

Mobility and its mystique

Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ and Oxford, 2007. 328 pp., £22.95 hb., 978 0 691 04987 8.

One of Bruce Robbins's epigraphs is from Irving Howe, lamenting that 'the welfare state does not seem able to arouse strong loyalties' and can draw on 'no encompassing mystique'. Certainly it would be daunting, not to say quixotic, to look back at the literary record of the liberal democracies Robbins focuses on (France, Britain and the USA) for sustained representations of welfare-promoting state policies and institutions. The nineteenth-century English novels that provide one of Robbins's major points of reference, and which constituted the predominant bourgeois cultural genre in the decades leading up to the inauguration of state-managed welfare, typically foreground scenes and occasions of private life, even where there is an engagement with what writers and reviewers used to call 'the social question'. Novel endings highlight personal and familial joys and sorrows, often set against the indifference or hostility of the anonymous public sphere. The kinds of identification such fiction mobilizes will engender few 'loyalties' towards collective projects and entitlements. In *Little Dorrit* (1858), Dickens highlights the importance, and scarcity, of proper care for sick children through the minor character of Maggie, who has been hungry most of her life and will never forget the delicious food she was given in hospital ('Chicking. My eye, it was prime!'). Here as elsewhere, Dickens the critic and reformer writes of public ills that should be remedied. But the conclusion shows Dorrit and Clennam walking quietly through the 'uproar' of the anonymous crowd, in the familiar kind of solitude *à deux*, suggesting that while the world may be out of joint, the protagonists will not be devoting themselves to setting it right. Relatively well-to-do readers are likely to identify with such protagonists, whether complacently or despairingly. As for the likes of Maggie, they read no novels.

To imagine a literary history very different from this would be to imagine, counterfactually, a social history where structural divisions of class had mattered less or had not existed, and in which the novel-reading public had been exposed to the same kinds of privation and insecurity as the non-novel-reading public. The vulnerability of welfarism noted by Howe reflects the

habitual indifference of the rich and powerful towards entitlements that they never struggled to win and often do not use. It also reflects the habit, which fiction tends to confirm and to make more widely current, of conceiving the good life primarily in individualistic-familial terms. The novel of upward mobility, the primary focus of Robbins's wide-ranging and intricately argued book, might be said not only to translate its protagonists from the sphere of directly felt need to that of relatively comfortable privilege, but also to induct and transpose them into a culture where the individual's self-realization is conceived in opposition to, rather than in solidarity with, that of others.

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) is a very recent novel whose protagonists, not unlike Dickens's, eventually secure themselves at home against the public threats and miseries the text has shown and hinted at. Robbins does not discuss it, but he has a long account of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, published in the same year; and the perspective he establishes helps us to read both novels. Robbins has traced a long history, but here, in the terms of his title, everything still revolves around the intersections between the discourse of the 'common good' and that of 'upward mobility'. McEwan's protagonist, Henry Perowne, has risen from a lower-middle-class suburb to become a neurosurgeon. Since he works for the National Health Service, always the emblematic welfare institution in Britain, can we, with the narrator, happily allow him his Mercedes and his Belgravia apartment – not to mention the nice little chateau that his wife hopes to inherit? The surgical firm that Perowne heads embodies familiar educational and economic hierarchies, and also tends to validate these, now in a post-social democratic form that figures the consultant's relative privilege as the acceptable, deserved reward of the team leader. Ishiguro's Kathy H., by contrast, who also works with the ill and dying, is a meagrely rewarded 'carer'. One response prompted by this richly ambiguous novel is a sense that Kathy, and others like her, should be asking for more than they are getting. This would appear to mean, Robbins suggests (while acknowledging that this need not be Ishiguro's sole or final implication),

that Kathy should seek to distinguish herself from the anonymous collectivity of 'carers', instead of submerging herself in it as a good citizen. Ishiguro's dialectical fable fully matches the complexity of his theme, and Robbins's reading of *Never Let Me Go* brings this out admirably by locating it in the long history of the upward mobility story.

The hospitals of *Saturday* and *Never Let Me Go* offer a more detailed and sustained representation of 'welfare' than we will find in any canonical nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century fiction (though this is territory long since appropriated by popular television). The taken-for-granted, central place of hospitals and schools in our metropolitan geography confirms the apparently unshakeable acceptance, in Britain, that basic welfare provision should be collectively funded and publicly provided: the fate of the sick child has turned out not to be so marginal to the story. (The contrast with the USA seems striking; but Robbins says surprisingly little about the significant differences between the three national societies he discusses, and nothing at all about the markedly stronger, more solidaristic and more homogeneous Scandinavian social democracies. He holds to the hope that neoliberalism can be rolled back, both sides of the Atlantic.) However, the antinomies of meritocratic welfarism are to the fore once we turn from the hospital to the school, which is important in many novels: even authors of a broadly democratic temper represent the school much more as the site of the protagonist's self-differentiation than as a place of collective enlightenment. The figure of the solitary self-improver displaces and obscures, in this record, a more widely available, if still very restricted, opening of new opportunity. If we identify more readily with the self-advancement of a Perowne than with the self-effacement of a Kathy, this is because welfare culture goes on being written and read from the viewpoint of the one who is set above the collectivity, and its social-cultural imaginary has never in that sense broken with individualism and exceptionalism.

The terms of Robbins's title capture this tension. His project, however, is not to make the obvious case that stories of self-improvement reflect and endorse individualistic and meritocratic values; rather, he sets out to show that the dispositions and sympathies which eventually made welfarism possible can be detected at work in European and American literary culture over the last two centuries and more, precisely in narratives of self-advancement and self-distinction. Thus in Dickens, for example, he writes not about the overt social reformism of *Little Dorrit* or *Oliver Twist*, but about *Great Expectations*, where loyalty

and solidarity are under maximum strain, as the quasi-autobiographical protagonist distances himself from his origins.

Robbins's prologue offers a reading of *The Silence of the Lambs* (not the only unexpected place where he finds the dynamics of mobility and patronage at work). Subsequent chapters discuss novels and other texts, in a broadly chronological sequence from Rousseau's *Confessions* into canonical fictions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – by Balzac, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Gissing, Alger, Dreiser, Wells, Doctorow and others. Recent and contemporary works discussed include memoir and life writing (especially by feminists and Black Americans). Robbins pursues his theme into adjoining theoretical fields, where arguments about the alleged *embourgeoisement* of workers in social-democratic societies, and about whether upwardly mobile intellectuals can or should identify themselves as representing their communities of origin (communities, here, of gender and 'race' as well as of class), indicate its resonance in sociology, cultural studies and social theory. There are illuminating comments on the views of E.P. Thompson and Perry Anderson concerning the destiny of Labour politics; on the intriguing synergies between Foucauldian anti-statism and 'the tradition of American individualist outcry against state and professional intrusion'; on how we might read the theoretical work of Paul Willis and Pierre Bourdieu in the light cast by their autobiographical writings. It is especially in his commentary on Bourdieu that Robbins considers the contradictions of welfare schooling, and rejects as too absolute the view that education under capitalism functions solely to ensure the reproduction of stable hierarchies.

Fictional and quasi-fictional texts are the main focus, and their discussion provides the basis for the book's general argument. Many readings, especially of French eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, focus on encounters between mobile protagonists and the mentor-figures with whom they enjoy erotic and quasi-erotic liaisons: Rousseau and Madame de Warens; the young Rastignac, newly arrived in Paris, offered different kinds of foothold in the metropolis by his cousin, the Vicomtesse de Beauséant, and by the enigmatic arch-criminal Vautrin; Julien Sorel and Frédéric Moreau and the 'older women', Madame de Rênal and Madame Arnoux, linked with them in *Scarlet and Black* and *Sentimental Education*. (Robbins points out that such liaisons were important in the lives of the authors, too.) These relationships and their analogues, such as the bonds between Pip and Magwitch and Jagers in *Great Expectations* and

between Carrie and her lover/mentor, Hurstwood, in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, are read not just as images of individual affections and needs, but as articulating social fantasies and formations of generational succession, benefaction, therapeutic dependency, economic and sexual exchange.

