

Book Reviews

Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures*, London: Profile Books, 1998.

In their introduction the authors write that their 'book is not against political radicalism, it is against intellectual confusion. Our aim is not to criticize the left but to help defend it from a trendy segment of itself'. The socialist leanings of the authors certainly give credence to the latter claim. Although they deny that 'it is one more shot in the dreary Culture Wars', this text will surely go down in history as a major engagement of those wars, especially against poststructuralism, postmodernism, and cultural relativism.

Sokal's famous 1996 parody, 'Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity', published in *Social Text*, is included as an Appendix. Reading it for the first time with some knowledge of the controversy it has aroused I felt – as a physicist and historian of science – not that it was a parody, but the work of a Devil's advocate. The text is polemical and there are, indeed, moments of deliberate parody, but generally the arguments seem quite good. I was also surprised by the clarity with which quantum theory is critiqued from a postmodernist perspective. I had been led to believe that this article is sheer deliberate gobbledegook.

The chief weakness of the main text lies, I believe, in its heavily polemical style. The very title 'Intellectual Impostures' is quite unfair to those criticized, since I am not convinced by the passages quoted that the authors they criticize are imposters. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that they are altogether serious and sincere, which for me makes matters far worse. It is not too difficult to understand, however, why Sokal and Bricmont are driven to polemic and accusations of dishonesty. Reading many of the passages quoted made me quite angry, which is a curious reaction to a serious piece of scholarship.

Consider the following from Jacques Lacan (*Écrits*, 1977): 'Thus the erectile organ comes to symbolise the place of *jouissance*, not in itself, or even in the form of an image, but as a part lacking in the desired image: that is why it is equivalent to the -1 of the signification produced above, of the *jouissance* that it restores by the coefficient of its statement to the function of lack of signifier (-1)'. Granting problems of translation and removal from context, I felt that this text and very many others in a similar vein, showed very little evidence of the scholar's responsibility for clarity, and a striking lack of rigour or

understanding of the technical scientific terms borrowed from mathematics and physics. I think my anger was provoked mainly by the assurance running through these texts that scientific terms are being used with full rigour and understanding, and that the texts are charged with profound meaning quarried with enormous effort from the deepest mines of human understanding. And yet it seemed to me that, beyond occasional imaginative allusions, virtually nothing which made any sense whatever was being said in the passages quoted. This judgement must, in part, reflect the limitations of my knowledge, and also, of course, my worldview.

The text apparently attempts to fulfil two functions, both to be an acid scholarly critique and a populist attack. Many readers will enjoy the almost limitless vocabulary of polemical terms drawn upon by the authors. However, having criticized them for being so polemical, it must be said that their powers of clear, measured and systematic analysis are quite extraordinary and refreshing. Their ability to dissect convoluted and obscure passages and identify key flaws almost led me to forgive their polemics. Not entirely, however. I was also a little surprised by a lack of any effort to relate the French traditions they were criticizing to the enormous impact which mathematics and imaginative literature have had on French scholarship generally. Nevertheless, from beginning to end, I found this book hard to put down.

There is a feature of the text that I find particularly encouraging. Here we have two professional physicists who are highly eloquent, widely read in the philosophy of science, sociology, French structuralism and poststructuralism, and in much else, who are nevertheless bringing something distinctively scientific to bear on their analysis. This is an attitude to evidence, interpretation, and knowledge which characterises much of science and which might be termed critical common sense. I find this approach to cognition a refreshing antidote to the philosophical scepticism and relativism which pervades so much of Western intellectual life today. It is heartening to see it re-asserting itself here so confidently and perceptively. Much criticized for its cultural isolation from the humanities, perhaps this very isolation has allowed a practical common sense epistemology to survive and prosper in physics and now to cross back into the humanities and to provide a much needed alternative platform of understanding in areas such as social theorising and the philosophy of science.

John Roche

John Searle, *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999.

John Searle is widely regarded as one of the world's leading philosophers. Some years ago, he was the living philosopher most cited by non-philosophers, and exceeded Thomas Kuhn in number of overall citations. Searle's work on the theory of speech acts has had great influence in linguistics, and his work on expression and meaning has influenced literary scholars. Within philosophy, two of his views especially have attracted enough admiration and enough attack that he need not have written another word to be a leader in the footnote race. I allude to a famous paper deriving an 'ought' from an 'is' and to Searle's Chinese Room Argument. In the latter, Searle argues for the conclusion that even if there were a computer that could 'translate' from English into Chinese, this would not mean that intelligence had been recreated in inorganic matter.

In several books, including his Reith Lectures, Searle maintains that consciousness is a biological phenomenon and that it is a mistake to suppose it can be reduced to or ultimately identified with states described in the terms of pure physics. Searle belongs to a growing band of philosophers whose banner has inscribed on it: 'PHYSICALISM NO, NATURALISM YES'. The thrust of this retreat from physicalism, is a matter of denying that biology, including neurobiology, can be given a physicalist reductionist treatment but a naturalist will insist that this denial of physicalism is compatible with the rejection of anything non-, or super-, natural meriting a place in our explanation and understanding of the mind. I sum this up by saying that the banner also has inscribed on it: 'NO SPOOKS PLEASE.' And if banners could have asides, this one's would be 'We are, after all, materialistic atheists'.

Such naturalism is comfortable in the van of ongoing enlightenment secularization and Searle avows belonging in that van, characterising his book as a contribution to the continuation of the enlightenment. No compunction in this book about being out of current intellectual fashion. It is in the opening section of the book, 'Basic Metaphysics: Truth and Reality', that we find most of the flag waving, though the rhetoric does not get in the way of helpful characterisation of the enterprise of philosophy, something Searle also ends his book with. Searle is good on what philosophy is, especially that way of doing it that is called 'analytic', and he is good at defending analytic philosophy against those who long for philosophy to serve spirituality or tell us what it all means, even if the price to be paid is obscurantism. For Searle, precisely because philosophy is not science, it needs to be, if anything, more rigorous. Near the end of his

book, Searle writes: 'In philosophy there is no substitute for a combination of original, imaginative sensibility on the one hand and sheer intelligent, logical rigour on the other. Rigour without sensibility is empty. Sensibility without rigour is a lot of hot air'.

