

Book Reviews

***The Essential Gombrich: Selected Writings on Art and Culture*, ed. Richard Woodfield, London: Phaidon, 1996.**

E. H. Gombrich, as the cliché has it, needs no introduction. Amongst so many other things, an iconologist especially familiar with both the decorative and high arts of the Medieval and Renaissance periods, Gombrich would appreciate the extent to which he has himself become an icon (even while disavowing the fact). A review of a selection of his writings will remain primarily a review of the selection, therefore, and only secondarily of the writings—of Gombrich himself as a writer and thinker, that is. This being the case, I should say at the outset that I share the feeling that Gombrich himself expresses in the book's 'Foreword': accepting that the task promised by the word 'essential' of compiling a truly representative selection is one that is 'impossible of fulfilment', 'Mr Woodfield has done his difficult job better than I thought possible' (p.7). Indeed, one of the first and abiding impressions given by the volume's scrupulous editorial organisation and presentation is of its being a personal tribute from Richard Woodfield to a famous historian and theoretician of art and from the Phaidon publishing company to one whose immensely popular, carefully and consistently re-edited *The Story of Art* must have been central to their financial enterprise since 1950.

Woodfield has divided his selection of writings from various—very various—periodicals and from Gombrich's fourteen 'Principal Works' (listed separately here at the end of the editorial 'Introduction') into eleven categories that pretend neither to an overall organisational principle nor to mutual exclusiveness, though the heading of each category clearly informs the reader of its common thread: 'Autobiographical'; 'The Visual Image'; 'Art and Psychology'; 'Tradition and Innovation'; 'Psychology and the Decorative Arts'; 'Primitivism and the Primitive'; 'On the Nature of Art History'; 'Alternatives to "The Spirit of the Age"'; 'On the Meanings of Works of Art'; 'High Art and Popular Culture'; 'Gombrich from within Tradition'. Each category contains between two and five essays and/or excerpts, amounting to a total of thirty one in all and of 570-odd pages of Gombrich text with (so far as I can ascertain from a spot check of about a third of the contributions) all the original illustrations, proximate throughout to their textual citations and if sometimes reduced from their first appearance, only to better relative effect.

The Essential Gombrich, then, is a judiciously selected and highly selective yet still generous garnishing from a massive body of writings over a sixty year period—especially judiciously selected in that Woodfield, having chosen a specific article and/or chapter does not then attempt any further, highly unrepresentative editing of the kind that pares down pages to passages or sentences and eliminates

what it takes to be all digressions or illustrations irrelevant to a main argument. Preserved throughout is Gombrich's careful, accumulative approach through a clear articulation of both the problem and the possibilities under consideration, an inclusive approach that somehow manages to avoid repetition or redundancy, written in a perspicuous language that somehow manages to avoid naivety: 'To talk cleverly about art is not very difficult, because the words critics use have been employed in so many different contexts that they have lost all precision' (p.80). Gombrich may distinguish work like *The Story of Art* written for a general audience from his more academic and theoretical work, but the prose of neither is ever less than accessibly clear, laying itself open to critical attention unashamedly for assent, refinement, or refutation.

Indeed, the volume as a whole gives the strong impression of a single, if not an 'essential' Gombrich; a Gombrich who resists any such tidy divisions as Woodfield's identification of 'effectively, three separate careers: the publicly acclaimed author of *The Story of Art*, the recondite scholar of the Italian Renaissance, and the famous commentator on the psychology of pictorial representation' (p.11). The activities of the critical historian of art and of the aesthetician are not, in other words, as distinct as might appear from this trinity; both aesthetician and historian address the 'curious fact' that Gombrich acknowledges as fundamental (the observation was Wölfflin's): 'not everything is possible in every period' (p.84). 'To explain this curious fact is not the art historian's duty' Gombrich continues in his introduction to *Art and Illusion* (1960), 'but whose business is it?' The question is, of course, rhetorical; Gombrich had been making it his business to explain why it is 'that different ages and different nations have represented the world in such different ways' (p.83) for twenty years and continued to make 'the implicit reflection on art-historical method' his business on and off for the next twenty (p.367).

It is not just the aesthetician and art historian whom Gombrich would reconcile, moreover; he would also build a 'much-needed bridge between the field of art history and the domain of the practising artist', evolving a common language that, 'if luck would have it', might be extended 'even to the scientific student of perception' (p.88). Indeed, in his own unpretentious way, Gombrich aspires to an inclusive 'science of art'—'My main interest has always been in more general types of explanation, which meant a certain kinship with science. . . . In history we record, but in science we try to explain single events by referring them to a general regularity' (pp.34–5)—an enterprise that brings together the academic art historian, curator, practising artist, biologist, sociologist, psychologist, and (*ut pictura poesis*) linguist. What he has in mind is an historicised 'cultural psychology' of aesthetic perception (adopting Aby Warburg's term [p.31]): 'my ambition—and it was rather a lofty one—was to be a kind of commentator . . . on what actually happened in the development of art' (p.34).

Just how 'scientific' is this aspiration of Gombrich's is glimpsed in his choosing to publish his study of 'The Visual Image: Its Place in Communication' in *Scientific American* (Vol. 272, 1972; reproduced here as pp.41–64). One is reminded of the origin of semiotics in linguist de Saussure's dream of a 'science of signs', except that in Gombrich 'the linguistics of the visual image' (p.87) is informed throughout by the irrepressibly historical sense of 'the so-called "Vienna

School" of art history' (p.38) and the Germanic philologists. 'For Gombrich', as Woodfield reminds us, 'an awareness of the past is a necessary part of being civilized' (p.9). Such reconciliations or compromises—contradictions?—are characteristic of one whose philosophy, like his science, is instinctively allied to an empirical and experimental tradition. Constructivism or conventionalism sits comfortably (for Gombrich, at least) with representationalism; Romantic transcendentalism and "'the canon of excellence" in art"—those 'household gods, the divinities of that middle-class religion known as *Bildung*' (p.38)—with scientific determinism and historicist revisionism. His is an endeavour to account for diverse sorts of perception and to do justice to them all by (literally and metaphorically) shifting the focus of his critical gaze, forty odd years ago aspiring to an 'aesthetics beyond aesthetics' of the kind towards which Wolfgang Iser in his article in this issue would have us aspire in the future, an aesthetics that takes in 'the inner polyaesthetics of art and art's transartistic entanglements; an aesthetics which is capable of considering all dimensions of *aisthesis*. ... I imagine aesthetics being a field of research which comprehends all questions concerning *aisthesis*, with the inclusion of contributions from philosophy, sociology, art history, psychology, anthropology, neurosciences, and so on'.

The question remains, however, as to just how compatible the various ideas and disciplines so effortlessly blended in Gombrich's genially accessible prose really are. The price of that very accessibility is often an indifference to critical debate—and an indifference to scientific dissent amongst psychologists, animal behaviourists, and neuro-physiologists, for that matter. Indeed, the same accessibility seems to have induced a comparable critical reticence in Woodfield, whose few attempts in his Editorial Notes to defend Gombrich's work against past misreadings and to promote his theory in the face of past and future dissent (e.g., pp.111–2; 159–60; 378–80; 527) only invoke an obligation to attend more consistently and with more critical rigour to that dissent than he does.

This is not to ignore Woodfield's substantial agreement with Gombrich (we might defend to the death the right of an antagonist to say what he or she likes but we are unlikely to volunteer to edit his or her 'essential works') or his conviction that an *epitome* of chosen writings is not the place to be carrying on a running argument (the occasional, 'conclusive' flourish aside [e.g., p.81]). Nor is it to ignore the obvious attraction of Woodfield's economic and unpedantic editing. Arguably, little more is necessary or even desirable in this context than the practice adopted by Woodfield of occasionally registering that there have been disagreements and of including reference to a representative number of examples. How adequate these are to the extent and variety of that critical dissent is another question, however: on Gombrich on art and illusion, for example, the commentary of Wollheim, Goodman, Wartofsky, Scruton, Wilkerson, Schier, and Mitchell (amongst others) might not exist.

The truth is that Woodfield's use of the terms 'controversy' and 'controversial' has little argumentative and ideological, and no emotional charge. Critical minimalism and partiality might succeed in idealising by giving the writings an ahistorical and benign omniscience—the essential Gombrich on essentials—but

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it is not without its cost. 'Essential writings' rescued from the flux in this way can have all the summary efficiency of a funeral oration or obituary; the sort of volume that one might find buried in a cylinder for future cultural historians or invading Martians to know and to commemorate the work of a major aesthetician and art historian of twentieth-century Western Europe, Earth. Like Gombrich himself on the images of *homo sapiens* projected into space for aliens by NASA scientists in 1972, however, one feels bound to object that the want of a vital perceptual context only impoverishes the selective images, occasionally to the point of unintelligibility (p.54). That some editorial attempt should be made to place the work in critical history, in other words, is surely encouraged by Gombrich's own, qualified historicism, in which 'schema' historically condition and confine the possibilities of physical vision and pictorial/iconic reproduction, rather as Kuhn's 'paradigms' and Popper's 'hypotheses' condition and confine scientific 'seeing'.

Woodfield, then, occasionally conspires with Gombrich to pass off as pluralism or an Aristotelian compromise what on closer examination proves to be either a contradiction or a calculated lapse of philosophical rigour—in the 'conventionalist' debate, notoriously. Having said that, however, I would risk my own contradiction by arguing that Gombrich's strength, not to say sanity, is precisely in his refusal to commit himself to what presents as 'inevitable' from a logical or theoretical point of view when it flies in the face of the experience and discriminations of common sense or consensus. 'I would contend that neither the Courts of Law nor the Courts of Criticism could continue to function if we really let go of the notion of intended meaning', he writes (p.461), casually summing up the centrality of authorial responsibility to the only ethical humanism able to justify the act of thinking and writing at all. If there are occasions on which he presumes an invulnerability and appears to know everything, most often Gombrich proceeds with a genuine intellectual humility and presumes to know little or nothing, as if there really were a 'common pursuit of true judgement' in which disagreement could take place without insult. The one time that Gombrich betrays anything vaguely resembling bad temper is in *The Story of Art* when he expresses a fear that his own ideas might be misappropriated by pretentious, half-educated connoisseurs of art who rely upon fashionable obfuscations (pp.78–80).

I began by saying this could hardly be a review in the usual academic sense of an account of a recently published and unfamiliar text involving an open meditation on its scholarly and/or argumentative adequacy; 'GOMBRICH, E(rnst) H(ans) Josef', has already entered the museum of print culture's historical anthologies, dictionaries and encyclopædias. I would conclude, however, by insisting that the good not be interred with Caesar's bones; by protesting that these writings contain ideas and qualities that resist the devaluations to which scholarship and philosophy are necessarily subject and that this volume be used rather prospectively than retrospectively. The clear and unpretentious theoretical intelligence that Gombrich shares with many of the critical thinkers about art and culture of his generation, for example, along with his refusal to allow speculation to carry him beyond common experience or useful discrimination, these are precisely what so much

literary and aesthetic theory subsequent to his major work has lacked. I believe that Gombrich's work is and should remain exemplary of the possibilities of humane learning as an *ethos* not exhausted by the term ideology; a humane learning that is genuinely, creatively intelligent without feeling impelled to manufacture ingenuities out of prevailing sophistications and genuinely contentious and progressive without becoming wilfully narrow or narrowly competitive.

As with the initially alien works whose individual appeal Gombrich's own historicist perspectivism did so much to help us recover—from oblivion, first; from 'Art' as an abstract; finally from 'the spirit of the age'—history can help to explain Gombrich but should not be allowed to explain him away. 'There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists' (p.65). There may prove to be really no such things as Aesthetics and Art History, only writers about art. Of these, E. H. Gombrich is pre-eminently one.

William Christie

Michael Krausz, *Rightness and Reasons: interpretation in cultural practices*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993; Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly: the new puzzle of the arts and history*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995; Robert Stecker, 'The constructivist's dilemma', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 43–52.

In a wide-ranging work, Joseph Margolis articulates a body of bold theses in metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of art and history. Centrally, these are (pp.2–7) that reality is 'cognitively intransparent', that reality and human thought are 'symbiotized' and 'historicized', that thinking is 'preformed', and that cultural entities (including persons) have histories rather than natures. Margolis thinks (p.47) that to maintain these theses it will be necessary to abandon the principle of the excluded middle, extensionalism, and physicalism, in favour of a doctrine of culturally emergent 'Intentional' (with a capital 'I') properties that can be constituted and altered by the processes of interpretation. In line with his central positions, he propounds a theory of interpretation that sympathises with certain positions advanced by Roland Barthes (his idea of writerly reading) and Jacques Derrida. Along the way he manages some very effective critiques of (among others) Gadamer on the 'classical' as some sort of interpretive norm, Michael Riffaterre on intertextuality, Stanley Rosen on contemporary theories of interpretation, Sartre on culture and nature, de Man on fiction and reality, and Danto on transfiguration and constitution, along with other unfortunates.

