

# A gender lens to the century

Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States*, Viking, London and New York, 1997. xiv + 753 pp., £20.00 hb., 0 670 87420 5.

The briefest reflection on the scale of this undertaking is enough to produce vertigo, induced not so much by the challenge of twinning twentieth-century British and US history, as by the enormity of the conceptual and thematic issues attendant upon specifying 'women' as the object of inquiry. 'How', Sheila Rowbotham asks in her introduction, 'can the multitude of events which become daily news, decade after decade, along with all those submerged personal experiences which women's history has sought out – births, betrayals, ecstasy or even the washing day – be encompassed between two covers?' Her answer is that the writing of history is an act of compromise, born of 'a grappling between evidence and consciousness'.

Among the many fascinations on the empirical side of this equation, we encounter New York shirt-waist makers on strike in 1909; Marie Lloyd, English music-hall idol; Theda Bara, 'the Vamp', early sex symbol of the silent screen, born Theodosia Goodman, daughter of a Jewish tailor from Cincinnati; Ruth Thompson, hanged in England in 1923 for allegedly compelling her lover, the lodger, to kill her husband. We learn in passing that half a million single women under thirty entered the USA between 1912 and 1917, including the Japanese 'picture brides' chosen by working men; that the only anti-perspirant available in 1930s Britain, Odo-ro-no, took twenty minutes to dry and lasted a week; that one reason for American GIs' popularity with women in wartime England was that they earned £750 a year while British squaddies got less than £100; that the FBI opened a file on Marilyn Monroe following her involvement with Arthur Miller; that 'Hound Dog' was recorded by the black blues singer Willie Mae Thornton three years before Elvis Presley's version. Stories of injustice and exploitation proliferate: Alice Wheeldon, imprisoned for her pacifist views in England during the First World War; a semi-literate working woman's appeal in a Chicago black weekly paper for 'healp ... to get out of this land of suffring'; lobotomy proposed by some US surgeons in 1956 as a solution to 'the mad housewife syndrome'; the female employees of the firm American Cynamid,

which, when reproductive hazards were revealed in the workplace in 1984, demanded that they 'be sterilized and then fired them anyway'.

But if the volume of evidence which Rowbotham has drawn upon is considerable (the corpus of feminist-inspired British and American women's history produced over the last quarter-century, of which Rowbotham is both pioneer and practitioner, supplemented by general histories and original source material), and amenable to a variety of interpretations, it is to the 'consciousness' side of Rowbotham's equation that we must turn for insight into the central concerns of this work.

Rowbotham declares two personal perspectives. First, there is her conception of the century as two lifespans, exemplified by her own and that of her mother. Second, she invokes her 'complex affair with the US', rooted in 1950s' popular culture but then sustained by internationalism and her links with US feminists. A third consideration is Rowbotham's involvement with 'women's history'. Since the 1970s, she explains, women's history, like labour history and black history, has been active in a 'recasting of historical "knowledge"'. In 'applying a gender lens' to the past, it has documented 'everyday life and culture', and raised new questions about the organization of work, the structure of the family, and attitudes towards sexuality. Its most general starting point is that 'women's lives matter' and should not be excluded from the historical record. But in seeking to redress that balance, the experience of women must be integrated: women, Rowbotham insists, do not exist apart 'from life, from society and thus from history'.

At the most basic level, this text provides two wide-ranging narrative histories of the lives of British and American women. Although Rowbotham is clearly fascinated by differences, similarities and interactions, she recognizes that the two countries are not 'homologous entities with synchronized impulses'; latitudinal and longitudinal thematic analyses are eschewed in the interests of an accessible, chronological structure

which divides the century into decades, each dealt with in a chapter which looks first at Britain and then at the USA, subdivided into sections on 'Politics', 'Work', 'Everyday Life' and 'Sex', with particular attention to the two world wars. The recognition that women cannot be dealt with in isolation means that each of these sections – Politics and Work especially – has to treat the wider political and economic forces pressing on the 'destinies of women'.

This structure, peppered with short essays on period-specific topics, a well-researched selection of illustrations, and bibliographical summaries, makes the book eminently user-friendly for random sampling by a general reader well-disposed towards the subject matter but unlikely to plough through 600-odd pages of detailed narrative. What this kind of grazing yields is a kaleidoscopic picture of twentieth-century womanhood. There are ordinary women and famous women, poor women and rich women, women on assembly lines and women in the home, women hunger marchers and fascist women, pro-choice women and anti-abortion women, women against pit closures and women cheering Margaret Thatcher.

There are two kinds of stories to be told about this diversity. From a liberal-feminist perspective there

is undoubtedly evidence of growing sexual equality. In Britain and the USA the century has brought unprecedented opportunities. And of all the decades in history to choose from, a wise woman would do well to have been born in the 1950s. Whatever her social status and ethnic identity, there would have been favourable odds on her benefiting not only from the economic boom of the immediate postwar decades, and from the expanded health, welfare and educational services, but also, as she came to maturity, from the mass availability of contraception, and from the definite, if unquantifiable, diffusion of feminist values from the active core of the 1970s' women's liberation movement. As a result of these developments, Anglo-phone culture moved, and was pushed, closer to a condition in which many – possibly a majority of – women in those societies might begin, two hundred years after Wollstonecraft staked the claim, to live lives governed by their reason rather than their sex; to achieve, in other words, full membership of the human race.

Yet it is also the case that the range of women's experiences exhibited in this text is subversive of women's history as 'an unproblematic unity'. As Rowbotham makes plain, the history of women is 'no more cut and dried than the circumstances of women'. The situation and the consciousness of many women who appear here reflect not so much their sex as their ethnicity or their poverty or their work or their property. Rowbotham is alert to privilege in these differences; and in teasing out the gendered dimensions of such right-wingers as Phyllis Schlafly or Margaret Thatcher, she shows that to be a woman does not automatically imply disadvantage. Yet it is her sensitivity to the interests of the oppressed which ensures that any tendency towards a smooth-surfaced tale of women's advancement through the century is constantly interrupted by a sharp-edged critical awareness of the contradictions inherent in such a perspective.

