bind’ of concepts such as style: at once that which promises an escape from the bad historicism of artistic development, and a category which demands a critical reflection on the relationship between the ‘new’ in cultural form and the condition of modernity itself. As such, Schwartz argues that only *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could begin to articulate this tension between modernity’s view of history and the denigration of its present, an articulation which Schwartz also identifies in Adorno’s deliberately ‘oxymoronic’ early essay titles such as ‘Timeless Fashion: On Jazz’.

Yet it is the discussion of Benjamin’s work and its sources which dominates the book. In part, this may be because of what Schwartz describes as the ‘compelling yet ambivalent’ status of so much of Benjamin’s writings. Whilst many might read Benjamin’s use of a

concept such as the expert (from 1925 on) as a somewhat ironic response to the technologization of culture itself, Schwartz demonstrates how this apparently everyday word is in fact mediated by Benjamin’s contact with key members of the avant-garde: Sasha Stone and Laslo Maholy-Nagy in particular. These artists’ ambitions to create graphic works that critically explore the ‘new conditions of attention, perception and thought’ found in Weimar modernity – Maholy-Nagy’s ‘Dynamic of the Metropolis’ setting the tone for Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* – meant a redefinition of the artist as an ‘expert’. It is a redefinition which Benjamin parallels with his own exploration of the role of the writer/critic in an age of ‘prompt language’, the particular textual demands of a regimented life: the card index, cross referencing, traffic signals. For both Benjamin and the artist/expert too, the human’s very sense of space is transformed, and with it the visual and tactile reception of artworks. Benjamin’s ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’ stands, then, in the centre of any number of discussions about the political role of perception itself. Jan Tschichold’s 1925 *elementaire typographie*, for example, makes the distinction between aesthetic contemplation as the ‘psychology of the savoring bourgeois’ and that of the ‘active worker, the proletarian’. For Schwartz, this equation between visual instantaneity, distraction and the artist as expert ‘could be taken over ready made’ by Benjamin, and informed his subsequent discussions of the spatiality of city life itself.

Yet Schwartz also demonstrates how Benjamin’s work subsequently feeds back into art-historical debate too. The work of Carl Linfert, for example, took Benjamin’s theory of baroque allegory to create a theory about the way in which modernity itself transformed vision and the experience of space. An ‘architectural vision’ (*Architekturanschauung*) emerges between pictorial language and that of the architectural plan, removing the ‘particular standpoint’ of perspective illusionism. Such ‘objectified’ vision entails, for Linfert, the removal of viewpoint and thus ‘the fragmentation of all sense of context’: ‘the constant in architectural drawing is not the fixed point of view but rather a visual circling around building’. Such reassembling of fragmented space ‘under a different law’ becomes, in turn, crucial for Benjamin’s theory of distraction. Whereas Benjamin’s work on *Trauerspiel* contrasted baroque fragmentation with the contemporary pathos of dramatic expressionism, it is Linfert’s realignment of Benjamin’s categories with the particular visual modes of modernity that enables a two-way dialogue between Benjamin and the Weimar avant-garde.

Yet, despite this, one may also sometimes get the impression that Schwartz is occupying a more familiar academic territory, in which the well-known thinker is revealed to be less of an original and much more indebted to pre-existing ideas than it first appeared. This is a game that could be (and often is) played with any thinker, and particularly one as appropriative and eclectic in their sources as Benjamin. To be fair to Schwartz, this is not all that the book does, and its original work on the broader context of Weimar intellectual life is rewarding enough. However, the central thesis of the book is this idea of a blind spot, implying the neglect or dissemblance of conceptual sources even as their terms live on. Knowing this, however, begs a fundamental question about Benjamin's methodology, which Schwartz only rarely pauses to consider: to what effect is the appropriation of such non-philosophical categories put, and why? Benjamin's own answer is straightforward: in any act of translation (between languages, between books, disciplines, or the past and the present) such transformations are always tactical, not simply a 'borrowing' but a utilization towards a particular end. The work of art essay makes this most explicit in a sentence which appears at the end of the opening paragraph of the second, 1936 version:

In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are *completely useless for the purposes of fascism*. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.