Margolis's theory of interpretation addresses the questions 'How can we refer to a text given that it has no fixed "nature"?'; 'How is a text first constituted as such?'; 'How can interpretation alter a text's "nature"?' . His answers to these questions are outlined on p.86 where he says of (literary) texts that, while they have no invariant nature each text can be identified through a relatively stable verbal medium which is open to interpretation. The 'nature' of any text can change when a precursor phase of that text gets interpreted. Interpretation is open-ended and depends on the power of the verbal medium and the history of

interpretation to absorb evolving cultural saliences. It is subject to no invariant constraints. Thus according to him a text changes its 'nature' while retaining its identity when it is subjected to an evolving succession of interpretations.

This model of interpretation seems excessively linear and cumulative. In reality interpretive histories are not so simple; they are spread out in space as well as in time, and for this reason can fail to exhibit the straightforward cumulative pattern Margolis favours. Traditions of interpreting the same text diverge and re-converge. It is clearly possible for interpreters either to be ignorant of some past interpretations of their text or to deliberately set them aside. Berkoff's production of *Coriolanus* flouted traditional approaches to the play, and will no doubt be ignored by some future directors. But Margolis seems to take the object of interpretation, à la Gadamer, in an objective historical sense—that is, as located in its tradition whether or not interpreters are aware of, and defer to, that tradition.

If p.86 is taken as delimiting the class of literary texts then we could define Margolis's literary texts recursively as either (i) the verbal medium of a literary work, or (ii) the result of interpreting a text. Making allowances for generalising this beyond the literary case, such a recursive definition does indeed imply Margolis's thesis (p.26) that texts include both what interpretation is practised on (the objects of interpretation) and whatever is constituted interpretively as a text (the products of interpretation). Every text would then be traceable back to a base text (a member of the base class (i) in the recursion), and Margolis wants to identify each text by its base text. If it were not for this claim about identification, it seems we would simply have one sense of 'text' defined recursively. But given the claim about identification, it seems we have strictly speaking two senses—the narrow sense which includes only the identificatory referents of all texts, and the broad sense which includes all texts, even those that have to be identified by reference to texts other than themselves. What is not clear is why Margolis thinks it necessary to identify all texts by reference to a member of his base class. Surely it would be more in keeping with his generally post-structuralist stance to allow as the input of one interpretation the output of another, without reference back to a legitimating origin.

Michael Krausz treats many of the same themes as Margolis and is, like him, a 'constructivist' in Stecker's sense: the process of interpretation is thought of as endowing its object with new properties, or as making salient some of its object's properties. But there are striking differences in style and methodology between the two authors. While Margolis cites a multitude of philosophers both analytical and continental, Krausz's citations are exclusively from the analytical tradition. His is the familiar analytical style of detailed discussion of points one at a time, in contrast to the broad sweep of Margolis's paragraphs. And Krausz insists (contrary to Margolis) that ontology is independent of the issue of pluralism versus singularism.

Like Margolis, Krausz favours interpretive pluralism, which is the view that for some objects of interpretation there is a plurality of ideally admissible (incommensurable) interpretations. He makes the point that this view is not entailed by the fact that objects underdetermine their interpretations.

When interpretations compete they are (according to Krausz) about sufficiently similar objects-of-interpretation, not about the same object. For example, in

discussing a line-drawing which can be seen either as two facing heads or as a vase, Krausz states 'the object-of-interpretation is understood in terms of its imputed properties' (p.68). Now it is true that different aspects of the drawing become salient in the two interpretations, and that if there are different saliences there are different intentional objects. Further it is true that 'the interpretation—face or vase—prompts one to impute salience to certain features of the presented configuration, which in turn confirms the propriety of interpreting the configuration as a face or a vase'. But if we take this to mean that there are two objects-of-interpretation, then we need to remember that behind these distinct objects-of-interpretation there is a single further object. This, we might say (following Margolis), has been identified in the two interpretations. Further, we could say that the two interpretations represent the further object differently, provided that our concept of representation did not rule out selectivity. The imputed properties (leading to the interpretations 'face' or 'vase') are, we can agree, part of the object-as-represented; but they are no part of this single further object of both interpretations, namely the configuration of lines in the figure. (The same points can be made with reference to Krausz's other examples—Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, Wordsworth's Lucy poems, self-interpretation and interpretation of other cultures.)

Krausz himself recognises that what he calls the object-of-interpretation (what I call the object-as-represented) is 'not spun out of nothing' but rather, 'imputational interpretation involves selecting features of the presented materials with which to fashion an object-of-interpretation' (p.94). These 'presented materials' are what I have been calling the further object of interpretation. The important point is that interpretation displays a three-tier structure. For present purposes I am calling the three levels 'interpretation', 'object-as-represented' and 'further object'. The labels are not vital; the number of levels is. All three are acknowledged by Krausz, but the further object is given scant attention. Margolis, by contrast, devotes considerable attention to this level.

A distinctive feature of Krausz's book is its espousal of what he calls imputationalism. He defines imputationalism as follows: 'The imputationalist view holds that cultural entities are the class of their interpretations, and that there is no object-of-interpretation independent of interpretation as such' (p.93). He distinguishes a radical imputationalism according to which 'any particular interpretation on a given occasion may fully constitute its object-of-interpretation' from a moderate variety which holds merely that 'a given object-of-interpretation may be constituted within webs of interpretations' (p.94).

Krausz's claim that cultural entities are the class of their interpretations is difficult to reconcile with his constructivist account of objects-of-interpretation. First of all, one has to ask whether by 'cultural entities' Krausz means objects-of-interpretation or the further objects I mentioned a moment ago. If by 'cultural entities' Krausz means further objects such as paintings and novels, then such entities seem to be distinguishable from the class of their interpretations: the painting or the novel has an author and a history that in general are not the same as the author and history of its interpretations. If on the other hand by 'cultural entities' Krausz means objects-of-interpretation, then the question is, are objects-of-interpretation open to a plurality of interpretations? If not, then one can see

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how the object could be identical with the class of its interpretations. But it seems that a Krauszian object-of-interpretation is open to a plurality of interpretations because, even with its inbuilt saliences, it could be assimilated into a plurality of different contexts. If so, the object-of-interpretation might perhaps be identified with the class of its interpretations on the ground that any given interpretation functions as a further determination of the relatively indeterminate object-of-interpretation—the general principle being that an indeterminate intentional object can be identified with the class of its possible further determinations. Whether this view, or some alternative spelling-out of imputationalism, is intended by Krausz, is not clear.

Robert Stecker, in his searching critique of constructivist accounts of interpretation, discusses Krausz's book along with some of Margolis's earlier writings. To constructivists in general, Stecker poses the question of how interpretation can involve both construction and predication—how an interpretation can complete an object-of-interpretation by making a claim about it. As Stecker puts it (p.50), 'The problem is to understand how making a claim about an object, even an object-of-interpretation, can give it a property claimed for it'. Our three-tier structure for interpretation provides one answer to this puzzle: the interpretation makes a claim not about the further object but about the object-as-represented, while the latter may go beyond the former. Interpretation does indeed involve both construction and predication, but at different levels: the object-as-represented is a construction from the further object, whereas the predicative relation holds between the interpretation and the object-as-represented.

Consider Krausz's example (also discussed by Stecker) of Van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters*. The painting gets represented differently by its different interpreters. To H. P. Bremmer, what is salient are various formal features including the correspondence between the members of the family and their coffee-cups; and the painting thus represented is subsumed under the interpreting concept 'interrelated unity'. H. R. Graetz's representation of the painting, by contrast, highlights the direction and expressive content of the subjects' gazes, the wall separating the older woman and man, the name 'Vincent' on the chair at the left, the lantern, and the steam rising from the hot potatoes and coffee; and the painting thus represented is brought under the concept 'expression of isolation'. Albert Lubin's representation of the painting also takes most of the features Graetz highlights as salient, but adds the child in the foreground, giving special prominence to this child, the mother and the Vincent-figure; this is all resumed under the concept 'representation of mourning'. Finally, Griselda Pollock represents the painting in terms that highlight the physical peculiarities of the peasants' faces, hands and postures; and her governing concept is 'representation of manual labour', an idea that synthesises Van Gogh's social concerns, his opposition to falsifying portrayals of peasants, and his emphasis on the bodily effects of peasant life.

In each case, by processes of selection, suppression, highlighting and contextualisation a representation of the painting is constructed, and this representation is then claimed to fall under a specific interpreting concept. This way of thinking allows interpretation to have both constructive and predicative elements, and thus perhaps provides a solution to Stecker's puzzle. At the same

time, it allows for a type of constructive interpretation not mentioned by Stecker—namely where the concept, applied by the interpreter to the object-as-represented, has itself been constructed precisely for this purpose.

Paul Thom

Katherine T. Brueck, *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil* (State University of New York Simone Weil Studies), Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Katherine Brueck has called her provocative study of Simone Weil's reflections on literature, *The Redemption of Tragedy*. Let us take a moment to contemplate the title she has chosen. It imposes on us, even before we open the book, by allowing two rich and formidable thoughts to engage one another. Awed a little, we might suppose that this study will bring religion and art into conversation, each venturing a privileged theme as an opening gambit. 'Redemption' says religion, 'Tragedy' says art. Yet a moment's thought will tell us that the conversation has long been going on, not between two distinct words but within the word 'tragedy'. When has it ever been possible to think of tragedy without religion? Take the notion of catharsis, for example, without which the history of tragic poetry would look very different; it begins with the Orphics and Pythagoreans and denotes a mode of mystical purgation. It is religious through and through.

True, Aristotle reset 'catharsis' in a context that devalued its mystical heritage, yet in doing so he did not aim to disentangle tragedy from religion. The point, rather, is that certain elements of religion—Brueck calls them 'mysteries' or 'supernatural aspects'—were put out of play by the philosopher's characterisation of tragedy. In the *Poetics* tragedy is construed as mimesis of a particular kind of human action, an unmerited fall from happiness to misery. Aristotle stresses that the tragic hero is fully human, like each and every member of the audience, and he does so in order to explain why the action moves us. We pity the hero because he is like us, and we are afraid because he is no different to us. In this understanding of tragedy the gods are neither dismissed nor put in question; they are simply of very little interest. It is an approach to tragedy that has been, to say the least, highly influential.

Once this classical backdrop is in place, the title and subtitle of Katherine Brueck's study begin to take shape as a thesis—or, rather, as three closely related theses. First, despite Aristotle and all those who have followed him, tragedy has a redemptive dimension that is irreducible to human categories: it requires us to affirm mystery. Second, we can redeem tragedy from the naturalism that has become normative in literary studies by stepping back from Aristotelian to Platonic ground. Even though Plato had a low opinion of art, he had a vision of the good beyond being; and literary critics need to embrace that vision if we are to talk sensibly of tragedy. And third, Simone Weil can help us recover this Platonic ground and to appreciate the supernaturalist perspective needed for a full and deep understanding of tragedy.

Although the classical backdrop cannot be forgotten, Brueck does not draw much attention to it. Her quarry is not Aristotelian poetics so much as romantic and post-romantic literary criticism, and the position she wishes to defend is not

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Platonism but 'mystical Christian Platonism'. Brueck finds this position outlined by Simone Weil in her later writings, and she thickens it through readings of *Antigone* and *King Lear*, *Oedipus Rex* and *Phédre*. For Brueck, both Aristotle and the (post-)romantics dismiss the supernatural and, in doing so, miss what is central to tragic experience. The one overvalues the rational, she thinks, while the others inflate the irrational. Correctly understood, by way of Weil, the tragedies of Racine, Shakespeare and Sophocles dramatise relationships of hero and the suprarational. It follows that the Hegelian approach to tragedy must be mistaken. *Antigone*, for example, is not a dialectic of correct yet partial visions—responsibility to family versus duty to the State—as Hegel maintains. The clash is between the spheres of the human and the divine. Another stubborn misdirection is that proposed by Nietzsche who attempts to situate tragedy wholly within the aesthetic. Redemption does not fall within the province of religion, he claims, it belongs to art. Life is to be transfigured through beauty, not through morality, let alone through submission to the divine. The consequence for Brueck is yet another falsification of tragic experience.

Brueck does not engage closely with Aristotle, Hegel or Nietzsche, and there is little philosophical subtlety in her expositions. Nor is she interesting as a reader of contemporary criticism, which she regards as old wine put into new bottles. Like Aristotle, Giles Gunn does not understand the role of mystery in religion; like Hegel, Martha Nussbaum and George Steiner fail to see that tragedy is a struggle between right and wrong, not right and right; and like Nietzsche, Nathan Scott confuses aesthetic and religious categories. So one does not read Brueck for the sharpness of her arguments against others. Indeed, her grasp of contemporary criticism is sometimes weak, not only in what it omits (Maurice Blanchot on Weil, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe on tragedy, Harold Bloom on gnosis and literature) but also in what it includes. After reading several woefully inadequate pages on structuralism and post-structuralism, we are told that 'I draw my summaries of structuralism and the two most influential forms of poststructuralism (deconstruction and the New Historicism) from the standard formulations provided in Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms* (p.161 n.5). Is it too much to expect an author to read and cite the primary sources that develop the positions she criticises?

