



## Book Reviews

**Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.**

In the closing pages of his widely read book of a dozen years ago, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty sketched his idea of the appropriate form of the modern philosopher's participation in the ongoing 'conversation' of culture. Philosophers had tended to arrogate to themselves the role of cultural judge, ruling on the utterances of their non-philosophical colleagues. This self-image fitted with their sense of what philosophy was, a second order project in which general principles determining what could count as knowledge, reason, meaningfulness, and so on, were worked out and applied to other, first order discourses like science, art, or ethics. But the grounds of this self-image had been undermined by modern philosophers themselves as they had demolished all the variants and vestiges of that conception of the philosophical project traceable to Plato. Philosophy as the search for the essences of things, 'essentialism', or for the foundations of knowledge, 'foundationalism', was dead. Philosophers had come to acknowledge this, at least implicitly, in the particularities of their work. What they had yet to do was to take this change seriously and reorient themselves with respect to the discourses of their non-philosophical colleagues. They should be engaging in the cultural conversation as partners on the same level as the non-philosophers, not judges pronouncing on them from on high.

This challenge to the idea of philosopher as judge of the form of non-philosophical utterances echoed the attack made by Hegel in the early nineteenth century on the foundationalism of Kant's philosophy. Kant had located philosophy at a 'transcendental' level: it explored the form of knowledge in abstraction from issues of *content*. This attempt to work out the *conditions* of knowing in isolation from the processes of learning about the empirical world was, Hegel claimed, akin to trying to learn to swim without going in the water. This line of thought was taken up by many of the seminal thinkers of 'continental' philosophy, despite the eclipse of Hegelianism itself. Such post-Hegelian thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault, all seemed to agree that Platonism had been knocked off its perch. Philosophy in the old sense was dead.

One of the striking things about Rorty's book was that he saw the demise of the 'essentialist' or 'foundationalist' heritage of Plato as coming equally from a tradition which had given Hegel and post-Hegelianism a very wide birth. That he saw a convergence between the 'continentals' and the later Wittgenstein may have not been so surprising. But the idea that one reached much the same position via the path taken by recent leading 'serious' analytic philosophers was. For Rorty, being convinced by Quine, Sellars or Davidson should make you into the same sort of philosopher that you would become by being convinced by Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida: these apparently *very* different sorts of thinkers seemed to be saying much the same thing.

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Like many other tribes-people, philosophers tend to divide themselves into opposed moieties. I imagine as many followers of Quine or Davidson took umbrage at the Rortian crossing of the categories as did Heideggerians or Derrideans. To those on the extreme 'right' of the analytic movement the writings of Heidegger or Derrida do not even approach philosophy while for many of the continental post-Hegelians, analytic philosophers exemplify the end point of the positivist degeneration of reason plaguing modernity. But even to those located somewhere in between, Rorty's anti-essentialist coalition often appeared to reduce and simplify their favourite philosophers beyond recognition.

In the years since that book appeared Rorty's philosophical views do not seem to have substantially changed. His approach is still based on a relaxed pragmatic 'anti-essentialism' which draws most heavily on the three philosophers he earlier described as the most important of the century: Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey. But this does not mean that Rorty's views have not continued to develop. Indeed, it is such a development that provides an interesting focus of attention in this collection of extremely readable and instructive essays. It is a development which we might see as proceeding along two parallel and complementary paths.

First, Rorty has continued to refine his story of how the views of Wittgenstein, Heidegger and, increasingly Derrida, 'chime' with the philosopher with whom he clearly identifies most—the American pragmatist John Dewey. As the title of this collection of twelve essays suggests, a number of these—the first four—centre substantially on Heidegger. Here he addresses much more specifically than before the question of how the views of this pessimistic German, disdainful of modernity with its technological power and democratic politics, converge with those of Dewey, a champion of the same technological and democratic aspects of modern life. Rorty seems to be imagining Heidegger as an American immigrant who, on arriving in the New World and taking up with new friends has learnt to speak like a Yankee. What aspects of his thought would he have shed as merely reflecting the particularities of his former time and place and which would he have hung onto as his own?

Rorty convincingly shows the strong pragmatist strain in Heidegger's work, especially his earlier work, but I suspect that many will still not be persuaded by this philosophical migration. Nevertheless, the issues raised and discussed here have a relevance far beyond the narrow realm of Heidegger interpretation and are surely as important as philosophical issues can be. The pragmatist Heidegger can be read as a device which allows Rorty to further his own lines of thought on the large philosophical issues of the age. Here, as in most of the essays in the book, Rorty has something definite, interesting and timely to say, and he says it lucidly and thoughtfully.