The opening section of the book, 'Metaphysics: Reality and Truth', engages the forces of darkness that threaten the continuation of the Enlightenment, and contains sharp rebuttals of pragmatist, anti-realist and postmodernist arguments which seek to convince us that we say nothing true, or nothing to any point, or nothing interesting, when we incline, as many of us still do, to say that inquiry and reflection strive to, and sometimes do, arrive at thoughts that are true or false depending on whether the world is or is not as such thoughts represent it. There are facts to which true statements correspond, and there are objects, properties, and relations to which our words refer. Searle urges both correspondence to independently existing facts and reference to independently existing objects as features of our interactions with the world.

Searle's thought is distinctive in that he has long advocated that it is an error to regard these ancient homilies as belonging to common sense. Common sense, according to Searle, is a matter of beliefs such as that if we want folks to be nice to us, we have to be nice to them, or that if it is very humid, moderately high temperatures can be very uncomfortable ('It ain't the heat, it's the humidity!'). But the existence of a mind-independent reality and the referentiality of our talk and thought belong to what Searle calls the Background, not to common sense. It is the Background, because when we philosophise about it, we have no choice but to talk in a way that makes it appear that we are evincing deep seated beliefs, assumptions, or things taken for granted. But the correct outlook is that these things lie so deep, or so far back, are so much something whose denial never so much as occurs to us, that no cognitive words such as 'believe', 'take for granted', 'assume', 'presuppose', 'be certain of', are appropriate. Wittgenstein in his late work *On Certainty* is urging something akin to this. He might even have touched on it in his early work when he made the enigmatic distinction between what can be said and what cannot be said, but only shown.

Searle characterises these Background matters as being or as lying behind 'default positions', by which he means that those who dispute them have to make the running in philosophical debate. It is not that nothing can ever happen which might remove something from the Background and put it up for grabs, even dispose of it. But it is so hard to make this happen that those who challenge default positions have to start the ball rolling and the rest of us only need to rebut challenges.

Nevertheless Searle acknowledges that many of the great philosophers got that way by attacking default positions and he hints that his own attachment to philosophy is a little embarrassed by that.

Searle scrupulously, if a bit tongue-in-cheekishly, distinguishes between rebutting the arguments of the anti-realists, postmodernists, and so on, and cultural diagnosis of them and their proponents. Diagnosis is called for because the arguments are so bad, even silly, that it is hard to believe that they can be what sustains the fashionable animus against an independent and objective reality. This reviewer, anyway, is inclined to agree with Searle. I will leave it to those who read this book to appreciate the detail of Searle's rebuttals and space here to applaud and elaborate Searle's diagnostic efforts. It is this aspect of his book which is, I think, of most interest to readers of this journal.

Searle rightly remarks that the main impetus to idealism or anti-realism has been that urging realism carries with it a problem about whether the representations of reality we arrive at are reliable and true. Along comes scepticism then, always there when philosophy is there, but more prominent since Descartes imagined his powerful and deceptive Evil Demon, and revived by the Demon's contemporary counterpart, the Brain in the Vat. Idealism, classically exemplified by George Berkeley, overcomes scepticism by reducing the content of claims about independent material bodies to the evidence for those claims. Thus tables and chairs are understood by Berkeley and later idealists or phenomenologists as really being more or less regular and organised bits of sensory experience, something available to brains in vats. J. S. Mill said that material objects were 'permanent possibilities of sensation'. This also comes to reducing truths about what exists to truths about evidence for them. Since scepticism thrives on the gap between evidence and what it is evidence of, scepticism is thereby overcome; but the price is idealism in one or other of its guises.

Searle, following one of his mentors, John Austin, is happy to rebut scepticism with the observation that it is a mistake to infer from the fact that two experiences are alike, while one is of something real and the other not, that there really is no such thing as veridical experience. For who says that in order to determine that experience A was veridical and experience B was not, I may exploit only the resources of the two experiences and not rely on further or prior tests and observations? This is a developed version of the point, often made against Descartes, that he appears to be inferring from the fact that any experience can be deceptive to the conclusion that all experiences can be. But this is a bad inference. No one would say that because any runner can win the race, they all can. Anyone who thinks such a

rebuttal is too simple is advised to see it in its glory in John Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*.

Searle observes that these days, the anti-realists (my tag for pragmatists, idealists, linguistic idealists, social constructionists, post-modernists) do not seem to lean so much on scepticism but on an array of other arguments which are shot through with confusions. There is, first, the argument that if you engage something from a point of view or a perspective you do not really encounter reality. Then there is the idea that since we have to use words to say what we think, the things we think about are somehow linguisticized or (might one say?) cultured (like a pearl!). Arguments of this genre are often accompanied with sneer caps, as when we read of 'Reality As It Is In Itself', that it is a notion to be dispensed with as adolescent in the growth of thought through Hegel and the pragmatists to the wisdom of various more recent luminaries such as John Dewey, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. It is fair enough to confront all this with Gottlob Frege's observation that, of course, you can't wash the wool without getting it wet; but even so, you have no business to infer that wool does not exist independently of being wetted.