In other words, these terms are not simply 'taken over' but strategically transformed, with a political intention that could hardly be more explicitly stated. Unfortunately, any analysis of the political implications of these various acts of appropriation in Benjamin's work is passing and brief. Indeed, 'politics' exists here only in the sense of the broad historical backdrop and the unfortunate affiliations of some of the figures under discussion. Simply commenting on the irony of Benjamin's use of terms which were previously developed by thinkers who came to align themselves with the very fascism that his work was attempting to resist (Hans Sedlmayr in particular) is not enough. Schwartz's aim – to reveal the blind spots of one discourse's indebtedness to another – thus risks a misrepresentation of Benjamin's task, despite the evident care and originality taken in re-evaluating the Weimar period itself.

Nickolas Lambrianou

Now here

David Pinder, *Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005. 354 pp., £50.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 7486 1487 7 hb., 0 7486 1488 5 pb.

Visions of the City proposes a counter-history of past utopian visions of the modern city. Its critical recovery of 'vital' models of utopian urbanism (rather than pastoral retreats) from late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Western Europe is, however, temporally double-edged: providing a corrective history, as well as hoping to rekindle a 'philosophy of the possible' for alternative city designs today. The intention is that to rethink current cities critically 'against the grain of dominant capitalist imaginaries' requires a return to the question of utopia, defined here (following Jameson) as what 'remains of our capacity to imagine change at all'. The political positions at stake here are clearly defined: those who desire a revolutionary change in present conditions are utopians; those who hail the demise of utopia are apologists for the sclerotic conditions of the status quo.

As part of his alternative, Pinder exposes a 'noir' archive of modernist forms of utopian urbanism, in particular the 'garden city movement' of Ebenezer Howard and the planned or 'concept cities' associated with Le Corbusier. In both cases, he dismantles the myth of 'value-neutrality' surrounding their rhetoric of 'purity', and exposes how their dreams of spatial order – and, through this, social harmony – resulted in a restrictive, homogenized and disciplining urban culture. To cut across the grain of these reductive city visions, Pinder poses alternative 'geographies of everyday life' – that do 'not repress complexity, diversity, ambiguity' – drawn from 'other contemporaneous currents of utopianism', especially from within the avant-gardes: namely, the surrealists during the 1920s and 1930s, and, for the second half of the book, the Situationist International (SI) during the 1950s and 1960s. These so-called 'dissident city' utopias are not embraced uncritically, but are in turn exposed as having their fair share of a 'dark side'. For example, the errant, fluid, dynamic and open formation of Constant's situationist city vision, called 'New Babylon', is praised for contesting the fixed and closed space of modernist city forms. But it too entails risks. The anarchic and democratizing freeing-up of social restrictions represented by its aleatory space, may also signal a more dystopian endgame: the sense

of groundlessness and indeterminacy that this open city advocates may ironically mirror the flows and boundlessness of a capitalist space–time – precisely what it intends to diagnose critically and transform. It is by contrasting the positive and negative sides of both modernist (Ebenezer Howard and Le Corbusier) and avant-garde city utopias (surrealism and the Situationist International) that Pinder reveals the uncertain and vacillating models of utopianism and urbanism that ‘modernism always contained’. It is this forgotten ambivalence that he resuscitates as relevant for critical revisions of the present.

For Pinder, all speculations and actions aimed at alternatives to current capitalist space–time are constitutively utopian. A subtle reworking of the temporality of utopia is at stake. It no longer refers to a future space–time, ‘an impossible fantasy’ closed off in an elsewhere and so cut off from the contemporary world. Utopia becomes (what it always was for Pinder) a speculative form of immanent critique of the present. Utopias emerge from within the conditions of the present as targeted negations of what exists. Although Pinder doesn’t put it like this, utopia is no longer a ‘nowhere’ but becomes an immanent ‘now here’. Of course, utopian thinking always transcends the present in its imagining an elsewhere. Yet, it is the ‘when’ of utopian instantiation that is at stake here. Pinder argues against the deferral of utopia through the use of a plan produced in advance of a future, yet-to-be constructed space, and instead argues for the possibility of utopia in the form of an event; that is, constituted through acts that are carried out immanently, from within and against existing conditions.