It is this democratised, pragmatist Heidegger who moves along the second of Rorty's developmental paths. Rorty here fills out and exemplifies what it is to be that thorough-going pragmatist that has 'circumvented' Platonism. It is in these essays, coming after a clutch of essays on Derrida and making up the remaining third of the book, that Rorty tries out his pragmatism with his fellow interlocutors, seeing what it allows him to say on the sorts of issues currently occupying so much interdisciplinary conversational space in the humanities.

In these essays Rorty for the most part engages with icons adopted by the American 'cultural left' (roughly the 'new left' minus Marx plus Heidegger) such as Foucault, De Man and Lyotard. Here Rorty is entering into what is not so much a conversation as a war within the academy. This has come to be a field in which

engagement with the opposing side is typically characterised by indignation, arrogant posturing and uninformed reflex denunciation. In this context Rorty's voice is refreshing in its clarity and level-headedness and for its capacity to get at substantial issues often buried by the rhetoric.

As an advocate of the anti-essentialism of the post-Hegelian Europeans, Rorty is, of course, on a particular side of the barricades. But the implications he draws from this set him apart from many of his fellow cultural radicals. Politically, the heroes of the cultural left tend to be grouped not by what they share but by what they oppose: there is probably very little that, say, Heidegger and Foucault would have in common in this respect save their opposition to 'bourgeois liberalism'. But it is precisely the political position or 'moral self-image' of the reformist 'bourgeois liberal' that Rorty adopts. (One suspects that he attempts to do to 'bourgeois' what Proudhon did to 'anarchist'.)

In these essays Rorty fills out that split between the philosophical and the political which had become apparent in his recent collection *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He rejects those aspects of post-Hegelian anti-essentialism which lead to a generalised critique of the modern world and its liberal political institutions. While seeing the anti-dogmatic aspects of this type of thought as *favourable* to democratic politics, he believes that there is no substantial link between such a culturally radical position and *any* particular political position. No 'argumentative roads' lead from anti-essentialism to the quasi-existentialist moral self-images or the anarchist politics that the cultural left tends to adopt. Neither are there particular links between the skills and techniques that the cultural left tend to prize (deconstruction and its variants) and progressive or radical politics. The pragmatist assesses things in terms of their usefulness, and the uses to which the radical curriculum tends to be put have to do with private projects of self-constitution and are largely indifferent to one's publicly moral identity.

This of course means that for Rorty the *fear* that many liberals have of the culturally radical curriculum are likewise misplaced. Public morality neither needs nor can achieve a philosophical grounding and so it is not threatened by threats to its imaginary grounds.

Regardless of whether one is convinced or not by Rorty's arguments there is much in this volume to make it well worth the read. Rorty can convey in a general and lucid way what is at issue in modern disputes within philosophy and the humanities as well as anyone I can think of. But in these essays he also does much more than this. He engages with a broad range of substantial living issues from a distinct point of view which is being mapped out and elaborated in the very process. Rorty has not only taught himself to swim by jumping in the deep end, he seems to be inventing a wholly new style.

Paul Redding

**Norman Talbot, *Four Zoas of Australia*; Robert Harris, *JANE, Interlinear & Other Poems*; Lily Brett, *Unintended Consequences*, Sydney: Paper Bark Press, 1992.**

Some readers may decide that *Four Zoas of Australia* is a reduction they do not like. Although it does, with something of Blake's gnostic ambition, resist the unified, male, dogmatised God, it lowers its sights when it begins with a familiar invocation

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of 'the poet Jesus' (which may be all the more subversive for being so familiar). Nor does Talbot's text claim the authority of inspired madness or pursue the dream of furious innocence (though inspiration and innocence still work as shadows in its quest). And Talbot's angels have been tamed, appearing in moments like 'Goosewings through the air' and 'A silver gull floats past the Codices', much closer to earth and its ironies.

But there are enough jokes and ironies to suggest that Talbot's text is aware of the losses involved in its translation and is, indeed, shaping itself from those losses. 'Maggie Farming in Wales' asks a lower-case magpie, 'Did he who made the lamb, make thee?' and implies a demonic force in the shadowside of its own puns: 'twenty-three of [the sheep] are black', 'One magpie ... killing time'. Is it a failure of taste? Is it a loss of religio-poetic nerve? Or could it be read as a comic attack on the authority of 'The Tyger', repositioning, but still reclaiming Blake's sense of awe? (Even so, Talbot's attitude seems to me more reverence than awe: his sense of ambivalence is dispersed rather than concentrated.)