This critical edge stems from the surviving conviction that any women's emancipation worth the name is only possible as part of wider social transformation. Rowbotham's conception of women's history is cast in the mould of a 1970s' feminism, inspired by a vision not of equal rights but of socialism reshaped to service feminism. Like the US socialist-feminist Crystal Eastman, writing in 1920, Rowbotham ponders 'how to arrange the world so that women can be human beings with a chance to exercise



their infinitely varied gifts in infinitely varied ways'. Seeking to 'reveal suppressed possibilities', she traces the gains and setbacks of social movements capable of eradicating not just sexual and racial discrimination but class inequality.

Running through this detailed account of cultural and social change for women, there is a political analysis of the rise of progressive movements on both sides of the Atlantic, and their subsequent defeat and dissolution. Not of least interest is the convergence and divergence between the British and the US experience. In both countries there are neatly symmetrical periods of intense socialist and radical activity before the First World War, and again in the 1960s and 1970s, framing so-called first- and second-wave feminism. In both countries, first-wave feminism overlapped with labour agitation, socialism and opposition to the First World War. Yet for the greater part, it is the contrasts that are most in evidence. The contradictions of capitalism and modernity have always been writ larger in the USA. Britain did not, for example, experience the dire social consequences of the Depression or the dynamism of the New Deal, the extremes of McCarthyism or the high degree of postwar consumer affluence. More specifically, American socialism and working-class politics sustained a near-fatal blow at the end of the First World War; and while the USA has remained 'a seed bed of vigorous social movements', radical democratic traditions have been far stronger there than collectivist strategies for change, and the sustained resistance to arguments about redistributive justice and social provision has blocked the emergence of a welfare state on anything like the scale of postwar Britain.

These factors all conditioned the character of second-wave feminism. The women's liberation groups that emerged in the USA from 1967, and soon spread to Britain, were closely interwoven with the civil rights movement, student protest, and opposition to the Vietnam war. Yet American feminism faced entrenched conservatism, and in the absence of a strong national labour movement its mainstream gravitated towards the pursuit of formal rather than substantial rights. The aim was equality in the world as it was. In contrast, liberal feminism made little impact in Britain, where the women's movement's close ties with trade unionism and the Left entailed a more general challenge to 'injustice and inequality of all kinds', and where the welfare state created many more openings for progress through social reform.

Rowbotham vividly recreates the energy and sense of potential of women's liberation in its heyday, drawing on her own experience as well as on other sources to

describe involvement in strikes, community protests, campaigns for reproductive rights, and attempts to create new kinds of sexual relations. 'Living the perfect, nurturing, non-possessive, non-hierarchical fuck', she recalls, 'became a terrible strain.' But her most powerful writing is reserved for the human wreckage visited by Thatcher, Reagan and their ilk on the lives of those who had most to gain from social progress. Here the transatlantic interaction consists not so much of the USA as the font of radical social movements as of the British tendency to ape American reaction. The new enterprise culture of economic liberalism was predictably 'full of contradictions for women, both ideologically and practically'. While competitive individualism created new levels of female achievement, its cost in Britain was borne 'by a shadowy host of homeworkers, hotel chambermaids, lavatory attendants and fast-food workers whose destinies were shrouded in the elusive statistics of government agencies'. Poverty 'had become shameful'. In the USA, poor people 'fought for basic needs – for housing, health-care and an unpolluted environment – and in the process came up against the arbitrary power of the market'. In Britain, as in the USA, it was usual to 'blame the poor', especially 'young, poor, single mothers', rather than 'to challenge the distribution of economic and social resources'.

Against this polarized backdrop, feminism – not exactly burned out but no longer a cohesive social movement – suffered in Britain from the 'isolation and powerlessness of trade unions and the left', and in the USA from an explicit anti-feminist backlash. In both cases there were divisions and a turning inward. Separatist feminists attributed all social ills to patriarchy and, in their 'equation of male sexuality with violence', foreclosed any solidarity with heterosexual women. And one might search in vain for any sign that the relatively successful female achievers, banging their heads on the 'glass ceilings' protecting the last masculine redouts, identified themselves as part of a sisterhood that could also promote the interests of low-paid, part-time and casual women workers. As the century comes to a close, we have reached a point which precisely exposes the limitations of any feminism that is not aligned with wider movements for social justice. That is the context of this book, and one whose key features are sharply picked out by it: on the one hand, the value of critical women's history that transcends the mere recording of women's lives; on the other, the continuing and urgent need for social movements capable of mobilizing the category of women as an axis against oppression.

**Gillian Scott**

# The extraordinariness of the ordinary

Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997. xi + 216 pp., £45.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 415 12821 8 hb., 0 415 12822 6 pb.

The story about the Oxford philosopher who offered lectures on 'The Meaning of Life', only to spend all his time on the semantics of the word 'life', may be apocryphal, but its truth is evident in the failure of a large part of the dominant philosophical tradition in the English-speaking world to take much responsibility for the 'big' philosophical questions nearly everybody asks at some time in their life. Just looking within the analytical tradition for answers to Kant's question about what I can hope for would often suffice to persuade one of the ubiquity in modernity of the 'nihilism' which forms the initial focus of Simon Critchley's book. Critchley himself could hardly be much further away from the assumptions of the Oxford philosopher: his book is an often beautifully written philosophical act of mourning, a meditation on mortality occasioned by his father's death from cancer. This fact alone ought to be enough to make one respect it, but it also commands respect because it obliges one to examine the fictions one employs to avoid really doing philosophy. Furthermore, in the light of contemporary attempts to revive dead theology as a means of filling the existential gap left by so much modern philosophy, Critchley's steadfastly post-Kantian rejection of theological answers to the questions he asks is very welcome. At the same time, any book which dares to step onto this exacting terrain must be subjected to serious scrutiny: the existential questions it asks have a vital political dimension that the Left has too often wanted to ignore.