All up, Brueck offers little argument and a good deal of assertion. Put more generously, she might be thought to develop a transcendental argument: only if we accept the irreducible reality of the Christian mystery can tragedy begin to make sense. The value of *The Redemption of Tragedy* would turn, then, on the case made for the centrality of the esoteric rather than the exoteric in art, especially tragedy. So let us see exactly what is presented. The main assumption is that tragedy is cathartic in an esoteric sense: it purges the ego and thereby opens the possibility of encountering a good beyond reason. Although unmerited suffering makes no sense when seen from an exoteric point of view, it has incomparable value when approached from an esoteric perspective. For in acquiescing to affliction, in the spirit that Christ accepted the Cross, we can experience divine love. This is not an abstract knowledge of God but a gnosis; it results in an enlivening of the *fundus animae* rather than in a conscious increase of rational truths. Only in accepting undeserved affliction can one hope to grasp the nature of

divine love: a self-emptying without return that we find equally in the act of Creation and the Crucifixion. The supreme value of art is that it can lead us to a mystical understanding of God. Great art, especially tragedy, mediates the natural and the supernatural realms. In other words, it is a sacrament.

On Weil's understanding, the Christian vision is essentially tragic: God allows the just to suffer. More than that, for Weil tragedy always reserves a place for Christianity; it is an essential possibility of tragic art, even when composed in pagan times. For catharsis can lead to a mystical identification with Christ. Far from being a self-contradiction, as has often been maintained, the expression 'Christian tragedy' indicates the depths of both Christianity and tragedy. Since she subscribes to a high Christology, Weil has no difficulty regarding all those who accept suffering as participating in the crucifixion of Christ. Whether they are atheists or pagans, Buddhists or Muslims, is immaterial. In Karl Rahner's succinct and challenging expression, they are 'anonymous Christians'.

The Redemption of Tragedy tends to be more compelling when discussing Simone Weil than when reading plays. And perhaps only a Christian who is already drawn to the mystical will be moved by the book's main thesis. The argument that you will understand tragedy only if you accept an esoteric Christian perspective is unlikely to make many converts. In the end, Brueck prizes art for its use value, and like all proponents of engagement she overlooks or reduces that aspect of art which serves no clear or definite end. There are moments when Weil's notions of the impossible and passivity are thematised rather too quickly for my liking, moments when Weil is made to seem more religious than she is—one needs to weigh a remark like 'Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith; and in this sense atheism is a purification' (*Notebooks*, I, 238)—and moments when Weil's distance from the romantics and post-romantics is exaggerated. She may not affirm 'the death of the author' as it is usually formulated, but she does not disagree wholly with Blanchot, Barthes or Derrida, who develop the idea in distinct ways. Consider this remark: 'A work of art has an author, and yet, when it is perfect, there is something essentially anonymous about it' (*Notebooks*, I, 241). Similarly, there are times when Weil comes very close to Novalis. Here is the Jena romantic: 'The intuition for poetry has a great deal in common with the intuition for mysticism. It is the intuition for the unique, personal, unknown, secret, excessively *disclosing*, the necessarily contingent. It presents the unrepresentable' (*Fragmente und Studien* [1799–1800]). And here is Weil: 'That poem is good which one writes while keeping the attention orientated toward the inexpressible, *qua* inexpressible' (*Notebooks*, II, 417).

To introduce Simone Weil into contemporary debate about literature is both timely and worthwhile. In *The Redemption of Tragedy*, though, Weil is not always put in the right company, and she is scripted not to listen to what others are saying (even when there are points of agreement, even when she is downright silly). Perhaps in time a genuine dialogue will take place.

Kevin Hart

Frederick R. Karl, *George Eliot, Voice of a Century: A Biography*, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1995.

Frederick Karl's avowed intention is not only to show the relation between George Eliot's life and work but to show how both of these, 'together, speak of the entire century' (p.xi). Echoing Lord Acton's famous words that Eliot's works are 'the emblem of a generation' and Basil Willey's that 'probably no English writer of the time ... more fully epitomizes the century', Karl says that 'perhaps more than anyone else in the period ... she seems most representative, most emblematic of the ambiguities, the anguish, and divisiveness of the Victorian era (p.xi; cf. pp.27-28, 29). But in arguing that she recognizes the divisions of the age because she recognized them in herself (p.xii), he appears to conflate the psychological divisions which most concern him with ideological divisions which hardly concern him at all. Treating her fiction as autobiographical—as a commentary on her illegal marriage, for example—he seldom sees her works as dealing with contemporary issues other than the 'woman question'. He further confuses his conception of her as the voice of the century by arguing, on the one hand, that those schisms in her were 'the very stuff of Eliot's voice' (p.28), and on the other that the same schisms had to be healed before she could find her voice: 'She was to form a union [with Lewes] that helped heal that profound divisiveness she felt between public and private'—shades of Ruby V. Redinger's *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (1975)—'a union, further, that allowed her, finally, to express her sense of the century' (p.168).

If Eliot does not emerge in Karl's work as the voice of the century, she does emerge as the woman of contradictions that Ina Taylor dubbed her in her 1989 biography *A Woman of Contradictions: The Life of George Eliot*. Exploiting a point often made that the various names Eliot adopted correspond to different selves, Karl so harps on her 'varying identities' (p.316), never convincingly presented as incompatible, as to suggest she is afflicted with a personality disorder. Moreover, he runs with Rosemarie Bodenheimer's implication in *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot. Her Letters and Fiction* (1994) that Eliot's different postures suggest hypocrisy. Without any consideration of the needs and obsessions that might have made her simply ambivalent, without feeling any need to reconcile 'the Eliot intellectual game' (p.315) with the considerable evidence that she thought truthfulness the 'highest moral habit' ('Dr Cumming'), he often interprets her illnesses, relationships, and other personal matters as involving assumed roles. 'She had played games with names so frequently that her emergence involved roles, role-playing, and acting-out, which scrambled reality; and she was aware of the factitiousness of it all' (p.576).

In concerning himself with the work of his subject, Karl undertakes to supply a want in Gordon S. Haight's *George Eliot: A Biography* (1968), as well as in Ina Taylor's *A Woman of Contradictions*. But Karl often interprets her fiction in procrustean fashion so as to illustrate his conception of her. Appropriating one of the least convincing of Bodenheimer's interpretations, for example, Karl is forced to identify Eliot with a character she abhors in order to read 'Brother Jacob' as a covert confession of what she always staunchly denied: that her fictional material was based on stories from life. Moreover, had Karl traced the daughter's filial relations from Maggie to Leonora Alcharisi, he might easily enough have reconciled

his statement that Eliot 'helped pioneer a new path for women' (p.xiv; see also pp.xvii, 512) with his emphasis on her conservatism. The right questions might have led him to see Eliot's depression and guilt as due not simply to her illegal marriage but also to psychological problems stemming from the impossibility in childhood of securing both acceptance and fulfilment of her potentialities—an impossibility that doomed her to be the Antigone that Karl supposes she wants to be (p.569). Karl's method is the more regrettable, for 'George Eliot, more than other Victorian novelists, actually lived the fiction by which she managed to master those facts that she found hostile' (to quote from U. C. Knoepfelmacher's 'Mr. Haight's George Eliot: "Wahrheit und Dichtung"', *Victorian Studies*, 1969). Eliot herself said 'the best history of a writer is contained in his writings'. André Maurois explains in *The Art of Writing* that 'The need to express oneself in writing springs from a maladjustment to life, or from an inner conflict'.

Karl's dubious conception of Eliot's life and work emerges from a welter of material presented in an equally dubious fashion. Following Haight, Karl gives us an encyclopaedic assemblage of facts; unlike Haight, often sacrificing coherence for completeness (see the third paragraphs on pp.497 and 608). But perhaps in an effort to avoid the documentary quality for which Haight has been criticized, Karl indulges in the even more exasperating habit of giving free rein to an imagination not checked by the facts, speculating wildly on anything and everything. On the slender grounds of a headache and a reference to life with Father as blissful, he hypothesizes that she broke off relations with the picture restorer, not for the eminently plausible reason she herself gave of needing to fulfil her ambition, but to please her father (pp.80–1). Other theories for which there is no evidence are Eliot's and Lewes's viewing of Thornie's death as their punishment (p.460); Lewes's sense of his relation to Eliot and Agnes as 'bigamous' (p.349n); the (typically masculine) attribution of some of Eliot's illnesses to menses or menopause (pp.152, 361, 386, 472).

More damning are his numerous errors of fact: the statement, ignorant of William Baker's publication of a fragment by Eliot probably written after Lewes's death, that she produced no copy for a novel after *Daniel Deronda* (p.570); the assertion that her translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* has never been published (p.197); the attribution of her words on her companionship with death both after Thornie's and Lewes's deaths (pp.463, 601); the attribution to others of her comments that marriage between incompatible persons is dreadful and that it is better for her not to be rich (pp.79, 368); the bungling of the legend that doing dairy work made one of Eliot's hands larger than the other (p.41). Then there is his misreading of the novels: Maggie is said to have almost drowned early on, Latimer to be drawn to Bertha 'because he knows how cruel she might be', and Dorothea to have attributed Casaubon's death to her refusal to promise to carry out his wishes (pp.337, 294, 494). Karl further erodes his authority by following Taylor in proffering imaginative construction as fact, the most conspicuous example being his characterization of Cross during his courtship as so aggressive a lover as to propose three times (p.620), based on nothing more than hearsay about Eliot's twice breaking off their engagement.

Karl's failure to document anything other than quotations from Eliot's letters also raises questions about his reliability. What, for example, is the

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evidence that George Eliot's father was mercenary (pp.31, 39), or that Eliot's relation with Barbara Bodichon became strained (p.166n)? We might wonder where he gets information that in the 1840s Eliot accepted proposals about marriage, divorce, and birth control (p.73) if we had not read Taylor, who also fails to document the information. In another case, his failure to document makes him responsible for perpetuating supposition as fact. Like others, he repeats Haight's statement in *The George Eliot Letters* (IV: 431n) that George Eliot considered killing off her lovers at the end of *The Spanish Gypsy* (p.434). But Haight is merely extrapolating from Eliot's remark that she originally intended to make the poem more tragic, for in a letter to me of 9 May 1984 he explains the reasoning behind his former statement: 'I cannot think of anything more tragic than the death of the lovers'. Karl's citing of the original source of two letters from Maria Congreve and Edith Simcox (pp.314-5, 667, 609, 680) is puzzling since he ordinarily cites Haight's *Letters* or his biography when letters appear there. Since Karl's quotation of these letters differs slightly from that of Haight, is Karl correcting Haight?

Certain problems of style only serve to accentuate Karl's general carelessness, most importantly a tendency to expression at once sonorous and unintelligible:

From the point of view of Eliot's art, water integrates into a general association with the female. In some complicated way, Eliot has intertwined water with Maggie's own nature: an image in the novel which becomes mysteriously connected to something in the author. Maggie must struggle against water so that it defines her. It is the single element she must conquer if she is to emerge, and yet it is the 'destructive element'. Whenever she encounters it, she is neutralized or, finally, lost (pp.337-38; see also last paragraph on p.552).

But nothing could be more careless than his numerous contradictions—Eliot's childhood was generally idyllic, and her 'protestations of a happy childhood' false (pp.14, 291, 274); Thornie's illness may have kept Eliot from concentrating fully on *Middlemarch*, and her concentration on the novel did not falter (pp.459, 488)—and numerous redundancies: concerning parental figures in Eliot's works (pp.20, 24, 393-94, 509), the earlier settings of Eliot's fiction (pp.9, 29, 217, 274, 353, 507), her lack of interest in political issues (pp.90, 151, 152-3, 201, 217, 350, 422, 434), and life expectancy in the nineteenth century (pp.27, 92, 125n, 156, 297, 386, 416, 432).

Not even emphasis can justify the thirty-one references to Eliot's plain appearance that I have counted. To perpetuate the common perception of Eliot as homely, Karl reproduces the usual unflattering likenesses of her. Why do we not more often see the photograph of her taken in 1854 or 1855, mesmerizing because radiating the 'calm, serious soul' that Emerson discerned in her? Why no likeness that might enable us to understand, as Edith Simcox tells us, that many thought her beautiful? I have seen this photograph only in B. C. Williams's and Taylor's biographies, the latter mistakenly describing the likeness as a painting (Kathleen Adams, who possesses a copy of the original, assures me in a letter of 30 January 1997 that it is a photograph).

