

Afterwards

Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder*, trans. Peter Drucker, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2002. 128 pp., \$15.95 pb., \$55.00 hb., 1 58367 081 5 pb., 1 58367 082 3 hb.

Verna V. Gehring, ed., *War after September 11*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, Boulder, New York and Oxford, 2003. 99 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 7425 1468 4.

Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds, *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2003. 226 pp., £16.95 pb., 0 8223 3221 3.

Alain Joxe, *Empire of Disorder*, trans. Ames Hodges, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, Semiotext(e), distributed by MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2002. 221 pp., £6.50 pb., 1 58435 016 4.

September 11, 2001 for most of us now signifies not so much the terrorist attacks that took place on that day as the start of the military campaign which the US government, supported with especial enthusiasm by the British, began to wage within weeks. These books and essays, all written before the invasion of Iraq (though some of the authors foresee it), discuss the assault on Afghanistan and assess some likely implications, internationally and for American politics and society, of the 'War on Terror' which it inaugurated. The monographs by Paris-based academics Alain Joxe and Gilbert Achcar review current policy within a longer-term critique of American global strategy. The contributors to the Gehring collection consider issues in legal, political and moral philosophy. The writers brought together by theologian Stanley Hauerwas and critic and novelist Frank Lentricchia represent a cross-section of dissenting opinion from within and around the American academy, supplemented by a trio from outside the 'homeland' – Slavoj Žižek, Jean Baudrillard and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Joxe's *Empire of Disorder* is dogmatic, self-indulgent and ill-translated. There is no index, and its footnotes contain a bare dozen passing references to work by fellow-scholars. Its publication was sponsored by the French Foreign Ministry and the Cultural Service of the French Embassy in the USA, which have made some amends by also sponsoring Gilbert Achcar's much better book. Achcar draws on Freud and Foucault, Marx and Greek myth, in a careful discussion of the hateful energies that the 'clash of barbarisms' centred on the Middle East is engendering. Like several writers under review, he distinguishes between the pity we may properly feel for all those who suffer and die violently, and the ultimately self-regarding sentiments which the media encouraged a

global audience to indulge in after the destruction of the Twin Towers. Achcar calls this mediatized emotion 'narcissistic compassion' and notes that while the politicians and opinion-formers who orchestrated it posed as universal humanists for the occasion, it is in fact 'evoked much more by calamities striking "people like us," much less by calamities affecting people unlike us'.

Achcar states well the familiar argument that US strategy in the Middle East, while it has its own fatal dynamic, pursues long-standing global goals. He quotes Theodore Roosevelt's address to Congress of December 1904, where he finds 'all the interventionist leitmotifs ... up to and including humanitarian intervention and war against evil'. To this policy which seeks to make America the Leviathan of the world, Achcar contrasts what he sees as Franklin Roosevelt's progressive Lockean liberalism, expressed in the founding Charter of the United Nations. Recent actions – in Kosovo, the Gulf War, Afghanistan (and, we can add, Iraq) – demonstrate that the USA now maintains only an instrumental relationship with the UN, which is at best 'a postwar management tool for territories ravaged by military interventions decided in Washington'. Hubristic US militarism, policing the Hobbesian anarchy of the globalized market, is more likely to inflame than to assuage the vengeful anger of the dispossessed. In a particular nemesis, Washington has paid the price of supporting Islamic fundamentalism, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as a preferable alternative to communism (Achcar does not discuss the American-backed slaughter of Iraqi Leftists during the Cold War, however). Meanwhile the sufferings of Iraqis under sanctions, and Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, have given plenty of reasons for Arabs and Muslims to hate the West.

Unlike Joxe, Achcar does not suppose we already have, in today's nation-states of Europe, the model and basis for the law-governed international polity that they would both prefer. Achcar hopes the movement against globalization can fill the vacuum left by the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and lay the basis internationally for an 'alternative to neoliberal capitalism'. In the space usurped by identity politics, including political Islam, a project of progressive secular democracy might then be rebuilt. However, Achcar does not consider whether the ideology of 'anti-globalization' is in fact compatible with the social-democratic politics and intergovernmental approaches to international security that he also advocates. And can we really assume today that Islamic fundamentalism is just a temporary displacement of dammed-up socialist energies in the Arab world?