How, though, does one validate philosophical contentions about life's lack of meaning or its meaningfulness, when the meaning of a life may in fact be irreducibly individual? Perhaps in this respect *philosophical* talk about mortality is itself the problem, because in attempting to articulate general truths it fails to confront the fundamental contingency of what is at issue. Awareness of this problem is what gives rise to Critchley's linking of death and philosophy to literature. On the other hand, the individual's relationship, not just to dying, but to death itself, is clearly affected by the perceived nature of dying in particular societies. This is *both* an individual *and* a socio-political issue, and it is influenced by policies on culture, employment, health-spending, poverty and exclusion, as well as by a whole host of other matters relating to the ethics of that community. Critchley's book

cannot be said to address this sort of question in an adequate manner.

Critchley begins with an examination of the situation where 'the possibility of a belief in God or some God-equivalent, whether vindicable through faith or reason, has decisively broken down' (p. 2), which he equates with 'modernity'. The central question in modernity is, then, the question of nihilism, whose history Critchley rather carelessly outlines, giving credit to F.H. Jacobi for first using the notion philosophically in 1799 (in fact it was Jacob Hermann Obereit in 1787); and citing the central role of the 'Pantheism controversy' in the 1780s between Jacobi and Herder (in fact, it was, at least initially, Moses Mendelssohn), before moving, via Turgenev, to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno and others. Critchley makes his view of the implications of the history of nihilism very clear: 'neither philosophy, nor art, nor politics alone can be relied upon to redeem the world, but the task of thinking consists in a historical confrontation with nihilism that does not give up on the *demand* that things might be otherwise' (p. 12) – a position of 'Hope against hope. Austere messianism. Very little' (p. 24), which will involve Wallace Stevens' 'return to the plain sense of things' (p. 28).

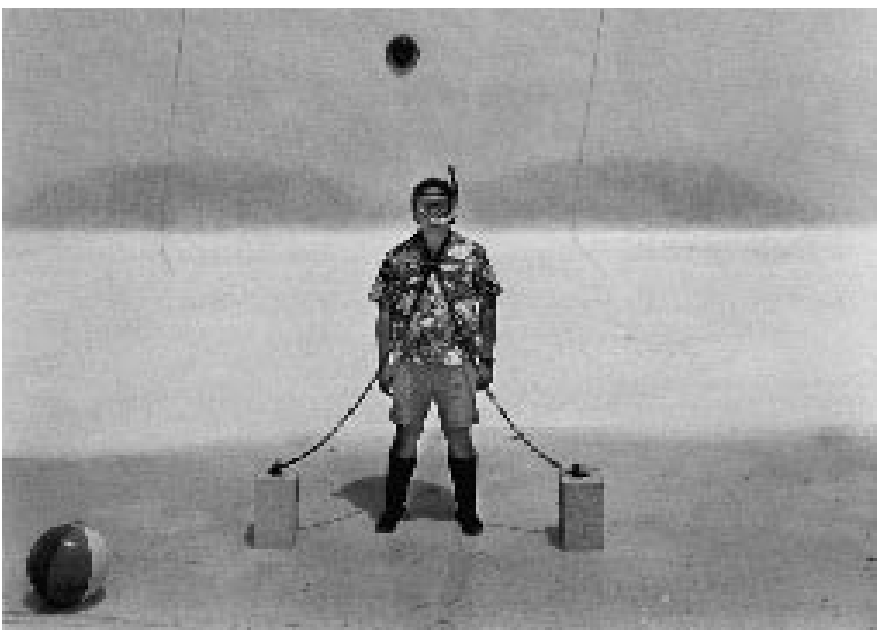
The obvious question is posed: 'if death (and consequently life) is meaningless, then how does one avoid moving from this claim into the cynical conformism and sheer resignation of passive nihilism?' (p. 27). Critchley's answer lies in the '*concrete reconstruction of the meaning of meaninglessness*' (ibid.), which he will see as achieved in the work of Samuel Beckett. The 'Lectures' begin with Maurice Blanchot and his idea of '*literature*, or, more precisely, *writing outside philosophy*', which 'escapes the moment of comprehension, or philosophy's obsession with meaning: the desire to master death and find a fulfilment for human finitude' (p. 33). The central claim, then, is that if death cannot be represented or comprehended, a form of articulation which itself confronts what is unrepresentable is the only proper response to the radical contingency of what we are. Rather than redeem our finitude by the Hegelian 'philosophical' demonstration that finitude requires the infinite as its condition of possibility, we need articulations which no longer claim, by trying to show how it can be transcended, to make meaning out of the meaningless.

Why, though, should 'literature' be so central to this enterprise? Critchley rejects the putatively 'Romantic' idea that the Absolute appears in the work of art. The weight of his own case rests on Blanchot's claim that 'the possibility of literature is found in the radical impossibility of creating the complete work' (p. 36) – the work that would comprehend everything, including death. Because the generality of the word cannot attain the particularity of what it tries to designate, 'Human speech' is supposed to be 'the annihilation of things *qua* things' (p. 53). 'Literature' must therefore be 'concerned with the presence of things before consciousness and the writer exist; it seeks to retrieve the reality and anonymity of existence prior to the dialectico-Sadist death drive of the writer' (p. 55). Clearly, what is demanded is impossible – if it is even intelligible – and 'literature' is suspended between the two impossibilities of Blanchot's 'day', in which the subject's use of designative language would negate the irreducible materiality of things, and his 'night', in which that materiality would somehow be attained. This is actually a very problematic version of Schelling's philosophy of the *Ages of the World*, which is later 'borrowed' by Heidegger in the conflict of 'world' and 'earth' in the *Origin of the Work of Art*. Schelling saw existence – and language as part of existence – as reliant upon a tension between never finally present, and ultimately identical poles of 'predicative' expansion and light, and 'pronominal' contraction and darkness. Missing from Critchley's version of such a conception, though, is any sense that predicative language can also enable things to 'be' by disclosing them in new ways, rather than merely 'annihilate' their uniqueness.

