

'To be matter'

Claudine Frank, ed., *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003. 416 pp., £17.95 pb., 0 82233 068 7.

In 1934 two men in Paris contemplated something new and wonderful. They had obtained a pair of Mexican jumping beans. The younger of the two wanted to cut open one of the beans to test his theory that it contained an insect or larva. Surrealist magus André Breton would have none of Roger Caillois's suggestion: dissecting the bean would destroy its mystery.

Caillois was right. A Mexican jumping 'bean' is the woody seed pod of the shrub *Sebastiania pavonivia*. If he had cut open his specimen, Caillois would have found that it was lined with silk and contained the caterpillar of the moth *Laspeyresia salitans*. It is the movement of the caterpillar, which, left to its own devices, will eventually emerge to complete its metamorphosis, that causes the 'bean' to jump. Caillois would have liked to know that, but he would not have been completely satisfied. No one knows why the caterpillar moves in this way, or why it can go on doing so for months.

At the time of the jumping bean incident, which, according to some versions of the tale, may also have been witnessed by Jacques Lacan, Roger Caillois was twenty-one and already a precocious veteran of several of the small avant-garde groups that were in revolt against both society and literature. He had been attracted to Breton's surrealism because he believed that it would destroy Literature. The quarrel over the beans led to a cooling of relations between the two men, but Caillois became truly disenchanted with surrealism, its automatic writing, and its subjectivism when he realized that it *was* Literature. He had little time for subjective introspection. Writing in 1938 (the text is included in this book), Caillois disdainfully describes Literature as what happens to myth when it loses its moral authority or collective force and becomes a source of 'mere aesthetic pleasure'. 'Literature' is a 'humiliated myth' and it can thrive only in a society that has lost its cohesive force and its sense of the sacred.

Caillois is probably best known as the co-founder, with Georges Bataille, of the short-lived Collège de sociologie, which functioned for only two years (1937–39). The Collège de sociologie was not in fact a 'college' but a small group of avant-garde writers

and intellectuals. And its concern with sociology was restricted to the sociology of 'the sacred'. The sacred is not synonymous with 'the religious'. For both Caillois and Bataille, the concept refers, rather, to the experience of all that inspires fear and wonder: eroticism, death, and everything relating to the *tremendum et fascinans*. Caillois had already written extensively on the sacred and on the related themes of mythology. For Caillois, a classicist who was well versed in the comparative mythology and religion of Georges Dumézil, a myth is not, as Lévi-Strauss would have it, a model for understanding the world but an elemental force with the emotional power to mobilize social forces. There is something of Sorel about this, though Caillois did not share his politics and was certainly not interested in fomenting general strikes. Much of his early work, such as *Le mythe et l'homme* (1937) and the important *L'homme et le sacré* (1939; translated as *Man and the Sacred*, 1960) attempts to rediscover a mythical era that existed before the historical era. Both Caillois and Bataille were greatly influenced by the French school of sociology and the nostalgic vision of a lost collective effervescence and an organic society that haunts the final sections of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. The other major influence was Marcel Mauss's theorization of the gift relationship. Mauss's sociology, and especially his description of the conspicuous destruction of enormous wealth during the *potlatch* ritual, provides the basis for Bataille's 'economic of excess and expenditure'. A lot of Caillois's early work discusses similar themes, but concentrates more on the theme of festival/carnival. Caillois does not seem to have read Bakhtin, and Bakhtin appears not to have read Caillois, but the similarities are there.

The Collège was a closed group that aspired to being a secret society of higher intellectuals who would eventually resacralize society. A number of such groups flourished in the interwar period. The group of young Catholics who gathered around the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit* from 1932 onwards shared a not dissimilar vision of the need for spiritual–social renewal. The surrealist group had some of the features of what we would probably

now describe as a cult. Shortly before the foundation of the Collège, Bataille was active in the secretive *Acéphale* ('Headless') group. Caillois appears to have kept his distance, even though he always said that he and Bataille (whom he met through Lacan) existed in a state of 'intellectual osmosis'. He was probably wise not to become too closely involved. *Acéphale's* tiny membership was half-convinced that an act of human sacrifice would create an indissoluble bond between them. The details still remain obscure, but the legend has it that, whilst volunteer sacrifices were not in short supply, no sacrificer could be found. Claudine Frank suggests quite persuasively that Caillois was one of those who turned down the position.

Although these small groups, which are hard to locate in conventional political terms of 'right' and 'left', may look like the fantasies of underemployed intellectuals, they did reflect a widespread disenchantment with the tepid party politics of the period. Many saw the defeat of France in 1940 as the final revelation of the country's intellectual, political and spiritual bankruptcy. One Pierre-Dominique Dunoyer de Segonzac believed he had the remedy: a cadre school to be based in Uriage near Grenoble. This was a private initiative, but it quickly found state support. The school was founded in 1940 and its stated aim was to produce a chivalrous cadre of intellectuals or even an order of knights who would steer Vichy's National Revolution to victory. Mounier and his personalists were well represented in Uriage's ranks. The experiment went somewhat awry when most of Uriage's knights in shining armour went over to the Resistance in 1942. Many of them made significant contributions to postwar intellectual-political life.

In retrospect, Caillois's involvement with the Collège de sociologie was no more than one episode in a complicated career. Stranded in Argentina by the outbreak of the Second World War, he worked for the Free French Press. He travelled widely, usually in bleak and remote places. He became fascinated with Latin American literature and subsequently translated Borges. Most of his postwar career was with UNESCO and in 1952 he became the founding editor of its interdisciplinary journal *Diogène/Diogenes*, for which he worked until his death in 1978. A member of Gallimard's powerful editorial committee, he was elected to the Académie Française in 1971. The Académie's main task, which will probably never be completed, is the compilation of the definitive dictionary of the French language. During the working sessions, Caillois relieved his own boredom by suggesting non-existent words and then supplying highly convincing etymolo-

gies to go with them. It would be nice to think that some did find their way into the Académie's dictionary. Caillois's own vocabulary is so refined – recondite to the point of being exquisitely precious – that one could be forgiven for thinking that some of it must be invented. It is not.

Caillois wrote extensively, and on a bewildering variety of topics; *Le Nouvel Observateur* once described him as 'the last encyclopaedist'. It is impossible to categorize him in terms of genre. Whether he is a philosopher, a sociologist, a mythologist or a theorist of the imaginary and play is almost impossible to say with any certainty. In this richly representative collection, essays on the sacred and the sociology of the intellectual, and on the literary mythologies of Paris, are juxtaposed with a description of a bleak shoreline in Patagonia that rivals anything by Bruce Chatwin. He wrote perceptively on detective fiction (a genre offering a pleasing combination of passive enjoyment and active research) and fantastic literature. Speaking of the latter he borrows from a truly obscure source a witticism that says more about the appeal of fantasy and horror than many a fully fledged theory: 'Do you believe in ghosts?' 'No, but I'm afraid of them.' Shortly before he died, he published a lyrically beautiful autobiography that contrives to say almost nothing about his life. He ventured into fiction with a counterfactual in which Pontius Pilate spares the life of Christ. The result is that two thousand years of history cannot and did not take place. That history was only a possibility, and it was described long in advance by one of Pilate's advisers. It was not for nothing that Caillois admired Borges.

Caillois is not, I think, widely read in France. In most histories of the French Intellectual, he appears only in a minor role – usually as a signatory to a petition. Although much of his work has been translated by the American university presses to which we owe so many translations, he does not appear to have found many readers in the English-speaking world either. Claudine Frank's *Reader* is the first of its kind and it is wonderful. The translations, the general introduction, the brief presentations of each of the thirty-two pieces, the annotations and the bibliography are of outstanding quality. This is scholarship of a standard that is encountered all too rarely in the contemporary intellectual world, and it is a delight to savour it. It ranks alongside Denis Hollier's classic account of the Collège (published in French in 1979 and in English translation in 1988). This *Reader* is a major contribution to our knowledge of the complexities of French avant-gardism from the 1930s onwards.

A taste for Caillois is probably not something that is easily acquired, and he is unlikely to take on the iconic status of a Bataille. His style is enigmatic almost to the point of obscurity. As Frank so nicely puts it, his work can often seem ‘lucid but meaningless’. He rarely deigns to explain either himself or his works in interviews, prefaces or overviews. He can be very contradictory. Fascinated by other cultures, and especially classical Chinese culture, he nonetheless clung to a strictly Eurocentric defence of culture against Nazi barbarism. The question of colonialism in Vietnam or Algeria, which so divided French intellectuals from the 1950s onwards, was of no interest to him.