To be sure, Karl's work is not without its redeeming features. When not

dissecting her, he treats Eliot sympathetically, ever aware of what we sometimes forget: that social conditions alien to our own made her suffer the torments of the damned. We must be the more grateful for his sympathetic understanding, as it is often missing from works of a higher order in which, as in Bodenheimer's *Real Life*, dissection sometimes requires murder. Furthermore, drawing on his wide knowledge of nineteenth-century England, Karl helps bring Eliot to life with information about contemporaries and such contemporary matters as 'scientific' notions of women's capabilities; earning power (including the equivalence in modern currency of Eliot's earnings); the average life span; Eliot's sales figures compared to those of other novels; the practice of reviewing; the operation of circulating libraries. But the scholar will not find useful a work that introduces little new material, deriving largely from other biographies (especially Haight's, which Karl sometimes paraphrases) and works of literary criticism. And the common reader will not find appealing a book whose unassimilated materials make the 644 pages seem even more.

Since Karl's faults might seem to be the consequence of trying to carry through too ambitious a project, the reader may like to know that 1996 saw the appearance of a biography that masterfully assimilates all the available materials relating to George Eliot's life, works, and times in readable form. Rosemary Ashton inherits the mantle of Haight, basing *George Eliot: A Life* on extensive research that yields much material never before published and documenting her book so scrupulously as to make it a model of scholarly accuracy. But, while she gives a fuller picture of Eliot than Haight does by discussing the author's fiction and place in the contemporary scene, no more than Haight does Ashton examine Eliot's imaginative reconstruction of the facts of her life to throw light on those facts. A work that will be enjoyed by both the scholar and common reader, this critical biography and Haight's complementary documentary biography will doubtless remain the best biographies of Eliot for a long time to come. Perhaps some day we will have a biography that, recognizing the autobiographical nature of her works, combines the sympathetic insight of Redinger with the trenchant psychological analysis of Bodenheimer. Then only, when the biographer manifests the 'personal intimacy' requisite for 'life writing' that Eliot herself notes in her review of Carlyle's *Life of Sterling*, will we have a work that reveals the character and mind of a woman who, though 'the most interesting of [her] characters' (Lord Acton), still remains much of an enigma.

June Skye Szirotny

Julian Young, *Nietzsche's philosophy of art*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, paperback edition 1993; James J. Winchester, *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche after Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

One of the more obvious characteristics of that strand of the modern philosophical tradition known as 'continental philosophy' is the importance it has attributed to aesthetics. It might even be said that this is one of its defining characteristics—one of those features which marks it off from the style of English-speaking analytic philosophy, in which aesthetics occupies a much more peripheral position.

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It is possible to imagine analytic philosophy as existing relatively unchanged in a parallel world in which art didn't exist; it is much more difficult, however, to think of either analytic philosophy in a world without science or continental philosophy in a world without art or literature.

These intuitions, if correct, must reflect something of the history of these disciplines. In this regard it could be suggested that each tradition reflects a different possible reaction to the philosophical revolution effected in the late eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant, a revolution which essentially deposed the conception of philosophy as a separate and distinct metaphysical *science*—a mode of inquiry, that is, within which one attempted to figure out something about reality by reasoning from a basis of concepts alone.

Kant's idea that concepts only yielded knowledge when linked to some sense-given content can be seen as having pushed philosophy in the direction of epistemology and philosophy of science—that is, in the direction of becoming a second order discipline which reflects on rather than competes with the empirical sciences. It is in this sense that Kant is relevant for twentieth-century analytic thought, with the central roles played there by epistemology and philosophy of science. But Kant's criticism of metaphysics might also be seen as having pushed philosophy in another direction, that of aesthetics. If empirical science had displaced metaphysical science as that which told you about reality, then perhaps metaphysics could be saved by conceiving of it, not as a rival science, but as centred on a form of activity and experience other than science—which is to say, on *art*. Effectively this was the direction taken by philosophical representatives of early nineteenth-century German romanticism such as Friedrich Schelling and Arthur Schopenhauer, both of whom attributed to art and aesthetics a profound metaphysical significance.

The metaphysics of early romanticism may be long gone but the alignment of thought with art and literature on the one hand, and with science on the other, has remained at the centre of late twentieth-century culture wars, and within these wars it is Friedrich Nietzsche who is most championed or reviled as that nineteenth-century figure who pursued the aesthetic model of thought to its extreme, an extreme in which philosophy, in some sense, becomes an art form. But Nietzsche's was a hard act to follow, both in the sense of doing—philosophers, unfortunately, are rarely literary artists of his calibre—and in the sense of understanding—how can any sense of continuity with philosophy be preserved with so radical a switch as that from science to art? Both of these books attempt to follow Nietzsche's move in the second of these senses, and in so doing offer timely and thoughtful insights as to what might be at stake in contemporary cultural battles within (and without) the universities. Both books are clearly written and well argued (although, on each of these criteria Young's is, I believe, the better work). Furthermore, given the array of genres and styles within which Nietzsche himself presents his ideas, each is rather conventionally constructed.

In *Nietzsche's philosophy of art*, Julian Young traces Nietzsche's thought through what he discerns as four separate periods, each centring on a particular text or group of texts (*The Birth of Tragedy*, *Human, All-too-human*, *The Gay*

Science, Twilight of the Idols), and each reflecting a different complex of aesthetic, metaphysical, ethical and epistemological views. This 'biographically' constructed account gives his book a simpler and more conventional structure than that chosen by Winchester. Nevertheless, Winchester's *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn: Reading Nietzsche after Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida* is somewhat more conventional than its sub-title suggests. The 'reading A after B' locution is one I have come to associate with a (sometimes real, more often imagined) theoretical sophistication purchased by interpreting A from within B's framework or perspective. (What else could 'after' mean here?—that one read A in July and B in June?) However, with this phrase Winchester seems to mean little more than to signal his intention to offer interpretations of particular doctrines of Nietzsche ('eternal recurrence', 'will to power' and so on) which contest particular currently popular alternatives, such as those of Heidegger on the former doctrine, Deleuze on the latter. (In fact, the whole subtitle to me looked like something added by SUNY's marketing division; only the sexy philosophers Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida are read 'after', according to the subtitle, while inside the covers the comparatively lesser-known interpreter of Nietzsche, Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, receives as much, if not more attention.) After the first four chapters in which he examines and criticises existing interpretations of major Nietzschean ideas, in the last three Winchester develops his own alternative positive reading of Nietzsche.

While it is clearly Nietzsche's 'aesthetics' which is the point of contact between these two books, as the different structures indicate, each author has adopted a different way of coming to grips with this topic. Winchester's book focuses Nietzsche's aesthetic mode of philosophy, his main concern being how to understand the nature and implications of taking the 'aesthetic turn'. It is the comparative failure to appreciate the implications of this turn that Winchester objects to in the various rival interpretations he considers. This is a somewhat surprising but interesting line of criticism of existing Nietzsche interpretation (of the French, especially), and it allows Winchester to make some significant points against the big names of 'continental' Nietzsche interpretation. However, such a way of proceeding has its costs in terms of the restrictions it places on the ability of the author to develop his own thesis. For me, the main problem with this book was that the question of exactly what constitutes the aesthetic turn is never directly spelt out, the reader being left mostly to figure it out for him or herself. Thus, for example, when Winchester develops his own account of Nietzsche in the last chapters, he focuses predominantly on Nietzsche's later works—works which are, in a thematic sense, the least aesthetic—and advocates that we understand them according to aesthetic criteria. But without any explicit confrontation with what aesthetic issues mean for Nietzsche, it is only indirectly, in the context of Winchester's objections to non-aesthetic readings, that we tend to get a sense of what these criteria might be. In the background is the idea, now familiar from the work of Alexander Nehamas, of Nietzsche as advocating a type of aesthetic self-creation, the creation of oneself as a type of artwork or literary character. But the way this is predominantly cashed out is in the challenge that it poses to the role of truth within philosophy. For Winchester, it would seem that a major aspect of Nietzsche's aesthetic turn, that which marks it off from conventional philosophy, is a change in attitude towards, or relation to, truth.

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In contrast, Young's book is explicitly centred on Nietzsche's philosophical aesthetics: as its title indicates it is first and foremost about Nietzsche's 'philosophy of art'. Thus, after a very useful chapter-length summary of the metaphysics and aesthetics of Schopenhauer, described as a philosopher whom Nietzsche 'breathed', Young begins with a treatment of that work which is not only Nietzsche's first major work, but the work most explicitly about art—*The Birth of Tragedy*. (Young's Nietzsche both starts as, and remains, a much more Schopenhauerian thinker than many other interpreters would allow.) With this Young is able to plunge into the depths of Nietzsche's actual aesthetic views, not only about 'art' in general, but about particular arts such as Greek tragedy and Wagnerian music drama. But as Young points out, his own book cannot be 'just about aesthetics': given the profound metaphysical significance aesthetics receives in Nietzsche's (and Schopenhauer's) thought, no merely aesthetic approach could surely do justice to it. So he too has to get involved in Nietzsche's metaphysical speculations, including importantly, his various claims about 'truth'.

Philosophy *per se* is, of course, meant to be radical in its unearthing and questioning of presuppositions, and unearthing and questioning assumptions about the nature of truth is probably about as philosophical as one can get. Winchester is careful in unpacking these issues in Nietzsche and exhibits a sound awareness of how easily this line of thought can slip into vacuity and self-contradiction. The main direction of his criticism of other interpretations seems to be that they understand Nietzsche's questioning of truth in still too 'metaphysical' a sense. They take Nietzsche as predominantly making extremely radical claims about truth—that is, as getting at some deep truths about truth. But with his aesthetic turn, Nietzsche, according to Winchester, has largely abandoned such a truth-based mode of philosophising. In trying to understand Nietzsche, we should not be looking for his underlying and logically coherent claims about metaphysical topics; or, to put it in another way, Nietzsche should not be understood as trying to convince us, or trying to get us to believe some view or other. He is not making truth claims to be responded to argumentatively, or in terms of belief, or doubt and so on. The irrelevance of truth has to do with his idea that philosophy involves self-creation, the creation of standards or norms to which one adheres. However, any truth-centred approach to philosophy would have to rely on the appeal to already-existing shared standards or norms. This is apparently why Nietzsche can be so dismissive and off-hand about 'truth'. Moreover, to complicate matters even further, from a Nietzschean perspective, the appropriate response to new norms would not be to adopt, criticise, or argue about them. Rather, it would be to be provoked to come up with one's own accounts which would embody one's own newly-created norms.

Within Winchester's approach can be found elements of the 'death of the subject' doctrine of French post-structuralism: he is not so much interested in Nietzsche the man as in Nietzsche that self-created fiction who comes into being in his writings. Moreover, he is not so much a single self-created character as a 'carnival of characters', a philosopher of a 'plurality of masks'. Here again Young's book contrasts with Winchester's. Clearly less sympathetic to the post-structuralist anti-canon (Heidegger, Deleuze and Derrida do not even make it into his index), Young traces successive stages in the philosophical life of Nietzsche

the person behind the masks as expressed in the works of those stages. This biographical approach allows Young to lay out in a very convincing manner the complex interrelation of Nietzsche's aesthetic, ethical, epistemological and metaphysical views as they transmute through various stages. Thus the devaluation that art undergoes in Nietzsche's 'positivistic' *Human, all-too-human* can be understood as a response to a change in his beliefs about the nature of science, while his later return to art is explained in terms of a subsequent devaluing of science brought about by the perceived sceptical consequences of his newly-developed perspectivist epistemology! (We might say that for Young it is Nietzsche's beliefs which drive the 'aesthetic turn' and so the role of truth in one way or another remains fundamental.) That he is willing to deal with a person behind the mask also allows Young to raise questions that are seemingly denied to the more post-structuralist approach, such as the question of when Nietzsche's claims about himself should be understood straight-forwardly as cases of self-deception rather than anything like 'self-creation'.

It will be clear from the above that I think that any reader seeking an account of Nietzsche's own aesthetics and its changing role within his broader philosophical development should, of these two books, read Young's *Nietzsche's philosophy of art*. The view of Nietzsche developed there is one that many of the authors discussed in Winchester's book would probably reject, but Young presents a powerful and sophisticated interpretation of Nietzsche's writings, and his book deserves to be taken as offering a particularly strong challenge to those post-structuralist views which currently tend to predominate. If, on the other hand, you are looking for a way into the labyrinth of these appropriations of Nietzsche which had started with Heidegger, then Winchester's *Nietzsche's Aesthetic Turn* would provide a useful guide.

Paul Redding

Andrew McRae, *God speed the plough: The representation of agrarian England 1500-1660*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996.