The difficulty here lies in the notion of what the later Heidegger and Derrida term the 'language of metaphysics'. This notion assumes that there is an *inherent* problem in the nature of designative language, which is supposed to be in the power of a dominating subject. Such language therefore needs to be escaped via something radically 'other', which goes under the name of 'literature'. The problem is that the concept of literature thereby becomes impossible to grasp at all, and it is even hard to say how the notional 'other' of designative language could be intelligibly identified, given that one presumably requires designative language to identify it. Such a conception would only be defensible if one could assume – as, incidentally, too much of the work of Walter Benjamin does – that language has fallen from being a pure 'language of names' into being *merely* a means of instrumental control. Once this idea is seen as the piece of mythology it is, one can envisage a less fraught conception of the historically specific modern idea of 'literature', as the configuration of language in ways which can undermine the fixity of instrumental usage, in order either to reveal truths that would otherwise be hidden, or, in the manner of wordless music, to refuse to mean anything finally determinate at all. Strangely, music does not even appear in the index of the book, and all we get is one reference each to Mozart and the Sex Pistols. Modern ideas about literature in the sense at issue were the product of the early German Romanticism of Schlegel and Novalis, which is the subject of Critchley's next 'Lecture'. The ideas of the Romantics are, though, inconceivable without the change in the relationship of music to language that is evident in the emergence of auto-nomous music at the end of

the eighteenth century, precisely at the same time as the beginnings of nihilism.

Having stressed the importance of Blanchot's 'ambiguity', 'the truth of literature', which results from the suspension between day and night, Critchley, after rejecting the problematic short-lived political ideals that resulted from early Romanticism's desire to unite philosophy and literature, acknowledges that the Romantics actually developed positions quite close to what he is himself seeking. Blan-



chot's 'ambiguity' is not far from Schlegel's 'irony', the form of assertion which negates itself without leading to a definitive counter-assertion, rather in the manner in which music often gestures towards meaning while withholding any determinate meaning. As the seminal work of Manfred Frank – which, oddly, is not mentioned anywhere – has shown, the Romantics, far from being essentially an offshoot of the German Idealist attempt to find new ways of grounding modern philosophy, were, albeit somewhat inconsistently, actually the first serious anti-foundationalists. The 'Lecture' on Romanticism concludes with illuminating critical reflections on Cavell's Wittgensteinian Romanticism, which tries to come to terms with the suspension, already prefigured in Schlegel, between the 'demand for criteria and the sceptical disappointment of that demand' (p. 136). For Critchley this suspension defines our philosophical situation: the question, though, is how one is to respond to it.

It would obviously be mistaken to expect a heroic culmination in a book devoted to revealing the ideological nature of redemptive claims to finality: any disappointment is in one sense intended. However, the final 'Lecture' on Beckett really is disappointing, even in Critchley's own terms, spending too much time on rather academic 'literary' debate with 'the critics'. Some of the individual points made are excellent, particularly on Adorno's failure to understand Beckett's humour, but given the importance attached to Beckett one expected at least a bit more. Critchley's conclusion is the following: 'What passes for the ordinary is cluttered with illusory narratives of redemption that conceal the very extraordinariness of the ordinary ... Beckett's work offers us ... a radical de-creation of these salvific narratives – an acknowledgement of the finiteness of the finite' (p. 179). Having acknowledged this finiteness – but how could we ever be *sure* we have really done so thoroughly enough, and do we really want to do so all the time? – the book enjoins us to 'Imagine' and to 'Know' (p. 180). Now this is either very little, or actually a great deal. However, Critchley gives us little real sense of *why* we should imagine and know, beyond the fact that we have no choice, because our species-being does it for us anyway. The vision here becomes disturbingly narrow. Even though non-human nature, for example, offers no ultimate redemption, the consequences of the failure to regard it as more than a resource for instrumental purposes are now very apparent, and have led to the need for new, imaginative ways of thinking about nature, of the kind adumbrated in Romanticism, which necessarily affect how we conceive of finitude. The book also too

often fails to engage with the stubborn persistence in modernity of a sense of temporalized transcendence which makes many 'ordinary' people continue to pursue cognitive, ethical and aesthetic ideals, even when they know they have no ultimate reason for doing so. The lack of such an engagement ultimately points to a serious failing in Critchley's whole approach, which becomes evident, for example, when he refers dismissively to 'what passes for life in suburbia' (p. 99) – the book's laudable and eloquent concern for the extraordinariness of the ordinary apparently does not extend to those inhabitants of suburbia who, despite all, put out the fires and nurse the sick.

**Andrew Bowie**

## Incommensurable shards

Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1997. xxviii + 276 pp., £29.95 hb., 0 520 06519 0.

*Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same* was first published in 1935, in National Socialist Germany. Its publication was remarkable in that its author, an ex-pupil of Heidegger's, was Jewish and in semi-exile in Rome. Löwith's dissident reading of Nietzsche, and his forthright criticism of party hacks such as Baeumler, meant that his work was refused publication in journals such as *Kantstudien*, and its appendix had to be held back until the second edition. Now, some 62 years after its first publication, Löwith's book is finally available to the English-speaking world. This is a study that is both influential and important in Nietzsche scholarship – though one that is not often mentioned.