Joxe and Achcar address an international readership. *War after September 11* is written for an American public, imagined as uncomplicatedly patriotic (one chapter originated as a paper given to the US Army War College) but still concerned about the legitimacy and legality of its government's deeds. These essays discuss the ethics of retribution and 'asymmetric war', the role of development in redressing the immiseration that is taken to be one cause of terrorism, and the need for international institutions. (Again Hobbesian and Lockean models are contrasted.) They are very clearly written and exemplify the uses – but also the limitations – of abstract philosophical argument as immanent critique, within a community whose shared assumptions they do not always test. Judith Lichtenberg is not alone in taking it for granted that on 12 September 2001 the USA occupied 'the moral high ground', or in arguing that Americans in pursuing terrorists should try to behave virtuously for virtue's sake, but also for America's: 'Appearing to be sensitive to humanitarian concerns is an important element in persuading the international community ... that we are not simply self-interested.'

Yet should the state behave morally and lawfully even if its selfish ends (to get information from detainees, for example) might be more readily gained by ill-treatment? This is one implicit theme of the excellent essay by David Luban. Luban shows how the US authorities, in constructing the black hole of Guantánamo Bay, have drawn just as it suits them on the very different legal-moral frameworks appropriate to war and to judicial proceeding. Prisoners of war must not be treated as wrong-doers or made to answer questions. Putative criminals should not be arbitrarily imprisoned and must be tried by due process. The

US administration, however, detains people through mere force, as defeated combatants, while interrogating them with a view to staging eventual pseudo-trials. In reply to those who say such measures are designed for a temporary emergency, Luban points out that the 'War on Terrorism' may go on indefinitely. It is inconceivable that all potential enemies of the USA will ever be killed or captured, so such a war 'can only be abandoned, never concluded'. Meanwhile it has spawned 'a model of politics, a worldview with its own distinctive premises and consequences', which include the 'hybrid war-law model.... So long as it continues, the War on Terrorism means the end of human rights, at least for those near enough to be touched by the fire of battle.'

Thanks in part, maybe, to interventions like Luban's, some members of the US establishment have spoken out to deplore the harm the Bush administration has been doing to the rule of law. Few have distanced themselves unequivocally from the 'war'; but if this is to be abandoned, pressure from Americans will be crucial. The cost to US forces will count heavily, soldiers being more than ever shown and seen as 'people like us'. Catherine Lutz notes in her contribution to *Dissent from the Homeland* that in the two decades before 2002, 525 US soldiers were killed by enemy action. In early January 2004, the Pentagon stated that 346 of its personnel had died in Iraq in just eight months since the end of that war was announced. As more people become aware of the evidence that alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction – even if any are ever found – were a pretext for an invasion the neoconservatives had long since determined on, majority American opinion may reject Bush's whole strategy.

The best reason for reading *Dissent from the Homeland* is that it illustrates a range of positions, from radical ecology to Christian pacifism, on which minority opposition in the USA has been based. It is a miscellaneous volume, with little sense of a clear editorial project. Some contributions read as though this were just another opportunity for writers to go through their paces. Baudrillard is the worst offender, in a woeful display of sham dialectics in a reprinted piece:

When the two towers collapsed, one had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-jets with their own suicide.... The symbolic collapse of a whole system happened through an invisible complicity, as if, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, the towers had played their part in the game, in order to crown the event.

Others proceed with more respect and more thought. They include several representatives of the American left (though Hauerwas wonders if ‘there is a Left left in America’). The contributions of Fredric Jameson, Catherine Lutz and Susan Willis combine critique, analysis and guarded hope that we can still find a political way forward. Anne R. Slifkin, in an essay that complements Luban’s in the Gehring collection, discusses the arraignment of the ‘American Taliban’, John Walker Lindh, captured in Afghanistan. Exploring questions of law, patriotism and free speech, she reminds readers that ‘the Taliban to which ... Lindh was attracted’ early in 2001 was receiving US financial aid for its anti-heroin policy.