Robbins works at the meanings of these case studies, favouring close historical contextualization, and largely eschewing theoretical exposition and explicit hermeneutics. His methodology is broadly structuralist, and sometimes, but only implicitly, quasi-Freudian. He says less than one might have expected about how his perspective complements or modifies those of contiguous *longue durée* literary histories such as Williams's *The Long Revolution* or Moretti's *The Way of the World*. One is often persuaded by the initial claims of his interpretations, as texts are made to disclose, behind overtly onward-and-upward trajectories, covert acknowledgements of kinship and indebtedness. However, it is more difficult to grant the further and larger thesis that these latent meanings shadow or foreshadow the discourse of welfarism and social democracy. This, for example, is how the case is made in relation to Rousseau's account, in the *Confessions*, of his sexual initiation by Madame de Warens. Robbins underlines the note of cool gratitude and apparent disappointment in these pages, and goes on to relate this to Rousseau's views on the family, the state and the general will:

[O]ne might say that this episode of seduction or instruction is called into being by Rousseau's political theory. In order for democracy to be chosen, Rousseau suggests, it must be desired, it must be eroticized, must come to permeate everyday affective impulses. Yet how is a general will to emerge if desire continues to flow along conventional channels, aiming by whatever detours at the eventual reproduction of the family? Where is a new, distanced, democracy-building desire to come from, and how will anything so new come to be felt as a genuine visceral desire? By contrast with more familiar and instinctive versions, the nonreproductive, suprafamilial desire necessary for the founding or sustaining of a democratic state would almost have to seem, at least initially, somewhat pale, eccentric, or ambiguous.

Objections might be raised both to the textual reading and, more fundamentally, to the framework of interpretation, which is made to apply well beyond this Rousseauian instance. To understand 'democracy-building desire' as cathected libidinous investment (however 'pale' and 'distanced') is more problematic, epistemologically and politically, than Robbins acknowledges. In terms of Howe's formulation, one

might argue, contrarily, that if political and social arrangements are to command 'strong loyalties', this must come about precisely not through an unlikely transference (or confusion) between the appetite for personal pleasure and a taste for the 'common good', but from a principled rational commitment which has nothing to do with 'visceral desire'. Moreover, it is a long way from the proto-democratic political discourses of the Enlightenment, or from the diffuse and half-repressed humanistic solidarity which can be inferred in the subtexts of nineteenth-century upward-mobility stories, to the institutions, and compromises, of welfare capitalism. The latter, it might be objected, are imaginable only as the result of a negotiation with the forces and agendas of working-class politics: a politics whose terms are too explicit, and too much formed by history, to be read back credibly into the subtexts of pre-socialist writing.

The book needed a fuller and more explicit engagement with these general interpretative questions. Still, there are ideas everywhere; and plenty to concur with, or use, or sharpen one's own against. Its historical breadth is welcome at a time when hyper-specialized micro-studies dominate the literary critical field: long views may lead to some unwarranted elisions, but they have the merit of reminding us of the enduring anti-nomies of the representation of class, and of 'welfare' itself. Robbins argues that although the compromise formation of the welfare state falls a long way short of socialism, it must be defended, not just as the lesser evil where unconstrained neoliberalism is the alternative, but also because many individual life-stories have been happier, and indeed more socially useful, thanks to the opportunities which it offers: this is the crux of his disagreement with Bourdieu. But for all that, the story of moving upward is always (as he shows) an unfinished story, as long as it is told in a society where other people must still remain below. Criticism can subvert its ideological attempts to address readers themselves as always-exceptional subjects. As he moves forward through twentieth-century anglophone culture, Robbins makes rather less of the recurrent structures of desire and patronage he has unveiled earlier, but still attends, persuasively, to revealing echoes and subtexts which betray a text's own better knowledge. Given the variousness of his engagements, it is perhaps unsurprising that his achievement is not to be found in a grand thesis or a set of portable generalizations. His always suggestive readings nonetheless extend and deepen one's sense of what is at stake every time the story of upward mobility is retold.

Martin Ryle

Compulsive and grimly irrational

Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2007. 496 pp., £50.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 1 40398 783 9 hb., 978 1 40398 784 6 pb.

Since *The Nature of Fascism* was published in 1991, Roger Griffin has achieved a reputation as a tireless champion of the revisionist ‘consensus’ in fascism studies. Historians associated with this consensus disdain economic and sociological explanations of fascism, emphasizing instead the role of subjective factors in the psychodynamics of fascist movements. Griffin’s contribution to the debate centres on his adaptation of Emilio Gentile’s conception of fascism as a political religion: for Griffin, fascism represents a ‘palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism’ oriented towards the regeneration of a decadent society through the ‘mythopoeic’ idea of rebirth. Although he concedes that such ‘utopian’ visions of regeneration are doomed to failure, he views fascism as a coherent ideology which appeals to its supporters at an authentic level, and which cannot be reduced to a mere superstructural effect or variant of conservatism. Griffin’s comparative-analytic approach to fascism is not without value: in the search for a ‘fascist minimum’ he has contributed to a broader acceptance of the concept of ‘generic fascism’ among a sceptical historical profession, even if his synoptic approach has failed to win over German and Italian historians who resist the approximation of Nazism and Fascism with a social-scientific ideal type. But he defends his theory of ‘rebirth’ in a monomaniacal way, continually refining the idea of ‘palingenesis’ in the apparent hope that it will eventually lead to a paradigm shift in the humanities. His latest study is ambitious and insightful, but is sadly let down by a literal, programmatic reading of ideology, an excessive concern with nuance, and a lack of critical objectivity reflecting an (unconcealed) ambition to establish a revisionist consensus in fascism studies that few historians actually accept.

Griffin’s thesis can be summarized succinctly: the crisis of modernity which gave rise to aesthetic modernism also gave rise to a range of political movements concerned with the overarching theme of *regeneration*. Fascism, according to Griffin, was a

vehicle for realising the heady sense, not of impotently watching history unfold, but of actually ‘making history’ before a new horizon and a new sky. It meant breaking out of the ensnarement of words and thoughts into deeds, and using the power of human creativity not to produce art for its own

sake, but to create a new culture in a total act of creation, of *poesis*.

Griffin locates the appeal of regenerative nationalism in the sense of loss incurred by those ‘thrown by history into the maelstrom of modernity and who experience[d] the full force of the anomy [*sic*] generated by its liminoid condition’. The obliteration of meaning caused by this crisis assumed political importance because ‘the will to create a new *nomos* can become so urgent that the programmatic modernist may enter a utopian, ecstatic, and ultimately delusory state of mind in which it seems possible to disembark, to make a new world, or at least inspire others to do so.’ Through a ‘close reading’ of the writings and speeches of fascist hierarchs, he identifies modernist nationalism as the coherent core in fascist ideology, depicting *Mein Kampf* as a ‘modernist manifesto’, and Corrado Gini’s organic nationalism as an attempt to provide a ‘scientific basis’ for fascist modernity. He acknowledges that fascism was hardly progressive in pursuit of racist and patriarchal goals, but insists that the goal of fascism was authentic – namely, to reverse the alienation and moral decay of liberal individualism. He also asserts the revolutionary nature of fascism, and the text can be read in some ways as a rejoinder to Nolte’s theory of generic fascism ‘in its epoch’. Fascism, he insists, is a ‘revolutionary revitalization movement’ not dissimilar to Bolshevism (‘Dionysian socialism’): both are involved in the same search for a new ‘sacred canopy’, and both offer a new beginning through a ‘comprehensive political restructuring of modern society’. From this perspective, Griffin rehearses Gregor’s (and more recently David Robert’s) assertion that fascism and Marxism are two forms of developmental dictatorship (an argument discredited by association with Cold War liberalism), though he is careful to distinguish his concept of fascist modernity from the conservative revisionist concept of fascist modernization.