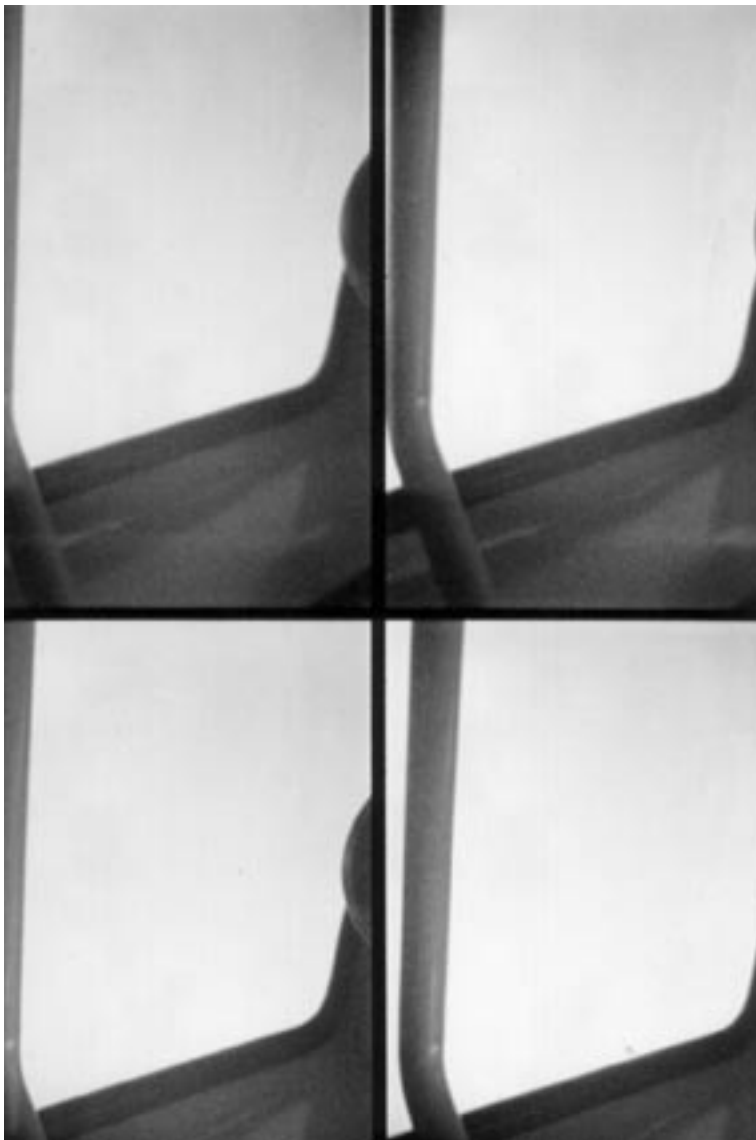
Although Caillois constantly changed tack, there were themes to which he returned again and again. His emblematic figure of the sacred was the female praying mantis, who devours her mate during the act of copulation. Caillois discusses her nasty habits at considerable length in his early work, and relates them to romantic literature’s perennial concern with the *femme fatale* or *Giftmadchen* who lures men to their death. For a

psychoanalyst, the fearful fascination with the mantis is, like Salvador Dalí’s grasshopper phobia, a classic expression of the castration complex. Caillois insists that this is not the case: the castration complex is an expression of the male fear of being devoured, and of consenting to being devoured alive. The psychical is grounded in, or at least paralleled with, the biological. The terrified fascination with the mantis, and all the fantasies that go with it, is of course a very male obsession. Caillois does not appear to have been greatly interested in the female psyche. Had he been, he might have become fascinated by those species of spider in which, no sooner hatched, the young begin to devour their mother. She is their best source of protein.

There are, Caillois speculates, parallels between the life of the psyche and biology and much of his work consists in the attempt to trace them. This is also the theme of his writings on mimetism in the animal kingdom (which, for Caillois, consists of insects and reptiles rather than mammals) that were not without their influence on Lacan’s first accounts of the mirror

phase. Mimetism is usually a defence mechanism: the creature mimics or merges into its environment so as to escape predators. As the creature merges into its environment, it loses some of the more obvious characteristics of life – visibility, mobility – and seems to retreat to some earlier stage. For Caillois, this is symptomatic of a desire to revert to an inorganic state that is characteristic of all living things. There is an obvious parallel here with Freud’s death drive and all that lies ‘beyond the pleasure principle’, but Caillois is much more ‘mineral’ than Freud. Such speculations indicate the distance that separates Caillois from so many of his contemporaries. Lacan and Lévi-Strauss broadly follow Hegel – or at least Alexandre Kojève – in emphasizing the distinction between animal societies and human societies and grounding it in the differential structures of real/imaginary, need/demand/desire, and raw/cooked. In its own way, much of the Marxist tradition is grounded in a similar duality. Caillois argues, in contrast, for the existence of continuities, or at least parallels, between the two.

It is not easy to detect any continuity in Caillois’s extensive body of work, but his ‘autobiography’ suggests that he



at least believed that it did have its unity. The title of *Le Fleuve Alphée* (which has never been translated) alludes to the mythical river Alpha. The freshwater river flowed through the salt sea, emerged untainted on the further shore and then flowed inland. The image of the river seems to represent some rebellious or perverse instinct that exists within parentheses: the surrounding sea is bracketed out in an almost phenomenological sense. By bracketing it out, Caillois can concentrate on his deepest obsessions. The unity appears to exist at the level of thematics and imagery. From the 1960s onwards, Caillois regularly published short texts describing stones and gems. They are, perhaps, best (if quite inadequately) described as prose poems. Here, his prose is as enigmatically beautiful as the totally inhuman objects it describes. A boy who regularly dismantled his toys to see 'what made them work' grew into a young man who wanted to cut open a Mexican jumping bean, and then a much older man who describes what happens when an agate is split in two and when its inner surfaces are polished. The ugly grey lump of stone is found to contain surfaces of shimmering colour that display regular patterns. They resemble the ocelli to be observed on the wings of certain moths and butterflies. The stones resemble ocelli, which resemble patterns found in plants and animals alike, and those patterns resemble the shimmering of an agate. There is something Baudelairean about these searches for 'correspondences', but, unlike Baudelaire, Caillois was no romantic symbolist. His search for analogies and correspondences between the human and the animal worlds, and between the animal and mineral worlds, sometimes suggest that he is what might be termed a materialist pantheist, and he did describe his studies of stones as a 'materialist mysticism'. When combined with the earlier psycho-biological stress on the desire to revert to the inorganic, Caillois's search for analogies (which he described as a 'science of diagonals') looks uncannily like the resurgence of a current which, like the River Alpha, flowed deep and constant in a sea of change.

One of the stranger features of nineteenth-century utopian thought was Pierre Leroux's theory (elaborated in 1834) of the 'circulus': the individual is both a producer and a consumer, and the 'waste' generated by individuals can be used to produce the food that keeps them alive. Three decades later, sewage farms on the outskirts of Paris were producing fine crops of vegetables, using treated human excrement as fertilizer. Similar experiments were successfully carried out near Edinburgh. The theme of the circulus had considerable impact of writers such as Victor Hugo

(the unforgettable descriptions of the sewers in *Les Misérables*) and Gustave Flaubert (and especially the Flaubert of the unfinished *Bouvard and Pécuchet*). Caillois never discusses sewage farms or the theory of the circulus, but there are times when his analogies are remarkably similar to nineteenth-century views on the continuity of the organic and the inorganic. The last temptation (or desire) to assail Flaubert's Saint Antony is simple (I cite Kitty Mrosovsky's Penguin translation of *The Temptation of Saint Antony*): 'To be matter.' He has already seen, he says, the 'birth of life'. He now wishes to 'flow like water, vibrate like sound, gleam like light, to curl myself up into every shape, to penetrate each atom, to get down to the depth of matter – to be matter!' And so, it would seem, did Roger Caillois.

David Macey

Something old, something new...

Judith Norman and Alexander Welchman, eds, *The New Schelling*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004. ix + 219 pp., £55.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 0 8264 6941 8 hb., 0 8264 6942 6 pb.

When I decided to translate Schelling's *On the History of Modern Philosophy* and to write a monograph on Schelling in the early 1990s it seemed that, apart from a swathe of researchers in Germany, and a few philosophers in Italy, France and the USA, nobody was that interested in Schelling, except as an occasionally intriguing episode in the history of German philosophy from Kant to Nietzsche. What was missing outside of Germany was a sense that Schelling offered a version of modern philosophy which deserved to be taken seriously in its own right, rather than be regarded as merely an adjunct to Kant and Hegel. Since then there has been a considerable growth of interest in Schelling in the English-speaking world. This has been occasioned not least by his receiving the imprimatur of Slavoj Žižek, who, rather surreptitiously, admitted that some of what he himself wished to express concerning the nature of the modern subject was in fact closer to Schelling than it was to Hegel.

What had interested me about Schelling were his strange combination of sometimes quite wild speculation about the origins of the riven nature of being with an acute logical sense in relation to ontological issues, his exploration of the idea of a 'divided self', and his

attempts to think about our place in the natural world in terms not dictated by the natural sciences. These aspects of Schelling, in addition to his anticipations of important ideas in philosophers as different as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Davidson, made it seem worth trying to resurrect a work which is, of course, at times notoriously inaccessible even to the most persistent reader. None of this explains, though, why such a thinker should now become the object of a wider revival of the kind suggested in the title of Norman and Welchman's collection, and in that of a forthcoming collection, called *Schelling Now*.