Searle does not use the following example, but he ought to have. It captures most of the point he is after about the way anti-realists confuse words and the world. Some years ago (in the *New York Review of Books*) I read: 'The Pacific Ocean was an invention of 19th century cartography'. It is to me one of the mysteries of intellectual life why some thinkers feel the urge to talk in such a silly way. Cartographers do not invent oceans anymore than astronomers invent galaxies. This point holds even though it is the case that dividing up the waters of the earth into so many oceans, seas, lakes, ponds, and puddles will lead to borderline cases, and some measure of conventionality, though it is almost certainly not as arbitrary as setting out the borderlines among, say, the states of Australia.

Searle's rebuttals are effective. His diagnoses are intriguing. He judges that the anti-realists are moved by a kind of detestation of the idea of a reality to which their thoughts are answerable, some of them seeing the idea of such a reality as the last bastion of the tyranny of omnipotent and authoritative divine being. This dislike, in academic life, especially involves a hatred of natural science. What better way to put science in its place (or remove it from its place) than to say that chemistry and physics, too, are texts and what they speak of not really different from fictions (social constructions and the like) This animus against science, Searle suggests, is not merely such, but a will to power. Power is, in a sense, asserted over reality itself (it is a social construction). But equality of status and power, within the academy

and in society, is also sought, even if the way to get it is to reduce the prestige of science.

It is worth remarking that Richard Rorty, the most famous pragmatist walking the earth today and a frequent critic of Searle, is on record as saying that the intellectual credentials of literary criticism are on a par with those of biology or physics. I once met a structuralist literary analyst who insisted that her analyses of literary texts (or the texts of matchbooks and T-shirts) were 'scientific' and that she had no interest in questions of value, such as what makes Shakespeare so much better than Joyce Kilmer, and no interest either in the claim that Shakespeare *is* better. That conversation took place nearly 30 years ago when structuralists in English departments were claiming kinship with the objectivity of science. That 'us too' move was the beginning of the envy of science that Searle speaks of. The first response to the envy was to hold that literary enquiry and criticism was really scientific. That failed, and the next response was to reverse direction and hold that science was really literary. This has fared better as a strategy and I have even met physicists who find themselves charmed by the idea, especially if they have already been bewitched by Thomas Kuhn.

What has gone on here is interesting. It used to be that the humanities acknowledged a serious difference between what they did and what natural science did; but this acknowledgment was not a matter of accepting some inferior cultural status and there was no envy or combativeness in it. It was a matter of the difference between the growth of knowledge and the growth of sensibility. The humanities also sometimes saw themselves as the institutional bearers of high culture. Reason was respected and available all round, just as it is available in ethical life via the difference between good reasons and bad reasons for acting; or via the difference between feelings that are apt (and in that way rational) and those that are not.

That happy accommodation was an offspring of enlightenment, no doubt mid-wived by economic and political liberalism, with its attachment to pluralism and tolerance. J. S. Mill's awakening to poetry and overcoming of despair, at the hands of Wordsworth, are a marvelous example of the possibility and importance of finding a harmonious relation between science and sensibility. 'Only connect the prose and the passion', says Margaret Schlegel in *Howard's End*. Many of us who got our education in the fifties lived under this old and happy dispensation. Many philosophers during the last 30 or so years have been concerned to criticize those who see a far more radical and sharp divide between reason and emotion than is justified.

It is a sort of Romantic Revival, this envious hatred of science that Searle diagnoses. Mill did not lose respect for Newton when he gained so much from Wordsworth. But others, Keats and Blake in the lead, Shelley not far behind, saw Newton as a great beast, a destroyer of sensibility, prophet of a meaningless and mechanical reality, no decent abode for the spirit. Keats (here I follow M. H. Abrams' book *The Mirror and the Lamp*), said that poets were the only real discoverers of truth and, more famously, that truth was beauty). Blake's loathing of Newton is well recorded. Mill was on the side of mutual respect, as Coleridge seems to have been, and Wordsworth too. But the depth of the divide between poetry and philosophy (which should be construed in this context as including physics, whose name used to be 'natural philosophy') has reasserted itself at the end of our century.

It has done so in a remarkable way. No Keatsian claim to be the only genuine seekers after truth, though perhaps a bit of Blakean horror at the meaningless world urged by materialist philosophers. Mainly what we are getting is a poisoning of the wells of rational reflection and inquiry by casting suspicion on the motives and putative power playing of those one criticises. Cultural studies, the newest kid on the academic block, is making its way by claiming to decry causes and motives behind ideas and arguments in a way even more blatant than the Marxists and Freudians of yore. Marx and Freud were as much offspring of the Enlightenment as Diderot, Darwin, and Bertrand Russell. Their diagnostic moves would normally be prefaced by evidence or argument of a straight kind against the positions or theses they took issue with. Freud probably had an opinion of what was unconsciously sustaining Jung in his views. But he urges the superiority of his own theory in a way that conforms (well enough) to the norms of objective inquiry and proper intellectual debate, even if, with hindsight, we can see in Freud (as we almost always can with any thinker) instances of blindness, oversight or pigheadedness in defense of his own views.

I have devoted this review to the beginning and the end of Searle's book. In between we are given succinct re-presentations of views for which Searle is well known, written for educated nonphilosophers. And well done it is. We are given his views on consciousness and intentionality (the name given to the directedness or the 'aboutness' of thought and feeling), and the centrality of this to the nature of the mind as a biological phenomenon. We are given a good taste of Searle on language and speech acts, for which, as I opened by mentioning, he is widely known outside of philosophy. Further, we get Searle on human institutionality and on the constructed nature of social

institutions (nothing to do, except via gross muddle, with the doctrine of the social constructedness of reality) and the centrality of language to the existence and nature of the social or the institutional. Searle even has a go at explaining to us the nature of money, a mystery if there ever has been one. This belongs to Searle's latest ventures beyond philosophy of mind and language into the realm of philosophy of social science. It is very useful to get clear about the difference between things whose very existence and nature is constituted by our minds and our practices, such things as votes and money, and things which, while our having concepts of them is an outcome of human life and mentality, nevertheless exist and have their nature independently of our minds; such things as rocks.