To support his theory of ‘primordial modernism’ (conceptualized as a timeless expression of the human urge to transcend temporality), Griffin draws on Gerald Platt’s idea of a ‘sense-making crisis’ to account for the cultural despair that permeated intellectual culture in *fin de siècle* Europe – although Platt’s study, included

in an earlier anthology on fascism edited by Griffin (*International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus*, Arnold, 1998), is not cited in the bibliography. According to Platt, a sense-making crisis is fuelled by a generalized experience of disorientation, creating a need for ‘new situated rules for interpreting the world’, which in turn give ‘meaning to the experienced chaos by providing for alternate worldviews’. Griffin provides a wealth of examples of the modernist ethos in art, architecture, literature and philosophy, and goes to great lengths to illustrate the impact of modernism in a range of social and cultural milieus, focusing on long-forgotten New Age movements such as ‘Swami Vivekanda’s first World Parliament of Religions’, and the ‘Esperanto Vegetarian Society’. He then links these ‘life reform’ movements – whose primary aim was to counter the *disgenic* nature of modernity via a ‘secularized immanent mysticism without God’ – to a fascist politics of the will drawing on the irrationalism of Nietzsche, Sorel, Bergson and a host of *fin de siècle* intellectuals who emphasized the seamless progression of time and experience.

Reading Griffin’s sensitive portrait of fascism as a utopian impulse projecting an idealized future against a hated modernity, one is left wondering why the ‘revolt of the aesthetes’ failed to win majority support without resort to violence, and why contemporary neo-fascist parties find it necessary to cultivate antago-

nism in order to mobilize supporters and demonize enemies. Griffin examines a range of intellectuals overwhelmed by forebodings of decline, but fails to relate the intensity of *their* aesthetic experience to the subsequent mobilization of ordinary voters against democracy. To support his thesis, he rehearses the view that disappointment with the First World War was sufficient to mobilize the masses behind self-appointed visionaries such as Mussolini and Hitler, but this explanation fails to account for the acknowledged weakness of Nazi support before the economic crisis of 1929 (or the rise of derivative fascisms in countries only marginally affected by the war). He also takes the evidence of fascist activists at face value, referring to the *squadri d’azione* who terrorized Italy as ‘paramilitary revitalization movements’, whose own self-adulatory memoirs he cites as evidence of an ‘authentic palingenetic vision’. As such, he exaggerates positive identification with fascism and fails to differentiate adequately between core believers and fellow-travellers. The importance of this distinction is demonstrated in a recent study of the Far Right in Belgium by H. de Witte, where support for Vlams Blok is revealed to be based on everyday racism and hostility towards immigration among Flemish speakers rather than identification with cultural nationalism (‘Extreme Right-Wing Activism in the Flemish Part of Belgium: Manifestation of Racism or Nationalism?’, in B. Klandermans and N. Mayer eds., *Extreme Right Activists in Europe*, Routledge, 2006).

The examples Griffin includes make fascinating reading, none more so than the work of Adalberto Libera and the triumphal modernism of Italian Fascist architecture; there is no disputing the modernity of Libera’s work, and the official patronage he received from the Italian regime. But for all his attention to the dichotomous juxtaposition of modern and archaic forms in fascist art and architecture, the study is let down by an uncritical approach which reduces its objective value as an academic text. In one section Griffin examines the alliance between Futurism and Fascism and the ideas of Marinetti, who exemplified the activist spirit of fascism in its early mobilization phase. As Günter Berghaus argues, however, while Marinetti repeatedly ‘professed his belief that “Fascism has a political concept that is absolutely Futurist, that is: anti-traditional, practical, heroic, revolutionary”, he was nevertheless critical enough to notice the reactionary element hidden underneath the Futurist or socialist gloss of Mussolini’s speeches’ (*Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction 1909–1944*, Berghahn Books, 1996).



Elsewhere, he mistakes the banal themes of Nazi propaganda art as proof that the National Socialist state was not reactionary but uncompromisingly modern in its ‘sterilization of modernism’, when the evidence suggests that National Socialism produced mass commodified artforms designed to anaesthetize rather than radicalize popular consciousness. In a short discussion of film and film-making under National Socialism, Griffin identifies a particular type of cinema which was ‘integral to the regime’s pursuit of an “anthropological revolution”’, emphasizing *Heimat*, landscape and traditional gender roles, but concedes that the ‘stereotype of the Third Reich as a regime concerned only with brainwashing citizens in the spirit of George Orwell’s *1984* is borne out by films with an outright propagandist purpose’, and that the bulk of films were ‘anodyne’ and ‘escapist’, ‘presenting dramas, crime-stories, romances or domestic situations of “everyday life” against a backdrop of an entirely normalized and *sanitized* Third Reich in which any illusion to the atrocities being committed had been radically expurgated’. Clearly, both fascist regimes simultaneously tolerated and proscribed forms of modernism depending on their utility, and the use of film as a propaganda medium is a familiar feature of totalitarian states; but the populist appeal of fascism lies less in its modernist ethos (despite attempts to extend culture to the masses through exhibitions or experimental drama) than in its adaptation to plebeian tastes. Following Frank Kermode, Griffin links fear of degeneration among intellectuals with an apocalyptic fear of temporal finitude; but despite his insistence on the futural, ‘iconopoetic’ function of fascist modernism as it returns to ‘mythic origins in order to go forward’, it can hardly be coincidental that the appeal of fascist ‘culture’ is linked to the commodification of *kitsch*, which Matei Calinescu defines as a ‘direct artistic result of an important ethical mutation for which the peculiar time-awareness of the middle classes has been responsible. By and large, kitsch may be viewed as a reaction against the “terror” of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future’ (*Five Faces of Modernity*, Duke University Press, 1977). As a distinctive feature of modern consumer culture, kitsch embodies the craving for familiarity, predictability, reproducibility and sentimentality – constitutive elements in the aesthetic false consciousness of the petty bourgeoisie.

Although the book is thoroughly researched, Griffin is not saying anything new. Gentile has emphasized the link between ‘modernist nationalism’, fascism and the

myth of regeneration in Italy in a number of works, arguing that ‘from the very beginning, this myth was associated with the myth of a Great Italy, based on the belief that a united and regenerated Italy would achieve a new primacy in modern civilization. The myths of regeneration and primacy also greatly influenced the modernist avant-garde movements that rose in Italy in the early twentieth century and that, in the years of the Great War, were determinant for the politicization of cultural modernism and the rise of fascism’ (‘The Myth of National Regeneration in Italy: From Modernist Avant-garde to Fascism’, in M. Affron and M. Antliff, eds, *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, Princeton University Press, 1997). Whereas Gentile is content to link fascist modernism with the rise of the avant-garde – which demanded an end to the autonomous status of art and a reconciliation of politics and aesthetics – Griffin extends the narrative to Germany, linking his concept of palingenesis with the ‘primordial human drive towards mythopoeic transcendence’, exemplified by the millenarian movements of the medieval and early modern eras which were engaged in similar attempts to restore the ‘sacred canopy’ of a cosmos shattered by accelerated change. He insists that in reconstructing the ‘primordial psychosocial mechanisms subsumed in modernism’, his aim is not to develop an anthropological theory but to assert the ‘presence of an innate human drive to achieve transcendence and create new cultural worlds, a drive which becomes particularly active whenever an established order is threatened by collapse’. But he does indeed stray into anthropological generalization to support his contention (asserted rather than argued) that the primordial modernism of fascism is linked to the perennial need of humans confronted by anomie to construct a new *nomos*.

This leads Griffin to naturalize the idea of revitalization by linking it to a timeless human facility to ‘overcome the terror induced by the prospect of personal death through a mythopoeically elaborated, cosmologically grounded, and communally configured belief in some form of suprapersonal renewal’. Drawing on Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, he argues that the new social movements of the 1960s were also engaged in an equivalent search for transcendence, ‘precipitated by the same psychodynamic factors which drove marginalized groups in Early Modern Europe to hasten the end of a corrupt age and trigger the immediate winding down of History in the Apocalypse’. From an ideological perspective this argument is inherently problematic: the social movements of the 1960s sought progressive cultural modernization

rather than ‘rebirth’. However, it also betrays a lack of sociological insight into the link between socio-economic and cultural-ideological change: the challenge to authority which led to 1968 was a consequence of rapid social-structural change, resulting in an overdue push towards cultural modernization that appeared to undermine the foundations of social order, but that actually functioned as a ‘rejuvenation therapy’ for an ageing society by activating necessary adaptation to changed environmental conditions. (By contrast, this process was blocked in east-central Europe until it resurfaced in the 1980s with explosive consequences.)