Talbot also continues his interest in Tristan, through whom he explores 'the relationship between the absolute wanderer and the hero of quest-romance' (*Makar*, September, 1975, 11). Tristan is found searching for the elusive harmonies of love as he does the rounds of Newcastle's beaches. His language has become 'half-silvered bits and mirrorshards'. Talbot's use of settings, titles and forms creates an affectionate parody which actually preserves the shadow of heroic desire. 'The Wrath of Tibrogargan', one of the epilogues, declares: 'Valuing things is an act of turning away./ of mistranslation ...' It even suggests that Talbot's playful versions of Blake are informed by a simple belief in love:

What are we all, without that shadow gaze  
Of a worn country where we cry to dream again?  
But love's transparent. But love names & breaks ...

However, this voice may be Adam's, not Blake's, and Talbot's desire for harmony, while it acknowledges intellectually 'the splendid failure to merge', may be, emotionally and tonally, simpler than Blake's. I am not yet convinced, therefore, that the Blakean frames are effective. They are distracting: they could easily give priority to an interpretive expectation which interferes with the individuality of poems like 'The Seafolding of Harri Jones', 'Mansfield Road & Holywell', 'The Owl's Voice' and 'The Pinkerton Haiku' and with the pleasure of reading them.

Robert Harris, in the sequences 'Seven Songs for Sydney' and 'JANE, Interlinear', takes two historical events—the sinking of HMAS Sydney and the execution of Lady Jane Grey and plays with competing versions of these events, placing poetry itself 'in the jaws between tactics and ethics', yet making death itself inviolate, unreadable. I do not find 'Seven Songs for Sydney' effective: its drama is too introverted, too obscure, leaving its socio-moral commentary without a sharp focus. Other readers may well decide that the poem establishes its own 'enigmatic page/ criss-crossed by selective reportage' and intends to drop its readers in 'where the currents divide'.

The currents are working overtime in 'JANE, Interlinear', as Harris considers how history can use hypothetical outcomes to soften the impact of actual ones, how art can be implicated in history's lies (though Harris also works the idea that art sees under the aspect of eternity), how the old men extend their political power (and sexual ego) through the young woman (though there is something intriguing about

the way the dead woman functions here as poetic icon), and how 'Opposing courses/ make an equal/ guilt'. It is an interesting reflection on the moral complexities of history.

To represent the interlinear processes of reading, the sequence employs a three-columned visual arrangement which keeps the reader continually moving between the horizontal and vertical directions of the text. This technique is afforded a philosophical respectability: 'Time/ held the notes/ apart and in relation'. But theory does not make a poem and, while there are some pieces which are effective in their fluid, fractured way ('The Deer At Bradgate' and 'In Anne Boleyn's Garden'), the overall effect is to scatter sympathy. Indeed, the technique heightens the sequence's hidden conflict: its desire to comment on and participate in what Francis Webb called the 'stops and gaps' of truth somewhat disguises its desire to have Jane as an object for lyrical meditation, a 'diminutive pale protagonist' who, absolutised by death, now defeats all versions of her.

Brett's *Unintended Consequences*, preoccupied with the Holocaust, is moving, but limited, despite the bleak smile it sometimes manages. There are some defiant approaches to happiness which bring welcome relief and suggest new directions for the poetry: some warm celebrations of woman-friendship--'To Watch' (For Helen Garner), 'My Best Friend', 'This Friend'—and some witty meditations on the humble handbag.

Brett's is a world of feeling finely observed but barely trusted: the security of a clean bed (and the fascination with 'clean'), the fear of happiness, the residue of sensual deprivation, the burden of hope, the cult of analysts, the competition with the dead, the almost genetic sadness which unifies Jews from different cities, and the pettiness which sometimes grows from unspeakable suffering. It is a world in which the Holocaust cannot be used to romanticise its victims: the poetry implies that memory can become oppressive, that suffering, even great suffering, can easily become a petty excuse, and that our attachments to the extraordinary (whether good or evil) can lead us to betray the ordinary.

Brett's is also a world in which the breath is meted out in short, caught lines. It is, in part, a breath which grips itself to 'keep/ the universe/ intact'. It is, in part, a breath on the edge of suspense, staying as still as possible in case it alerts the ghosts of the gestapo. Within its short lines, Brett's poetry prefers a quick, clean image. Here words like 'fragile', 'bloodless' and 'fearful' assume extra significance: the poetry is shadowed by ghosts, afraid of becoming full-bodied, unable to relax into a line or a place. At the same time, these brevities give the Holocaust a shape and size which a more expansive and aggressive rhetoric might not manage. It is as if the poetry is saying that the Holocaust is an image of such monstrosity that it almost separates us from language, leaving us connected only by a slender thread.