It is good to be clear about this because denying the difference between ballots and boulders, or votes and rocks, is just what post-modernists of various ilks are up to. It would be good if they stopped it and perhaps a book like this one of John Searle's will slow them down.

Lloyd Reinhardt

The Letters of Wilkie Collins, 2 vols, ed. William Baker and William M. Clarke, London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1999.

When N. John Hall updated and upgraded Bradford Booth's 1951 edition of the letters of Anthony Trollope, in 1983, his object was to make it 'as complete as possible', in emulation of the collections of the letters and other papers of Thackeray, George Eliot, Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Meredith which had appeared during the preceding four decades. Hall added nearly 900 'new' letters to the 932 that Booth had found, and transcribed in full over 300 that Booth had chosen, or been constrained, merely to summarize. Sixteen years later, Wilkie Collins has at last joined Trollope and the others. Sad to say, however, and despite the definite article in its title, William Baker's and William M. Clarke's *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* hardly does as much for Collins – *mutatis mutandis* – as Booth did for Trollope back in 1951. Because of 'pressures of space', the editors were able to transcribe in full only 464 of the 2,223 letters they found; another 127 are summarized; and the remainder – no fewer than 1,632 – are merely listed in Appendixes to each volume, with the date, recipient, topic, and present location of each letter all indicated in a single line.

Knowing where all the untranscribed letters may be found will of course afford scholars some consolation for the fact that such a disappointingly small proportion of the letters is actually reproduced.

But this and the other information we are given about them, terse as it is, would obviously have been much more helpful if the names of the recipients had been included in the Index of Correspondents, and if those of people or titles mentioned in the laconic descriptions of the 'topics' had found a place in the general index.

In deciding which letters to transcribe in full, which to summarize, and which to relegate to the appendixes, the editors appear to have decided, no doubt rightly, to give priority to those which shed the most light on Collins's private life and his own literary activities. Thus in Volume 1, covering the years 1838 to 1865, nearly all his letters to his mother are transcribed in full or summarized; so too, until 1858, are all but a few of those to Charles Ward, apparently one of the two closest friends of his youth, and a large selection of those to the other: Edward Piggott, an important literary colleague in Collins's young days, his sailing-partner from then until two years before his death, and probably his closest confidant during the last twenty years of his life. There are only four letters to Dickens, of which, oddly, the first is merely summarized and another relegated to the appendix. (Others presumably went up in the bonfires Dickens made of his correspondence in 1860 and 1861.) Piggott, Ward, and Dickens all knew about Collins's 'secret life' – his two mistresses and his 'morganatic' children – but then so did many other people, not all of them personally acquainted with Collins; the letters relating to it have all been thoroughly mined by recent biographers, as have the letters to Collins's mother, a devout high-church Anglican who either never knew about it or never let on that she did.

Many of Collins's letters to his publishers – Bentley, Smith, Harper Brothers, Chatto, and others – are transcribed in full. We also get several letters to Charles Reade, chiefly on stage and copyright matters, and many to Collins's literary agent A. P. Watt. Most of these shed light at least incidentally on his own literary activities but very little on the literary scene generally. The commonest topic of his letters is his own ill-health, whether making it impossible for him to accept a social invitation or keep one he has already accepted, retarding his progress on the latest instalment of a novel, or even preventing him from attending a funeral (his mother's included). His correspondents hear far more about the therapeutic properties of calomel, colchicum, and laudanum (one of them, Charles Kent, even being persuaded to try laudanum himself) than they do about his opinions of and contacts with other novelists. He does not rank any of his contemporaries among the 'kings of fiction' (Scott, Fenimore Cooper, and Balzac) and, at least in the letters transcribed, he has virtually nothing to say about any of them, apart from Trollope and

Disraeli (after their deaths) and Mrs Henry Wood (because cheap editions of *East Lynne* undeservedly outsold those of his own novels – and at a higher price).

Looking through the lists of unpublished letters in the appendixes, one cannot help wondering whether a different selection of letters for transcription or summary might not have given a better picture of the range of Collins's interests and personal and literary friendships, and whether, with this object in view, more of the rather repetitive letters to, for example, the Lehmann family and his American friends Schlesinger, Seaver, and Winter might not have been relegated to the appendixes. In their principal introduction to the volumes the editors promise us letters to Lillie Langtry, Mary Anderson, Squire Bancroft, and Trollope in which the 'full flavour' of Collins's 'experience of writing and of stage craft' emerges; but none is transcribed or even summarized. I am a little surprised that no place was found, either, for a letter as touching as the one he wrote to Edmund Yates after Yates was sentenced to a term of imprisonment for unintentionally publishing a criminal libel: 'My dear Edmund,/At such a time as this, I am not sure that it is a very considerate proceeding to trouble you with letters. Let me only say that your old friend remembers old times just now with more than customary tenderness. I have read the Law report in this morning's newspaper with sincere sympathy and sorrow'. Leaving aside particular cases, however, one can fairly ask why so much higher a proportion of the letters Collins wrote during the last twenty-three years of his life, after he had reached the peak of his fame, is left unpublished than of those he wrote during the preceding twenty-seven years.