The incoherence of Griffin’s approach stems from an inadequate theorization of decadence, which Lukács traced back to the absolutization of bourgeois subjectivity in romanticism and the rise of vacuous individuality in the face of economic and political totalization. Lukács argued that fascist decadence arises from the de-autonomization of art in the work of the avant-garde and the aesthetic reconstruction of subjectivity in politics. Autonomous bourgeois art served a key function in competitive capitalist society, a means for representing those needs (solidarity, truth, humanity, etc.) excluded from the sphere of instrumental reason. But a contradiction is entailed in the avant-garde demand for a reunification of art and praxis, for, as Peter Bürger has commented in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, ‘art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticise it, along with its distance’, rendering art vulnerable to fascist manipulation. It is the aestheticization of the political, rather than the ‘sacralization’ of politics, which most accurately defines fascism. As Lutz Koepnick argues, fascism ‘moves beyond any systematic encoding of action in a shared repertoire of values or norms, moral principles or aesthetic beliefs.

It marshals the tools of postautonomous art and image making in the hope of removing former standards of valorization and legitimation and of glorifying expressions of power as auratic presences’ (*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, University of Nebraska Press, 1999). This point is also made by Andrew Hewitt, who notes that in the ‘moment of full unfolding, the avant-garde, no less than fascism, could think of itself as the completion and the liquidation of historical sequentiality. If a modernist history promises such plenitude, it must nevertheless within its own progressive logic defer that moment. In making good on that promise, Fascist Modernism both realizes and derealizes the modernist logic of history’ (*Fascist Modernism*, Stanford University Press, 1993). Furthermore, he adds, the decadence that grounds aestheticism is implicated in the rise of imperialism. Fascist imperialism is not merely an extension of traditional imperialism in a geopolitical sense, but a ‘transgression’ of the idea of nationhood, which Arendt defined as an expansion of political power that dissolves and destroys all politically stabilized structures, both at home and abroad. It is *this* pathology in Western imperial civilization which is obscured in conventional liberal histories of fascism. Although Griffin is right to stress the modernity of fascism, exemplified by the use of modern forms of socialization and control, and the ambivalent appropriation of modern artistic and architectural forms by fascist rulers, by equating fascism with a reaction *against* a dissolute and corrupt individualism, he misses the point that fascism – as a response to liberalism’s ideological impasse – should itself be viewed as a compulsive and grimly irrational manifestation of the decadence, rapacity and moral decay it claimed to overcome.

Daniel Woodley

Step back in terror

Bonnie Mann, *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. 216 pp., £42.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 978 0 19518 745 8 hb., 978 0 19518 746 5 pb.

The title of Bonnie Mann’s book signals her intentions fairly succinctly and it comes, therefore, as no surprise to discover that her primary engagements are with what she perceives as a masculinist postmodernism (as represented by Lyotard and Jameson but also, by implication only, Baudrillard), a masculinist conception of the sublime (primarily Kant’s), and the post-modern sublime (Lyotard). Her foregrounding of the

phrase ‘women’s liberation’ indicates also the variety of feminism (or, in this instance, ecofeminism) to which she is harking back. Whether there remains, however, anything very new to say in the by now rather arid dialogue between feminism and postmodernism is a moot point. Similarly, it might be asked whether the very use of the term ‘postmodernism’ in a book title, and the accompanying assertions that we continue

to inhabit something called 'postmodernity', are not anachronistic. Most feminists, at least, have now moved on from these debates although not, it seems, in ways that Mann approves of: many of her most ardent criticisms are reserved here for those feminists who have succumbed too easily to the seductive lure of postmodernist and post-structuralist thinking.

Mann's thesis is as follows: that the era of postmodernity has brought about *and* that postmodern theorists have advocated (she routinely runs these two statements together, as if they are both established and *identical* truths) a severing of mankind from 'the real' and, by extension, man's (and woman's) fatal separation from nature. (She tends to write of 'the real' and 'nature' as if they were interchangeable concepts.) The sublime, as she figures it, therefore functions, 'in its dominant contemporary expression, [as] an extreme kind of compensatory experience'. It is 'compensatory', because the 'aesthetic experience of terror/exhilaration' that it involves serves as a 'silent justification' of and/or a blinding of us to this doing away with the real. Therefore, her argument goes, there is a need for a feminist reclamation and re-imagining of the sublime in a manner which will help re-establish our connection to nature – 'disclosing' rather than 'severing' relations with the earth and with others – before the planet implodes beneath us in a fireball of unimaginable proportions. It is these environmental concerns which motivate the polemical urgency (and occasional hyperbole) of her argument.

What is new, or unique, about Mann's book – given the already substantial catalogue of feminist writing on both postmodernism and the sublime (in its various incarnations) – is her bringing together of these distinct but related debates in the service of an environmentalist treatise. However, as even the brief outlining of her argument given above will have indicated, there are significant problems with this enterprise, even assuming that we concede its fundamental worthiness and utility.

Most problematic of all is Mann's conception of postmodernism, which here becomes the kind of cardboard stalking horse so ripe for annihilation that it is practically self-immolating. Her early statements on the subject do not bode well, as she characterizes postmodernism and postmodernity in the following rather caricatural terms: 'Having lost our belief in the referentiality of language, we sacrifice our faith in any relation between words and things.' And: 'We live more or less blithely in a suicide/homicide of the species (our own and others), entertained by escape fantasies' – 'blithely', thanks to a 'shrug-your-shoulders

nihilism' that is held to be typical of postmodernity. In one of her most simplistic portrayals of postmodernism and its effects for women and for the environment, she claims that

A concern with the deconstruction of metanarratives replaces our concern for women, and the melting away of 'women's nature' acts in part as a repressed expression of the melting away of any nature whatsoever. In both cases we exchange our implacement in the political and natural worlds both through sublime experience and for sublime experience.

(It's notable that many vital things and relations are held to be 'melting away' in this book, undoubtedly as a covert warning of the perils of global warming.)

In her characterization of postmodernism, Mann conflates several different issues: the argued loss of the referent and of some transcendental signified, the anti-essentialism of much recent feminist theory, and the (distinct) experiences of being divorced from the real and 'set adrift from the earth', which we are in the process of ruining. This amounts to a conflation of post-structuralist theories of language and meaning, mainstream postmodernism (as theory and cultural practice), postmodern feminism, and the historical emergence of certain forms of (arguably dehumanizing and destructive) technology.

Most crucially, Mann evinces a familiar failure in critiques of postmodernism, to distinguish between discourses which problematize our relationship with reality and those which (allegedly) 'do away with' reality altogether. Her use of Mary Daly's line from *Quintessence* that 'postmodern theorists need not bother their heads about the (real) world, since for them it does not exist' is telling, and elsewhere she avers that, with postmodernism, 'it was discovered that everything is fiction'.

The chapter on the Kantian sublime does little more than reiterate its already remarked-upon gender bias, this being particularly obvious in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. As Mann acknowledges, in the references she makes (and the book is nothing if not extensively researched, with frequent, lengthy footnotes clogging up the page), the patriarchal character of the sublime has already been discussed by numerous feminists, including Irigaray. Furthermore, Mann uses her dutiful, albeit torpid, reading of Kantian aesthetics as a platform for political statements about the contemporary world which frequently jar. Thus a close reading of Kant's discussion of freedom and necessity in the third *Critique* segues into an aside about women 'in many parts of the world [who] spend a great deal of their time going

long distances to get potable water and carrying it home – not in the least free not to go one day... Of course this is not ... the kind of freedom Kant had in mind exactly.' Well, quite.

Throughout, Mann's close readings are detailed, but the analyses themselves can be simplistic in their summations ('Lyotard's contribution to a radical politics is his stepping back from the rush to judgment...'), and the ground that she's covering is already much trampled (is it necessary to read Lyotard reading Kant, again?). In her comments on Jameson (in the Preface and Introduction) and Lyotard (in the chapter devoted to him), Mann goes significantly awry, again, in her characterization of postmodernism as unequivocally celebratory of the terror, awe and disorientation of sublime experience: 'in postmodernity we tend to flee into an exuberant affirmation of the irreality of any real that exceeds our creations.' Yet if the experience of the postmodern sublime is euphoric, it is not straightforwardly so, particularly not in the way that Jameson represents it – something revealed by the very quotations from *Postmodernism* that Mann chooses to include – and Jameson's invocations to certain kinds of 'cognitive mapping', although obscure, do not constitute the variety of 'nihilism' that Mann accuses postmodernism of. And if the postmodern sublime is not an 'exuberant affirmation' of dislocation, disorientation and severance from the earth/Other, then it cannot adequately serve the 'compensatory' function that she apportions it.