It is as if Brett fears that too much noise will break that thread. So she keeps her language self-contained. Talbot is converting the prophetic into the poetic and ironic, but he does not exclude a pentecostal resonance: 'there's always/ the wind on some heath to borrow'. Harris, the one who most enacts the divisions within language, declares, in 'Studying Ezekiel', that it is time to 'filch speech back from the packs who bay for Baal' and defeat 'the fake prophets (who) subdivide 'the voice of God'', then ends: 'Your message? At length a fugitive verifies it.' Is the prophet Ezekiel his fugitive? Brett, who has the greater moral issue, does not assume a prophetic stance. Her position is interior, vulnerable, and so thinly direct as to avoid 'stance'.

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However, for the reader who wants pleasure, Talbot's 'The Pinkerton Haiku' is a gem. His command of the haiku, his subtle appreciation of its Eastern and Western, its masculine and feminine versions, his depiction of a romantic quest in which love is lost to the single, male ego, come together in a work which is very moving and beautiful. And the beautiful may be more important than the prophetic in a world of fugitives.

Noel Rowe

### **David Buchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry*, Melbourne and Sydney: Macmillan, 1991.**

Is it possible for a book to introduce students to literary theory and the critical practices related to it unless the book is itself an example of distinguished theoretical thinking and of practical criticism? *Contemporary Literary Theory* suggests that the answer must be 'No'.

It is a short text book (144 pages) which offers to expound six theories or theoretical currents, and to show how the theories produce distinctive kinds of readings when 'applied to' poems. The theories are: New Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Russian Formalism, Marxist and other historicisms, and the major currents within feminist literary theory, viz. American socio-historicism, French post-structuralism and British Marxist-socialist feminism. The odd choice of New Criticism as a *contemporary* theory is explained by the fact that it is still taught. The chapter on feminist theory is contributed by Barbara H. Milech, the rest are all by Buchbinder.

The exposition of the theories is very uneven in quality. Buchbinder uses the term, 'New Criticism', to cover not only the American New Critics such as Ransom and Brooks, but also the Chicago Aristotelians, and the British critics, I. A. Richards, W. Empson and F. R. Leavis. As a result, the specificity of the views of the Chicagoans and the British virtually disappears. For Buchbinder 'New Criticism' is a floppy bag into which everything before the Anglo-Saxon appropriation of structuralism can be thrown. By this means all pre-structuralist theory except that of American New Criticism can be ignored.

In the chapter on structuralism we are given a clear account of Saussure's basic ideas of language, and Jakobson's adaptation of them for the study of literary texts. But structuralist ideology is foisted on Saussure in what is now, unfortunately, the usual way: he is said to have held that our perception of reality is constructed by language, and that language is the governing model for all aspects of human activity (p.36) (whereas he only claimed that language is the condition for distinct thought, and that linguistics is the model for other branches of semiology, which for him did not cover all the human sciences).

The account of Derrida's ideas is clearer, and more plausible than other introductory accounts I have seen, but at crucial points depends on the expected evasiveness and ambiguity: because the text 'must find accommodation in linguistic and cultural codes that *may be* contradictory, the discourse of the text *is unlikely to be* unitary and unambiguous. Thus, *all texts may be said to contain* disruptive elements, points of rupture or gaps ...' (p.57) (my italics). Does 'may be said to contain' mean 'may contain' or 'do contain'? Or, has the difference between the subjunctive and indicative moods been deconstructed? This kind of looseness of

thought is common in the book.

The account of Russian Formalism is Buchbinder's best exposition. It is crisp and clear, and he quotes well from the primary sources, which gives a certain concreteness to the account.

By contrast, the chapter on historicist approaches is undoubtedly the worst in the book. It tries to cover too much, and so is cursory and superficial. (It is no reply to urge the shortness of the book. Why not write a longer book?). The account of Marx's ideas is so erroneous that one cannot help suspecting deliberate intent: 'the middle class ... with the aristocracy will wither away as capitalism becomes obsolescent' (p. 105) ... 'eventually ... capitalism will die of its own accord, and workers' socialism will replace it' (p.110). Well, thank God we don't have to make a revolution any more. The views of Althusser and Macherey are presented as *the* literary theory of Marxism (and presented only in Eagleton's summaries). The views on literature of Plekhanov, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukacs, Goldmann ... are not mentioned, nor are their writings listed in the 'Suggestions for Further Reading'. We are not told that Althusser and Macherey's notion of the gaps and silences in texts derives from Freud and not Marx, nor that Althusser's conception of ideology derives from Durkheim. In general, Marxism in this book is completely mystified. The accounts of Bakhtin, Foucault, and the New Historicism are so brief as to be useless. Post-colonial criticism is rendered ridiculous by the examples chosen to illustrate ethnocentricity—Keats' ode, 'To Autumn', and Browning's 'Oh to be in England/ Now that April's there ...' (p.115). For a northern hemisphere poet to write about northern hemisphere seasons is oppressive and marginalising, it seems.