Questions also arise about other aspects of the way in which the editors – and to some extent the publishers – have performed their tasks. The text has not been adequately proof-read and has far too many typos and other blemishes, particularly for a work that purports to be scholarly and that in some respects errs absurdly on the side of pedantry – for example, by noting which particular letters in a word are underlined: 'WC doubly underlines 'read' of 'bread'.' 'The 'oil' of 'boil' [is] underlined, and the 'oi' of 'boil' underlined twice'. Both editorial insertions and conjectural readings are placed in square brackets, as if the textual status of an editorially-inserted parenthesis explaining that a 'locum tenens' is a 'temporary guardian of the place' is the same as that of a word conjecturally forming part of the letter itself: the reader often has to look twice to ascertain which is which. Erasures by Collins are indicated by the notation 'erased word(s)', also in square brackets, and at times the erasures, conjectural readings, or other editorial insertions come so thick and fast that the text becomes

almost impossible to follow. For example, 'fierce young gentlemen with dirty faces blue blouses and beards whose [explaintive] [hairiness] might put [indecipherable word] himself to the blush . . . dirty old houses deeply suggestive of vermin and three [indecipherable letters: erred] woman's only to tell you what you already know'. Collins himself describes one of his letters as 'rambling, scrambling, scrawling', and his handwriting certainly can be fiendishly difficult, but in a case like this – far from unique – would it not be better to resort to a summary of the letter, omitting the indecipherable section? And what textual justification can there be for supplying or conjecturing words that simply don't exist: like 'explaintive' in the first of the above passages, or 'hurrican[ors]', 'Malpheureux', and 'transpositive' elsewhere? (However bad Collins's handwriting, the words he used must clearly have been 'hurricanes', 'Malheureux' and 'transpontine'.) In another case, that of the 'bore' who kept Collins awake droning on about James and Horace Smith and 'the Rejected [Add . . . rs]', a glance at the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* would have told the editors what the indecipherable word was.

For a work that will be used for reference purposes, both the indexing and the footnoting leave much to be desired. Apart from the lack of any index to the names and topics mentioned in the lists of unpublished letters, the general index by no means includes all of the references to the names and topics it does cover. And the footnotes are both sparse and prone to error. If it was worth explaining what 'locum tenens' means, could it safely be assumed that readers would know what Queen Victoria did when she 'Duke of Yorked us' (in August 1844), or which of Sterne's novels was set in France, or who the 'Henry' referred to on p.232 is, or what the joke is when the English call Taine 'An Ass' (or should this read 'You Ass'?). Several footnotes contain errors resulting from inadequate proof-reading (transposed numbers in dates, for example). At least two others confuse young men with their more illustrious fathers: Thomas Hood and Baron Tauchnitz respectively. Another footnote, on a reference to 'Art – Unionites [sic]' in the Royal Academy, clearly misses the point, as, I suspect, do some of the editors' introductory comments on particular letters: surely Collins has his tongue in his cheek when he tells George Bentley that he 'sides with Bright' on the subject of the Crimean War; and the 'pious bitch' he refers to in another letter is surely not an unidentified 'tenant', as the editors say, but a cousin, a legatee of his father's.

The editors found 140 letters in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow but missed the two Collins letters, to Marcus Clarke, in the Mitchell Library, Sydney – both concerning Clarke's stage adaptation of *The*

Moonstone: I discussed them in a note, 'Charles Reade, Wilkie Collins, and Marcus Clarke', in *Australian Literary Studies*, 11 (1984).

Peter Edwards

Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London and New York: Verso, 1999.

For the last twenty-five years or so aesthetics as it has been traditionally conceived has been undermined by trends in theory influenced by French poststructuralist philosophies of the 1960s and 1970s. This process has gone so far that it is now commonplace to meet demands that aesthetics should be abolished, and replaced by discourses concerning politics, ideology, and desire. One trend, influenced by Althusserian Marxism, sees aesthetics as ideological mystification of class relations. Another, influenced by Nietzsche and Foucault, sees aesthetic values, like all values, as the impositions of dominant social groups, and as the mediations of their power. A third trend, influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, and prominent in Cultural Studies (itself the displacing rival of 'literature' disciplines), offers to conceive both works of art and the fictions of popular culture as the products of the 'impossible' relations of power and desire between human 'subjects'. All these trends have had a toxic effect on aesthetics because of their Nietzschean hostility to the holistic categories bestowed on aesthetics by Idealism and Romanticism: totality, organic whole, harmony, reciprocity, plenitude, closure, and the rest. More specifically, they have all tended to see works of art and aesthetic discourses as active in the ideological constitution of the subjectivity of individuals, an unhappy process in which human beings are 'subjected' by collective representations (discourses and imagery) to the condition of being a 'subject', with all the illusions of autonomy and self-unity that this implies. In this situation it may be useful for those interested in aesthetics to examine Slavoj Zizek's latest offering on the subject of the Subject, especially as he claims to be vindicating the universal human Subject so much attacked by poststructuralism, and more latterly by postmodernism. Is Zizek giving us a restabilized concept of the Subject on which aesthetics could be more securely based?

Well, no. Zizek is himself a Lacanian, and his Subject is just as decentred, and heteronomous, given to illusions of plenitude, and so on, as that of poststructuralism in general. The real significance of this book for those of us concerned with the autonomy of aesthetics is that

it launches a civil war against its own poststructuralist/postmodernist subculture. Zizek's personal motto is 'Include me out!' For the rest of us 'Know your enemy' is still a good maxim.

Zizek claims, specifically, to be defending the *Cartesian* subject. But this is transparently a joke, since he admits immediately that it is not the Cartesian *cogito* that he wishes to defend, but its hidden core, 'a certain excessive moment of "madness" inherent to *cogito*' (p. 2), in other words the Lacanian concept of the Subject, or, to be precise, Zizek's leftwing version of that. One of the sources of irritation with this book is the need to cut through the layers of misleading assertion to get at what exactly is being argued.

The general aim of the book is political. It argues for Lacanian psychoanalysis as a basis for a renewed left radical politics. Zizek's own politics are (or at least seem to be, on the surface) socialist, and much of the book is a polemic against global capitalism, its commodified culture, and its ideological counterpart, liberal-democratic multiculturalism. However, Zizek, a Slovene, rejects orthodox Communism, and offers us instead what he regards as the 'true' dialectical materialism. He also sees himself as a Leninist, although 'Leninism' is also to be redefined. As with so much poststructuralist discourse, canonical authorities are to be rewritten, both saluted and betrayed in the same discursive gesture.