In fact, the sublime here serves disparate functions and is applied haphazardly to the form and content of a number of the theories under consideration. This seems to me another indication of Mann's too facile conflation of different theories and phenomena: thus, the 'central moment of unravelling in Butler's work is an implicit "sublime" experience, where both temporality and the relation of speech to place mirror those found in Lyotard's notion of the sublime.' Furthermore, after claiming that 'the sublime is at work in feminist postmodernism ... though not explicitly', she proceeds to argue: first, that the pro-pornography stance of certain feminists in the 1980s and 1990s is directly facilitated by postmodernism, which allows pornography to be reduced to 'discourse' and thus to be treated as "'representation" rather than "reality"', and so as harmless; and second, that these pro-pornography feminists (specifically Linda Williams and Laura Kipnis) are 'caught up ... in the sublime experience of the dissolution of what exceeds or resists the text' and engaged in 'celebrating the sublime intensity pornography produces'. The problems with this hardly need stating: to say

that pornography is 'representation' is not the same as saying that it is 'unreal', because 'representation' and 'reality' are not so starkly and simply opposed; and it's not evident what might be 'sublime' about the pornography that Williams et al. are 'celebrating' (if this is what they are doing). 'The sublime' is to be found, according to Mann, almost everywhere: in 'the best of feminist writing and in explicitly feminist art', but also 'in more dangerous places' – she even connects it to anorexia, asserting that 'it is the aesthetic experience of the sublime that explains why women continue to starve themselves beyond the limits of socially prescribed slenderness.' It's debatable whether so disorientatingly malleable (sublime?) a concept can have any useful content or applicability.

Stylistically, the book is, at times, an uneasy mish-mash of sustained philosophical and political analysis, anecdote, unsubstantiated assertion and ill-judged analogy. For example, in documenting the 'linguistic turn' in feminism, Mann employs the clunking imagery of a 'marriage' of ideas, where Marxism is the unsatisfactory husband ('old man'), and postmodernism is the exciting 'bad-boy boyfriend' who could 'transmute at will into a gay man, or a woman, or even a lesbian, making things more interesting'. In the midst of an analysis of the 'ontological dislocation' involved in an experience of the Lyotardian sublime, she starts a discussion of Hurricane Katrina, which 'destroyed place to such an extent that she unbinds the before and after for the survivors', causing both spatial and temporal disorientation. However admirable it might be to concretize these otherwise rather abstract philosophical ideas, making them more relevant and politically acute, her attempts to do so are rarely convincing.

Ultimately, the book is a sustained lament for the perceived passing away of second-wave feminism, and Mann's attack on postmodernism is an attack on the moment when 'women's liberation, in whatever contested form, ceases to be at issue in feminism, ceases to be the point of feminism.' She asks: 'what takes its place?', revealing that her central concern is with 'the stakes of feminism' or 'what the feminist project is', but the book cannot hope to answer so gargantuan and fraught a question. Its operation via a negative critique, and of such battle-worn opponents, makes it weighty in all the wrong ways.

Nevertheless, as the title also implies, this book is also a call to and for liberation, and, as such, deserves our attention and admiration. Yet even here there is something peculiarly constraining about this model of liberation, as Mann asks us to 'understand the

feeling of the sublime, the terror at the edge of the abyss, the silence of the Other, as a call to undertake the difficult task of learning to hear and speak anew'. Despite her insistence that women are not 'biologically or mystically bound' to 'the realm of necessity' and to the earth, Mann still contends that 'our ascribed role in bearing and raising children gives us an epistemological advantage in seeing what's to be done'.

Ultimately, Mann advocates a move away from a masculine sublime of 'triumph and rupture', towards a feminine one which will be a 'return to the relations of vulnerability that structure the experience from the outset'. But the very nature of this movement as a *backwards* movement, and one which allies woman with the earth, emphasizing not only her vulnerability but also her responsibility, makes it a step backwards that few will want to take.

Kaye Mitchell

The Eurydice complex

Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi, with foreword by Judith Butler, introduction by Gridelda Pollock and afterword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006. 245 pp., £52.50 hb., £13.58 pb., 978 0 8166 3586 3 hb., 978 0 8166 3587 0 pb.

Individual articulations and actions that sought to redress social, legal and political inequality on the grounds of sex and gender obviously go far back in history. However, 'feminist theory', as a genre of intellectual production, was in many ways defined by emergence within discourses in the 1980s that sought to identify 'oppressed others' from the perspective of class, race and ethnicity. Hence, the central problem that faced it, and feminism more generally, was being heard only on condition that sex/gender could be situated as such an 'oppressed other'. The starting point for feminist theory was thus the binary structure man/woman, or masculine/feminine; which in turn implied prior binaries of true/false, good/bad, yes/no, which always already prioritized the former over that latter. Hence, feminist theory was left with two obvious approaches, which have occupied it from the 1970s to the present: either to dissolve the distinction altogether, with 'woman' to be shown equal to, and given the civic status as, 'man'; or to transform the

male/female distinction into difference, dissolving the hierarchy that operates through it and the essentialist conceptions of sex and gender that underpinned it. Bracha Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace* is a fresh attempt to address this problem, offering a new answer to the question of how we might circumvent these hierarchical binaries today.

Ettinger is a practising artist who is also a practising psychoanalyst, as well as art theorist. *The Matrixial Borderspace* comprises six essays, all written during the 1990s, accompanied by intercepting examples of her 1990s' series of artworks entitled *Eurydice*. The publication includes useful notes, a good bibliography of Ettinger's work and a helpful index. Since *The Matrixial Borderspace* at times seeks to address an audience that is also interested in art – albeit within the context of psychoanalysis and feminist theory – it is a shame that we are not offered colour reproductions of her work. Having said this, we are directed to publications that do and a full representation of her artwork; this publication seeks to focus on the more theoretical aspect of her work. Ettinger's starting point is sexuality as articulated in psychoanalytical theory, and this publication engages with all three disciplines at once. For she insists that all three disciplines – four if we include feminist theory separately – are closely interconnected, informing, even transforming, each other:

Discussing art in a psychoanalytical context is inseparable ... from debating sexual difference, for we enter the function of art by way of the libido and through the extensions of the psyche closest to the edges of corpo-Reality. ... Seeds of ideas that germinated in my paintings and in my *Notebooks* about making art were textured into psychoanalytic theory. ... Theory does not exhaust painting; painting does not melt into theory; painting produces theory and seeds that can transform it. Theory does not alter painting in process; it can grow shoots from it, and translate them into its own language.

Psychoanalysis is of decisive importance for Ettinger since it is a discourse in which the hierarchy of sexual difference is codified. As she notes: 'For Freud, the male's bodily specificity – the penis – is regarded as the only index for sex difference for both sexes; the sexuality of girls is fundamentally male, and the libido has only one essence.' Hence, maleness exists whilst femaleness is marked by absence. For many feminists this account explicitly articulated a position they could expose as patriarchal, going on to develop the principal alternatives of equality or difference. Ettinger offers a different reading of psychoanalysis that tries to avoid

the binary structure these alternatives have struggled with. Moreover, she argues that this reading is already present within psychoanalytical theory, though in an undeveloped form. She starts by rereading Lacan, particularly his late text 'Sinthôme', from December 1975 (shortly to be published in an English translation). Ettinger's painstaking reading shows a line of argument in Lacan's writings after 1975 that acknowledges his account is argued from a masculine model, and that there is, as she puts it, a 'second phase of his theory on the feminine' that is not blind to the one-sidedness of the language of the phallus and its limits. She points to his *Encore* seminar, where Lacan says: 'I wish to succeed one day ... in causing the sexual relation, in the male's way, to fail.' In his account of *sinthôme* she points to 'a holy trinity' that is offered in the form of 'woman/psychosis/art-creation', all three of which elude the phallus. Lacan acknowledges the problem as structural: 'How ... can the function of the Other be situated?' For the Other cannot be added to the One. The distinction is one of differentiation not addition. He goes on to argue that 'the Other is the One-less', and thus 'it is from the perspective of her being One-less that she must be grasped'. However, this maintains a binary structure.