Milech offers a concise account of the history of discourses about women, and of feminist theories and practices. She writes from a standpoint of commitment, and gives some sense of the ongoing debate within feminism. Her chapter is superior in interest to Buchbinder's, but she too has her blind spots and absurdities. She passes without comment the stupid idea that logical thinking is masculinist, an idea which her own chapter proves false.

But, the book claims a special value for itself in offering to illustrate the kinds of 'reading' that these theories make possible, and here, it seems to me, it fails miserably. The structuralist reading tries to conceal its triviality by operating on a nonsense poem by Carroll; the 'Marxist' reading has nothing Marxist about it, and is utterly banal; the deconstructionist, Russian Formalist, and feminist readings are indistinguishable from New Criticism—only the terminology is changed. The authors do not seem qualified to turn the theories into practice. The readings are either laborious analyses of the obvious, or exercises in ingenious irrelevance. Interest in the poems is generally absent, having been replaced by a preoccupation with constructing the readings. Students will only learn from these examples to be heavy-handed, grossly inept, or frivolous.

As a theoretical discourse, this book is naive, superficial, and quite uncritical. Buchbinder says he will consider the strengths and weaknesses of each theory, but this is done perfunctorily or not at all. The looseness of the exposition constantly raises large questions in the reader's mind, but Buchbinder passes blithely on without noticing them. The need for a poetics to distinguish valid from invalid readings is mentioned at the end of the chapter on New Criticism, but this topic then disappears from the book (understandably so, given the readings of poems offered by Buchbinder). The issue of value is briefly mentioned in the introduction and conclusion, but otherwise totally ignored. As an example of theoretical

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thinking, the book lacks all seriousness. It offers the theories as, by implication, all equally valid, and not really in competition with one another. One can be a structuralist on Monday, a deconstructionist on Wednesday, and a Marxist on Friday, it appears. The vast ideological shifts that occur in the purpose of studying literature as we pass from theory to theory are generally ignored. The issue of the direction of enquiry, whether towards reading individual texts more adequately, or towards establishing a body of theoretical knowledge, is glossed over.

The great, gaping hole in the book ('gap', 'silence', 'absence') is its failure to recognise that all the methods of 'reading' discussed presuppose that the text has already been read in another and more fundamental way: i.e., that the black marks on the page have been constituted into words in particular arrangements within the reader's mind, that the reader has in fact reproduced the text as adequately as possible in his or her consciousness. Unless this process takes place, there is no object for all the other methods of 'reading' to attend to. This primary kind of reading, discussed by Richards and Leavis, and theorised by hermeneutics is totally ignored. As a result this book's conception of what a reader needs to bring to a text is quite naive. Buchbinder talks of 'applying theories', as though all one brought to the reading of a text was a set of abstract ideas. Whereas, before any ideas can be applied, the reader must have reproduced the text in his or her own mind by bringing to bear relevant experience and adequate mental capacities (what used to be called sensibility). And in this reproduction of the text considerations of value are intrinsic.

Comparison of the first chapter with the last suggests that the book is offered to students in a spirit of cynical careerism. The classroom, we are told, is a situation of power where teachers expect students to provide readings of a certain kind, and where, apparently, the students have no choice but to do so. By implication academics must also conform to the views of their senior colleagues. As Buchbinder says, 'it is important for us to have several theoretical strings to our bows ... at different points in our careers as students or scholars' (pp.7-8).

When 'Theory' can produce a book that so evidently has no interest in literature or even in theory, can its demise be long in coming? Theorising about literature and the conditions of its existence ought to be a serious business, and fortunately there are intellectual traditions within which it can be done (hermeneutics, phenomenology, reader-response theory—none of which are mentioned in this book—and Marxism). But, if the academic study of English literature were doomed to continue in the spirit and at the level of thinking represented by this book, intelligent students would be well advised to abandon it.