Contributors like these, whose arguments are not faith-based, find themselves in company that would look odd in much of Europe, for half their fellow essayists write as members of religious communities (one American Jew, one American Muslim, and half a dozen Christian pastors and theologians). The pres-



ence of so many believers reflects American realities. Srinivas Aramudan cites surveys showing that while in many Western European states three-quarters of citizens are atheists or agnostics, about 80 per cent of Americans believe in a divinity. Aramudan notes that the US public sphere is characterized not by secularism but by a tolerance of religious differences, originally framed to allow rival Christian sects to coexist: ‘The fundamental attributes of US nationalism have always derived from the moral doctrines of a nation of passive religious freedoms... [which can be] conveniently kept alive and renewed by the state when in pursuit of militarist agendas.’ Bush withdrew his too hastily uttered word ‘crusade’, but Christianity went on being invoked as America went to war after September 11. Michael J. Baxter, a Catholic priest, records his distress at seeing on the day the bombing of Afghanistan began, the cover of a church bulletin showing ‘a large cross

with a banner of the stars and stripes draped over it.... Emblazoned over the image was the Prayer of St. Francis, beginning with the words, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace”.’ Aramudan points out that while a Muslim cleric was invited, unprecedentedly, to open the memorial services held on 14 September, ‘these services anyway featured a military choir singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” to an assembly of the entire current political leadership’.

It was timely to bring together religious voices speaking against war and for an active, substantial dialogue between faiths. Hauerwas notes in his Introduction that while George Bush has assured Americans that Islam is a ‘tradition of peace’, it was ‘curious, given Christianity’s history, [that he did] not find it necessary to assure us that Christianity is a tradition of peace’. One applauds this well-directed irony, and assents to much that Hauerwas and other religious contributors say. Overall, however, I found myself uneasy with many intimations and implications of

these faith-based chapters. John Milbank urges Americans to reject Locke along with Hobbes and Machiavelli, in favour of ‘a more truly radical legacy of Christian (and at times Jewish) associative agrarian and civic Republicanism’. This brew is strange, but more palatable than what some others proffer. Not everyone who shares Baxter’s unease at the draping of the cross with the flag will follow him when he suggests that one reason not to fight for the USA is the fact that abortion is legal there. Socialists may struggle to frame arguments which we know lack popular support, but few of us will opt for the language used by Peter

Ochs, who speaks as one of the faithful minority privileged to see the ‘as-yet-invisible Event’. If what is left of the Left risks being caught between crusade and jihad, it seems more important than ever to criticise the human limitations of our societies in terms of the good life and secular citizenship.

There is a hint in some of these essays – some phrases in Ochs and Žižek, a sentence in David James Duncan’s eco-spiritual reflections, Hauerwas’s repeated references to ‘an apocalyptic event’ – that what happened on 11 September had an aspect of redemptive sublimity, calling our minds to higher things. I agree, rather, with Jameson, who says clearly that the attacks and their predictable consequences have brought nothing but ill, in a disastrous dialectic that offers little prospect of transcendence and may lead to the common ruin of the antagonists.

Martin Ryle

Critical convert

Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, foreword by Slavoj Žižek, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, xxxvi + 467 pp., £54.50 hb., £18.00 pb., 0 8166 3460 2 hb., 0 8166 3461 0 pb.

This is an admirable book in every way, and it is hard to imagine how, as an introduction to a contemporary philosopher, it can be surpassed, so amazing are its range and depth. Peter Hallward has an intimate knowledge of the Badiou corpus, a corpus both vast and extravagantly diversified. Little of it has been translated so far; much of it, for instance the early pre- or proto-systemic work, will in all likelihood never be translated; a lot of it, consisting in essays, articles and pamphlets scattered in little-known journals or issued by very small militant publishing houses, is hard to come by and remains uncollected. The Badiou scholar must possess all the qualities of the collecting enthusiast. And this knowledge of the corpus is first hand, the texts are read in their native French, and no nuance in the language escapes the eye of the analyst, who thus avoids the usual pitfall of translation-induced mistakes that so often cause the French philosopher rendered into English to pass for a charlatan. But Peter Hallward's qualities are not merely in the realm of philological criticism: his author being a modern version of that long-gone figure the polymath, he has had to acquire a wide range of competence, and one unusual in our field, for instance in mathematics (the book comes complete with an appendix on the essentials of set theory). And his commentary shows considerable pedagogic skill: an always possibly bewildered reader is taken through the difficult terrain step after logical step, his flagging attention is gently jogged by sentences beginning with the verb 'remember' ('and remember that a situation is...'). The result is a book that is complex (Badiou is not an obscure, but is certainly a difficult, philosopher), but always clear, challenging yet always readable.