Ettinger argues that Lacan offers a more concrete solution by bringing together the feminine and artistic creativity. However, she insists that this is from the masculine perspective and that there is another, albeit not always 'visible', either literally or metaphorically. Her argument is that Lacan's '*objet a* is the trace of the part-object', the trace of 'the archaic Other/mother, both of which are linked to pre-Oedipal impulses and are considered forever unattainable'. It is not perceptible because it is the borderline of the corporal, sensory and perceptual zones. Thus subject and *objet a*, whilst inseparable, are not visible at the same time; when the one appears the other disappears. Moreover, she argues, 'when *objet a* finds a way to penetrate to the other side (as in art) or to reappear as hallucinations in the Real, signifying meaning disappears and goes into hiding.' And yet she maintains that the fact that Lacan, Freud and others take care to theorize in itself suggests something else, even if it cannot be accounted for in terms of existence, at least not from the phallic perspective. The artwork reveals this; it 'attests that something of the matrixial layer may infiltrate beyond anxiety to the poietic and aesthetic object, and to the



margins of ethical questions'. Ettinger argues that Freud's account of the 'uncanny' is yet another way in which the familiar and the homely are repressed and with it what she calls 'intrauterine phantasies' and the 'maternal womb'. It is in this context that she proposes a 'matrixial difference' that emerges '*beyond* the binary difference between the sexes'; it is a matrixial *subjectivity-as-encounter*.

Ettinger offers a compelling argument, which, whilst not always easy to follow because of the density of the text, is extremely thorough and carefully argued. And yet, even if we are persuaded whilst reading the text, when we move away from it and look at the overall argument from a slight distance, the question returns: to what extent does she succeed in circumventing the problem of the binary structure and the related issues discussed above? In many respects, despite all her efforts, by focusing on the feminine and artistic creativity her argument is in danger of falling back into the old distinction whereby the masculine is positive and has existence whilst the feminine is merely the seat of reproduction – whether artistic creativity is included or not. Artistic creativity tends to return to a subject, and if 'femininity', 'woman', and so on, is not a subject, artistic creativity may be its seat, but

not its product, property or possession. It is true that Ettinger takes great pain in all her six essays to argue that subject–object relationships operate only from the perspective of the phallus. Her own account of the matrixial and its perspective allows for a co-emerging and co-fading between life and non-life, and as such circumvents the binaries of same/other, male/female, existence/non-existence. Moreover, she claims, ‘the artist desires to transform death, nonlife, not-yet-life, and no-more-life into art, in co-emergence and in co-fading into a theatre of the soul.’ As a feminist academic and artist working in and with art, I would like to embrace this account, but, whether it is years of education and socialization, or my philosophical training, try as I might, I always fall back to what Ettinger argues is the masculine/phallic perspective. In the end, I am unable to hold this slippery perspective of the matrixial borderspace.

However, look at Ettinger’s artwork, especially her series *Eurydice*, with all the references to the mythical character who, as Judith Butler notes, is ‘already lost, already gone, already dead’, and yet, at the moment at which our gaze apprehends her, she is there. She is there for that moment, for our very gaze is also the gaze through which she is banished. Freud focused on the myth of Oedipus as structural to our psyche if not our cultural tradition; Irigaray has criticized this through the figure of Clytemnestra; but I wonder whether it is not Eurydice who offers an alternative for our apprehension through loss.

Nicola Foster

Crossing and recrossing

Nikolas Kompridis, ed., *Philosophical Romanticism*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2006. 304 pp., £65.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 0 415 25643 8 hb., 978 0 415 25644 5 pb.

Many of the essays collected in *Philosophical Romanticism* follow in a recent tradition of North American appropriations of (mostly German) philosophical and literary romanticisms. The editor of this latest appropriation claims a geographical and historical singularity for this tradition. Both claims are contentious. That ‘philosophical romanticism’ is ‘not a purely European phenomenon’ turns out to mean that it ceases to be European and becomes North American – as

if this philosophy of ‘Beginning Anew’ (Part I) was destined to find its true place in the New World, which is however not so new, nor geopolitically confined today. This sense of a singular tradition, circumscribing ‘Thoreau, Emerson and Dewey ... up to the current work of Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty’, reveals the historical homogeneity of its concept, which is its real problem. ‘Philosophical romanticism’ fails to draw a distinction either between early and later romanticism, or between philosophical and literary romanticism, leading to a flattening-out of the disputes that make those distinctions distinct. Notably, there is a tendency to interpret the early German romantics as (little more than) the fore-runners of later conceptions of the ‘self’, ‘agency’ and ‘authenticity’. As the terminology would suggest, these interpretations involve broadly pragmatist readings of Nietzsche and Heidegger – and not, primarily, of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel.

Given this problem of homogeneity, it is promising to read that Nikolas Kompridis seeks to ‘re-inherit’ romanticism, rather than represent it as a museum exhibit. But this attempt to break with the old turns into a somewhat audacious self-definition – because this definition is by no means new. ‘Philosophical romanticism’ is defined in terms that are quite familiar to other, undoubtedly richer, intellectual traditions. The editor speaks of a ‘crossing and recrossing’ between ‘American’ and ‘European’ philosophy in recent years. But why this rigid distinction in the first place? The identity crisis of (this) ‘American’ philosophy is currently shared, in a different way, with its ‘European’ counterpart. Because of this shared identity crisis, the possibilities of crossing and recrossing should not be simply dismissed. But this requires an understanding of what is being traversed.

This understanding is seemingly absent from the editor’s ten-point manifesto (which, not for the first time, cannot be taken to represent the intentions of *all* the essays contained within). Philosophical romanticism ‘is a critical response to the Enlightenment interpretation of modernity’. Since when was this undertaking a new and exclusive concern? The same objection can be made of point 5, which seeks to ‘identify with the humanities rather than with the sciences’. Point 2, by comparison, states that, ‘[i]n being responsive to the conditions of modernity, philosophy is seeking to make sense of the conditions of its own possibility.’ This is already familiarly known as, variously, historical materialism or Nietzschean genealogy.

Is not this manifesto for the self-reflexive understanding of modernity accordingly a philosophical

modernism, rather than philosophical romanticism? No: Kompridis excludes the definition of ‘artistic modernism’. For, ‘that impression gets altered once we see the normative primacy that philosophical romanticism assigns to receptivity. The new is not something we will, something we can make happen; it is something that we “let” happen’. Kompridis misrepresents artistic modernism here, much of which ‘situates’ the new in the material or the work of art, not in the subjective intentions of artists and beholders. His *non sequitur* serves to evade the question of modernism and to conveniently introduce the next item on the list of contentions: a critique of freedom as self-determination.

Romantic reflection leads to an understanding of self-determination as equally ‘Letting Oneself be Determined’ (Martin Seel). But the attempted critique of negative freedom uncritically affirms a form of ‘receptivity’. This is negative freedom once again, because it is a negative receptivity to what the (stable) positive self is not. It is as if romanticism had now made its peace with the society to which it, once upon a time, protested. Perhaps it has. Seel, not uniquely, interprets Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* (without naming it) as passive, rather than as an ‘openness to being’ that is not given but is, quite conversely, ‘enigmatic’, ‘ec-static’, and so on. The problems with this account of receptivity appear to derive from a limited reading of Heidegger. Several of the authors, whilst alluding to a concept of the authentic self, tend to conceive of the self of the agent, not the self of *Dasein*. Despite the ‘petty bourgeois’ (Adorno) existentialism of *Being and Time*, it is possible and even necessary to understand the self of *Dasein* as a self-interpretation of ‘being with others’. Heidegger himself moves in this direction, with his subsequent ‘history of being’. If *Dasein* is already historically mediated self-consciousness, then Heidegger is as much a student of Hegel as he is of those romantic ‘beautiful souls’. The constitutive otherness of the self is not that of the one, romantic other, but of (a) society as a whole.