'England is a garden', wrote Emerson (in *English Traits*). 'The fields combed and rolled, appear to have been created with a brush instead of a plough'. Not so the English fields of Andrew McRae's recent study, in the 'Past and Present' series from Cambridge, where the representation of rural work and folk, including the 'plowman' (as depicted on the dust-jacket), is the focus of a detailed account of an astonishing number and variety of texts, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, revealing the momentous changes in agrarian life in the early modern period. The title comes from an anonymous ballad written around 1500 and the analysis is 'grounded in a belief that practices of representation are enmeshed with processes of material change'.

I learnt a good deal from this book and found several of its details delightful (including the illustrations—such as the intricate map of Surrey, divided into 'hundreds'). Cambridge, too, are to be congratulated on an exemplary production. How rare it is today to find a scholarly text (particularly one such as this, with so many opportunities for error in old spelling and so forth) devoid of 'typos'.

Having said this, I found *God speed the plough* as disturbing as it is informative.

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This, of course, is not necessarily a criticism of a book. The source of my principal concern is revealed in the chapter titles—for example, 'Agrarian communism' and 'Husbandry manuals and agrarian improvement', but then, 'The rural vision of Renaissance satire' and 'Rural poetics'. The book is a hybrid, by turns historical and literary in character. Not that this is a distinction, I imagine, that McRae or his editor and the other contributors to 'Past and Present' would acknowledge, being committed to 'interdisciplinary' scholarship. Literary texts possess significance, here, in terms of their historical and political discourse; while texts of no apparent literary merit are elevated to parity of worthiness with great poetry because of their perceived 'cultural' significance. 'Niceties of genre' are dismissed as such—oddly, when Renaissance texts are being discussed—yet McRae devotes pages to the unreadable *Poly-Olbion* of Michael Drayton, which contains such lines as this:

The shrubs are not of power to sheeld them from the wind.

On these principles, Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' is of no more intrinsic value than John Fitzherbert's *Boke of Surveying*. Indeed, McRae reduces Jonson's celebration of the moral qualities of the Sidneys and their country estate to the presentation of 'a landlord whose power is accentuated by his generous decision to observe customs of hospitality'. If the poor and the tenants are invited to share the board at Penshurst—'all come in, the farmer, and the clown [peasant]'—this could not be the wholehearted response to a genuine expression of humane fellow-feeling on the part of Sir Robert Sidney that Jonson's poetry celebrates in a buoyant language reflecting that abundant generosity. It has to be a ritualised condescension—the mere observance of 'custom'—for the purposes of reinforcing the Sidneys' 'power', furthermore, and the people's subjection. Complimentary lines cannot be taken at face value:

Whose liberal board doth flow,
With all, that hospitality doth know

The poem is as duplicitous as Sidney, as Jonson conspires with him to affirm his authority and the consequent oppression of the 'lower orders'—power and hierarchy, moreover, being necessarily oppressive. That the regime at Penshurst is different from other contemporary country houses—which is Jonson's explicit, concluding compliment: 'their lords have built, but thy lord dwells'—also has to be obscured on this reading lest equality of humanness sustained by a traditional social order be seen to be possible, let alone benevolent, even in one place.

God speed the plough, that is to say, proposes a somewhat simplistic evaluation of the 'various and changing ways in which English men and women of the early modern period sought to ascribe meaning and order to the economy and society of their native countryside'. (There is little about women, in fact, a matter to which I shall return.) In McRae's presentation, the critics and victims of the establishment are necessarily admirable, distinguished amongst them being the ploughman as 'the embodiment of powerlessness, humbly appealing to the better judgement of the powerful'.

This romantic view leads to several distorting judgements. When John Wycliffe, for example, argues that (in Anne Hudson's paraphrase) 'only the just have true

possession; since the just are by definition in perfect charity, they would wish to share their goods, whether spiritual or temporal', McRae uncritically accepts both her extraordinary judgement that 'this is not a particularly strident position' and Wycliffe's alleged vision of the social perfectibility of the 'just' which it entails. One would like to know how the position could be more strident and the vision less true to experience. Those who knew the English peasantry at first hand, such as George Eliot (who was essentially sympathetic towards them), expose the folly of the delusion that, by virtue of the common bond of their separation from the corruptions of wealth and influence, they were 'in a condition to enter at once into a millennial mode of *altruism*, wherein everyone is caring for everyone else and no one for himself'.¹ As one of McRae's favourite sources in Christopher Hill reminds us, the radical Milton had none of our modern democratic illusions about 'the people' and their inspired impulses.² This is not, of course, to maintain that the 'powerful' were not corrupt. But the shortcomings of human nature are not confined to one social class.

The Cromwellian Commonwealth is presented, similarly, in *God speed the plough*, as a marvellous effusion of freedom, when 'proponents of communism were liberated from the constraints of monarchy and censorship'. How 'liberal' was Presbyterian Calvinism, as its exponents went up and down the country vandalising churches and closing the theatres? One set of constraints was replaced by another, as Milton soon—and pithily—recognised: 'New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large'. The great bogey-words of today, 'conservative' and 'traditional', are worked very hard in *God speed the plough*. They are automatically assumed to be negative epithets, and are set in linguistic contexts of negativity, implied or explicit: 'The ideals of 'perfect knowledge' ... required considerable justification in the face of conservative criticism'; 'traditional Christian doctrine ... assumes a strict social structure'.

C. S. Lewis, seen to be 'working within the traditional literary canon' (another constraint of freedom), had argued that it was 'doubtful' whether Thomas Tusser's doggerel, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, 'is to be treated as literature'. McRae's response that it is 'culturally significant' and was 'intended for the use of small farmers', not 'for the entertainment of the gentry'—as if there were something disreputable about 'entertainment' and for that class of person—does not dispose of Lewis's objection. In his utilitarian approach to Tusser's work, McRae seems to have imbibed the Puritanism of his chosen period; radicalism, whenever and wherever it appears, is blithely endorsed. Montaigne's commendation of the primitive communism of cannibals is noted, but McRae does not seem to perceive the irony of such praise from the wealthy French essayist, retired at 38 to a sumptuous *château* amongst the French vineyards bequeathed to him by his merchant father. The first example of 'champagne socialism'?

With regard to women (or 'gender'), McRae does not sustain a thesis about their position in rural life, though in a regretful footnote he registers his concern about the 'gendered perspective of early modern writers' and his apprehension that even to present it may 'perpetuate their apparent gender biases'. In other words, to tell the truth about the past could have unfortunate social consequences today. He observes that the 'vast majority of texts represent agrarian England as a

field of predominantly masculine labour and responsibility'. Surely this is simply because the majority of agrarian labourers were men, while women were 'labouring within a gendered domestic economy' (that is, they were housewives). McRae refers to 'the gendered discourse of the surveyor'—in other words, surveyors, being men, wrote to them and about them. How could it have been otherwise? How many female surveyors were there in the seventeenth century? Should this discourage women today from taking up surveying?

The regrettably 'gendered' world of the early modern period is also reinforced by its poetry: 'the new georgic effaces the labours of women'. One must take issue with the verb here—meaning wilfully to rub out and obliterate. The work the poetry describes was substantially undertaken by men. To argue that it represents a deliberate conspiracy to 'efface' contributions women made to such work is as persuasive as it would be to suggest that midwifery manuals 'efface' the male contribution to childbirth.

The consideration of religion is the least satisfactory component of the book. If one is going to enter the very complex world of early seventeenth-century English religious history, one has to step very carefully. McRae states that the period was 'redefined by Calvinism' and that 'Calvinism rose to a position of orthodoxy in Jacobean England'. The Jacobean monarch and many of his bishops and clergy would be startled by this observation. James had seen enough of Calvinism in Scotland to do his utmost to thwart it in England—at the Hampton Court Conference, for example. He affirmed the Divine Right of Kings and the Apostolic Succession, as embodied in the episcopate. These doctrines were anathema to Calvin. How 'Calvinist' was William Laud, whose rise to prominence began in 'Jacobean England'? Or Lancelot Andrewes, who refused to attend the Synod of Dort (1618–19)? Or John Donne? Not only were they and many others in ecclesiastical authority bitter critics of the Genevan theocracy, but within 'Calvinism' itself one has to be discriminating.

Unaccountably absent from McRae's conspectus is George Herbert (1593–1633), the very model of the rural parish priest whose reflections on his cure amongst agrarian workers in 'The Country Parson' and his 'Outlandish Proverbs'—not to mention his poetry itself—are serious lacunae in *God speed the plough*. Arguably though by no means conclusively Calvinist in persuasion, Herbert's religion, with its emphasis on the Atonement, its sacramentalism and liturgical aestheticism, was also substantially unreformed like the Anglican Protestantism of the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. McRae's references to the English Christianity of the time could lead the uninformed reader to reduce its complexities to the simplicities of the 'Protestant gossellers'. But Herbert's 'High Calvinism' had little in common with their theology and less with their worship.

Herbert's exclusion, however, is probably a political rather than a theological decision. His being a son of the aristocracy, of 'power', it would be difficult to reconcile Herbert's establishment pedigree with his pastoral solicitude for rural folk within the political discourse of this study. One fears that, had McRae considered Herbert, he would have had to interpret that cure of souls in the manner of his reading of Sir Robert Sidney's hospitality—as a covert exercise of 'power' over the powerless.

McRae's criticism of Anthony Low's 'desire to separate poetry from economic

discourse' implies that the marriage of the two is inevitable. Answering Low's description of Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* as a 'mixture of didacticism, forehead-knuckling, and greed', McRae praises 'Tusser's georgic' as the expression of the transformation of 'the individualist as the humble ploughman working within the conservative structures of a corporate ideology' to the representation of 'the industrious smallholder'. No doubt this is true, but as with McRae's rejection of Lewis's critique, Low's artistic reservations are sidestepped. *God speed the plough* is to be warmly recommended for its painstaking historical analyses, though they are to be assessed with a sharp critical eye. To the degree that it ventures from the world of the plough into that of (in Emerson's terms) the 'brush' or artist's instrument, and to the degree that it ventures into the realms of theology, I found it less satisfactory.

Barry Spurr

Notes

- 1 *Westminster Review*, 66, July, 1856: 53.
- 2 'Milton was never a democrat', *Milton and the English Revolution*, London, 1977, p.91.

Gale Greene, *Doris Lessing: The Poetics of Change*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Gale Greene feels Doris Lessing has never quite been given her due. Like all complex writers Lessing constantly challenges her readers and Greene's work shows how critics have often been obtuse with regard to Lessing's style, and intolerant and unimaginative in their responses to a writer whose impulse is always towards change. The hard-nosed social realism of her earlier works gives way to explorations of mysticism and science fiction, matters that western literary tradition of the twentieth century has been reluctant to respect. Greene ably defends Lessing against her critics with a comprehensive examination of what she considers Lessing's most interesting works and in the process illustrates rewarding ways of approaching the Lessing *œuvre*.

As the title implies, this is a study of the development and patterns of Lessing's poetics, a poetics that demands the constant exercise of the imagination that is the prime responsibility of us all, and the writer's *raison d'être*. It is Lessing's constant revitalisation of imagination that Greene contends has the power to change minds and hence lives, as Lessing did for her generation of women.

Greene quotes liberally from the generation of feminist writers and critics for whom Lessing was a contemporary leading light, the female pioneers who moved into academic institutions in the 1970s and continue to challenge, re-vision and renew courses with their feminist and increasingly postmodern perspectives, releasing women creators from dungeons of neglect and dismissal to take their pride of place in a variety of disciplines. As such this is testimony to Lessing's talent from a particular perspective: that inspiring generation of feminist scholars, the so-called second wave.

Two introductory chapters give us in brief Lessing's life as a writer and a general overview of the critical reception of her work. Greene devotes the

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following chapters to the novels she finds most interesting: the *Children of Violence* series (1952–1969), which includes *Landlocked* (1965), and *The Four-gated City* (1969); *The Golden Notebook* (1962); *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973); *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974); *Re: Colonised Planet 5, Shikastru* (1979); *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five* (1981); *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984); and *The Good Terrorist* (1985). The book has an adequate index, footnotes that expand cogently and a bibliography with good coverage of seminal feminist texts and secondary Lessing sources. Each chapter is prefaced by a quotation, usually from the novel under discussion, to flag its pervading themes. Chapters are divided by sub-headings signalling the changing topics under discussion. This signposting is a component of Greene's style that makes her so readable and a useful reference aid for scholars.

The quotation introducing Chapter 1 prepares the reader for the sense of rupture Lessing suffers between the beloved natural landscape of her childhood in Africa and the narrow racist colonial society she is born into. Here lies the source of Lessing's narratives in her life and her art: her need to break free and the alienation she suffers in the process. This is combined with a constant questioning of the many ideas and philosophies that teem through her life and her books and keep her imagination pushing boundaries constantly towards the 'something new' that Greene finds recurring throughout Lessing's work. Modernism challenged its artists with a 'make it new' ideology. Lessing, like many second wave feminist writers, has reinterpreted this maxim as 're-newal', the act that poet Adrienne Rich calls 're-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—[which] is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival'. Greene seeks to understand Lessing's acts of survival through the poetics of her texts: 'the texture of her prose, the intricacy of her structures, the rich resonances of her intertextuality' (p.33).