One answer to this is that with the waning of post-structuralism as a serious philosophical option for trying to understand the present – a present which involves a deeper sense of anxiety than was the case during the heyday of post-structuralism in the 1980s and 1990s – a philosopher who, while having some affinities with post-structuralism via his critique of Hegel, remained committed to a rational picture of humankind's role in modernity, might offer new directions. More problematically, and of relevance in a climate in which awareness of appalling atrocities all over the globe is heightened by mass communications, Schelling wrote about evil in a manner which may be seen as being able to help us respond to the apparently ever more widespread preparedness of human beings to act in a manner that seems devoid of any kind of rational or ethical constraint.

The source of interest in Schelling in this respect is his attempt to see evil not as some kind of mysterious force, but as a perversion of reason itself, which precisely involves the capacity to choose either good or evil. This capacity is not itself reducible to antecedent causes, and is what makes human freedom so philosophically intractable. The danger of using Schelling, or any philosopher for that matter, to address issues like terrorist atrocities is that a metaphysical conception can all too easily obscure the need to look first in detail at political and economic factors in the explanation of the rise, for example, of Islamist terrorism. Evidently there is plenty of justification in calling terrorist acts 'evil', and they might indeed confirm the relevance of Schelling's metaphysics, but the relationship of this kind of judgement to the kind of analysis which might lead to a diminution of such acts by understanding their historical roots is anything but clear. Joseph P. Lawrence's essay on Schelling and evil in the present volume seems to me to fall into the trap of using metaphysics as a substitute for politics, despite providing some insights into Kant's and Schelling's philosophical positions on the question of evil.

What, then, does the collection do to establish the 'new Schelling' as a live philosophical issue? One important contribution is the translation of important work on Schelling by Jürgen Habermas, Manfred Frank and Odo Marquard. Habermas's essay, which was omitted from the English translation of the volume in which it first appeared in German, is a useful antidote to the claims of those who think of Habermas as merely the philosopher who sold out Critical Theory to a rationalistic version of the linguistic turn. The essay explores links between Schelling and the traditions of Jewish mysticism, and offers fascinating perspectives on Schelling's ambivalent relationship to the German Idealist idea of self-grounding reason. Frank's exemplary exploration of the parallels between Schelling and Sartre on questions of being and nothingness both reveals the importance of Schelling for this topic and shows to what extent Sartre has been unjustly neglected in recent mainstream European philosophy. It is a pity the editors did not translate more of the text from which they excerpt this discussion. Marquard's influential essay offers important insights into the origins of psychoanalysis in aspects of German Idealism. These contributions are from well-established commentators and have a deserved reputation in the canon of Schelling literature. They are only new to an audience in European philosophy which is either unable for linguistic reasons or unwilling to engage with recent German philosophy.

Norman and Welchman essentially attribute the need to look anew at Schelling to the influence of Žižek. But what precisely is new about what they seek to advocate? After all, the essays by Habermas and Marquard date from the 1970s. Sadly, Žižek's contribution in this volume adds little or nothing to what was said in his stimulating book on Schelling, a book which did not do much for Schelling scholarship but did quite a lot to make him part of contemporary debate concerning the nature of the modern subject. The difficulty for the rest of the volume, where the material really is new, lies in many respects in Schelling himself, who is not always that consistent a thinker, which is both part of why he continues to fascinate, and why writing about him is difficult. Given this difficulty, there is a demand on the contributors to such a volume to make their ideas both relevant and clear to an audience expecting to have explained to them why they should follow this philosophical path rather than any other. Frank's contribution offers a model for how complex issues in Schelling can be made part of an ongoing philosophical discussion by seeking to elucidate arguments which are not always

fully explicit or which are expressed in terms that have become less familiar in the intervening period. The new essays in the volume do not, however, always live up to Frank's elevated standard, and they vary considerably in quality.

Michael Vater proposes a novel way of approaching Schelling by revealing the parallels and differences between his thinking about the Absolute and that in Mahayana Buddhism. These parallels help to make more sense of both forms of thinking, as well as widening the philosophical horizon of most potential readers of the book. Norman's essay on Schelling and Nietzsche on willing and time succeeds to some extent in using each thinker to illuminate the other, and the link is important in understanding the development of nineteenth-century philosophy. She does, though, let Nietzsche set the agenda, and deals with remarkably little of Schelling's work. This seems odd when there are grounds for suggesting that Schelling may offer ways out of some of the aporias of Nietzsche's attacks on rationality. Schelling insists on reason's failure to ground itself at the same time as seeing this failure as the source of the challenge given to us as free beings. The challenge is precisely to arrive at forms of rationality which incorporate our ineliminable dependence on a nature which is our never fully transparent ground as both embodied and thinking beings. The obvious more recent connection here would be to Merleau-Ponty, for whom Schelling was highly significant, but he does not even make the index of the book.

The most worrying aspect of the volume can be suggested by Norman's account in the introduction of Iain Hamilton Grant's essay on 'The Physics of the World Soul':

Grant mobilises recapitulation in the service of a catastrophism that ruins the possibility of the same, arguing that even identity must be constructed, and thereby building an unusual bridge between Schelling's philosophy of nature and philosophy of identity phases.

Whatever this might mean, it did not need to be stated in a style that is all too familiar from a certain kind of English-language (these days, particularly Deleuze-oriented) continental philosophy, which seems to see no need to communicate with anyone but the converted. Grant's essay does show evidence of some interesting philological work on other thinkers of Schelling's period, such as Kierkegaard, and on philosophical construals of physics since the Greeks, but, along with Alberto Toscano's essay on 'Philosophy and the Experience of Construction', it otherwise belongs to that kind of philosophy which I increasingly tend to think of as 'continental science fiction'.

Grant's aim is the pursuit of 'speculative physics', which apparently is also being called for by 'physicists too', though he only cites one book in defence of this claim, and does not explain just why this is a necessary or desirable intellectual aim. English-language European philosophers have belatedly realized that exploration of the relationship of what they do to the natural sciences is a major desideratum. Schelling is undoubtedly a resource for exploring that strand of modern philosophy which, as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Adorno and others do, seeks to reveal the dangers of scientism and to establish a role for philosophy which does not assume that the only serious truths are those provided by the sciences. Grant, however, concludes his essay on what can be construed as an attempt to establish a new kind of relationship of philosophy to the sciences as follows:

It is between the physics of the phenomena (geology) and the dynamics of the concept (noo-phronomy), on the one hand, and the recapitulating, auto-potentiating forces that produce both, that speculative physics attains a physics capable of geology and noology, without sacrificing the physicality of either, or questioning their physical reducibility to the permanently raging yet identical 'abyss of forces'. This is how a physics of the World Soul is possible.

So now we know.

It might seem unfair to quote this passage, but it is significant that in a book purporting to explore Schelling anew there are texts of which some parts are far harder to understand than Schelling himself generally is. If this were a phenomenon confined to the present book it might be passed over in silence, but the self-marginalization of certain areas of English-language European philosophy evident in such prose is now a widespread problem. Doesn't Grant realize that hardly anybody is listening any more? At the same time as this kind of writing is being produced, there is now a major dialogue going on between all styles of philosopher, both analytical and European, about the new ways in which Hegel has been interpreted by Brandom, Pinkard, Pippin and others. This is a dialogue about, among other things, Grant's theme, the 'relationship of nature and thought', but he nowhere adverts to it. Given that Schelling produced the first cogent critique of Hegel's philosophy, one might expect that the new Schelling might be sought in a reinterpretation in contemporary terms of his critique of Hegel and its relationship to the rest of his thought. Although the theme of the Hegel-critique surfaces at various points, it never does so in a way which would connect with what is one of the most influential debates in

contemporary philosophy. *The New Schelling* is, then, in some respects a mirror of its subject: there are highly insightful parts, but they are mixed in with things that will soon appear very old indeed.

Andrew Bowie

Deathwork

Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004. 408 pp., £42.00 hb., £15.00 pb., 0 231 13018 X hb., 0 231 13019 8 pb.

Spectral Nationality presents itself as both a radical postcolonialist intervention in philosophy and a philosophical intervention in postcolonial studies and its literatures. In this respect, the book sits comfortably alongside similar engagements by the likes of Gayatri Spivak (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*), Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe*) and Alberto Moreiras (*The Exhaustion of Difference*). Like these, Pheng Cheah's formidably ambitious book works from and through literature to ask questions about politics, history and philosophy. Unlike them, however, it presents a spirited defence of revolutionary cultural nationalism. *Spectral Nationality's* principal political question, and its *raison d'être*, is: does the nation-form have a future as an emancipatory possibility? Cheah's answer is: yes, in its postcolonial mode, or rather, one that takes account of its aporias as they have been unravelled through the historical experience of radical forms of decolonization. Cheah has thus set himself the difficult task of critically defending the nation-form in a context in which, due to global capitalist reterritorializations experienced, he writes, as a 'prosthetic' implant into people-nations in the form of neocolonial states, such an agenda appears to be on the wane. Despite the historical failures of revolutionary decolonization, Cheah insists that its nation-building project remains the concrete emancipatory horizon of any contemporary cosmopolitics of freedom.