Zizek engages with various philosophers and philosophical currents influential at present in the philosophy of the subject, in political philosophy, and in social and cultural theory, including the theory of gender. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part he is concerned with Heidegger, Kant, and Hegel; in the second part with the post-Althusserians Alain Badiou, Ernesto Laclau, Etienne Balibar, and Jacques Ranciere; in the third part with Judith Butler, with the theory of contemporary society as the 'Risk Society', and with postmodernism. With most of these thinkers and positions his critique takes the form of a triple movement: he takes from each something he values (translating it into his own Lacanian terms); he dissociates himself (or strives to do so) from the rest; he then connects what he has taken with own Lacanian views.

Unfortunately Zizek does not expound his own ideas in one place, in a single coherent exposition. On the contrary, his ideas emerge intermittently, bit by bit, as a by-product of his criticism of other thinkers and doctrines. This leaves the reader to piece together the fragments of Zizek's position, and the book rambles so much that one cannot be sure that one has fitted everything together (or indeed that Zizek has done so).

Part One opens with a discussion of Heidegger and Kant. From Heidegger Zizek wants to take the notion of an authentic act, but he finds the nature of this act in Kant rather than in Heidegger. He criticizes Heidegger for recoiling from what Kant supposedly offers concerning the nature of such an act. What Heidegger is said to recoil from is Kant's notion of transcendental imagination, at least as interpreted by Zizek. For Zizek finds the 'secret' of transcendental imagination to be the 'abyss of radical subjectivity'. Zizek stresses the negative, destructive aspect of transcendental imagination rather than its positive, synthetic aspect. And he identifies this 'power of the negative' with the early Hegel's 'night of the world', the capacity of the Imagination (in the later Hegel, the Understanding) to withdraw from the world of experience and to break it down into fragments (in thought). This is for Zizek the essence of freedom, and the ultimate basis of any political emancipation. And so, with Hegel, Zizek sees negativity as the essence of the Subject. From this context of German Idealism we leap to Lacanian psychoanalysis, for Zizek identifies, or analogizes, all these notions of negativity with Freud's death-drive. The death-drive, while horrifying as a negative power, is offered to us positively as the real possibility of social revolution. (Hegel's power of the negative is also analogized to Descartes' 'bracketing of the world' – hence the show of defending the Cartesian *cogito*.)

Hegel, in the second chapter, is treated in a different manner from the other thinkers discussed. Instead of endorsing and critiquing, Zizek asserts what he takes to be the all-important truth of Hegel's philosophy, and defends Hegel from alleged misreadings. However, Zizek is so concerned to focus on the moment of negativity in Hegel, and to neglect the positive moment, that his account of Hegel involves much not very convincing rewriting. For example, there is nothing holistic in Hegel. The Absolute Subject is not an organic totality. The negation of the negation is not a positive, restorative moment, merely another and more radical negative. Hegel is then translated into Lacanese (e.g. the movement of the universal through self-division in order to become actual or concrete = the Lacanian 'forced choice', the choice where only one alternative is a real possibility). And finally he is to be supplemented by Lacan. Zizek says he wishes to revise Hegel's Logic (don't we all?) by adding books on intersubjectivity and 'absolute logic'. These would be, respectively, the 'logic of desire' and the 'logic of drive'. So what at first seems to be an endorsement of Hegel's philosophy turns out to be an indirect way for Zizek to offer us his own Lacanian views.

Part Two begins with a discussion of Badiou. Badiou is a Christian philosopher (a 'reader' of Saint Paul), who, it seems, wishes

to revamp Christian existentialism with notions drawn from Marxism and deconstruction. From Badiou, Zizek wants to take two things: (i) the notion of a Truth-Event, which goes beyond the limits of the existing social (and symbolic) order, and to which one must be faithful; (ii) the existentialist notion of an ontological gap between human freedom and the positive order of the world. The former of these is analogized by Zizek to the idea of loyalty to the memory of the Bolshevik Revolution. The latter is necessary to Zizek to avoid what he takes to be the Communist error of offering to speak as the 'voice of the cosmos' – this, according to Zizek, can only lead to totalitarianism. But while existentialism offers Zizek these notions with which his own ideas have some affinity, it is also hostile on principle to psychoanalysis because the doctrine of the Unconscious appears to undermine human freedom. So Zizek must do some more fancy footwork to dissociate himself from this aspect of existentialism, and to vindicate Lacan from Badiou's critique of psychoanalysis. Inevitably, the existential free act of Badiou is to be translated into the Lacanian 'act proper'. And Saint Paul's Love, which supersedes the Law, is analogized to the death-drive which has the power to suspend the Law in the Symbolic Order.

Part Two continues with a discussion of politics, and engages with Ranciere, Laclau, and Balibar. Like them, Zizek wants to revive the notion of politics as a specific kind of activity, not grounded in ethics, and not to be rejected by ethics. He sympathizes with Ranciere's politics of mass protest, the revolt of the excluded and marginalized, who insist that it is *they* who are 'the people'. He also endorses Laclau's notion of ideology as a struggle for hegemony between particular social groups, all of whom wish to present themselves as 'the universal'. This kind of politics derives from the petty bourgeois radical democracy of the French Revolution, and doesn't obviously have anything in common with the Marxian socialism to which elsewhere Zizek seems to express adherence. But inside this form he wants to posit a different content, a universal restructuring of social relations. So we seem to have a Marxian content dressed up in the trappings of the French Revolution. I'll comment on this oddity later. Meanwhile, it does at least explain why he rejects Balibar's preoccupation with merely reviving the liberal public sphere (and Zizek is uniformly critical of Habermas throughout this book). What Zizek wishes to contribute to this democratic perspective is a psychoanalytical dimension. Such an oppositional politics is said to require the overturning of the collective Symbolic Order, and to this end Zizek invokes Lacan's doctrine of 'traversing the fantasy', that is, undoing the basic fantasy that supports the symbolic

space within which individual subjects are located, and given their social identities.