A brief overview of Lessing's early life is quilted together from the interviews and journal articles that have since been brought together in Lessing's own *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949*. This overview sheds light on crucial events in her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood which Lessing says have remained in her consciousness and provoked the questions she explores in her writing. One of the most potent of these for Lessing is the mother-father dichotomy. The pressure of her parents' incompatibility and unhappiness developed in Lessing a sensitivity to subtext, to what goes on beneath condoned social structures and their politics of power, whether it be marriage, the communist party, or the racial divide. This, she says, is what has made her a writer and one who shunned formal education for the innovation and freedom of self-discovery. She developed a strong distrust of the minefield of language with its ability to hide as much as it reveals, and Greene's critique shows how Lessing's use of language attempts to deconstruct ideologies.

Lessing's particular ideological portrayal of society is a radical critique of Anglo-Saxon culture displaying an irony and an acerbic wit that contrasts sharply in the immediate post-war years with the provincial sentimentality of many of her male contemporaries. Greene follows each phase of Lessing's career chronologically, showing how innovative her texts become. She demonstrates

how each of her chosen novels extends the circular structures that dominate Lessing's work, structures 'that thwart endings and allow new beginnings' into something different (p.221) despite their often strong 'sense of an End' (p.222). To trace these circular and often paradoxical processes of change is to trace the vision of a writer who believes in both commitment and the constant questioning of it.

Lessing has steadfastly refused to be pigeon-holed, often to the chagrin of feminists wanting to co-opt her into a movement that, with each wave, demonstrates as many differences as similarities. Greene believes Lessing's recalcitrance to the institutionalisation of ideas reveals a writer who has always been several steps ahead of theory, and one whose only unwavering commitment is to her writing. Greene both understands and respects this stance, while fervently believing that Lessing's works 'require a feminist reading' (p.28)—and not only because she centres her texts on women's consciousness and concerns. She illustrates Lessing's feminism not as one of creating role models, but as one of exposing structures of oppression—of race, class and sex—and revealing how they interact to reinforce one another. This is the power she feels Lessing's writing has to transform society and human relationships.

Those who enjoy that warm communal generosity that often marks American feminist endeavour will enjoy the tone of this book. It is informed and informal, interesting and thought-provoking. Greene's style is not only informed, but she is lucid in her application to Lessing's work of theories, concentrating on the wide gamut of feminisms and including formalism, intertextuality and the psychoanalytic. She combines this with a generous inclusion of friends and colleagues, and their experience and responses to Lessing's work. This gives her rigorous critical acumen the relaxed ambience of a discussion between like-minded friends, rather than an intense academic exercise, and makes her book accessible to all Lessing readers.

While I thoroughly enjoyed and benefited from this book I have one particular gripe. Greene's unbounded admiration for Lessing sometimes leads to overstatement: '*The Golden Notebook* remains the single most important work of feminist fiction in this century' (p.14). Anticipating criticism for this, she emphasises her belief that this is not 'hyperbole'. The superlatives merely reinforce structures of the male-dominated western literary tradition, however, which feminisms, among other theories, have successfully opened up and enriched in the process, breaking down the excluding hierarchies of 'best-and-greatest' structures that ignore and demote difference. Such statements by Greene undermine her feminist practice. Every generation produces its pioneers and *The Golden Notebook* is indeed an important landmark. However it is not the only one from recent or earlier twentieth-century writing. As Greene herself makes clear, Lessing eludes categorisation and continually distances herself from any particular stance, feminist or otherwise, probably fearful of labels that might henceforth confine rather than liberate. It is one of the attitudes that endows her work with that paradoxical combination of commitment and freedom, of opinion as well as style, which for me makes her wise and courageous—and *one* of our brilliant writers, certainly.

Since the publication of Greene's book, Lessing has published the first volume

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of her autobiography and another novel *Love Again* (1996), attesting to an ongoing and prolific talent that includes drama, short stories, poetry and non-fiction, as well as the 21 novels from which Greene takes her selection. Greene's book is an important contribution in the equally prolific appraisal of this important writer. As she suggests in her conclusion, it is unlikely that any one book will ever be able to bring finite conclusions to Lessing's body of work. Her mythic, shape-changing capacities will see to that.

Jennifer Moore

Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994.

Sylvia Walsh's *Living Poetically* is a lucid, balanced and scholarly exegesis of Kierkegaard's existential aesthetics. It aims 'to reclaim Kierkegaard as a poetic thinker and writer from those who interpret him as an ironic practitioner of an aestheticism devoid of and detached from the ethical-religious as well as from those who view him as rejecting the poetic and aesthetic on ethical or religious grounds' (p.4). While much Kierkegaard scholarship repeats the view that Kierkegaard started out as an aesthete but gradually abandoned poetry in favour of the religious, Walsh adduces overwhelming textual evidence in support of her dual claim that Kierkegaard's writing was religious from the outset and that Kierkegaard did not abandon poetry as a result of his apparent dialectical sublation of the aesthetic as a mere stage on life's way. In fact he refers to himself most frequently as a poet in the journal entries corresponding to the final part of his authorship—with over ninety references in the journals after 1847 as opposed to a single reference in the journals prior to 1847 (p.224).

Walsh's sketches of the aesthetics of Hegel, the German romantics, and J. L. Heiberg, are very useful for understanding the philosophical and literary context in which Kierkegaard was writing. The explication of Kierkegaard's early polemical works is also one of the book's strengths. It brings out the crucial notions of life-development (*Livs-Udvikling*) and life-view (*Livs-Anskuelse*), and articulates them onto the dialectical aesthetics of Hegel and Heiberg. It also allows us to understand the reprise of these notions in Kierkegaard's later views on the art of living poetically within religious faith. Most importantly, Walsh gives us some insight into Kierkegaard's 'inverted Christian dialectic' in which he used poetry not to communicate the word of God more persuasively, but to establish more clearly the absolute distance that separates human beings from God. This is crucial, in Kierkegaard's theology, to emphasise human reliance on God's grace for salvation.

Living Poetically retraces the whole of Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*, pausing for 'close textual analysis of major works in all periods of Kierkegaard's authorship' (p.1). This allows for a detailed and systematic pursuit of the overall argument of the book, but it also risks lapsing into fairly pedestrian summaries of some of Kierkegaard's works. In fact much of the discussion of the works between *Fear and Trembling* and *Stages on Life's Way* lapses in this way. The extent of these close textual analyses diminishes markedly during the course of the book, so that

the 'third and final phase in Kierkegaard's understanding of the poetic ... in the journals and specifically religious writings' (p.223) is treated rather perfunctorily in only twenty pages. This is about the same amount of space as that devoted to *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a rather slight work compared to *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Armed Neutrality*, *Practice in Christianity*, *For Self-Examination*, *Judge For Yourself!* and *The Instant*, all of which belong to the final phase of Kierkegaard's authorship. The space devoted to the latter is about one third of the space devoted to *Either/Or*, which deservedly receives a lot of attention as the most explicitly aesthetic work. But such uneven attention undermines Walsh's contention that striving to live poetically in religious faith is characteristic of *all* of Kierkegaard's writing.

By far the weakest part of Walsh's book is her attempt to apply Kierkegaard's critique of German romanticism to 'postmodern French feminism'. Not only does Walsh regard 'postmodernism', 'poststructuralism' and 'deconstruction' as 'a single phenomenon' (p.245), but she reductively conflates the positions of the specific theorists she seeks to criticise, viz. Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous and Clement. For example, Walsh problematically assimilates Kristeva to the French feminists of sexual difference. Yet Kristeva explicitly repudiates the label 'feminist' for herself, and aims to substitute a sexually indifferent subject-in-process for sexually differentiated subjects. This position is quite different from that of Irigaray, who adopts talk of a specifically female identity *strategically*, as part of an attempt to subvert phallogocentrism. To collapse these two distinct positions into a generic 'postmodern French feminism' which is susceptible to Kierkegaard's (alleged) refutation of the German romantics is far too swift.

It would have been much more interesting to make a detailed comparison of Kierkegaard's understanding of sexual difference with those of Kristeva and Irigaray. For example, Kristeva's 'bisexual' subject-in-process has both masculine and feminine characteristics, which correspond closely to the Kierkegaardian categories which Walsh dubs 'the masculine mode' and 'the feminine mode'. The former are primarily a self-relatedness and the latter primarily a relatedness to others. But whereas Kierkegaard's subject-in-process is represented by Walsh as androgynous, Kristeva distinguishes sharply between 'bisexuality' and 'androgyny'. Furthermore, Kristeva's aim is to subvert the phallogocentric identity of the Symbolic order by rearranging the mutual relations of the semiotic (feminine) and the symbolic (masculine). She does this by invoking the maternal experience, and the pre-œdipal experience of the infant, which are not bound to a single identity. Kierkegaard's purpose is to uphold the existing phallogocentric order by reproducing and disseminating its distinctions, categories and values—including, very importantly, the category of the individual. The use Kierkegaard makes of his categories of masculine and feminine reinforces stereotypical patriarchal positionings of women as submissive, devoted and giving. While Kierkegaard conflates the identities of woman, mother, and the feminine, Kristeva wants to keep these distinct. For Kristeva the maternal experience, in which the mother shares her identity with an other, can be characterized in terms of giving and devotion. But in order that the woman not be abjected with the mother when the infant asserts its autonomy, the maternal function should be distinguished from the woman.

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Another interesting area for specific comparison would be the uses to which Kierkegaard and Irigaray put *mimesis*. Kierkegaard's whole pseudonymous authorship can arguably be read as an elaborate parody of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. This mimetic strategy to undo a hegemonic system of thought is very similar to Irigaray's use of *mimesis* to deconstruct phallogocentric texts. But Walsh glibly identifies deconstruction with Kierkegaard's understanding of Socratic irony as 'infinite, absolute negativity' (p.247), then dismisses it as purely destructive and nihilistic. She might more charitably have explored Irigaray's (and Derrida's) strategic uses of deconstruction as forms of 'mastered irony', which expose the values at work in the unconscious of a text and open the field to alternative constructions of power and value. Kierkegaard's irony and proto-deconstructive techniques are interesting because, although they are used to subvert *one* hegemonic system, they are no obstacle to Kierkegaard's support of another (patriarchy).

I would also like to have seen a more Foucauldian approach to the whole topic of Kierkegaard's aesthetics, as opposed to the history of ideas approach which informs *Living Poetically*. The book traces the influence of particular authors on Kierkegaard's work. It also follows the inner dialectic of the existential meanings of Kierkegaard's ideas. But it never interrogates the position of these ideas in the social and discursive formations of the time, or the role they play in structures of power. So, for example, Walsh takes Don Juan to represent a universal stage in all human lives—as do Kierkegaard and his psychoanalytic interpreters Barfoed and Nordentoft (pp.69 ff.). This is despite the fact that they all acknowledge the *medieval* origins of the Don Juan figure. It would have been interesting to see some work on what was specific to the social and discursive formations of the middle ages which might have generated this fascination with the sensuous-erotic—in the form of an aristocratic male seducer. Changes in laws of inheritance (to male primogeniture), in the consolidation of the patriarchal power of the church, and the forces that generated chivalric literature all play a part in the genesis of the Don Juan figure. Walsh also accepts uncritically Kierkegaard's claim that Christianity introduced 'the fundamental conflict between flesh and spirit' into the world (p.76). This dubious distinction may be due to Zarathustra, or Gnosticism, or Manicheism, or Buddhism—but not to Christianity as such. However, the emphasis on it in the medieval Christian church is crucial to the genesis of the Don Juan figure.

All of this could have been questioned had Walsh adopted a Foucauldian methodology rather than that of the history of ideas. Furthermore, her critique of 'postmodern French feminism' would have been seen to be misplaced. The Christian categories and values basic to Kierkegaard's sense of self-identity, of sin and guilt, inherited in the line of the father, the One and Holy, are engendered by the patriarchal church. They rely on surveillance (the lidless eye of God), self-surveillance (confession, the diary, self-review), self-discipline (reading, writing, scholarship), suffering (guilt, debt, sin, anguish), and the exclusion of women (from the ministry, from the monastic life of the devoted religious poet). These values, and the libidinal economy they map, are quintessentially masculine. They are (re)produced by institutions such as the church, school and university (science, *Videnskab*). As Foucault and Judith Butler have pointed out, the singular identities

produced by these institutions to fit their norms, using technologies of surveillance and discipline, are crucial to modern forms of power. An analysis of the discursive origins of Don Juan, Ahasuerus and Faust—rather than their ideal origins in a dialectic of existential types—would have revealed the technologies at work which produced and reproduced them, and the values with which they are associated. Kierkegaard was at least gynophobic if not misogynist by the standards of our present age. His powerful writing, reproduced in countless texts and student minds, propagates phallogocentric and patriarchal values. The eternal identity sought by Kierkegaard in Christian faith, through suffering, guilt, despair and sacrifice, is precisely what is rejected by postmodern celebrants of *jouissance* and polymorphous perversity. Walsh relies on the authority of Kierkegaard's assertion that we need a single identity to escape the despair of fragmentation and self-difference. But this begs the question of 'postmodern feminism'.