It is in order to expand this deployment of utopian urbanism that Pinder turns his attention to the ‘unitary urbanism’ of the Situationist International, with a particular focus on the transformation of the city envisioned by Constant. Despite Pinder’s insistence on the obscurity of the SI, the account he gives reiterates what has now become the dominant, and highly reductive, reception of the group’s practice, via the academic disciplines of architecture and urban planning, as constructors of alternative cities and, through this, *provocateurs* of new, as yet unnameable, types of provisional subjectivities. Pinder does, however, make productive connections between the SI’s theory of unitary urbanism and, their one-time friend, Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space. The SI’s refunctioning and reterritorializing of post-World War II Paris from below, on behalf of the marginalized – their model of a renovated, anti-capitalist city polis – aspired to overcome alienated social relations.

Spatiality for the SI and Lefebvre is social, and society is spatially constituted. Therefore a change in one domain acts as the catalyst for a change in the other. What prevents this tactic from deteriorating into some abstract account of deterministic behaviourism is the particularity of the SI’s dialectical negations of the city. For example, the SI’s collective actions targeted the atomization and specialization induced by the ‘society of the spectacle’; they embraced idleness and play in the name of a critique of enforced work or slave labour under the conditions of capital. However, this affirmation of play, as a targeted negation, gets overlooked at times by Pinder’s seeming embrace of play as such – despite the SI’s constant warnings that a ‘play-city’ could end up as a Luna Park of escapist entertainment. The SI’s provisional yet concrete utopian actions were not mindless or nihilistic, but part of a constructive project whereby specific urban *détournements* were not simply about producing a new type of space, but aimed at inciting new forms of social relations. It is the SI’s commitment to change ‘now’ that provides Pinder with a possible model for a living, as opposed to an idealist and dead, utopianism dedicated to the end of capitalism today. Though it was precisely for this reason that the SI actually refused to use the term ‘utopia’, stating that ‘reality is surpassing utopia’. Of course, reality changes.

So, for Pinder, unlike for the SI, ‘utopia’ becomes a term that needs to be reanimated. But, also unlike the SI, whose actions were carried out in the name of non-authoritarian socialism, Pinder’s desire for urban change lacks any specific political affiliation. His call for ‘partisans of possibilities’ has no basis in actual social constituencies. And for all his speculations on ‘a critical urbanism today’, it is precisely what constitutes our present that remains a mere vision in this book, hinted at in a few broad, gestural descriptions given in the last pages. Here, the possible use value of the SI’s strategic critiques of their times ‘could’ be seen as influencing a few generically presented activist movements, such as the so-called ‘anti-capitalists’. But how these present-day groupings are differentiated, along contested political, sexual and racial lines, is never clearly outlined. And those dissatisfied with the present may call for change, but not necessarily in terms of a total revolution, as Pinder seems to assume.

The cost of the vanishing mediator of the present means that Pinder’s call for a utopianism today remains locked in the recent past it recovers. This can offer insightful rereadings of the critical potential of past dreams, perhaps a wishful thinking for some sort of Benjaminian shock, where the ‘old’ revital-

izes the ‘now’ through alternative, because untimely, encounters. Yet, to avoid Pinder’s own aversion to nostalgia – where future cities of the past compensate for our loss of imaginings of how to get out of here – the relevance of the extension of past strategies into the present needs to be established from a contemporary perspective. To be fair, Pinder does allude (albeit briefly) to recent feminist critiques of many of the utopian cities he has selected – in keeping with the author’s acknowledgement of the book’s ‘male-dominated’ and limited ‘Eurocentric focus’ – and he also acknowledges the gender blindness of many of the SI’s theories and practices. But this hardly qualifies his support for them. Ultimately, to neglect the difference between the political situations of the 1950s, from which the SI’s urban visions arose, and today can only delimit the philosophy of the possible we need now.