The book is divided in two: the philosophical and the literary. Cheah generously suggests that postcolonialists might want to leave out the philosophical, and philosophers the analysis of postcolonial literature. Such readings are possible, but problematic; the latter in particular because it would reduce the status of literature to a mere object rather than, following Lukács, the privileged cultural medium through which

the aporias of a whole tradition of thought qua (failed) political practice of culture are dramatized. The novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for example, constitute the historical thought of the postcolonial critical frame through which such a tradition must be interpreted today. As for many critics, the travails of decolonization have here conveniently taught a deconstructive lesson. Hence the *spectrality* of the nation-form in the South today. Broken by global capital and neocolonial states, it nevertheless insistently returns as ghostly. Rather than let history take its toll, Cheah seeks to extend the life of a post-'organismic' nationalism through the incorporation of its own death-dealing other (state *techne*) that has marked it – as the finitude freedom seeks to transcend – since its philosophical conception, in a new nation-state constitution and cosmopolitical arrangement. Subordinated to the nationally incarnated people, the state can provide for their protection – against capital, for example. Such a claim depends on how successful Cheah is in persuading us of the importance of 'organismic' philosophical thought for freedom today.

Cheah does not mount a socio-political defence of the nation-form as such. Rather, he engages with the 'black legend' of nationalism – its irrationality, its totalitarian character as death-work – as represented in discourses of cosmopolitan intent, from enlightened despotism, through liberalism and Marxism. In particular, he questions the supposed philosophical poverty of nationalism, imputed to it by both defenders of its more enlightened Third World versions (such as Benedict Anderson) and critics of its imperial form (subalternists such as Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee). Indeed, it is Cheah's defence of the nation-form that separates his position from a subalternist one. To defend nationalism's rational substance, particularly as formulated in the German Romantic tradition, he resorts to Hegel, as the most systematic of philosophers, as well as to the founding father of cosmopolitanism, Kant. Cheah's critical gesture is thus a powerfully ironic one. He also looks to Fichte – the philosopher, in Cheah's account, of popular anti-statist cultural nationalism – and Marx, the anti-national philosopher of labour and proletarian cosmopolitanism. The chapter on Marx includes a discussion of the revolutionary (post-Leninist) nationalisms of Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon, who are to Marx's anti-nationalism what Fichte is to Kant's. Meanwhile, Hegel's anti-cosmopolitan statism, centred on his defence of the sovereign will, stands theoretically against them all: against Kant, against Marx, and against the 'people-nation' – since famously, for Hegel,

the people 'refers to that category of citizens *who do not know their own will*'. Despite their differences, however, all are presented by Cheah as constituting a tradition of vitalist philosophers of freedom.

Cheah turns to the second part of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, 'Critique of Teleological Judgement', for his concept of culture as *Bildung*, showing how it emerges out of a notion of culture modelled on the life of a self-recursive organism. In opposition to mechanical natural causality, the organism is self-originating and self-organizing, positing its own limits and setting its own ends. Nature's end, according to Kant, is the happiness of 'man', and this organicizing power (the 'aptitude' of 'determining ends' out of itself) is 'nature's gift' to the human race. This is an 'incarnational' and self-originating' conception of culture, according to Cheah, which in Kant becomes the model of autonomy, moral freedom and the transcendence of finitude, as well as the ontological ground for the 'co-belonging of politics and culture' as *Bildung*. Culture, in turn, depends on a founding 'ingratitude' towards nature's gift, which, since it 'cannot give itself to us in any other way but mechanically', takes the form of a retroactive anthropomorphism or mimeticism that erases human heteronomy (its finitude) with regard to the contingency of nature's gift conceived contradictorily as 'inhuman *techne*'. Since, for Kant, 'the constitutional political body is culture's highest achievement', its 'organismic causality' becomes 'the ontological paradigm and ultimate end of the ideal constitutional state'. Cheah shows how Kant's political writings on state-form and cosmopolitics emerge from this anthropological conception.

Cheah's readings of this philosophical tradition are complex, detailed and rewarding. He shows how the writings of Fichte and Hegel give sociological shape to Kant's ideas, criticizing his concept of culture for its lack of institutionalized, incarnational content. Freedom, for Fichte, writing in a context of 'colonial' occupation (the Napoleonic Wars), is embodied in the language of the German people and their capacity to resist an imposed state; whilst for Hegel it is actualized in the ideal State as the unity of sovereign will and political constitution. Cheah sets out these accounts with real intellectual verve and skill as he explains their internal dynamic, illuminating and deconstructing their aporias: life transcending finitude in political forms, but not quite being able to attain autonomy – a problem symptomatized most obviously in Hegel's incoherent notion of a *Volksgeist*. Marx, meanwhile, in a clear anti-cultural move, translates Kant's idea of *culture* and Hegel's idea of *spirit* into *living labour*,

and their concept of *Bildung* into the proletarian 'appropriation' of dead labour accumulated as capital. Because of the socialization of production beyond national boundaries, such a revolutionary *Bildung* leaves the nation-form behind as bourgeois ideology. For revolutionaries like Cabral and Fanon, however, Marx's anti-culturalist economism left them bereft of a politics, for which they turned to Lenin's stagist idea that, in contexts of anti-colonialism, nation-state building constituted an 'awakening to politics', and thus to freedom. Hence, in Cheah's view, their Fichtean national-populist turn. Fichte was a writer for whom 'men of letters' were also key producers of the *Kultur-nation* conceived in active resistance to occupation. At this point, the philosophical stage is set for Cheah's own postcolonial perspective.

Spectral Nationality offers a novel account of the German critical philosophical tradition, subjecting its 'organismic' metaphors to sustained interrogation. Any serious and sustained critique of it would need to engage with its readings of and assertions about each and every author it discusses. Here, I will raise just one possible criticism. As Cheah notes, Kant's concept of culture as knowledge is a divided one, for nature's gift of *Bildung* is, in effect, not handed on to all. 'Skill', Kant insists, 'is incompetent for giving assistance to the *will* in its determination and choice of its ends.' It is a purely mechanical activity, and 'calls for no special art'. Its subjects are 'the majority', who 'provide ... for the ease and convenience of others', including the subjects of 'discipline', whose constitutive negativity defines *Bildung* as 'the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires whereby ... we are rendered incapable of exercising a choice of our own'. Here again, the autonomy of culture (for some) masks a fundamental heteronomy (for others), overcome this time through domination and *cultural* death. The very idea of culture as the practice of freedom would thus seem to be grounded in a violent but constitutive subalternization. In Howard Caygill's view this division suggests that Kant's socialized concept of culture has been proposed with some awareness of its class content. Robert Bernasconi has recently reminded us that Kant's attempt to unify mechanistic and teleological causality – hence his appeal to Blumenbach's notion of the 'formative drive' (*Bildungstrieb*) – in his account of culture in the third *Critique* emerges from his production of the concept of 'race'. Nationalism, meanwhile, is precisely what gives meaning to death in a secular modern world. Cheah agrees, to a degree, although with the hesitation deconstruction demands: in the tradition he mines, the nation-form is life-

affirming; it attempts to transcend death. From such a perspective, however, the social scene Kant portrays suggests another story, involving a statist accumulation and translatory death-work that is analogous to capital's, although inverted: a 'spiritual' accumulation that breathes life and meaning back into the culturally 'dead' as the ruling classes build and populate a world in their own image. This might include nations, and other 'incarnations' too. As Benjamin pointed out, when they are victorious even the dead will not be safe.

John Kraniauskas

The revolution will be live

Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, Verso, London and New York, 2004. 443 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 84467 003 1.

Of all the radical art practices which emerged in the 1960s, that era recently vilified by Tony Blair as the source of all current 'social problems', free improvisation is undoubtedly the least well documented or critically engaged within the wider intellectual culture, such as it is today. There are a number of reasons for this: the relentlessly uncompromising character of the music itself and of its modes of production and dissemination, an oft-expressed resistance on the part of its practitioners to any 'extrinsic' critical discourses and terminologies, as well as a general marginalizing of music within contemporary academic fashions and concerns. At the same time, free improvisation's emphasis on the absolute primacy of the inventive moment of performance has undoubtedly worked to discourage certain established theoretical frameworks or 'close readings' that might otherwise have eased its reception. In attempting to write free improvisation's 'story', Ben Watson has, then, clearly had to face some fairly daunting difficulties.

Watson's solution is to mediate his narrative through the biography of free improvisation's most consistently radical representative: the English guitarist Derek Bailey. If this means that Watson's characteristic polemical style is rather muted at times, it also allows him to avoid getting bogged down in the full range of often byzantine ideological and personal disputes between improvisation's central participants, which might have made his (immensely readable) tome

even longer. As it is, this is a book which should be required reading for anyone interested not only in postwar music, but in the contemporary possibilities and dilemmas of the avant-garde in general.