Robert Pippin nevertheless acknowledges and explores the social otherness of the self in his essay on Proust: ‘On “Becoming Who One Is” (and Failing)’. Other essays in this collection provide useful scholarship on the problems of interpreting early German romanticism. Jay Bernstein and Frederick Beiser come to opposing conclusions about the value of pantheism in the Jena system (not coincidentally, these essays on *early* romanticism diverge from the editor’s manifesto, in spite of his claim for ‘an uncanny unity’ to the book). Bernstein draws a distinction between Schiller and Schlegel, suggesting that the absence of a concept

of ‘disenchantment’ in Schlegel means that his ‘progressive poetry’ remains divorced from a historically utopian programme. But Bernstein invites, without considering, another set of problems, concerning the unstated ontotheological and anthropological assumptions that lie behind narratives of disenchantment.

In spite of these contributions, the general problem of the collection is that, in claiming the territory of a ‘critical response to the Enlightenment interpretation of modernity’, without incorporating the conceptual artillery of the intellectual traditions that (also) provide that response, ‘philosophical romanticism’ is left only with conceptions of the self to address problems that go far beyond this self (the classless ‘agent’). In his own essay, ‘The Idea of a New Beginning’, Kompridis observes that modernity is characterized by the new. The new becomes ‘normative’ for modernity. Though belatedly prompted by Adorno to distinguish between the new and novelty, Kompridis fails to follow Adorno’s dialectical understanding of the two. We are left with the familiar call to arms (familiar to recent ‘European’ philosophy also): ‘do something new!’ In fact, most of the interesting romantics remind us that the new is precisely *not* a matter of intending it. The last thing to bring about the new is its mantra-like invocation. The emptiness of this new – novelty – appears to be connected to the reactive structure to which its undialectical conceptualization gives rise. If novelty, as normative, is constitutive of the life of modernity, then the new, which is here the abstract negation of that novelty, is equally the abstract negation of the life of modernity, which we nevertheless live and cannot transcend. This new is in that case already the (pre-modern) old. Instead, the new would be something more akin to a transformation within, and of, modernity itself: determinate negation.

The essays in the part on ‘Returning the Everyday’ are similarly problematic. After having cited passages from Heidegger that appear to contest the charge of romantic anti-capitalism (technology must be *aufgehoben*, etc.), Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Spinoza go on to write in a more provincial vein than almost anything penned in the *Hütte*. Heidegger, so claim the authors, teaches us to return to the everyday. Dreyfus and Spinoza have specific everyday practices in mind. Their examples revolve around the family and the home. The point hardly needs making that this is already a dominant ideology, coextensive with, not opposed to, a ‘total interpretation of being’ as ‘technology’. The contention that the private, everyday world is exempt from social and institutional forces – ‘out there’ – is familiar.

Unfortunately, much of *Philosophical Romanticism* merely serves to show that a romanticism of the everyday is never very far away from romantic anti-capitalism. In this regard at least, the collection faithfully represents one strand of romanticism, philosophical or otherwise. It does so at the expense of another, coming from (contra-Bernstein?) the early romantics – the ‘first avant-garde’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*). This latter, ‘anti-tradition’ is by no means self-evident, today. Perhaps it is this problem that in fact calls for (its) crossing and re-crossing.

Wesley Phillips

Automatic icon

Larry Kahaner, *AK-47: The Weapon that Changed the Face of War*, John Wiley, Hoboken NJ, 2007. xi + 258 pp., £17.99 hb., £8.99 pb., 978 0 471 726418 hb., 978 0 470 16880 6 pb.

Traditionally, too much emphasis has been placed on new weapons deciding the outcome of wars. While it is true that better weapons may win battles, one should be careful to place them in the wider context of a given war, particularly the skill of the people who control and wield them. In short: one should be sceptical of technological determinism. In certain situations, such as colonial warfare, new weapons have been decisive, but even here victory is invariably a product of a number of factors. And, of course, it is often not long before the colonized get hold of similar weapons and turn them on the colonizers. The Arabs’ use of new Soviet-supplied portable anti-tank missiles and mobile anti-aircraft missiles and guns in the 1973 Arab–Israeli War is a more recent example of the decisive impact of technology. Without these weapons, they would not have had their phenomenal initial success against the Israelis (who always had the decisive advantage in armour and air power), and without this initial triumph it is unlikely that the Israelis would have come to the negotiating table in 1978–9 for the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty.

Usually, the introduction of an apparently unstoppable weapon forces modern armies on both sides to produce effective countermeasures: depth charges to destroy submarines or dispersed infantry tactics and portable firepower to cope with machine guns. Indeed, in 1973 after less than a week’s fighting, the Israelis had developed systems to overcome the

Arabs’ new weapons. This creates a depressing cycle of technological development in which warring groups quickly copy, counter and check new technologies introduced by opponents. This militates against new technologies having a decisive impact on warfare.

Instead of examining these issues, much (perhaps too much) of the literature on technology and war focuses on military hardware and assessments of theoretical capabilities – ‘killing power’ – rather than on analysis of technology, science and war within a wider historical narrative, taking into account political, economic and social factors. The best studies analyse the interaction between military technology/science and national history, thus providing a counterweight to those who see the subject only in terms of an unhealthy interest in guns and their technical specifications.

To his credit, Larry Kahaner is not obsessed with the technical side of the AK-47, preferring to contextualize the rifle’s invention and spread within wider debates on war and society. (AK-47 stands for *Avtomat Kalashnikova* – automatic Kalashnikov 1947, the year of production for the Soviet self-taught designer Mikhail Kalashnikov.) Kahaner’s main theme is that the AK-47 did more than just change the course of a particular battle or war: it changed the face of battle and the course of history after the Second World War. This is a dramatic thesis, but, for this reviewer, highly debatable and not proved here. While the AK-47 was cheap to make, easy to handle, neatly designed and mass-produced, it did not change history.

The assault rifle was not a revolutionary but an evolutionary development that flowed from the introduction of gunpowder to Europe (from China) from about the fourteenth century and the subsequent development of firearms. Before the nineteenth century, the standard infantry firearm was the muzzle-loading musket. The loading of these muskets from the front (the muzzle) was a fussy, time-consuming business, requiring the soldier to stand upright on the battlefield and go through the slow procedure of forcing gunpowder, wadding and a ball down the barrel with a long rod, preparatory to firing. One estimate is that early matchlock muskets required 96 separate motions by the soldier for each round of firing. As they slowly loaded and fired, perhaps managing at most two rounds per minute, the soldiers with muskets needed to be protected against enemy cavalry and infantry charges. This required the deployment of soldiers with edged weapons – usually pikemen – interspersed among their vulnerable comrades who were busy loading and reloading their muskets. The advent of the relatively simple technology of the socket bayonet, which fixed

over the end of a musket while still allowing firing, meant that the infantryman could stand alone.