With politics in general, then, Zizek has at least something definite and discussable to offer, whatever one may think of it. His engagement with the politics of gender is not so happy. In the first chapter of Part Three Zizek engages with Judith Butler. Butler has attacked Lacan, as well as Freud, for being socially conservative and patriarchal. It is difficult to see how these charges can be denied, but Zizek has to try, if he is to vindicate his own view of Lacanianism as a new basis for radical politics. It seems to me that Butler's challenge is the strongest that Zizek has to meet, and that this chapter is the weakest in the book. Zizek gets himself entangled trying to distinguish real sexual difference from sexual difference as legitimated in the Symbolic Order. This seems to be a distinction difficult to sustain without lapsing into essentialism, and much of Zizek's discussion here seems to be waffle. Butler's strength is that she meets Zizek on his own psychoanalytical ground, and is thus able to expose his weak points, at least in the theory of gender.

In the last chapter Zizek is concerned with the state of contemporary society and with postmodernist culture. His starting-point is the decline of paternal authority, and with it the authority of the Symbolic Order. He associates this with the decline of belief in the 'modern' God of Descartes, a being whose act of pure will opens up the space for rationality and science. As this god has retreated, his place has been taken by the neo-pagan divinities of New Agism's resexualization of the cosmos ('Men are from Mars, women from Venus', etc). The psychological correlate of all this is that Freud's Oedipal subjects have been replaced by narcissistic post-Oedipal subjects. Zizek is not very clear on this point – he says different things in different places – but I think he regards some of us as perverts, and others as hysterics, the hysterics being encouraged into dependency by the shift of the therapeutic function from the family to public institutions. At one point, he suggests that perversion and hysteria are connected in a loop, a kind of vicious circle, in which each is the unsatisfactory escape from the other. The decline of collective beliefs and values has brought us into the Risk Society (as expounded by Ulrich Beck, and by Anthony Giddens), where there are no generally accepted principles with which to deal with the novel problems of global warming, nuclear waste, and so on, and where any rational solutions we work out remain uncertain, because we cannot know enough about the consequences of any actions we take.

Eventually, though, Zizek backtracks to the traditional Marxist position that such problems are restricted to a capitalist society. And

against all the New Agers, against all the postmodernist celebrants of perpetually mobile social identities, against the Foucault who endorses the 'polymorphously perverse' as a mode of subversion – against all this fashionable intellectual rubbish he asserts that psychoanalysis and Marxism can still help. But although he sees himself as radical, Zizek sometimes sounds defiantly conservative. Like Robert Hughes he disapproves of the 'culture of complaint' (as a form of hysteria). The postmodernist pursuit of a guilt-free and endlessly variable sexual pleasure will end, he says, in boredom and sado-masochism. Perpetual self-refashionings only conceal the nothingness within. All sexual relations involve an element of harassment, so complaints of sexual harassment are misguided. He even constructs a psychoanalytical argument to prove that we are all *a priori* guilty.

Zizek's solution for all this is not the conservative one of restoring the authority of the Symbolic. He goes to the other extreme. He wants that radical negative act that abolishes the Symbolic Order altogether, a 'traversing of the fantasy' that releases one from one's bondage to an imposed social identity. So, this is psychoanalysis in the mode of anarchism. Astonishingly, his exemplar of this stance is Mary Kay Letourneau, the schoolteacher who had sex with her fourteen year-old pupil. Zizek sees her as following her desire, not compromising it, acting in passion gloriously against what she knew to be right. She traversed the fantasy, and freed herself from the symbolic space of fixed social identities. (Hm. How does Zizek know she wasn't acting out the fantasy, rather than traversing it?)

Generally, the criticism of other authors and positions is what is strongest in this book. Its weaknesses are its own theory and method. As criticism it is acute, stylish, and often amusing. Zizek has the postmodern panache of being able to refer to Hegel and Julia Roberts, if not in the same sentence, at least in the same paragraph. But he also comments in a lucid, sober, scholarly way on the relations of Kant and Heidegger; his Lacanian concepts work well in the analysis of the mystifications of ideology and media images; and he says wittily many things that need to be said about the follies of postmodernism. As I have said already, he is weakest on Judith Butler, and perverse on Hegel.

His own theory is radically self-stultifying – which is a pity, as he often seems to be a decent fellow capable of a commonsense realism. But his stress on negativity is so one-sided that it is hard to see how it could possibly be connected with any effective politics, radical or otherwise. In theory, he values the moment of popular protest, the moment of revolutionary disorder between regimes, just as in practice he values the 'interregnum' in Yugoslavia between the

demise of Communism and the restoration of capitalism. He regards all social orders as imposed by violence, and as closing off the freedom which for him is only negative. This is clearly anarchism, and not socialism. But it is a gloomy, self-conscious, Stoical kind of anarchism that has lost hope in moving towards any real, permanent state of social emancipation. Things go from bad to worse, says Zizek, and we must be prepared to assume responsibility for that worse. If he knew the Bolshevik Revolution was going to end in Stalinism, he would still go ahead and make the revolution. Zizek's politics, then, it seems to me, end in irrationalism. He privileges destruction, if only because he cannot see any way forward to achieve a new construction.