Following a typically bracing blast of invective in the introduction, the book's opening chapter settles down into a surprisingly conventional biographical mode, covering Bailey's early life growing up in a 'respectable' working-class Sheffield, through to manual labouring and a stint in the navy. The second chapter recounts his many years as a jobbing musician during the 1950s and early 1960s. The details of this early career, which included an unlikely four-month season at the ABC Theatre in Blackpool playing in the Morecombe and Wise Show, make for a fascinating and entertaining read, and most of it is recounted, simply enough, in Bailey's own words; the guitarist being revealed as a witty, insightful, and thoroughly un sentimental raconteur. This apprenticeship was clearly crucial to Bailey's own later development, both in musical terms and in the understanding it gave him of the commercial logics of the culture industry. ('Having troubles with audiences in the commercial world is serious', the guitarist comments at one point. 'In the art world, you put it on your CV; in the commercial world you get fired.') Nonetheless, the real story of free improvisation begins with Bailey's formation in 1963 of the Joseph Holbrooke Trio with drummer Tony Oxley and bassist Gavin Bryars. It was this group's 'impatience with the gruesomely predictable' that led them from familiar avant-garde influences, including Webern, Cage and modal jazz, to an entirely singular mode of collective musical interaction, all the more remarkable for having been developed in the relative isolation of Sheffield, far from the metropolitan energy of either the commercial mainstream or the fashionable art scenes of the time. If free improvisation has, like modernity itself, many beginnings, this was certainly one of its primal scenes. All the same, and typically, no sooner had it begun than the fragile constellation of musical minds that constituted the trio started to come apart, culminating in Bryars' turn away from improvisation towards composition.

The ongoing argument between Bailey and Bryars serves to focus many of the key issues within musical modernism in general, as Watson shows. In this light, part of what marks Bailey out as such an important figure within the music of the last forty years is what might be described as the absolute *purism* of his belief that music is 'best pursued' through a practice of 'permanent improvisation' – for Watson, an almost Leninist refusal to compromise. It is this belief that has

led to Bailey's notoriously critical attitude towards the 'idiom' of jazz, which, for many other free improvisers (like Tony Oxley) continues to be an essential element within both the music's history and its contemporary forms. Watson, as a writer fully convinced of the virtues of 'swing', is evidently not that comfortable with Bailey's position on this, and, at times, he is forced to admit a yearning for an 'Afro-centric' funkiness that Bailey frustrates. Nonetheless, he finds his own way to make sense of such frustration, as exemplifying an impeccably modernist productive logic: 'Just as ... Samuel Beckett needed to shake off the Irish prolixity of James Joyce, Bailey needed to shake off the waggle and quake of blues and jazz.' This not only provides a means of locating the 'distinctiveness' of Bailey's 'cool and precise' technique, but also productively recalls Beckett's own unrelenting search for an art of which one could say: 'I don't know what it is, having never seen [heard] anything like it before.'

If Bailey's uncompromising *modus operandi* accounts for his dominant image as (in the words of saxophonist Steve Lacy) always the most 'obstreprously intransigent' of figures, it also explains his preference for the 'semi ad hoc' group which exhibits 'a degree of familiarity [while] retaining the shock of the strange'. 'Purism' should not, however, be mistaken for 'puritanism'. Bailey has been anything but sectarian in his choice of collaborators, who have ranged, over the years, from tap dancers and Fluxus-style provocateurs to Japanese rock groups and drum'n'bass DJs. Most notable in this respect were the annual Company Weeks organized by Bailey from 1977 to 1994, at which he sought to convene (originally at the ICA) increasingly eclectic, temporary ensembles of musicians from a range of different backgrounds,



'specifically to invoke', as the poet Peter Riley put it, 'the confrontation of difference and unity'. Watson devotes over a hundred pages to this, tracking Company's development year by year. Some might find this section a little anal in its cataloguing of the events, a little too close perhaps to an extended series of reviews. But it's where, in many ways, Watson comes into his own, reminding us of what a good critic he is, alive to the insistent 'actuality' of a performance or recording and to their immanent historicity.

It also allows Watson to elaborate his own understanding of what Eddie Prévost has described as free improvisation's 'dialogical mode', and to locate the singularity of Bailey's practice within this. At the heart of the analysis is an explicitly dialectical conception: Bailey, Watson writes, 'attempts to understand what [other musicians] are playing by contradicting them. He "tests" their musical utterances ... [H]is negations are productive because they are grounded in musical comprehension of his interlocutor's logic.' As one might expect, Watson is particularly keen to draw out the political implications of this open-ended dialectical practice. 'Free improvisation resembles the worker's council', he writes at one point. Its 'joy' is like that of 'revolutionary socialist politics' in the collective nature of its intercourse. (Surely he can't be thinking of SWP meetings?)

This can all get a little hyperbolic at times, making claims for the music's *realization* of a revolutionary democracy that threatens to drift into utopianism; one reminiscent in some respects (though he won't appreciate the comparison) of the free-jazz-influenced notion of 'composition' invoked by Jacques Attali, as the 'arrival of new social relations', at the end of his 1977 book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Nonethe-

less, it is, above all, Adorno who is Watson's guide here, and who provides him with the theoretical resources for a resistance to any 'feel-good' liberal or communitarian reading of improvisation as a 'sound of conciliation', stressing instead the critical moment of the non-identical within the music's 'conversational' structure. Equally, it is Adorno's reading of Schoenberg which Watson adapts in order to explain the reasons behind free improvisation's lack of popular or institutional acceptance. If this music is rejected, it is

not because it is misunderstood, but because what it expresses is understood all too well: what Watson describes as its 'overload of truth about physique and desire'.

This is a critically productive line to take, but it does also lead into what is, for me, the one major problem that emerges from Watson's account of improvisation (leaving aside the usual ill-informed rants against supposed 'Parisian nonsense', consistently, and entirely wrongly, assimilated to anglophone 'cultural studies'). For, following from the materialist affirmation of improvisation's 'return of music to the physical act' and to 'human labour', there is an extremely questionable yoking of this *exclusively* to the virtuosity of 'instrumental skill' rather than to wider forms of instrumental knowledge. This may not reflect any kind of simple 'nostalgia for craft production', but there is a sense that the dynamics of certain recent musics present a challenge to entrenched notions that can only be polemically overcome, such as by the lofty dismissal of laptops as nothing more than 'consumer froth'. Instrumental knowledge is not restricted to 'hardware props' made out of wood, metal or skin (whether acoustic or electrified). The, at times, somewhat crude materialism articulated here is compounded by the connection made to a frankly undialectical conception of 'real time', explicitly contrasted to 'anything that is constructed on a computer' (which presumably operates in some kind of 'unreal time'). This may simply repeat general preconceptions within some free improvisation circles, but it also echoes the most romantic critiques of the machine as inherently 'inhuman' and 'alienating'. (Watson is probably a man who once owned a 'Disco Sucks' T-shirt.) A truly modernist music cannot evade the task of immanent engagement with new means of musical production. There is, at any rate, much contemporary electronica which does anything but conform to the abstractions of 'clock-time', to which Watson would seem to believe it is condemned.

If Watson and I disagree on this, we can nonetheless agree on the central claim that underpins this excellent book: 'Anyone who thought the avant-garde was dead simply forgot to listen.' It's the last word there – *listen* – that is key. For maybe it is time for the avant-garde's obituarists to consider whether they might be looking – or, rather, listening – in the wrong place, whether there are 'art practices' originating in the 1960s which, as Watson puts it, have, unlike the sorry products of most contemporary 'art gallery art', 'managed to preserve that [period's] revolt as activity and experience rather than image'. Seventy-four years old, and now

relocated to Barcelona, where he continues to seek out new musical experiences, Bailey remains, almost uniquely among his generation, a force to be reckoned with. Listen to Bailey. Read Watson.

David Cunningham

First base

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London and New York, 2004. xxi + 168 pp., £16.00 hb., 1 84467 005 8.

Butler's post-9/11 collection of political essays may surprise some. Far from drowning her analyses in a deluge of 'theory', as the uncharitable reader might have assumed, the Butler that emerges from these papers on American foreign policy, censorship, Israel, Guantánamo Bay, and a 'non-violent' ethics, is a thoroughly sober and eminently *reasonable* thinker. There is, in fact, little here that strikes one as controversial: we are told, for example, in clear and detailed terms, why confusing anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is a dangerous and politically suspect act, potentially blocking off all forms of criticism of Israel and Israeli policy from Jews and others. One has the sense that it is a sad reflection of the current US political climate that this is as far as Butler feels she can go. She restates what many will acknowledge to be transparent elements of the current global order: that internal criticism of American foreign policy is immediately and wilfully misconstrued as both anti-American and pro-'terrorist'; that the war on terrorism is a war on a potentially infinite scale; that the mainstream media privilege some deaths above others. When she says that 'it is not a vagary of moral relativism to try to understand what might have led to the attacks on the United States', you have to wonder, are things really so dire that someone would need to state such an obvious thing? If they are, then Butler's book is rather timely, otherwise it might simply not be read at all.

What ultimately mars Butler's claims is that her politics are not political enough and her philosophy not philosophical enough. This is not an idle criticism. She draws heavily, on the one hand, from news reports, quotations from the administration and legal documents, and, on the other, from Agamben's work on biopolitics, Levinas's ethics and Foucault's discussions of sovereignty and governmentality. However, what's often lacking is a more sustained presentation of the facts: should we really be so surprised that the

US stepped up the war rhetoric immediately after September 11th if we had already read the – widely available – ‘pre-emptive strike’ proposals outlined in the ‘Project for the New American Century’ and other documents? After all, Butler has a wealth of material to draw from here and plenty of heavyweight political commentary to support her claims. (She quotes Arundhati Roy twice and refers to Chomsky once, but only to point out his exclusion from the mainstream US media.)