Nietzsche's initial impact was largely in literary or political fields: Yeats, Gide, Hesse, Shaw and others all found inspiration in him, and the varied political uses he was put to before the Nazi appropriation are now well known. As Bernd Magnus states in his useful Foreword, Löwith stands with Jaspers and Heidegger as one of the first to see Nietzsche as primarily a philosopher. For him, 'Nietzsche's philosophy is neither a unified, closed system nor a variety of disintegrating aphorisms, but rather a system in aphorisms'. To see it as the former is to fail to realize Nietzsche's critique of philosophical systems; as the latter is to reduce him to a literary author. Löwith's suggestion attempts to rec-

ognize the interlinked nature of Nietzsche's thought, but also to accept the challenge that he throws down: the challenge of slow reading. In Nietzsche's work the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality* best showcases this slow reading and detailed exposition: the whole essay serves as an interpretation of the aphorism that precedes it. As Löwith sensibly notes, of all Nietzsche's books 'it is *Zarathustra* that demands this art of reading'.

Nietzsche's notion of the eternal recurrence of the same is both his strangest and most challenging idea. Arguably, it is also one of the most important to understanding him as a philosopher. The idea was first mooted in *The Gay Science*, when Nietzsche asks how we would react if we were informed that 'this life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it'. The whole of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is structured around this idea – as the lesson that Zarathustra must teach, but also as his greatest challenge. In the notes posthumously collected as *The Will to Power* Nietzsche hints at its cosmological significance, calling it 'the most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses'.

Critical appreciations of Nietzsche have often either evaded the idea, or pronounced it a simple existential challenge to make your life worthy of being relived. Some have read it as working in parallel with the thoughts of the overman – annoyingly translated here as 'superman' – and the will to power. Others have noted the impossibility of seeing these thoughts work in tandem. More recently, a great deal has been made of a split within Nietzsche's thought: the 'yes-saying' of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the 'no-saying' of works such as *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. The suggestion is that the 'no-saying' works, Nietzsche's critique of Western philosophy, can be taken seriously whilst the ideas of *Zarathustra* can be quietly dismissed.

Löwith allows none of this. For him all of Nietzsche's later books are commentaries on *Zarathustra*: he suggests that they contain nothing that has not already been introduced in the earlier work. The 'no' to modernity presupposes the 'yes' to the eternal cycle of things. He is equally critical of Jaspers and Heidegger, not least for the intrusion of their own thought into their interpretation of Nietzsche. In contrast, Löwith attempts to be faithful to Nietzsche, quoting him at length and devoting much space to explication of ideas and passages. This close reading offers a series of interesting and challenging claims.

Notable among them is the suggestion that Nietzsche's encounter with Wagner was enormously important even after the split visible in *Human, All Too Human*. Löwith claims that Nietzsche's 'ring' of the eternal recurrence is his reply to Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Nietzsche, it is argued, went from admiring disciple to disillusioned 'free spirit', and thence to teacher of the eternal recurrence. Such a development is persuasively argued to be linked to the wider picture. Löwith suggests that the death of God is, for Nietzsche, the death of the moral imperative 'thou shalt', which leads to the potential nihilism of the 'I will': the man who would rather will nothing than not will. The willing of the eternal recurrence, the escape from nihilism, leads to the rebirth of the 'I am'. The shadow is liberated from the wanderer; the merely heroic Zarathustra is transformed into the divine Zarathustra-Dionysus. Nietzsche thus comes full circle, returning to the views of *The Birth of Tragedy*. As the last line of *Ecce Homo* asks: 'Have I been understood? – *Dionysus versus the Crucified*.'

This sympathetic reading does not mean that Löwith is a mere disciple. Far from it. The major claim of his reading is that Nietzsche's thought shatters into 'incommensurable shards'. Essentially, this boils down to the following chain of arguments. If the notion of the eternal recurrence is scientifically provable, it is a fact. Willing the eternal recurrence as a test of one's character only makes sense if this is a choice, but one cannot choose to will a fact. If the eternal recurrence is not provable, knowing it to be a fiction undermines the point of struggling to will it.

The translation is of the third, 1978 edition, with the important appendix suppressed in the original edition. Löwith's attack on Alfred Baeumler, official advocate and editor of Nietzsche's works under the Third Reich, is that he removes the eternal recurrence from Nietzsche's thought, replacing it with a will to power misunderstood as 'will *as* power'. This, Löwith suggests, is the 'dubious foundation of Baeumler's entire interpretation of Nietzsche's beheaded philosophy'. The appendix also includes incisive critiques of other key interpreters – Lou Andreas-Salomé, Jaspers and Heidegger among them. The translation itself appears to be excellent, with a host of useful notes clarifying the choice made for difficult words, identifying the allusions Löwith appears to be making, and providing translations of words and passages in languages other than German.

There is much in Löwith's challenging reading that sent me back to Nietzsche's texts and those of his interpreters – notably Heidegger's immense study

– in search of confirmation, critical distance and new perspectives. It strikes me that there can be no higher accolade than that.

**Stuart Elden**

## No answer

Peter Wilkin, *Noam Chomsky: On Power, Knowledge and Human Nature*, Macmillan and St Martin's Press, London and New York, 1997. viii + 203 pp., £40.00 hb., 0 333 66916 9.

Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1997. x + 228 pp., £17.50 hb., 0 262 02418 7.

Noam Chomsky has often referred to what he calls 'Plato's Problem'. Bertrand Russell described it as follows: 'How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do?' Given the limited and fragmentary information provided by an individual's life-experience, how is it that she or he can, by adulthood, nonetheless acquire rich systems of knowledge, such as a human language? Chomsky's answers form the bedrock of his work in linguistics and philosophy. One important test of any book which treats of his contributions is, then, how well it describes 'Plato's Problem' and 'Chomsky's Answers'. By this standard, two recent books by Robert Barsky and Peter Wilkin do not measure up well.