The exegesis of Kierkegaardian aesthetics on its own terms, as is the case with *Living Poetically*, serves to obscure the values of the discursive and disciplinary formations to which it belongs. Poststructural readings of Kierkegaard, while perhaps at variance with Kierkegaard's intentions, at least open the possibility of radical critique. I also think they can be articulated in non-violent and illuminating ways onto Kierkegaardian texts, as I have suggested with respect to the work of Kristeva and Irigaray.

William McDonald

Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

This new book by Fredric Jameson, based upon a series of lectures given in 1991 in California, continues his endeavour to present a 'Marxisant' critique of the dominant theories of postmodernity and to elaborate a more adequate diagnosis of our epoch, insofar as our entanglement in it permits. The three chapters of the book in fact constitute three quite independent essays, though they were intended by their author to supplement each other.

The first essay ('Antinomies of Postmodernity') is from a general theoretical standpoint the most ambitious and interesting. It attempts to outline some irresolvable contradictions of contemporary thought and culture which, as common conceptual dilemmas, underlie the diversity of particular positions and opinions—contradictions that completely exclude each other, yet simultaneously and without any mediation collapse into each other.

Since for Jameson the most significant outcome of this is the immobilisation of a social imagination imprisoned in an eternal present, the second chapter ('Utopia, Modernity and Death') is a 'mournful' evocation of a lost past, a recall of the repressed idea of Utopia. More precisely, it is a recall of the idea of Utopia that was nurtured by what Jameson calls the (now disappeared) Second World—the world of socialist experiment and its culture. Concretely, this second chapter deals with the literary analysis and interpretation of Andrei Platonov's novel *Chevengur*, a work written in the late 1920s but not published until the 1980s.

Lastly, the concluding chapter ('The Constraints of Postmodernism')—in the form of a typology and using architecture as an example—explores the possibility

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of active cultural responses to the antinomies of postmodernity, indicating the structural limitations of these responses to what for those of us in the present must remain irresolvable.

According to the differing aim and contents of each of these three essays, the method exemplified by each is different: in the first chapter it is dialectical; in the second, deep-psychological; in the third, semiotic. The reader who would recover that reading desired by the author, however, will encounter some difficulties. Not only are there understandable discontinuities and gaps between the three chapters, there are also considerable conceptual obstacles to their 'unification'.

This is not the only aspect of the book that may cause frustration, however. Another is the impenetrable opacity of many of its formulations. At the very beginning of the volume one comes upon characterisations of our epoch like the following: 'So it is that depth forms (if any exist, like prehistoric monsters) tend to be projected up upon the surface in the anamorphic flatness of a scarcely recognisable afterimage, lighting up upon the board in the form of a logical paradox or a textual paralogue' (p.4). And what sense is one to make of the assertions 'the contradiction is a singular substance' (p.2) and 'time is today a function of speed' (p.8)? Nor will the reader's confidence in the author be enhanced by a number of elementary philosophical howlers: by his declaring the 'improductivity' of Kantian antinomies on p.2, for example, or his misrepresenting the idea of the categorical imperative on p.42; by his completely confused discussion of the notion of 'civil society' on pp.154-155, and so on.

It would be unjust, however, not to acknowledge immediately that all these are the disturbing symptoms, not of any ineptitude on the author's part, but of an unrestrained rhetoric and carelessness (as well as of a disrespect for the reader). Beyond a formidable power of interpretation which is especially impressive in the third chapter, Jameson betrays a genuine capacity to discuss theoretical (including philosophical) issues in both an informed and informative way. And if some chunks of the book are (for this reader at least) impenetrably obscure, enough remains of unquestionable theoretical interest.

Jameson offers a diagnosis of our present, of postmodernity understood in an historical and sociological sense. Though he draws a number of fine distinctions between the modern and the postmodern, fundamental to his analysis is a characterisation of our postmodern epoch—identified as the third, multinational, global and informational stage of capitalism—as fully accomplishing a process of modernisation (commodification; instrumental rationalisation; urbanisation; and so on) which was only the *project* of modernity or the second, imperialist and monopolist stage of capitalism.

It is on this basis that he outlines the antinomies of the present. The antinomy, first, of Time: an historically specific form of temporality in which an unparalleled rate of change goes together with unparalleled standardisation; absolute change that, because it changes nothing, is revealed as a form of stasis. Then there is the antinomy of Space: the homogenisation of the entire world in which enclaves of precapitalist difference are obliterated along with all boundaries, including those between the urban and the provincial—an homogenisation which at the same time, however, appears as the ground of unlimited diversity and heterogeneity. Third, we have the antinomy of Nature: nature's disappearance as fact and as a

valid norm, on the one hand (in antifoundationalism the idea of nature as an object of knowledge disappears; in antiessentialism, the idea of a *human* nature), and on the other, nature's simultaneous return as the object of a passionate awareness, albeit with a repressive, disempowering character. Lastly, the antinomy of Utopia: a virulent anti-Utopianism which 'reveals itself as a vibrant form of Utopianism in its own right' (p.67). In each case, Jameson at least gestures towards the disclosure of some deeper, primarily economic causes. The analysis remains essentially that of 'patterned effects' (p.68), however, for his historical system occludes not only the workability of an alternative future, but the very idea of one.

This diagnosis contains a number of suggestive and noteworthy details—and not a few *non sequiturs*—which cannot be discussed here. As a whole, however, it raises a basic question: *what* is it exactly that is being described? Is it some (dominant) form of theoretical discourse and ideology? Is it the characteristic features of a mass culture's representations? Is it the typical life-experiences of 'postmodern' individuals—or perhaps even some of the constitutive characteristics of the present social system, as yet conceptually distinct from the economic system? Equally unclear is the question of how far this discussion refers to actual facts (as suggested by the characterisation of postmodernity as accomplishment) and how far it refers only to projectively selected tendencies (as stated at some points). The exposition in these respects seems to shift constantly from one level to another, its referent remaining indecipherable.

This has serious consequences for the very status of Jameson's analysis. A symbiosis of technocratic positivism and aestheticising nominalism characterises the 'affirmative' ideologies of postmodernity. What they share is a suspicion of conceptual-categorical thought, a fear of abstractions. Only 'identity' and 'difference' survive—the most abstract and formal of categories which seem 'to offer virtually no content in their own right' (pp.6–7). Or so Jameson argues in his opening critique of ideologies. And yet his critical diagnosis of our antinomies is throughout by the categories of homogeneity and heterogeneity, which are merely other names for identity and difference. Jameson, to be fair, clearly acknowledges this fact (p.66). The justification he has to offer, however—that 'in a fallen or class society . . . [t]here can be no escape from ideology' (p.77)—only raises the old question of whether or not ideology-critique is at all reconcilable with the supposition of the ubiquity of ideology.

Moreover, the issue itself is rendered superfluous by the fact that even this is not consistently carried through in the text. This becomes clearest in Jameson's discussion of Utopia. Our having rendered impossible the very thought of a genuinely different future, of any rationally acceptable idea of Utopia, is our deepest quandary and for Jameson constitutes the defining feature of our postmodernity. This at least is his 'official', unambiguously and consistently reiterated viewpoint. It is a viewpoint that is no less consistently undermined by the text itself, however, which leaves us in no doubt whatsoever that its author knows only too well that such a Utopian future ought to be the Marxian ideal of a non-market society based on collective ownership and communal planning and control. Not only is this explicitly asserted (p.74) but, more importantly, it underlies its whole critical diagnosis. Postmodernity is conceived as being nothing other than late capitalism, its antinomies as being rooted in the effective

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globalisation of the principles of market and profit. Even if the actual causal mechanisms connecting this 'base' with the 'superstructure' are occluded by the system, the existence of this connection is assumed, even declared to be self-evident (p.68).

Even this is not represented consistently, however, for when the memory of the lost socialist Utopia is evoked, it is not this Marxian ideal but the chiliastic Utopia of *Chevangur* that is discussed. *Chevangur's* Utopia is based on the premise of an utter devastation, annihilating all those 'fruits of civilisation' that for Marx constituted the soil and guarantee of the possibility and necessity of a communist transformation. Its projected image is of a 'society' that has abolished any kind of labouring and has not only established a universal brotherhood among humans but has, equally, 'liberated' its cattle and even the oppressed weeds who also 'want communism'. (To the novel's small community, the dim-witted inhabitants of a completely isolated provincial town in the steppe, everything is freely provided by the Sun as the chief cosmic proletarian.) What Jameson fails to mention at all in an otherwise perceptive interpretation is the fact acknowledged by all its commentators that Platonov's novel is a response not only to Soviet experience, but also to one of the strangest products of Russian intellectual history: the millennial phantasmagoria of the religious eccentric Fedorov. Equally, he fails to make it clear—and this in spite of his discussion of the 'ironic' aspects of its Utopia—that the novel is about the necessary, *internal* failure of the Utopian project even before the town is destroyed from the outside by a detachment of Cossacks.

This is not simply a case of one-sided interpretation or, more broadly, of theoretical inconsistency. What these omissions point to is a debilitating lack. If postmodernity represents the capitalist homogenisation of the world, then the demise of the non-capitalist 'Second World' is the premise of its establishment. Furthermore, if the immobilisation of the very thought of Utopia is postmodernity's fundamental feature, then questions concerning the causes of and reasons for this collapse are not only of historical but also of decisive theoretical interest. For these were societies that claimed to have realised the greatest and theoretically most significant of all Utopias—or that were driven, at least in their origin, by a collective effort truly to do so. Jameson carefully avoids raising these issues, other than indirectly. When he does so, however, his remarks only beg the question: these societies, we are told, educated and structured to oppose one form of capitalism, were undone when it mutated into its new, postmodern form because they were unable to withstand its competitive pressures (p.76).

Elsewhere one is presented with a crude example of conspiratorial history. The collapse of Second World communism is treated as an 'ideological achievement' and attributed to the 'overwhelming power' of a capitalist propaganda that identified collective control and planning 'with repression and renunciation, with instinctual impoverishment' (p.30). All else aside, this is an insult to the tens of millions whom Jameson writes off as dim-witted dupes.

Fredric Jameson is regarded, not without justification, as the most significant Marxian or 'Marxisant' cultural critic in America. His new book, however, does not make joyful reading for those who still think that Marxism, in the complexity of its traditions and history and of the lessons they offer—lessons of failure,

certainly, but not only of failure—retains a relevance for us today. A way of thinking unwilling to face up to those traditions, that history, and the lessons of its past cannot expect—does not deserve—a meaningful future.

Gyorgy Markus

Michael Wilding, *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction* (Sydney Studies in Society and Culture 16), Sydney Studies: Leichhardt; Shoestring: Nottingham, 1997.

Patrick White might have been pleasantly displeased with Michael Wilding's *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction*. In this regrouping of essays on Marcus Clarke, Henry Lawson, William Lane, Joseph Furphy, Jack Lindsay, Christina Stead and White, it is White who is the outsider, the writer whose crucifixion of Himmelfarb is 'grotesquely untypical of Australian social reality', the writer whose Voss 'inverts the historical reality of the mass killing of the privileged white explorer' and takes a 'scandalously unrepresentative event as the basis of a social myth'.

I am not entirely convinced by this essay, which seems a little too determined to ignore the possibility that myths might serve other than social roles. It is, however, concerned with 'the politics of modernism', situating White within a larger argument:

The exclusion of the economic and political from the novel is a characteristic of modernism. Confronting socialist realism with its focus on the representatively human, on the socially progressive, on the readily intelligible, modernism chose to privilege the alienated, the outsider, the decadent, the deviant, celebrating human isolation and non-cooperation, expressing despair rather than hope (p.224).

In a sense, then, the essay is a close reading of White's comment that he was 'determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism'.

Wilding's reading of White is also what Laurie Hergenhan, in a backcover blurb, describes as 'challenging criticism', and White is not the only one subjected to it. Readers familiar with a landscape reading of Marcus Clarke's description of the 'Weird Melancholy' of the Australian bush may be surprised by the possibility that Clarke's perception owed as much to hashish as to geography. Readers fond of a sentimental, national Lawson may not want to know that the writing emerges from a more radical socialist commitment which is partly suppressed by nationalist readings. What I would have been inclined to characterise as a strand of fatalism in Lawson's work is interpreted in terms of 'radicalism in retreat', 'the desolate paralysis of the radical movement', 'the climate of repression with the defeat of the unions by the mid-nineties'. Wilding's is an interpretation which pays close attention to particular social detail (something he admires in Lawson's own writing), but which is also able to incorporate notions of the absent and inexpressible.