*David Brooks*

**Edmund J. Smyth (ed.), *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, London: Batsford, 1991.**

Publishers, it seems, are less disturbed than academic commentators by the pieties of 'traditional' or 'liberal humanist' criticism. 'How can we begin to establish a canon for a movement in full swing around us ... ?' asks the paperback cover of *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*. Not that we need feel anxious; the 'ten leading specialists in the subject' that contribute to this volume will resolve our dilemma by 'concentrat[ing] on the fundamental concerns of the leading

Postmodernist writers'. The problem is that 'canons' and 'concentration' and 'fundamentals'—indeed, even 'concern'—are amongst the inherited manifold of 'constructs' that, according to many of the specialists themselves, are legitimately challenged or rejected by the postmodernists. Again, once inside the covers, we find that the first of the two sections of the book is entitled 'Centres of Postmodernism', even though one of the few characteristics upon which *all* the specialists are agreed is 'the *decentring* impulse of postmodern writing' (Editor's Introduction, p.14).

Then there is the further irony that the reader is being offered 'a useful guide' to a fiction in which 'the [reader's] self disappears under a welter of proliferating narratives, 'forking paths', which never cohere or become commensurable with one another' (Thomas Docherty, p.185); in which '“vertigo” is a word commonly used to describe the effects of ... textual strategies, for the reader is confronted not only with an undecidable situation, but a logically impossible one. Paradoxes abound. Words are shown to be liable to erasure' (John Mepham, p.151). What we have, in short, is a guide to a literature that self-consciously and scrupulously denies us guidance, abandoning us *Dans la labyrinthe* (Robbe-Grillet).

But the consummate irony—meta-irony?—is that academic publishing, through which we academics secure institutional advancement by explaining our own explanations of literary phenomena, might reasonably be said to stand as a composite symbol of all that we are told is anathema to the postmodernists. To quote Linda Hutcheon's essay: 'postmodern art and theory work to reveal the complicity of discourse and power' and 'to interrogate and demystify totalising systems that unify with an eye to power'; 'Art, theory, criticism are not really separable from the institutions (publishing houses, galleries, libraries, universities, etc.) which disseminate them' (pp.112, 114). Now, if we add Smyth's introductory insistence that '*Postmodernism is a construction of reading rather than a ... literary period*' (italics mine)—his insistence that postmodernism is only 'what the literary institution has chosen to call Postmodernism' (p.11)—then we are left with a predicament worthy of the postmodernist novel itself: *viz.*, 'the literary institution'—of which the present anthology is an agent—fabricating or 'constructing' a literary historical phenomenon (postmodernism) that is characterised by its contempt for, and subversion of, the very literary institution that constructed it. It is the logic of Groucho Marx, when he objected to becoming a member of a club that would have *him* as a member.

Still, these are ironies that we have come to live with, if not by, and they are perhaps best left to the (decentred) individual's (deferred) conscience. Moreover, the volume is a success, though it succeeds precisely because it fails—if I may be permitted my own deconstructive 'paradox', or *apparent* contradiction (*pace* Mepham). In failing to enlighten, that is, and thus to resolve the various dilemmas that it invokes, the volume manages to keep faith with the complexity of postmodernism *per se*, as well as with its complexity by virtue of its being the object of human enquiry. And in failing to enlighten, the volume also manages to throw considerable light on the topic. Here, it is less the specialization of the contributors that is crucial, than their number, variety, and individual integrity.

The five essays on the 'Centres of Postmodernism' offer what are in effect brief, occasionally descriptive bibliographies comprised of the main postmodernist texts of Britain, America, France, Italy, and Spanish America respectively. Each essayist, however, also evolves a working definition of postmodernism in order to justify his selection of texts, thus anticipating (without pre-empting) the interpretative

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explorations in 'The Critical Agenda' of Part Two. And each essayist has his own interest(s). Randall Stevenson's opening essay, for example, is apologetic in conception, defending the British against accusations of literary conservatism, not to say formal paralysis. David Seed, on the other hand, ranges confidently amongst a larger and more varied choice of American novelists, many of whose critical reflections on their own work save him the trouble of having to speculate as to what postmodernism might mean. Edmund Smyth takes up the attitude of cautiousness that he assumes in his Introduction when he asks whether the *nouveau roman* might reasonably be considered postmodernist. His essay takes the form of an extended and unanswered question, and his own critical persona resembles one of Robbe-Grillet's narrators: dispassionate, suppressing conviction and commitment. In 'Italian Fiction in the 1980s', Michael Caesar allows few critical questions to trouble the unashamedly taxonomic approach that he shares with James Higgins in the latter's short discussion of Spanish American fiction, though Higgins justifiably celebrates the postmodern as a golden age.