The parallel, and indeed the ground, of all this is in Zizek's Lacanian psychoanalysis. This, too, privileges the 'power of the negative'. One must traverse the fantasy, undo the Symbolic Order, pursue one's desire, even if it ends in destruction. Lacan's own example here is Sophocles' Antigone, who defied Creon and the law of Thebes in order to bury her brother. But Antigone finally killed herself, while the Theban social order carried on – just as Mary Kay Letourneau went to prison, and the US laws on sexual offences against minors remain in place. Zizek says that one must accept that the 'authentic act' may result in catastrophe and self-obliteration. Well, yes. But how does this sort of mad suicide help the cause of political emancipation? Zizek's anarchism in politics is, then, grounded in a psychoanalysis in the mode of an extreme, perverse Romanticism: passion is good, rational self-control bad. The contradictions are obvious. We must dissociate the ethical from the Good, asserts Zizek. On the other hand, following one's passion is said to be a *duty*.

Zizek has many good passages of Marxist criticism of capitalism and its culture, but these remain floating in the air, ungrounded in any Marxist theory. Indeed, Zizek rejects explicitly all of Marx's major doctrines. Zizek doesn't believe in scientific socialism, a planned society, or the withering away of the state. He rejects Marx's notion of the socio-economic constitution of classes, and wants 'proletariat' to be a group label to be adopted by anyone who wants to join in. He reduces dialectics to negativity. And he turns materialism and idealism inside out: 'materialism' is now rejecting the idea of any hidden structures behind appearances – by this phenomenalist criterion, Marx and Engels were idealists. Zizek wants to reject classical Marxism, while continuing to call himself a Marxist. This schizophrenia explains his desire to embrace a petty-bourgeois democratic politics, while calling for a total restructuring of social relations. Zizek would like the latter, but he cannot really believe in its possibility. So he clings to the former. The protest itself is the thing. There are many

places in this book where the shadow of Bernstein looms: the movement is everything, the goal nothing.

Zizek wants to be on both sides of the freedom vs determinism divide. As a Nietzschean he wants to speak in the discourse of freedom and authenticity, of 'the act', and of responsibility. All this seems to presuppose human autonomy. On the other hand, as a (post-)structuralist he wants to reduce human agency to an 'effect' of structures. He speaks explicitly of the decentred human subject that lacks autonomy, but in existentialist mode he seems to presuppose the very autonomy he denies.

He is also entangled with the conscious and the unconscious. Against Foucault and Badiou he wants to insist on the existence of the Unconscious. On the other hand, his whole ethico-political discourse is in terms of choice and 'the act' – these seem to presuppose conscious activity. It is hard to see how the death-drive, a structure of the Unconscious, can be deliberately activated in order to set in motion revolutionary activity. Zizek falls back on the ambiguous concept of spontaneity. But if the operation of this spontaneity is a matter of contingency and chance, as Zizek asserts, how can it be depended on as a motivation for revolutionary politics, or indeed any politics?

These theoretical *aporiae* arise because Zizek makes no attempt to think through his own views systematically. He is indeed one of those modern Romantics who are opposed on principle to systematic thought (hence all the emphasis on negativity, and the refusal of Hegel's third moment of positive, speculative reason). But this means that in his own exposition he cannot get beyond thinking in analogies. And eventually all analogies lead to Lacan. Over and over again he will use a sentence of the form: 'But is not this *x* in . . . (Hegel, Heidegger, Butler, whomever) really the *y* in Lacan?' To which one can only reply that, if theoretical terms take their meaning from their theoretical context, then, no, it isn't. This sort of self-serving 'translation' isn't new. It goes back to Feuerbach. But it seems to have been pervasive amongst the left intelligentsia for a generation. As a mode of theoretical construction it is blatantly preposterous, but like other absurdities it continues to flourish. Zizek wants to contribute a new theoretical basis, not just for cultural criticism, but for revolutionary politics. But when one comes to examine what is offered, there is no theory, there are only fragments, tendencies, dogmas, just jostling each other, and at the fundamental level cancelling each other out. This is futile.

What finally of aesthetics? It is apparent from Zizek's work that it is not all the categories of aesthetics that are rejected by Lacanianism. It

is only the categories associated specifically with *beauty* (organic whole, harmony, plenitude, and so on). By contrast, the categories of the sublime and the monstrous have their own place within Lacanianism. The sublime corresponds to that experience of excess, that pleasure-in-pain, which is *jouissance*. And the monstrous (already illustrated by Lacan with the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch) corresponds to the 'night of the world', the capacity of radical subjectivity to divide, dissolve, fragment. All this seems to imply Romanticism against Classicism (the fragment vs the perfected work, the open vs the closed, the mobile vs the fixed). But equally, it seems to be one side of Romanticism against the other (the fragmented vs the organic, the Gothic vs the idyllic, the sublime vs the beautiful). The truth of this combination of antagonisms would seem to be Surrealism, with which Lacan was associated in the 1920s and 1930s. So it would seem that beneath an attack on aesthetics in general the ground for a particular style of aesthetics is being insinuated.

However, there is still a complication. Aesthetics on one side, and what belongs to the non-aesthetic practical sphere on the other seem to have changed places and functions. Žižek notes that in the Risk Society ethical judgments – that is, all judgments concerning what is right, good, or lawful – have taken on the character of aesthetic judgments. We can no longer subsume the particulars under a known universal, because all traditional beliefs and values (it is said) have disappeared. Rather, with each concrete situation we must invent a new universal under which it may fall, as if we were criticising a uniquely beautiful scene or a work of art. So, it seems that aesthetics has given its formal character to ethics and politics, while ethics (as all that concerns desire) and politics have given their content to aesthetics. This is a knot that will have to be undone.

Despite the negative criticism that I have levelled at Žižek, I still want to recommend this book. Žižek's views are undoubtedly mad, but his madness is touched with genius.

Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

Anyone interested in aesthetics, literature disciplines, or cultural studies should read this book – if only to observe the intellectual history of the last third of the twentieth century spiralling towards its self-destructive climax.

David Brooks