Barsky has written an intellectual and political biography of Chomsky which consciously attempts to avoid a 'personalized framework' in dealing with Chomsky's life – something of a contradiction in terms. The result is a curious book, with very little sense of Chomsky as a person and rather hit-and-miss coverage of the people and institutions surrounding him. One expects of a biography that it will at least tell you what the subject has *done* in her or his life. Chomsky's trips to North Vietnam and Laos during the US onslaught, to the West Bank during the Intifada, to Nicaragua during the Sandinista period, receive no attention – perhaps as a result of Barsky's 'depersonalization' of the biography.

On the other hand, Barsky relies on Chomsky's account of certain events (such as the critical 1958–59 academic conferences in the USA at which he established his brand of linguistics), without any independent verification. It would be wrong to give the impression that there is nothing of value in *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*; Barsky uncovers much of interest, particularly regarding the influence of 'Avukah', a

small libertarian Jewish group which promoted an anti-state, anti-supremacist variety of Zionism. And he does cover many aspects of Chomsky's life, providing, for example, the most balanced and comprehensive account of the Faurisson affair that is readily accessible. Turning to 'Plato's Problem', Barsky's only reference to the issue comes on page 157, when he reproduces the Russell quotation with which we began. There is no further elaboration.

While Barsky treats Chomsky's two spheres of activity – political and linguistic – from an external vantage point, Wilkin attempts to identify the internal connections between Chomsky's work in cognitive psychology and his social criticism. 'Plato's Problem' is discussed at the outset:

Chomsky has frequently raised the Platonic problem of attempting to account for the richness and depth of knowledge that we possess (in this case in the area of language) given the limitations of our experience. This is usually referred to as the 'poverty of stimulus' thesis. Such knowledge could not be explained away through empiricist accounts of induction, habit or learned response. This led Chomsky to believe that the alternative was to give some account of the innate structures of knowledge, which must exist within the mind-brain in order for us to acquire our knowledge of language.

That's it. The reader must fend for herself thereafter. By anyone's standards, this is a rather abbreviated account.

Chomsky makes a number of points. First, almost every time someone speaks (or writes), they create a novel arrangement of words (new to them, or perhaps even new in human history). How can one learn to create such *new* arrangements of words by *habit*? Second, there are rules of grammar which one 'knows' without ever having been taught them. For example, in the sentence 'John believes he is intelligent', 'he' could refer either to John or to another man; it's ambiguous. However, in the sentence 'John believes him to be intelligent', the pronoun cannot refer to John. Chomsky comments, 'Now, did anyone teach us this peculiarity about English pronouns when we were children? It would be hard to even imagine a training procedure that would convey such information to a person. Nevertheless, everybody knows it – knows it without experience, without training, and at quite an early age.' Many further examples can (and ought to be) provided.

We know things we have never been taught (and not merely in the domain of language, Chomsky suggests). There are forms of knowledge which are built into us, which in certain areas merely require exposure



to some limited and fragmentary data in order to construct rich and complex systems of knowledge, such as the grammar of a human language. The notion that we have genetically inherited, species-specific, mental 'organs', such as the 'language faculty', which do not 'learn' in the usual sense, but 'grow' and 'mature' when placed in appropriate environments, is a modernized (and heavily modified) form of the 'rationalism' of Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers. It is also a picture of fundamental 'human nature'.

A lecturer in politics and international relations, Wilkin attempts to connect Chomsky's work on 'human nature' in this sense with his political writings, which rest on a libertarian and (mildly) optimistic notion of 'human nature' in the more usual sense. However, he fails to heed Chomsky's own warning that the linkages between these concepts are 'speculative and sketchy'. He appears to presume the empirical confirmation of Chomsky's claims regarding the 'language faculty' strengthens the case for what Chomsky regards as an 'instinct for freedom' in human nature. This is an error in reasoning which Chomsky himself would strenuously disavow.

Neither Barsky nor Wilkin provides his readers with an adequate basis for further discussion of Chomsky's linguistic and philosophical ideas. This is a more severe problem for Wilkin, as his book is devoted to a deeper analysis of these ideas. His discussion is deeply confused, betraying a lack of understanding of many of Chomsky's positions (on the notion of 'epistemic space', for example); and riddled with some fundamental conceptual confusions between 'rationalism' (in the sense described above) and 'rationality', between 'objectivity' and a belief in 'objective reality', and between the latter belief and 'rationality'. When such misunderstandings are mixed in with a soup of postmodern 'discourse' (to which Wilkin has an ambivalent attitude), the result is interesting more as a tangled intellectual puzzle than as a contribution to our understanding either of Chomsky, or of the relationship between epistemology (concerned with the grounds for human knowledge) and political commitment (premissed on a certain notion of human nature and need).

By the preliminary test of how they deal with 'Plato's Problem' and 'Chomsky's Answers', Barsky and Wilkin do not fare well. However, for those already familiar with Chomsky's work in either linguistics or politics, there is intriguing and thought-provoking material in both of these studies.

**Milan Rai**

## The best hope?

Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997. xii + 126 pp., £11.50 hb., 0 300 07019 5.

Michael Walzer is a writer who is poorly served by being straightforwardly assimilated to the camp of communitarian philosophers. He is in fact one of the most astute, sensible, compassionate and well informed theorists of the political currently writing. His work grows out of a deep familiarity with developments not just in political philosophy but also in history and the social sciences generally. It is at the same time always sensitive to the contingencies of time and place. This essay on toleration is no exception. It is a brief but elegant and clearly formulated meditation on the problem of multiculturalism. Its concision, directness and relevance are exemplary, providing a model which the authors of other more extended and laboured studies of the subject would do well to emulate. Above all, Walzer writes as someone aware of the extensive debate on 'pluralism', 'multiculturalism', 'the politics of difference' and 'identity', but who will not merely recycle conventional pieties and recommend familiar nostras. He is realistic about the state of contemporary America, but cautiously hopeful that the end of the Republic is not yet nigh. He thus exemplifies the requirement of any intelligent commentator of our times that they be pessimists of the intellect and optimists of the will.