Frances Stracey

Merely meagre, or doggerel redux

Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, Routledge, London and New York, 2005. xiii + 137 pp., £45.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 0 415 35630 X hb., 0 415 35631 8 pb.

Not so long ago the professional Anglo-Saxon philosopher responded to poetry with scorn, deriding its metaphysical pretensions as so much *Sturm und Drang*. In so far as truth and knowledge were claimed, the status of poetic argument was below philosophical consideration, as vaguely understood as the dignity of manual labour. Simon Critchley’s approach is rather to embrace poetry as a grand affair in need of popularization. Belletristic musings remain unfashionable, especially among academic critics who are steered against literary truth-claims as so much happy-clappy ideology. Critchley, nevertheless argues, as the blurb puts it, ‘that poetry enlarges life’ and that it ‘contains deep and important philosophical insight’. His enterprise is, then, rather bold and untimely. Readers aware of Critchley’s other work might expect a high-level engagement with Heidegger and Derrida, and through them the traditions of thinking in which poetry is fundamental. Heidegger’s importance is evident in the margins, but Critchley is rather too reticent about the

troubled struggle to salvage a poetics of thinking, or of poetry, out of the Heideggerian legacy. Derrida is strikingly absent from this book.

The gamble, then, is that some more direct encounter with the poetry of Wallace Stevens might be possible. Having confessed to his own youthful dabbling in ‘bad Nietzschean free-versifying doggerel’ – a rather promising recipe for new modes of satire he unfortunately abandoned – Critchley reassures the reader that he himself no longer writes poetry. Indeed, he opines that, ‘If I have a general cultural complaint it is that, first and most importantly, there are too few readers of poetry and, second but relatedly, too many of those readers are writers of poetry.’ It isn’t evident how these problems are related: whether, for example, the problem is that writers of poetry are misleading guides to the art form who should be encouraged to abstain from their doggerel so as to increase the proportion of readers who aren’t writers. Critchley presumably does not wish to put a stop to experiments in democratic self-expression, as if, by analogy, there would be more people listening to music if fewer people tried to make music. A clue is provided by the function of poetry as Critchley conceives it:

poetry elevates, liberates and ennobles human life.... Poetry enlarges life with a range of observation, a depth of sentiment, a power of expression and an attention to language that simply eclipses any other medium ... poetry is life with the ray of imagination’s power shot through it.

A total eclipse of the heart, one might infer. Those with a rather different sense of poetry as a horizon of language might be wary of the metaphor of shooting, especially of anyone trying to shoot rays through anything. This ray-gun conception tends to fire over the heads of those who conceive of poetry as an art of language more distinct from life, or who are suspicious of such metaphors of size and power. One form of liberation much argued for by avant-gardes would be to free poetry from its associations with nobility and the religiosity of spiritual goodness. Poetry might need to be destructive, debunking and thoroughly low, developed through processes of deconstruction, if only to socialize poetry out of the clutches of pseudo-affirmative therapeutics. But how might poetry enlarge life, assuming there are some who can be persuaded that they need enlargement?

The book’s focus is on the epistemological insights offered by Stevens, principally the relation between ‘thought and things or mind and world’. Critchley concedes that it would be fatuous to mine poetry for philosophical puzzles dressed up in ‘pleasing poetic garb’.