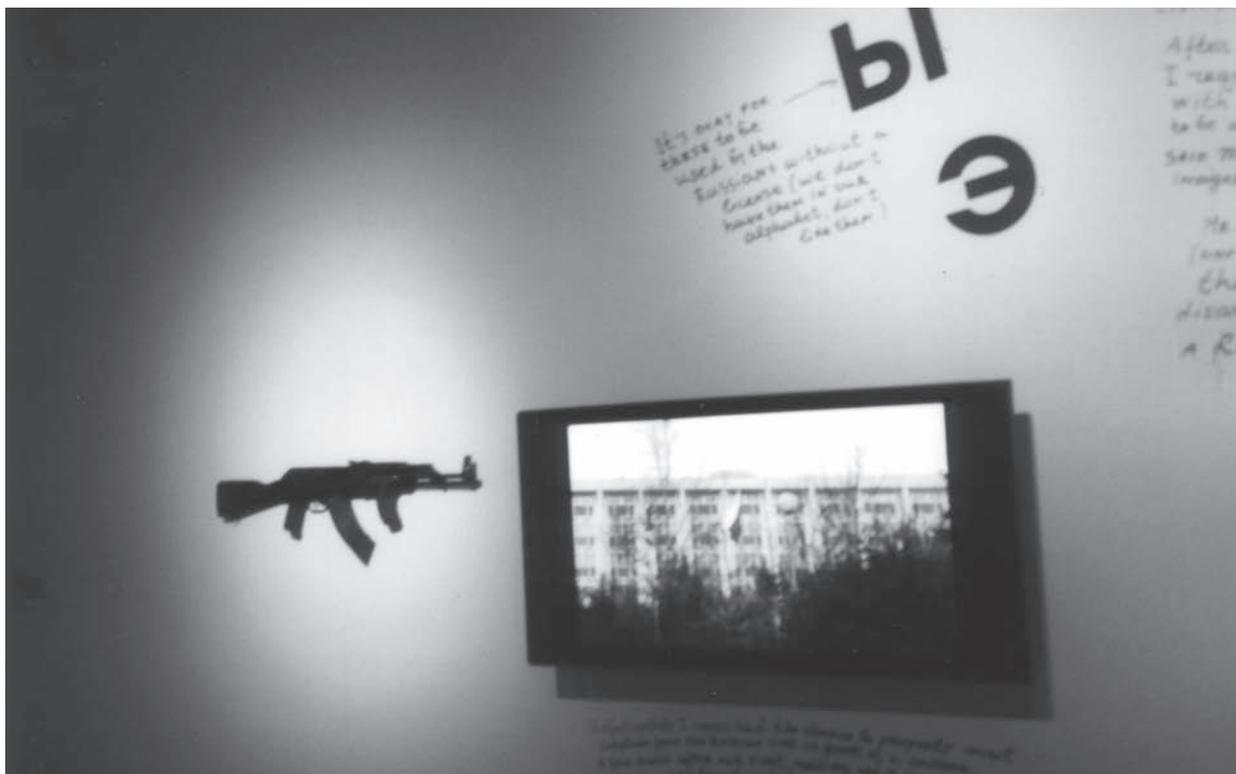
In the mid- to late nineteenth century, the advent of breech-loading rifles and new ammunition with more powerful propellant to drive the bullet revolutionized the firearm, allowing the infantryman to fire more quickly (up to fifteen aimed rounds per minute) and in a prone position as he did not have to stand up to load the weapon from the barrel. This new weapon was also much more accurate, with an effective range of 1,000 metres. By 1914, all major European armies had their own standard breech-loading infantry rifle, usually named after the factories that made them: Steyr Mannlicher (Austria), Mauser (Germany), Lee Enfield (Britain), Arisaka (Japan), Mosin-Nagant (Russia) and Springfield (USA).

In the 1880s, Hiram Maxim had invented a weapon that loaded and fired automatically – the machine gun. It used the gas from the explosion of the bullet in a reverse action to force back the mechanisms inside the weapon in a continuous action that reduced the gunner to the role of a machine operator. Fed by belts of ammunition stored in boxes, the machine gun was heavy, requiring a wheeled base and a team of soldiers to operate it. By the First World War, light machine guns such as the British Lewis gun fed by bigger magazines or strips of bullets were available. Designed to be fired in short bursts from a bipod, the light machine gun could be carried by one man into battle. But it was still fairly heavy and required supporting teams of soldiers to carry all the ammunition required.

The need for even smaller, lighter weapons led to the deployment of the sub-machine gun, in operation from 1915 and widely used by the Germans at the end of the war. The problem with the sub-machine gun was its lack of accuracy and short range.

The need for an intermediate weapon – between the rifle and machine gun, on the one hand, and the sub-machine gun, on the other – led designers to develop the assault rifle (sometimes called the automatic rifle) during the First World War. This would have the power of the rifle, the automatic capability of the machine gun and the lightness of the sub-machine gun. It would fire an intermediate calibre bullet: lighter and less powerful than the standard rifle round, but more powerful than the sub-machine gun or pistol round. Combining these different functions was no easy task, and Kalashnikov's fame comes from the way he went about tackling, and solving, the problem.

Kalashnikov improved and adapted existing technology and expertise for his AK-47. Little was new about his design. He recombined known designs and technologies in a durable package. He might even have copied other people's designs. Towards the end of the Second World War, the Germans had pioneered lighter stamped-sheet-metal, mass-produced assault rifles (the MP-40, MG-42 and Stg-44). Even earlier, in 1916, the Russian V.G. Federov had designed a version of an assault rifle. In his biography published in 2003, *Ma Vie en Rafales* (My Life in Bursts), Kalashnikov said nothing about the influence of the Germans, which is odd as the Soviets would have captured German assault



rifles in the closing years of the war. We will never know how much the Germans influenced the Soviets, who had their own pre-existing stamped-sheet-metal production capabilities. But this has not deterred its reputation-mongers. When Polity Press translated *Ma Vie en Rafales* into English in 2006, the book became *The Gun that Changed the World*.

Kalashnikov's skill lay in the way that he created a weapon that met all the criteria asked of him and one that has stood the test of time and been copied by numerous other weapons designers. Kalashnikov used the gas principle from the machine gun as the starting point for the AK-47. When the first bullet is fired by a small pin being forced into the back of it, the gas from the explosion in the base of the metal case (or cartridge) that holds the bullet follows it down the barrel. It cannot go backwards as the breech/chamber from which the bullet has been fired is sealed by the bullet's metal case and a locking mechanism on the bolt carrier. Before the bullet leaves the end of the barrel, a small hole in the top of the barrel fairly near the muzzle allows some of the gas travelling behind the bullet into a short chamber that lies on top of the barrel. The concentration of gas in this chamber forces back a long rod (or piston) on the bolt carrier. This pushes back the bolt carrier. As it moves back, working against a returning spring, it slides on two grooves in the receiver part of the weapon and pulls back a rotating bolt. While Kalashnikov did not invent the rotating bolt, he adapted it to great effect in the AK-47. As the rotating bolt is twisted and pulled back inside the bolt carrier, it ejects the spent metal bullet cartridge (or jacket), forces back the hammer of the trigger (thus re-cocking the weapon), and then returns forward under pressure of the return spring. As it does so, the rotating bolt now swivels back to its original position; in doing so, it picks up another round from the magazine and locks itself tightly into the chamber, ready for the next round to be fired. If the soldier has his weapon set to automatic, this process is repeated all over again. The curved magazine, an integral part of the iconic image of the AK, is a result of the bullets being bottle-nosed and so best stored in a curve.

Kalashnikov's design is beautifully simple. Not only are the moving parts kept to a bare minimum but the bolt carrier that is doing the work is located high up the receiver on two grooves. (Kalashnikov describes his bolt carrier/moving parts as 'floating'.) This means that any dust or grit that gets into the receiver where all the key moving parts are located should do little damage as the vibration of firing the weapon will mean that they fall harmlessly down to the bottom of the

receiver. While modern Western assault rifles work on similar principles, they are far more complicated to operate and, while more accurate than the AK-47, are also more likely to jam and are more difficult to strip down and clean, especially when in battle. The Kalashnikov is a basic, functional weapon designed for armies of peasants. It is very easy, even for a layperson with no weapons training, to break down a Kalashnikov into its component parts, not something one would say about, for instance, the British army's current SA-80 assault rifle.

Did all of this change the face of war or the world? The AK-47 has not won any major conventional wars. Most modern armies need a more accurate weapon than the AK-47. Admittedly, the AK-47 was widely used in anti-colonial liberation struggles, but this is not why colonialism collapsed after 1945. The causes were obviously more profound, linked to economic, social and political factors both in Europe and in the colonies. Indeed, many successful anti-colonial guerrillas after 1945 carried Second World War-era bolt-action Lee Enfields or Mausers. The AK-47 was (is) a symbol of resistance, an emblematic, iconic image, pressed into service on the national flag of Mozambique and the political party flag for Hizbullah. It was produced in vast numbers – between 30 and 50 million AKs were manufactured after 1947, a significant point when compared to the 7 million US M-16 assault rifles built in the period 1957–85 – but other weapons such as the US-supplied 'Stinger' missiles in Afghanistan used by the mujahidin against Soviet air power have been more significant. Indeed, air power, armour, computer technology, missiles or the atom bomb were all more revolutionary than one type of a basic infantry firearm. In this respect, the AK-47 resembles Che Guevara, another icon of revolution.

Kahaner's book is readable and ranges far and wide. The comparison of the AK-47 to the USA's response in the 1960s with the M-16 is the best part of the book, not least as the inventor of the M-16, Eugene Stoner, died largely unknown but a millionaire, a point that obviously piqued the relatively poor but famous Kalashnikov. However, the book is a jumbled account of weaponry after 1945, using a limited range of sources. Unfortunately Kahaner was unable to interview Kalashnikov himself. In some measure, it is an argument chasing the evidence. But Kahaner is a journalist, not a historian, and his racy account will appeal to those who enjoy dipping in and out of ephemeral journalese.

Matthew Hughes