The inexpressible returns in the essay on *Such is Life*, which argues that the omission of shearers represents the omission of radical unionists and shows 'the

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possibility of a politicized proletariat is absent' and that 'The verbal taboos that Furphy foregrounds are examples of the huge and arbitrary system of social control embodied in language and literature' (p.112). One of the delights of this chapter is the way Wilding moves between Marxist and Freudian perspectives to expose what he so astutely terms the 'parallel between the inexpressible sexual and the inexpressible political'. At the same time he is able to integrate the politics and practicalities of publishing into the material of his reading, detailing how 'the socialist exposition' was excised, leaving 'the analysis of collapse without the dialectic of renewal'. In this way he locates Furphy's work in a tradition of the novel of ideas, placing it with Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, and William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*.

Lane, then, becomes central to the tradition Wilding is remembering and is seen as 'a pioneer in the development of English language socialist realism' creating a narrative of education and conversion and working with materials of evidence and argument. Lane's is a new realism, abandoning plot ('the laborious machinery of bourgeois realism') and favouring an open ending which is itself representative of a positive socialist perspective (the 'hope' that Patrick White could not see among the workers). The chapter on Jack Lindsay finds another conjunction of socialism and modernism:

Without surrendering the socialist commitment to a 'realism' of psychological portrayal and authentic social evidence, Lindsay has nonetheless managed to rearrange these necessary ingredients in such a way that the aesthetic effect is one that breaks free from the limitations of a conventionalized realism. And the modernist disruption of harmonious plot and unified action in favour of tonal juxtapositions allows Lindsay the possibility of directly introducing the analytical. No longer does it need to be disguised in point of view, in metaphor, in symbol. Now it can take its proper role, its own tone. And so the political conflicts of *1649* are foregrounded (pp.152-53).

These are also the political conflicts of the 1930s: Wilding skilfully contextualises the novel, seeing its emphases on surveillance and control as points of contact with the work of Conrad, Hasek and Kafka. At the same time, he maintains that the novel uses 'a history that seeks analogies' (and so moves as much within differences as within similarities) in order to show 'how capitalism established itself over the cooperative impulses, how the cooperative impulses were outmanoeuvred by Junto authoritarian centralism'. In this argument he finds another inexpressible: King Charles. By beginning with the execution of Charles, Lindsay indicates that the king is an absence that allows the real political struggle between 'emergent democracy and communism' and 'the emerging force of Capital'.

Of Stead, Wilding remarks: 'Her aesthetic has not been obviously programmatic and her work has rarely, if ever, been discussed in studies of Marxist writing' (p.220). He himself provides a reading in which Stead's dynamic vision of social and economic relationships is intimately connected to the character of her writing. Her rejection of narrative pattern derives from 'her commitment to rendering and revealing human motivation and behaviour' and her habit of introducing and

naming characters who never again appear expresses her egalitarian understanding. If there is a rough texture to much of Stead's writing, and an element of political scepticism, this too is part of her socialist realist perspective. Discussing *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Wilding observes:

What Stead offers us is an inside picture of the uncertainties and contradictions and uneasinesses of the left. It is not an external attack from a right wing position. The weaknesses observed are all weaknesses the members of the left were only too well aware of. The uncertainties, the ambiguities, are part of the texture of that world. And it is a world in which there are many undercurrents, many contradictions, many unexplained things: this is not the classic nineteenth century bourgeois novel in which everything is explained, conspiracies revealed, meanings made clear. Social activities are no longer seen as so easily explicable (p.186).

One of the (cumulative) effects of this collection is to undo the idea of a simple Australian realism by suggesting a tradition that is much more radical and much more various in its literary and social visions. Yet *Studies in Classic Australian Fiction* is not merely a work of political commitment; it is a work of historical scholarship and cosmopolitan reference, a work in which details, large and small, are valued equally for their literary and social reality. Perhaps this is because it is also a work which displays some sympathy for the real processes of creative writing. When, in his reading of Stead, Wilding is dissolving the all too conventional distinction between 'realistic' and 'symbolic', he notes that 'inventing is not a matter of "making it up" but of discovering the meaning of what is all around'.

Noel Rowe

Barry Spurr, *Biographer's Lives—A Literary-Critical Analysis of the Complete Prose Works of Lytton Strachey (1880–1932): A Reassessment of His Achievement and Career*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1995.

Giles Lytton Strachey sought and enjoyed notoriety, and would have been delighted to know that since his death controversy has continued to pursue him. It focusses on the biographies which his contemporaries recognized as his chief achievement, and for which he continues to be best known. Accordingly, there is by now a considerable body of literature examining Strachey's life and achievements, and not the least achievement of Barry Spurr's book is its thorough and judicious conspectus of the field. But that survey is only the beginning of Spurr's achievements. In this useful and well-written book, he makes a spirited intervention in the continuing disagreement about Strachey as a biographer, and he also directs attention to major aspects of Strachey's achievement which have been almost entirely ignored. In addition he subjects Strachey's writing to the most delicate and probing analysis any Stracheyan critic has yet brought to bear. For these contributions, this is a book to be grateful for.

Strachey's first successful book was a work of popular criticism, *Landmarks in French Literature*, but it was his biographies, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria* and *Elizabeth and Essex*, particularly the first of these, that brought him the public attention he craved. He and his friends were products of Victorianism, and reacted

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against it with passionate hatred. In particular they loathed what they saw as the life-denying influence of Victorian Christianity. For them, the very term 'Victorian' was one of abuse, and Strachey's title *Eminent Victorians* accordingly was an oxymoron of deeply satirical intent. He was attempting to come to terms with the challenge posed by his parents' generation, by toppling them from their pedestal, and he was also fanatically anti-Christian. To a British reading public which both venerated and struggled against the achievements of the nineteenth century, Strachey's book was a shock and a liberation.

Strachey's model was Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, and the essays which make up *Eminent Victorians* are compressed, vivid and scintillating. For a reader accustomed to labouring with yawning groans through the two- and three-volumed hagiographies with which Victorian widows too often memorialized their distinguished departed spouses, Strachey's vivacity and brevity came as a delicious relief. But there was a price to be paid for his liveliness. Several of his essays, notably those on Dr Thomas Arnold and Cardinal Manning, are more concerned to be amusing than to be accurate, and this is a fatal flaw in a biographer.

Challenged to support his claim that Dr Arnold's legs were too short for his body, Strachey retorted that Dr Arnold was the kind of man whose legs *would* be too short for his body. Wishing, in the absence of evidence, to suggest that Manning was promised rapid advancement if he converted to Roman Catholicism, he simply invented a conversation to that effect between Manning and the Pope. It is clear that if facts were lacking to support his argument, he was quite willing to fabricate them. To quote Spurr, Strachey 'cunningly manipulates his sources, invents incidents, and often omits pertinent material in a highly selective portraiture precisely designed for the expression of his points of view' (p.21).

And though these defects, catastrophic from the historian's point of view, are most obvious in *Eminent Victorians*, they remained a characteristic of Strachey's biographical writing in his other major works too. He was the modern originator of what the Canadian critic Ira Nadel has approvingly called 'the creative fact'. If biography is documentary, Strachey's form of it is docu-drama. The reader is unwise to accept any of his 'facts' at face value. Nadel would argue that this does not matter; Spurr is rather more subtle.

'No graver charge could be made against a historian', wrote a biographer, than that 'he wrote what was false in order to deceive'. That biographer was Strachey himself, writing in 1905, without apparent irony. How can Spurr defend him against the charge? The last four words of Strachey's sentence hold the key: Spurr denies that Strachey's aim was to deceive. On the contrary, Spurr argues, Strachey's use of 'creative facts' allowed him to penetrate to the heart of his subjects in a way that more cautious and pedestrian biographers could not. Strachey may have got some of his facts wrong, but his analyses of his subjects, Spurr argues, are unerring. Spurr admits that Strachey's essay on Dr Arnold is indefensible (p.28), and he is dubious about some aspects of the essay on Manning; but the rest of Strachey's biographical writing he defends. 'Strachey . . . reclaimed biography for art and true judgement, and the best biographical work of today is in a direct line from his example', he writes boldly (p.118).

Spurr is not alone in making this claim—Lord Skidelsky, Maynard Keynes's biographer, called Strachey 'the father of modern biography'—but it remains a

deeply unconvincing one. The Modern Biography shelves in our bookstores are not filled with witty, brief, inaccurate, Stracheyan volumes. Quite the reverse: the twentieth century's production of massive, archival lives, monuments of scholarly accuracy, show clearly who the true father of modern biography is. Richard Ellmann's *James Joyce* and *Oscar Wilde*, George Painter's *Marcel Proust*, Leon Edel's *Henry James*, even Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey* (which Spurr greatly admires and aims to complement by his own writing), are in direct line of succession not from Strachey, but from James Boswell. Spurr's counter-argument that Strachey's 'insistence that a human life worthy of biographical immortality needs to be artistically treated is patently evident in the best modern productions' (xvii) is not a strong one: which of the many good biographies produced before Strachey wrote fails to treat its subject artistically?

But it is a sign of the strengths of Spurr's book that even where one disagrees with him, his argument is put persuasively and interestingly enough to engage attention and hold it. And where he breaks new ground, this book becomes an important addition to Strachey studies. In particular, he is a pioneer in the attention he pays to Strachey's letters, to his minor critical articles, and to his style.

Strachey was one of the great correspondents of his generation: he loved writing and receiving letters, and his own are consistently witty, malicious and revealing. His best letters, as Spurr points out, were written to women—to his sister Pippa, to Ottoline Morell, and to Virginia Woolf—and the femininity of his own personality emerges clearly in these communications with clever, sensitive women, every aspect of whose lives fascinated him. (Spurr is rather less thorough in commenting on Strachey's letters to men: in particular, the extraordinary letters he wrote to Leonard Woolf, one of the few heterosexual men to whom he revealed himself fully, would have made a valuable addition to Spurr's study. In them a different Strachey is revealed: sexually anguished, deeply angry at a world which seemed to have rejected him, raging at God, and bitterly contemptuous of a whole range of his fellow human beings: blacks, Jews, Christians, people of any other class than his own.)

In his letters, as in everything he wrote, Strachey honed his characteristic writing style, and Spurr's analysis of this is original and masterly. He traces in detail the seminal influence of the stylists Strachey most admired, from Bacon to Samuel Butler, focussing particularly on Edward Gibbon. For it was from Gibbon, Spurr argues persuasively, that Strachey learned the stylistic trick most consistently typical of his writing throughout his career: the triplet. The ternary formation of words, phrases and whole sentences, once Spurr has pointed it out, is everywhere to be found in Strachey's writing. Even as a sixteen year old rewriting 'Little Red Riding Hood', he would describe 'the crafty eye, the sinister jowl, and the gaunt form of the wolf'. As a mature writer, he would describe the excesses of pre-Revolutionary France in the same cumulative terms: 'the scandal of arbitrary imprisonment, the futile barbarism of torture, the medieval abominations of the penal code'. What might have become a monotonous literary tic in the hands of a lesser writer becomes for Strachey a supple and infinitely various instrument, and Spurr's analysis of it is a case-study in close and informed reading.

Equally revealing is his amusing discussion of what he terms Strachey's

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'Camp Mandarin' style, combining erudition with mincing absurdity, epigrammatic wit with unsustainable judgements masquerading as eternal law. Strachey's description of Michelet's writing, quoted by Spurr (p.96), can stand as self-analysis too: 'in its strange convulsive style, its capricious and imaginative treatment of facts, and its undisguised bias, it shows up the spectacle of the past in a series of lurid lightning flashes'. Spurr is of course an advocate for Strachey, but he has too clear an eye to fail to notice and acknowledge his subject's failures as a stylist: his weakness for clichés, which grew as he aged, and his production of the feeblest late-Victorian poetry at a time when Eliot and Pound were revealing the possibilities of Modernist verse to anyone who had ears to hear. But when it came to the writing of the twentieth century, Strachey had ears of tin. It is a credit to his fair-mindedness that Spurr is alive to the degree to which Strachey was a literary anachronism.

His discussion of Strachey's shorter critical writings, on such diverse figures as Racine and Pope, show, by way of balance, how penetrating and accurate a critic Strachey was of the writing of centuries other than his own, and Spurr's discussion should do much to bring these essays back to scholarly attention. This original and wide-ranging study should find a large audience. But its dull PhD-thesis title is unlikely to attract one, and the production of the volume, by the Edwin Mellen Press, is of a very low standard: printing and layout are inferior to those possible for anyone equipped with a desktop publishing program and a good laser printer. Barry Spurr and this book deserve better.

Peter Alexander