He acknowledges poetry as a mode which might be more articulate than philosophical prose. But, despite the caveats, Critchley quickly adopts categories poets and philosophers have taken much trouble to question: 'What I find in Stevens, what I see his verse moving towards, is a meditative voice, a voice that is not shrill, but soft yet tenacious.' Aside from the problem of 'voice', and what this might imply for a metaphysics of presence read into writing, the brooding, meditative calm 'found' in Stevens quickly begins to look like the hard-sell for a spiritual retreat into Black Forest gateaux among the Heideggerian woods and clearings. Given the propensity of post-phenomenological poetics to focus on a rather restricted canon of poets – Hölderlin, Rilke, Trakl and Celan, say, rather than Mayakovsky, Brecht, Zukofsky or Frank O'Hara – the focus on Wallace Stevens allows an English-language focus without too quickly becoming mired in romanticism again. Critchley reads Stevens through romanticism, however, suggesting that all poetry *has* to be written in romanticism's failure and be 'animated by the belief that poetry should take on to itself the existential burden of religious belief without the guarantee of religious belief'. He is not alone among readers of Stevens who want to domesticate the strange, more Joycean, more modernist materiality of language in Stevens's poems. But just as Nietzsche needs to be defended against those such as Heidegger who seem not to find Nietzsche funny, so Stevens needs to be defended against his more prominent admirers. Put bluntly, the modernism of Stevens remains to be understood and recognized. Stevens may be guilty of writing poems that too easily lend themselves to quasi-philosophical musings, but his work also fizzles with modes of levity that shrug off the pretensions of ideas, and are often hilariously offhand with the furniture of desire and perception supplied by romantic poetry.

There is, however, the embarrassing question of intentionality, and what Stevens may or may not have thought his poems were meant to mean. As Critchley notes, there is the influence of George Santayana, a thinker who appears about as likely to appear on the twenty-first-century philosophy syllabus as Santana (the one with the electric guitar), though one can imagine a poem by Stevens on the subject of their mutual influence. If, as Critchley suggests, 'At its best, modern poetry achieves the experience of a sudden rightness that can be crystallized in a word, a name or a sound, the twanging of a blues guitar'; why not Santana? Scholarship has yet to provide a sufficiently nuanced account of the intellectual history of Stevens, not least the pseudo-philosophical prose that Stevens

wrote. He may have talked up the idea of pure poetry, but his poetry is anything but pure. For Critchley, the necessary philosophical matrix is provided by Kant: 'I am not saying that Stevens is simply a Kantian, but rather that he begins from Kantian premises read through romantic spectacles. That is, he begins from a perceived failure of Kantianism, from what might be called a *dejected transcendental idealism*.' I take it that this should be read as a joke. Even if some sense can be made of Stevens's poetry read as offering qualified assertions of an anti-realist metaphysic, surely the tone could also be read as one of Nietzschean affirmation rather than anything dejected.

As the argument unfolds, this reader wondered whether Critchley should not take up versification again to bring a little more poetry to some of his resonant assertions: 'Metaphysics in the dark is a kind of music, where rightness means sounding right.' While the dance of meaning in Stevens is often a precarious high-wire act, on the verge of collapsing into a rather well-constructed metrical safety net, Critchley goes right out on a limb without much to help him defy gravity: 'Things merely *are*: the palm, the bird, its song, its feathers, the wind moving slowly in the branches. One can say no more.' But of course this one called Critchley can and does say rather more, and says more than can be read without scepticism, disbelief or a strong stomach. There is an oddly tacked-on discussion of Terrence Malick, which is interesting, but which jumps into the medium of film for no obvious reason and ignores the many poets who might be said to have worked on through Stevens. In the conclusion Critchley aligns Stevens with Blanchot and Levinas, but even fragments of Stevens's poetry suggest that very different strategies of writing, wit and seriousness are at work in such different *œuvres*. Part of the fragility of poetry is its vulnerability to appropriation, but there is more to Stevens than the kind of dejected idealism mined here. The principal merit of this short, rather informal and lightweight book is that it reveals, for anyone who doubted it, that the late romantic ideology of poetry is alive and kicking down publisher's doors. Despite the best efforts of sundry modernists, avant-gardists and exponents of ideology-critique, it is still possible, apparently, to meditate on the lofty sayings of poetry, especially by implicating them in the parallel lofts of philosophy. Things might not merely be so, however, if Critchley could be persuaded to stop reading poetry and go back to producing Nietzschean doggerel, the badder the better.

Drew Milne