Similarly, Butler’s reconfiguration of Agamben’s ‘naked’ or ‘bare’ life as the ‘precarious life’ of the title – with a nod here and there to Levinas – lacks a more critical approach to the concept of biopolitics. Here, precarious life becomes a positive resource (or, at least, an inescapable one) quite different from Agamben’s more subtle claim that, in the sovereign conception of power, ‘bare life’ is what gets ceaselessly separated from a generic ‘form-of-life’, whose reconfiguration might provide the only resource for a non-statist conception of politics. Whilst Butler may openly state her method as one of applying philosophy to ‘cultural analyses’ – for example, by demonstrating how ‘useful’ Levinas’s ‘theological view’ about the relation between the ethical demand and the face is in a broader analysis of ‘how best to admit the “faces” of those against who war is waged into public representation’ – we have to wonder how Butler circumnavigates Levinas’s own ambiguous pronouncements about who the other is (or, rather, who it is not), especially when she herself argues in favour of Palestinian self-determination and ‘even’ statehood.

It is hard not to agree in principle with Butler when she calls for ‘non-violent, cooperative, egalitarian international relations’ to be ‘the guiding ideal’, or when she argues that ‘the United States has effectively responded to the violence done against it by consolidating its reputation as a militaristic power with no respect for lives outside of the First World’ (and very few of the lives in the ‘First World’ either, we might add). But without downplaying the importance of this reiteration, we might say, well, we *know* all this – how about some more detailed investigation of what’s really at stake in American foreign policy, given that it’s unlikely that Wolfowitz et al. will be keen to take time out ‘to remember the lessons of Aeschylus’? The very idea that the invasion of Iraq was in any way a *response* to the events of 9/11 is bald propaganda, which Butler nevertheless seems implicitly to accept.

Butler is on much firmer ground when she is discussing three main themes, which could be said to form the major concerns of her previous philosophical

work: namely, ‘the human’, feminism, and the various modalities and effects of exclusion. Taking as her starting point the tentative formation of a notion of the ‘human’ – exclaiming ‘as if there were any other way for us to start or end!’ – she asks: ‘who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? ... What *makes for a grievable life?*’ This particular rhetorical style, it should be said, characterizes much of the book, replacing the certainties and crass oppositions of contemporary bellicosity with an ‘open questioning’ that in turns appeals and irritates. Butler mobilizes this searching notion of the ‘human’ against what she refers to as ‘western humanism’, and appeals, not to an emancipatory notion of the capacities of the human as a positive resource against oppression, but to a kind of intrinsic ethical-social relationality that manifests itself in loss and grief: ‘Let’s face it,’ she writes, ‘we’re undone by each other.’

Butler’s, surprisingly brief, claims about feminism and its abuses in political discourse point to a crucial element of contemporary rhetoric:

The sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retroactively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military actions against Afghanistan, is a sign to which feminism, as a trope, is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of First World impermeability.

This is an important point about the mercenary use to which the discourses of progressive struggles have been put, and it is refreshing to read such an unequivocal position on what would otherwise be the territory of the ‘Left’. It is important to bear in mind just how many ‘left interventionists’ have pushed the well-it-may-all-be-about-oil-but-think-of-the-women line of late, not to mention the reams of liberal squeamishness emitted in response to the ‘horror’ of female violence at Abu Ghraib. As Butler quite rightly points out, ‘nothing about being socially constrained as women restrains us from simply becoming violent ourselves.’

The final major strand of these essays crystallizes around forms of exclusion and relates to Butler’s tentative discussion of ‘the human’. Fundamentally, she asks, who today counts as ‘human’? Will the ‘indefinitely detained’ at Guantánamo ultimately stop ‘counting’, having been found neither guilty nor innocent, occupying the role neither of subject of international law nor of ‘official’ combatant? Butler taps into a major strand of radical thought here, from John Pilger and Mark Curtis’s more explicitly political work on ‘unpeople’, to Agamben’s figure of the ‘refugee’ and Badiou’s recent claim that ‘the great majority of humanity counts today

for nothing... The only name available is “excluded”.’ General Tommy Franks’s statement about Iraqi deaths – the infamous ‘we don’t do body counts’ – is a stark reminder of who does and does not ‘exist’, such that death would have any meaning on the political stage. As Butler puts it: ‘some lives are grievable, and others are not’. Butler’s claims about exclusion and its links to wider political situations (Agamben’s Benjaminian ‘state of exception’, the media blackouts on certain deaths, and its repetition of others, i.e. those killed by our ‘enemies’) is ultimately the most important aspect of these brief texts. It is worthy of much more detailed work in the future.

Nina Power

Best intentions

Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002/2004. £45.00 hb., £11.95 pb., 0 262 03295 3 hb., 0 262 53264 6 pb.

The irruption of HIV/AIDS into the gay world in the early 1980s threw the hardly consolidated and by no means socially legitimate community into a crisis (medical, cultural, political) whose reverberations echo on even as the profile of the global pandemic has shifted profoundly. Now no longer a mysterious consequence of an unknown pathogen, HIV/AIDS has to some extent become a manageable chronic condition in the West, whilst remaining a fatal scourge in the non-West, where, in the absence of affordable drug regimes, it destroys whole populations in sub-Saharan Africa and threatens the burgeoning development of India and China as their particular epidemics gather pace. The modulation from irrational menace to all-too-explicable consequence of politically sanctioned poverty, deprivation and cultural and educational deficit has shifted the coordinates according to which the pandemic is represented. As the death toll lets up in the West and accelerates in the Rest, disavowal or indifference have become the default responses, even from those who were once the main objects of concern and contagion, gay men, who no longer bear the figural weight of the epidemic, an honour shifted to the more familiar iconography of the emaciated African.

The measure of this change becomes startlingly clear in Douglas Crimp’s collection of essays on ‘AIDS and Queer Politics’ – now published in paperback – which brings together his various interventions around

the representation of the epidemic and the place of gay men within it, from 1987 onwards. That the collection has been published at all is in part a response to the growing oblivion into which the Western epidemic and its history have fallen. Crimp rightly sees the dangers of such forgetfulness and seeks in part to erect his own work as a sort of monument to the fallen and the struggles in which they engaged.

The first essays of the collection are radically defensive attempts to ward off the censorious (and often opportunistic) attacks of the political Right that sought to blame gay men’s sexual culture for the contingency of the epidemic. The ‘moralism’ of the book’s title is one of the many pathological cultural responses to the brute fact of disease emerging within an already suspect and marginalized community, but one whose symptoms were hardly confined to heterosexuals. A constant target of Crimp’s own invective is the out-riders of moral condemnation within the American gay community itself: Randy Shilts, whose dubiously factual history of the epidemic, centring on the demonic figure of Patient Zero, earns Crimp’s acid scorn; Larry Kramer, whose long-established puritanism (witness his pre-AIDS novel *Faggots*) received an extraordinary dynamism and public sanction with the outbreak of the epidemic; and the myopic Andrew Sullivan, whose smug claim that the ‘epidemic is over’ provides the point of access for the introductory updating of the book, where Crimp interrogates Sullivan’s purblind ignorance. Against these, Crimp wants to maintain the gains of Gay Liberation, and the creative pursuit of sexual experimentation, hence the provocative title of one essay, ‘How to have promiscuity in an epidemic’.

If moralism is the colour of homophobic representations of the early epidemic, then Crimp’s preferred alternatives are the activist engagements of ACT UP, GRAN FURY, and the polemical art of film-makers like John Greyson and Greg Bordowitz. His essays on these counter-representations are interesting and still smack of the flavour of contestation at the point where the fused signifiers of sex and death led to despair and threatened quarantine or worse. Underlying these later essays is the book’s other theme, melancholia, which has become a pervasive structure of feeling for late-twentieth-century intellectuals. Crimp is perhaps too lax here in his thinking of Freud’s seminal opposition between mourning and melancholia, and the notion of melancholy as self-abasement which is used in his polemic with Sullivan is hardly more than sketched. There does seem an interesting way in which identification with the lost object and its incorporation as something which is then subject to censure by the

superego – moral attacks, in short – might underpin the abject conformism of the gay conservatives and their viciousness towards other gay men. The complex play of hatred, loss, guilt, trauma and repressive forgetfulness could find a structuring form in an expanded account of melancholia, but Crimp cannot find the space to develop it.

And in the end, this is the problem with the book: it remains an eloquent testimony to a past, but it cannot quite find the strength to think the future. It is salutary to be reminded of the ways in which it once looked as if gay culture might actually be destroyed by disease and political assault, and Crimp's own fatigue might well be seen as the cost of the battle against that near genocide. Yet the medical management of HIV/AIDS did lead to an attenuation of death and incapacity, and the engagement of gay men with the state and in the creation of a whole new set of institutions led to a political and cultural resurgence – perhaps more so, significantly, in Europe than the United States. It is this new situation coupled with the massification and hyper-sexualization of sexual culture (notoriously, the ubiquity of pornography and the compulsory dressage of the gay body) and the pervasiveness of claims for political inclusion, based on problematic notions of rights, that requires rethinking. Crimp is well aware of the ways that such changes have impacted on the continuing sero-conversion of gay men despite twenty years of health campaigns, but his plea for an appreciation of the complexity of such issues cannot be the final word. AIDS/HIV is no longer a gay American disease, but a global pandemic whose amelioration is threatened precisely by the extension of an American power, which, if it will play the gay card for Bush's re-election, is in the game for bigger stakes. There is a hint of the parochial in Crimp's polemics, a fixation on the American situation, that his best intentions would seek to escape and yet the pull of his own melancholic identification with the dead cannot avoid.