The comparative freedom from 'the burden of the past' of the Spanish American writers, as well as the power and congenial absurdity of the rich folk tradition available to them—not to mention a manifold of extra-literary contingencies—signals the wisdom of an approach to postmodernism that respects its function in specific national and linguistic contexts. Oddly enough, however, when considering postmodernism's genealogical relationship with Modernism, 'The Critical Agenda' fails to take into account the attenuation or absence of Modernism in some of the literary cultures discussed in the first part.

Otherwise, the more speculative, theoretical essays are, individually, informed and considered treatments of their chosen topics. Collectively, they cover most of the moot issues in a debate about the nature of postmodernism, which is also and necessarily a debate about the nature, and direction, of contemporary culture. Linda Hutcheon looks at ideological and discursive aspects of postmodernism; Hans Bertens distinguishes three 'Postmodern Culture(s)' (avant-gardist, poststructuralist, and aesthetic/erotic); John Mepham explores both fictional and cultural 'Narratives of Postmodernism'; Dinah Scherzer disappoints with too superficial an examination of 'Postmodernism and Feminism' (a perfunctory gesture, perhaps?), though an important link is suggested nonetheless; Thomas Docherty concludes the volume with an essay on 'Postmodern Characterization', both *in* the novels and *of* the reader, that is impressively eloquent and intelligent, as well as being highly dubious!

Earlier I stressed, along with the propriety, the critical importance of representing postmodernism by a number of approaches. Out of the realization of their respective unlikeness evolves a tentative, if unwitting consensus; in other words, out of the repetition endemic to an anthology dedicated to characterising a single, nominal literary phenomenon, certain themes or tendencies or 'narratives', as well as certain correlative formal techniques, begin to assert themselves: postmodernism's self-conscious, if ambivalent relationship with Modernism, for example, especially with regard to the status and rendering of consciousness itself; its projection or positioning of its readers, wilfully 'teasing us out of thought'; postmodernism as a 'metafictional historiography' (Hutcheon) that is often justified as a form of higher 'realism' or '*mimesis*'—*because of its 'metafictionality'*, in other words, it is often defended as more faithful *either* to general human experience or experiencing (in spite of critical protest to the contrary), *or* to a sense of

contemporary crisis, or to a sense of the illusoriness of temporality itself; an intense 'anxiety of influence', expressed as a series of ironic intertextual gestures '*in an age of lost innocence*' (Mephram quoting Umberto Eco); the affected or rhetorical 'discovery' by postmodernist authors of the paucity and poverty of language's and/or their own expressive and representative resources—a 'discovery' which, though as old as literature, has peculiar ontological and epistemological implications; and so on. These—along with other literary, cultural, and ideological themes cited or examined in the anthology—engage with the reader's own experience of active reading to become, as it were, the raw materials as well as the designs from which he or she begins to construct a provenance and significance for postmodernism.

The success of the volume, in other words, is attributable to the pluralism (as opposed to poststructuralist 'plurality') of a liberal academic enterprise that is as distrustful as any other enterprise of 'totalising narratives' that prescribe meaning—or meaninglessness, for that matter.

William Christie

**Jamie C. Kassler (ed.), *Metaphor: A Musical Dimension*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1991.**

The first volume in a series of monographs titled 'Australian Studies in History, Philosophy & Social Studies of Music', this collection of thirteen essays presents various metaphors which deal in some way with music and musical activity. It is based on material presented at the Symposium of the International Musicological Society and Festival of Music held in Melbourne in 1988. In bringing these otherwise diverse writings together, the editor encourages us to acknowledge metaphor as a something with the power to illuminate the world in its own way without just being a decoration of the main idea. To give a taste of the variety to be found here, I will summarise each essay.

In 'Two Types of Metaphoric Transfer', Marion A Guck works with the image of an arch as a shape and as an arrangement of interdependent structural tensions to describe the overall form and internal workings of a piano piece by Chopin. Here, metaphors are shown to be powerful descriptive tools, either to do with form or emotional effect when dealing with music. The metaphorical transformation of a period of time or a gesture into an object permits us to 'view' ephemeral things in a structural manner. In 'Understanding Style: Wolfflin's Principles of Art Applied to Music', Morris Taylor examines Wolfflin's theory of five principles which serve as diagnostic tools in the examination of stylistic shifts in art from the Renaissance to the Baroque. These are summarised as: Linear to Painterly; Plane to Recession; Closed to Open Form; Multiplicity to Unity; Absolute Clarity to Relative Clarity. Taylor suggests that these may be equally well applied to similar stylistic shifts between music of the Classical and Romantic periods, and suggests educational benefits that such integrated approaches to the arts could provide. Martina Sichardt's 'Convergence and Divergence: The Interdependence of Poetical and Musical Structures in Atonal and Early Twelve-Tone Works by Arnold Schoenberg' looks at the relationship between structures of text and music in selected works by Schoenberg and how, although these are apparently at odds with each other, there occurs a union of purpose at a higher level of analysis.