Walzer starts from a contrast – an ever more sharp and familiar one in political philosophy – between what he terms 'proceduralist' and 'circumstantial' approaches. The first derives general principles within a hypothetical position ideally characterized and abstracted from any particular set of social or historical circumstances. Those principles are then presumed to require realization within the actual world. This is political philosophy as applied moral theory. The second, 'properly circumstantial' approach offers a historical and contextual account of the different forms social and political co-operation have taken and presently assume. Its recommendations are tailored to the circumstances of each particular case: 'The best political arrangement is relative to the history and culture of the people whose lives it will arrange' (p. 5).

The shortcomings of the first approach are that it falsely assumes political choices to be uniquely and unequivocally determined by a single principle, or set of principles. It is insensitive to the particularities of

a polity, its history, traditions, established customs, institutions and ways of life. But the second approach courts a different set of problems – those of relativism. Walzer accepts that any recommendations *are* relative in the fashion quoted. But he insists that such a relativism is a constrained one. It rules out the grossly unacceptable, such as totalitarian regimes; and rules in only whatever ‘provides for some version of peaceful coexistence (and thereby upholds basic human rights)’.

Walzer is probably right to insist that the issue is not whether there are limits to our political choices, but how wide they are. But some may feel his remarks here are merely gestural. It is hard to disagree with a robustly realist politics which also declares its humanist provenance. To insist, however, that ‘peaceful coexistence’ alone (without the inferred commitment to rights) is a ‘substantive moral principle’ may beg crucial questions. After all there are contemporary writers – Richard Rorty and John Gray spring to mind – who suggest that the achievements of liberalism, admirable as they may be, cannot be the object of a universally convincing, all-the-way-down justification. Walzer, one suspects, rejects that view, but also chooses to oppose the ‘proceduralists’ who do seek to provide firm and general moral foundations for liberalism. It is a hard trick to combine a plausible account of the political which is both feasible and desirable. Walzer is magisterial in getting us to see what the trick is, without necessarily showing us how to carry it off.

Walzer offers five regimes of toleration. There is the multinational empire, exemplified by the millet system of the Ottomans and the Soviet Union; international society; consociations such as Belgium and Switzerland; nation-states; and immigrant societies of which the USA is the most notable instance. Against the background of that broadly characterized typology Walzer considers the complicated cases of France, Israel and Canada. He devotes a chapter to the question of how toleration is further complicated by considerations of power, class, gender and religion. He examines what is required of education if a tolerant regime is to reproduce itself, and asks, in particular, what must be taught about the values and virtues of the state itself (the ‘civil religion’). His remarks are nuanced, commonsensical and clear: ‘Toleration is most likely to work well when the civil religion is least like a ... religion’ (p. 77).

It is, however, Walzer’s concluding chapter on ‘Modern and Postmodern Toleration’ which offers the most interesting and genuinely original insights into

our (and most especially the North American) political condition. Here he suggests a development which cuts across the grain of the modernizing democratic project of toleration. The latter took individual assimilation and group recognition to be the terms of democratic inclusiveness. Yet what is increasingly salient is the fact that individuals are today marked by a simultaneous fragmentation and proliferation of identities. They are breaking free from old group identities (themselves changing), without simply assuming either a common or a new group identity. The following is a marvellous expression of that insight: ‘There still are boundaries, but they are blurred by all the crossings. We still know ourselves to be this or that, but the knowledge is uncertain, for we are also this *and* that’ (p. 90).

An Epilogue reflects on the implications of this increasingly different, and differentiated, version of difference. And it does so with a wary eye on the apparent current effects of such social dissociation: familial breakdown, random violence, homelessness, high rates of geographical mobility, and a decline in membership of the associations of civil society. Walzer’s view is that the conditions of toleration, civil peace and a common life are secured not by rugged individualism but by participation in groups, unions and associations. For even so modest an association-alism produces and sustains the individuals who can be both ‘strong’ and connected to others. He concludes by insisting that this mutual reinforcement of individuality and community in the service of a common interest requires effective political support – support which receives the name of ‘social democracy’ and the subtitle of ‘left liberalism’.

Here, in the very last words of the essay, is made explicit Walzer’s commitment to a form of participatory democratic egalitarianism as the best hope for America’s future. Here too a ‘circumstantial’ political philosophy conjoins with a vision of the common good. Walzer thinks the weakness of this complex creed explains why multiculturalism is, on balance, so threatening. But he defers an account of the creed’s prospects to ‘another, longer story’. If he chooses to write it, it will be worth waiting for.

**David Archard**

## Holding back

Herman Rapaport, *Is There Truth in Art?*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1997. xviii + 222 pp., £35.50 hb., £13.95 pb., 0 8014 3275 8 hb., 0 8014 8353 0 pb.

A criticism often made of aesthetics is that it discusses art purely as a concept, and makes few references to individual art works. This is a problem especially in the visual arts where, as a class, 'art' now potentially includes every possible entity. In his new book, Rapaport, I am pleased to say, does not do this. He considers a number of art works and a variety of art forms. These include, among others, atonal music (Anton von Webern's 'Two Rilke Songs'); sculpture (the stone circles, walked lines, and documentary pieces made by Richard Long); and film (Marguerite Duras's *Aurelia Steiner* trilogy). What is disappointing, however, is the way in which Rapaport brings philosophy to bear on these works.

The concept of truth which he develops is the Greek *aletheia*; this is in opposition to the Roman *veritas*. As Heidegger observes in the *Parmenides*, *veritas* is a disjunctive conception of truth, derived from the Romans' military imperative to determine what is and is not the case; and on this basis, art can be true only if it is a *correct*, mimetic representation. *Aletheia* is truth as disclosure. It does not take the presence or existence of an object for granted, but refers to the way an object comes into being, the way something is open to view.