Philip Derbyshire

Bored as a moose

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004. xii + 102 pp., £28.50 hb., £11.50 pb., 0 8047 4737 7 hb., 0 8047 4738 5 pb.

The Open is Agamben's fifth title in the Stanford, Meridian 'Crossing Aesthetics' series. In it he presents a series of bite-sized chapters offering a new reading of

his conception of bare life, that fundamental element that affords man an openness to the animal and that is incomprehensible to the 'anthropological machine'. His chief concern is with the 'central emptiness' or 'hiatus' in metaphysics and ontology that has come to separate 'man and animal' not externally but 'within man'. Agamben reads Bataille, Kojève and, most importantly, Heidegger on the relationship between man and animal, occasionally revisiting the scene of the camp, of Auschwitz, to elaborate a new perspective from which to imagine bare life. He asks whether Heidegger's 'supreme category' of ontology, its 'letting be', can enable us, as man, to know how to let the animal, what is '*outside being*', be. Agamben writes that we must work instead to 'risk ourselves' in the 'central emptiness' that offers greater insights into the 'mystery of separation' inhabiting any culturally received binary opposition such as man and animal. Agamben is once again at the forefront of philosophical work attempting to offer us a language for addressing issues as divergent as ethnic cleansing and the Human Genome Project.

The second chapter introduces the debate between Bataille and Kojève on the end of history and the 'figure that man and nature would assume in the posthistorical world'. Agamben tells us that Kojève believed that the 'rest' that survives the death of man returns to be animal. Bataille could not accept this view, based as it is on a reading of Hegel that regards history as the 'work of negation'. He instead believes in something called man's 'unemployed negativity' that will survive the end of history in the form of 'eroticism, laughter, [and] joy in the face of death'. Agamben reads such disputes as presenting man as a 'field of dialectical tensions', 'always already cut by internal caesurae'. He is unhappy with such a representation of man and animal, one that only ever allows man to be human because he 'transcends' and masters 'the anthropophorous animal' which supports him. One reason for the popularity of this representation for Agamben is that the concept 'life' never gets properly defined. Agamben returns here to his notion of 'bare life'. He asks for a reappraisal of humanism away from a thinking of man as a 'conjunction of a body and a soul', and towards a thinking of man as 'what results from the incongruity of these two elements'. Agamben questions whether our inability to define the difference between the living and the non-living, the being and the nothing, collapses this difference, thereby leading us towards genocide, atrocity and 'extermination camps', which may ultimately act as 'experiments' in deciding between the human and the inhuman.



Agamben discusses anthropological theories that have sought to define the difference between man and ape, where man is defined as a 'machine or device for producing the recognition of the human'. For Agamben this 'anthropological machine of humanism' holds man 'suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature'. A subtle connection is implied here between the work of scientific advance and systems of discrimination, where certain characteristics of the 'inferior race' can be scientifically designated as marks of the animal.

Agamben contrasts a premodern anthropological machine with its contemporary equivalent. He writes that both must establish a 'zone of indifference at their centres' within which 'the articulation between human and animal' may take place. It is 'bare life' or that life that is 'separated and excluded from itself' that each machine can only ever discover. Agamben urges us to understand how each machine works 'so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them'. But Agamben's emphasis of a 'zone of indifference', his toying with the Heideggerian notion of 'letting be', and his limiting of the notion of a 'historical task' to this faulty anthropological machine, offer only mere glimpses of political alternatives.

Language is frequently regarded as the *sine qua non* of difference between man and animal. Agamben also has problems with such theories as Heymann Steintal's, whose 'prelinguistic stage of human-

ity' defines language, the difference between man and animal, as a 'historical production' that 'can be properly assigned neither to man nor to animal'. For the anthropological machine 'the human is already presupposed every time' and therefore must produce a 'kind of state of exception (a notion important to both *Homo Sacer* and Agamben's forthcoming *States of Emergency*)'. Yet one must wonder how effective is a state of exception that only affords us an openness towards a 'zone of indifference'?

Agamben moves next to a lengthy discussion of Heidegger's lecture notes on the animal. Heidegger reads 'poverty in the world' as the 'essential characteristic of the animal'. For Heidegger, the animal's 'captivation' offers it beings that are 'open' but in an 'inaccessibility and an opacity'. Agamben reads Heidegger's treatment of the animal as paradoxical; it states that the animal possesses a 'more intense openness than any kind of human knowledge' and is yet 'closed in a total opacity'. For Heidegger, however, this brings an 'essential disruption' into the 'essence of the animal', which Agamben regards as shortening the 'distance that the course had marked out between man and animal'. Animal 'captivation' is to be regarded as a 'suitable background against which the essence of humanity can now be set off'. It is only by way of Heideggerian 'profound boredom', however, Agamben claims, that the 'closest proximity' to this state of the animal can be realized by man. The man who becomes bored finds himself in the 'closest proximity' to the animal's 'captivation'. Both are in these states 'open to a closedness'. Agamben writes that '[i]n becoming bored, Dasein is delivered over (*ausgeliefert*) to something that refuses itself' just like the animal in captivity. Profound boredom also possesses, however, the potentiality for the 'originary possibilitization'; it points towards 'whatever it is that makes possible' and we might wonder how close this might be to Agamben's 'zone of indifference'. It must be remembered, however, that profound boredom does not reveal the grounding 'nothing' that Heidegger believes is essential for metaphysics, for the overcoming of the openness to beings 'as a whole', and for the usurping of a prevailing scientific logic in thought. It is only in anxiety that for Heidegger 'the original openness of beings as such arises'. Agamben's prioritization of profound boredom might suggest an anxiety in the face of the nothing that also inhabits bare life.

Agamben calls Heidegger 'the last philosopher' to believe that the 'anthropological machine, which ... recomposes the conflict between man and animal, could still produce history and destiny for a people'.

He urges us to move beyond such thinking. As man has reached his 'historical *telos*', and has 'become animal again', it is the 'taking on of biological life itself' that is now apparently the supreme political task. Modern society has reacted with the 'total management' of biological life, a move that leads Agamben to question whether its humanity 'is still human'. Society's consigning of the 'open' to the 'suspension and capture of animal life' is creative of being that 'is always traversed by the nothing', and it is here that Agamben finally moves towards the Heideggerian state of anxiety.

Agamben's elaboration of the different readings of the duality expressed through man and animal finally comes to rest on what is in between, or, citing Benjamin, what is referred to as 'the play between the two terms, their immediate constellation in a non-coincidence'. Benjamin reminds us of that life that has 'freed itself from its relation with nature only at the cost of losing its own mystery'. Agamben develops Benjamin's idea through a reading of Titian's painting *Nymph and Shepherd*. The lovers who have lost their mystery now inhabit a more blessed life, a 'human nature rendered perfectly inoperative ... the supreme and unsavable figure of life'.

These richly woven essays offer further elaboration of Agamben's important concept of bare life, but their privileging of phrases such as 'letting be', 'zone of indifference' and 'profound boredom', together with an aligning of man's 'historical task' with a tired anthropological machine, might leave the reader gasping for some less profound political alternatives.

Michael O'Sullivan

The Cliffite position

Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left*, Merlin Press, London, 2004. xii + 210 pp., £16.95 pb., 0 85036 532 5.

Despite being a somewhat elusive figure, Perry Anderson is one of Britain's most important intellectuals. His work, spanning four decades, represents one of the most significant political and theoretical contributions to Marxist theory in the English-speaking world. It is in great part due to his efforts, through his work as editor of *New Left Review* and owner of its publishing house Verso (formerly New Left Books), that the English-speaking public was introduced to the work of Althusser, Gramsci, Sartre, Poulantzas, Colletti and many others; and that Britain finally had

its own equivalent of Sartre's *Les Temps modernes*. For Anderson, the purpose was to place British socialist strategic thinking on a firmer theoretical footing. Those reasons were sufficient to convince Paul Blackledge, an English academic whose political sympathies lie with the Cliffite International Socialist tendency, to write a book-length study and critique of Anderson's thought. The book aims to trace Anderson's evolution from his early radicalism to his later reformism and liberalism, to make sense of it, and immanently to criticize his later trajectory and contemporary political perspective.

Blackledge argues that the central problematic of Anderson's thought revolves around the fact that the various strands of Marxism have at their heart a lacuna: they contain no satisfactory theory of the modern bourgeois state as it has evolved in the West, and no systematic account of the nature of bourgeois democracy. Anderson believed that it was imperative to address this lacuna in theory and turned to this task in order to inform revolutionary practice. In *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974) and *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974), Anderson's most significant books according to Blackledge, he undertook a panoramic study outlining the genealogical underpinning of the differential development of states West and East. Because of geographical and temporal delineation, Russia no longer inhabited the same developmental framework as the West. The political consequence of this position is that a specifically Western strategic framework for revolutionary advance would have to be developed, which, while incorporating insights from Lenin, should also break with some of the essential characteristics of Bolshevism. For Blackledge, these books are 'his most influential, yet perhaps also his most flawed work'.