In 'Meaning in the Music of Charles Ives' Carol Baron describes Ives's music

in terms of sensory images, humour, parody and literary ideas to illustrate its richness and evocative power. Baron concludes that it cannot be divorced from its extramusical relationships with the composer's experience of life. Patricia Debly's 'Social Commentary in the Music of Haydn's Goldoni Operas' looks at the interaction between Haydn's music and the libretti by Goldoni and their dual roles of amusement and education of the audience. Detailed examination is made of the way in which Haydn uses assorted witty musical devices to emphasise the underlying social commentary in Goldoni's text. Analogues are drawn between social, text and musical aspects showing where correspondences can be seen. In 'Music as Sight in the Production of Music's Meaning' Richard Leppert focusses on the ways in which the visual experience of music performance links the observer/ listener to the physical and social, as does the sound of music to the abstract and ethereal. The author goes on to demonstrate the wealth of semiotic information that visual aspects of music can provide through the depiction of musical subjects in visual art in a detailed examination of a seventeenth century Dutch painting. He touches also on the significance of the written score in this light.

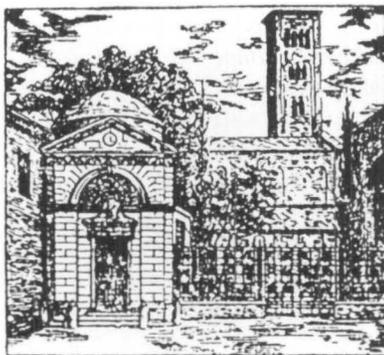
'Music and Shamanic Power in the Gesar Epic', by Geoffrey Samuel, examines the Gesar epic of Tibet and the shamanic characteristic of Tibetan Buddhism. Parallels are drawn between the shaman and the epic bard (often one and the same) through their shared ability to manipulate the perceived reality of their community. Judith Becker's 'The Javanese Court Bedhaya Dance as a Tantric Analogy' presents both exoteric and esoteric interpretations of the Bedhaya dance and their relationship to its Tantric origins. Complex associations are drawn between the symbols of Tantric Buddhism and the ritual of the dance along with their portrayal of aspects of the material world. In 'Belian as a Symbol of Cosmic Reunification', Ashley Turner suggests that the shaman's drum is transformed, through the symbolic powers invested in it, into a bridge between the spirit world and our own. Turner presents a detailed analysis of the Belian, a healing ritual of the Petalangan people of Sumatra with whom the author lived for some time. 'Musical Modes and the Medical Dimension: The Arabic Sources (c.900-c.1600)', by Amnon Shiloah, presents material from old Arabic texts on the role of music in the medicine of the time and speculates on how they might have been applied.

The editor's contribution, 'Man a la Mode: or Reinterpreting the Book of Nature from a Musical Point of View', focusses on the late seventeenth-century writings of Roger North who, expanding upon the Stoic tenets of 'Tension' and 'Goodness', built up a musical metaphor to deal with the Cartesian Mind-Body problem. Body, Mind and Spirit are here depicted as Consort, Conductor and Composer (or Score) respectively. 'Analogy in Leonard B. Myer's Theory of Musical Meaning', by Naomi Cumming, examines the use and function of analogy in Meyer's writings (1956). The writings of various American Pragmatists are shown to have affected the formation of his own ideas on meaning in music. Cumming goes on to cover such issues as errors in interpretation and post-structuralist approaches to this kind of 'semiotic failure'.

In the final essay, 'Analogy in Music: Origins, Uses, Limitations', Graham Pont offers a word of caution about the limits of analogies and metaphors especially in analysis and edition of older works. It is argued that once an analogy governs one's interpretation of a work, any elements which fall outside its scope are then treated as 'irregularities' or 'mistakes' to be ignored or even removed. This tendency to 'normalise' everything denies the natural spontaneity and nuance of a living art.

In sum, it would be fair to say that metaphors dominate our world-view more than we think. The planetary model of the atom, for example, long since discarded by physicists (for yet another metaphor), is still most people's way of visualising atomic structure. This book serves to re-focus our attention on this vital link between language and life and I would recommend it to anyone who ponders the 'how and why' of musical activity.

*Rodney Berry*



'Centro Dantesco: Ravenna'.  
Pen and Ink Drawing

*Eileen Slarke*