It would seem that Rapaport's intention over seven chapters is to provide various demonstrations of how truth as *aletheia* can be manifest in art works, in 'complex site-specific articulations'. However, his excursions 'into the gallery' strike me as excuses for close, technical readings of a few chosen thinkers (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Levinas). There is nothing wrong in this. In fact, these sections are the book's high points. It is just that the art works appear to be doing nothing more than illustrating the philosophy.

For example, Chapter 3, 'Brushed Path, Slate Line, Stone Circle', views the land art of Richard Long through Heidegger and Derrida. Truth as difference (in contrast to truth as imitation or correspondence), so it is claimed, emerges from the tension between the interventions which hint at Long's presence in the world and his ultimate absence from the photographs he takes as documents of his work. The observation that Long is physically absent from his photographs is, however, a trivial one. Even more disconcerting is the thought that a large part of this Derridean reading of Long (against the concept of truth as correspondence, remember) is based on a tenuous correspondence between 'absences' in the two bodies of work.

I have to disagree with Gerald Bruns, who, on the back cover of the book, praises Rapaport for attending

to the particularity of the art work. I find instead that Rapaport displays the same disregard for particularity which he identifies in other commentators. For example, in relation to Webern's 'Two Rilke Songs', he quotes Walter Kolneder's observation that 'the voice dominates in long melodic lines, which are completely conditioned by the meaning of the text'. But, according to Rapaport, 'this statement is nowhere demonstrated by Kolneder, only asserted in an analytical vacuum' (p. 70). However, there seems equally to be a vacuum between the songs and Rapaport's interpretation of them. The following quotation indicates the kind of claim which he is making for the 'Two Rilke Songs'. A 'holding back' occurs in Webern's music, he avers, where it treads the boundary between silence and audibility, and this 'is nothing other than the over-coming of a human emotion that demands not only an appeal to an other but also mutual confession and consent, what a less constrained vocabulary would call consummation or the establishment of a passionate bond' (p. 72).

The *aletheic* property of the work, Rapaport argues, derives from the tension between *silence* and *utterance* in the songs. Yet while the significance of these concepts for Heidegger and Derrida is explored in detail, the conclusions of this philosophical analysis are simply imposed on the songs. They themselves are not allowed to offer any resistance. The 'vacuum' metaphor is ironically appropriate: it is as if there is no medium in or through which the songs can be heard.

Rapaport conducts some very impressive philosophical discussion. His engagement with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Levinas is thorough and demanding. Anyone with an interest in these thinkers will gain a lot from this book. Unfortunately, it is also a good example of the difficulty philosophy has in talking about art. Art certainly figures prominently, but, given that Rapaport's truth is supposed to be 'site-specific', the question of the truth of the featured works is not fully articulated.

**Clive Cazeaux**

## Reading disorders

Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996. x + 132 pp., £37.50 hb., £11.99 pb., 0 415 13381 5 hb., 0415 13382 3 pb.

‘So two cheers for food!’ concludes Elizabeth Telfer’s meditation on ‘philosophy and food’, in faint echo (I assume) of E.M. Forster’s *Two Cheers for Democracy*, that distillation of mid-century English liberalism. It is an apt conclusion for a book which modulates between ethical and aesthetic issues, and arrives at a commonsensical defence of ‘balanced temperance’ which Forster would surely have found appealing.

Telfer affirms that an interest in food can be ‘an element in a worthwhile life’, but the terms for consensus as to what is ‘a worthwhile life’ are scarcely established in this brief study. The examples she provides tend to be derived from within narrowly middle-class horizons, and consequently seem tangential to the important issues involved. In her chapter on the ethical debate that surrounds the obligation to feed the hungry, she invites us to ‘suppose that I am a wealthy businesswoman wondering whether to spend money on a donation to famine relief or on a sports car for my son’. If this appears to be a red herring, then her discussion of the putative status of cooking as an art form must seem even more diversionary. We are invited to imagine her entering a gallery, encountering a pile of metal pipes, and wondering ‘whether it is a work of art or some materials left behind by the central heating engineers’. The staleness of the example is indicative of a more general banality pervading the discussion.

Telfer makes a case for hospitality as a moral virtue, and takes to task Dr Johnson, together with Jane Austen’s Mrs Elton in *Emma*, for lacking appreciation of what she terms ‘Good Samaritan hospitality’. Her literary examples are surely revealing of the context within which Telfer herself discovers the ‘worthwhile life’. Richard Adams and C.S. Lewis are other writers whose fiction provides examples for her case.

After endorsing ‘balanced temperance’, that fundamental value of the Classicist sensibility, Telfer’s conclusion launches into full-blown Romanticism, effectively undermining the conclusions arrived at in previous chapters. The shortcomings of an interest in food are encapsulated in its failure to serve ‘solitude’, ‘timelessness’ and ‘transcendence’ or ‘a sense of the sublime’. Telfer has at this point left behind the clearly defined social worlds of Johnson and Austen, and has declared her affinity for the heady cosmology one finds in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. The shift from middle-class dining room to the lofty peaks of Romantic ideology comes as a dramatic and disconcerting surprise, and adds to the inescapable impression of conceptual and structural incoherence in this book. I suggest that

Telfer might usefully have taken her literary paradigm from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Mrs Ramsay’s dinner party fuses Augustan sociability and Romantic egotism in a way that resolves the ostensible dilemma in Telfer’s argument. Woolf’s modernism also amalgamates the ethical and aesthetic approaches adopted in *Food for Thought*, without the sense of disjunction that one finds here. Opting instead for a Forsterian set of values in the body of her study, and appending a Wordsworthian coda, Telfer denies us the possibility of the concerted critical response a high modernist position would invite.

The undoubted need remains for rigorous analysis of the ethical and ideological implications of current saturation of the media with programmes, books and magazines that deal with food and cooking.

**Julian Cowley**