Blackledge outlines some of the problems of Anderson's analysis, and in particular its political conclusions. He questions whether Anderson was able adequately to articulate the distinction between the modern Western capitalist state and the Russian state of 1917. More importantly, he criticizes Anderson's strategic proposals for never being posed in concrete organizational terms. Blackledge explains that Anderson's failure to address this issue has weakened his contemporary strategic orientation. Anderson's analysis, in spite of its strengths because of its abstract character, is severely limited as a guide to action. 'Outside an organisation that could test his ideas in practice, and without the historical research necessary to deepen them, Anderson's insights remained formal and abstract, with no real purchase on the actual struggles of the prole-

tariat.' For those reasons, and given that the focus of Anderson's work was primarily political rather than academic, Blackledge concludes that it was 'something of a failed project'. In his influential *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), a current he contributed much to putting on the intellectual scene, Anderson had sharply criticized the 'structural divorce of theory and practice' characteristic of that trend of thought. For Blackledge, ironically this equally applies to Anderson's own thought.

From the 1980s onwards, Anderson gradually distanced himself from Marxism. With the various defeats of the Left, East and West, he came critically to accept Fukuyama's obituary of socialism, as no systematic alternatives to capitalism any longer existed. In essence, he argued that social democracy could be reinvigorated through the incorporation of the best elements of liberalism and be given a new lease of life in a regulated European integration. He argued that 'the parameters within which history can turn at the present conjuncture were much more circumscribed than Marx had anticipated: not socialism, but more humane forms of capitalism were the only practical alternative to triumphant neo-liberalism.' Also, according to him, Michael Mann had an analytical theory of the pattern of human development 'exceeding in explanatory ambition and empirical detail any Marxist account'. Blackledge is very critical of Anderson's conclusions. If Anderson's position is correct, then the only principled position to take is 'stoical opposition to capitalism'. If Anderson is wrong, as Blackledge believes, events such as France 1995, Seattle 1999 and Argentina in 2002 show that an alternative is possible and that 'the parameters within which history can turn at the present conjuncture are considerably broader than Anderson's assessment allows.' Blackledge's criticism is not so much that Anderson failed to predict those upsurges, but the fact that his analysis provides no concepts through which he could have understood them.

Paul Blackledge's book is the second to be published on Perry Anderson's thought. The other, Gregory Elliott's *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* (1998), is far more comprehensive. As the bibliography shows, Elliott had access to and made use of much more material than Blackledge. Elliott's ability to examine Anderson's thought in its smallest details is also difficult to rival. What is original about Blackledge's book is its radical political critique of Anderson's thought. Elliott is too close to his subject politically to be able to articulate fully an immanent critique of Anderson's ideas. Specifically, Anderson's thought has evolved to accept a highly pessimistic

interpretation of the contemporary political conjuncture that Elliott broadly shares. According to Elliott, Anderson's political perspective in the 1990s can best be characterized by its realism. However, for Blackledge, Elliott is wrong: Anderson's political reorientation in the 1990s 'was premised upon certain contestable assumptions and led to some highly unrealistic conclusions'. It is 'unwise' to adopt Anderson's position: 'Socialists must reject his political perspective if they are to avoid gross strategic errors.'

Blackledge identifies three central flaws at the core of Anderson's thought. First, political impressionism resulting from an undynamic conception of the political conjuncture. He was too optimistic about the perspectives for revolutionary advance in the West after 1968, and then too dismissive of them once the Left was in retreat. The second flaw is his pessimism regarding working-class agency. Anderson, according to Blackledge, has a tendency to downplay the role of workers' struggle; in particular he rejects the idea that contradictions might develop between the consciousness of British workers and the ideology of Labourism. The third flaw is Anderson's acceptance of Isaac Deutscher's conclusion that socialism will not necessarily come 'from below' as the self-emancipation of the working class; it can be the result of a revolution 'from above'. This resulted in Anderson having illusions about the progressive nature of the Soviet bloc and in 'transposing his conceptualisation of the key locus of the class struggle from the point of production to the Berlin Wall'. It is due to those three (fatal?) flaws that, for Blackledge, Anderson's thought from its earliest days was unable to account for potential challenges and systematic alternatives to capitalist modernity. A decent intellectual biography, Blackledge's sharp and clear political polemic is a useful complement to Elliott's more comprehensive and less critical study of Anderson's thought.

Liam O Ruairc

Intercontinental

Robert Bernasconi with Sybol Cook, eds, *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2003. 352 pp., £50.00 hb., £18.95 pb., 0 243 34223 6 hb., 0 253 21590 0 pb.

'Race' is often presented as incidental to core philosophical questions, with racism indicating little other than the fallibility and cultural prejudices of the great thinkers rather than anything substantive about their

positions. In Heideggerian parlance one might say the question of race concerns the merely ontic without impinging on more profound ontology. Yet it is interesting to see how, as Alain David illustrates in his contribution to this book, metaphysics and anthropology, nominally separate, are too easily made to slide into one another. Has metaphysics always been anthropologized? Laudable as a quest for universality might initially appear, the abstract conception of the human proposed in metaphysical models is consistently undone by insidious anthropologies, Kant being an example par excellence of this practice. In brief, then, is race supplementary to or a constitutive element in, the generation of philosophical concepts?

The Enlightenment credentials touted by the disavowers of race and gender theory repeat a symptomatic blindness to the lack of neutrality of their own position. In the scathing onslaught against ‘philosophies of difference’ or ‘multiculturalism’ launched by the likes of Badiou and Žižek, discussion of issues of race and gender hover at the fringes of the capitalist agenda, providing a semblance of radicality without ever disrupting the status quo. From this perspective a concentration on these issues constitutes a double betrayal: betrayal of a hypocritical penchant for liberal tolerance that valorizes the intrinsic worth of cultural particularity, a position easily assimilated by the likes of Le Pen; and betrayal of the possibility for real solidarity in struggle. How can one justify continuing to speak about race when there are no races? Does such a strategy simply serve to perpetuate a dangerous myth or reach for some spurious essence that can do no work for the future of humanity?

Robert Bernasconi refuses to dodge the kinds of difficult objections inevitable in debates about race. Although the articles in this book deal with latent and explicit racisms in philosophy and deny a biological conception of race, they also refuse simplistic choices by examining the ways in which philosophers’ concepts have been reappropriated to open up spaces for thinking differently. This reappropriation may operate at a strategic level – DuBois, Senghor, Suzanne Césaire – but is not therefore merely calculated, unambiguous or oppositional. For precisely this reason an attention to context and history is fundamental to this book and the authors resist the temptation to give a liberal, unequivocal and benign sheen to apparently illiberal positions, drawing out blind spots, and offering ways of thinking through such positions in a contemporary context. This is not a labour of ideological restitution. The authors manage to convey a sense of the time during which their subjects were writing, and the

ways in which those writings were traversed by a multitude of currents – literary, artistic, psychological, economic, social, political – in abstraction from which they can be understood only with difficulty, if at all. It is precisely this approach that provides the richness of a ‘continental’ philosophical approach to race as opposed to a more decontextualized argument-centred analytic approach.

Bernasconi’s previous edited collection, *Race* (2001), supplied a set of readings – primary source material and critical commentary – that provided both a historical and a critical contextualization of the debate about race. *Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy* builds upon those foundations, with an emphasis on detailed, engaged analyses of race within the context of continental philosophy. Avoiding the temptation to gravitate towards textual exposition the essays include some unexpected readings: a version of a defence of DuBois against Douglass; a complex analysis of the relationship between anthropology and philosophy in Heidegger; the reasons for Arendt’s inability to see the problem of race in America and a rehabilitation of her concept of communicative power; the depth of Fanon’s engagement with Merleau-Ponty. The political implications of racial categorization are, unsurprisingly, central to this volume. As Joy James writes, it is a myth to think democracy is not racialized. Her staccato, militant essay is a stark reminder of how racial classifications intertwined with skewed power relations are played out against a background of hypothetical equality. One finds nothing of the caricatured multiculturalism so bemoaned by Badiou and Žižek, but a sensitive exploration of why the questions of race and racism cannot be straightforwardly jettisoned in the attempt to reconceive ‘humanity’, as Fanon well understood.

Against those more inclined to lump ‘postcolonial’ thinkers into an amorphous class of closet essentialists or cultural relativists, the book demonstrates the level of critical dialogue and debate between thinkers like Fanon and Sartre, or DuBois and Douglass. Fanon himself revealed the limitations of some of the dominant strands of continental philosophy – phenomenology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, existentialism – and sought to develop positively his criticisms to articulate a new conception of humanity. This relation is not simply a one-way passage from Europe to Africa (besides the essays on anti-Semitism, most authors discussed in this collection have a link to Africa and/or Europe), but constitutes a more complicated process of dialectic and debate.

Aislinn O’Donnell