The main quality of the book is that it skilfully negotiates the two pitfalls that await such books. It avoids the Anglo-Saxon pitfall of carping criticism, whereby the great philosopher is firmly put in his place by an even greater critic, and the continental pitfall of hagiography and sectarian discipleship. In the case of Badiou, because of the systematic nature of the system, and the decisionist conception of truth that lies at the heart of it, and requires conversion and fidelity, the second pitfall is particularly hard to avoid, and at times Peter Hallward comes very close to the brink, like Charlie Chaplin rollerskating blindfolded on the brink of the abyss in *Modern Times*. But this

is only because he wants to provide a full account of the system, and to let its power of fascination, which is considerable, operate to the full (he even goes to the length of treating *l'Organisation politique* seriously, as if it were a major political force), only allowing himself rare moments of ironic distance, as when he describes Badiou's 'retreat from history': 'in a word, the movement of history failed to live up to Badiou's *confiance*'. When the mountain fails to come up to Muhammad, he turns his back on it and sulks.

That Peter Hallward, who is clearly a disciple, is a critical disciple, is evident in the last but one chapter. Here some of the most obvious failings of the system (its incapacity to account for the phenomena of culture, its denial of any relevance to the concept of society, the anti-unionism of the 'axiomatic' politics derived from it) are firmly pointed out. True, this announces the last chapter, where Badiou's next, as yet unpublished and largely unwritten, masterpiece, *Logique des mondes*, is presented as an answer to the questions raised by the limitations of the system, and as a correction. Incidentally, this is the only book of its kind I know that accounts not only for all the published work of the author, but also for his future work. There is more than a joke in this, as this state of affairs demonstrates the closeness of the critic to his object.

Peter Hallward has erected a critical monument worthy of what is, it is increasingly clear, one of the major philosophies that have appeared in Europe in the last fifty years. A monument all the more welcome as, in spite of the translation of a number of the shorter works, the *magnum opus*, where the system is expounded, *L'Être et l'événement*, hasn't appeared in English yet. So the English reader will have to work her way through this book to feel the full force and fascination of the system and grasp the philosophical and political gains that conversion entails: a principled defence of universalism, against all forms of communitarianism and identity politics; a philosophical and political firmness, to the point of stubbornness, that will not, in spite of the various 'turns', linguistic or liberal, that have afflicted the contemporary scene, give in to opinion; a refusal in particular to give in to the currently prevailing turn to ethics and the woolly ideology of human rights, an ideology near to exhaustion (with proponents such as Tony Blair, who needs opponents?).

Yet there is a point at which one must leave the system, and try to view it from a critical distance. This, Hallward does not do himself (his criticism is internal to the system, it attempts to move it a little further on its majestic way), but his exposition is so clear-headed that it allows the reader to take the necessary steps.

I shall start with what is, to my mind, the only thing missing in Hallward's exposition. The chapter devoted to Badiou's 'inesthetics', with its analysis of 'artistic configurations', shows how Badiou's poetics derives from his ontology and is fully integrated in the system. What it fails to show is the potential contradiction between a high modernist canon (Mallarmé, Beckett, Proust – there is nothing strikingly original in this) and the theory and practice of drama (Badiou is an established playwright), with the choice of comedy as the militant philosopher's mode of dramatic intervention. The claims of closeness to truth routinely made for poetry are not usually made for comedy, and Badiou is perhaps closer to Brecht (whom he obviously despises) than he would like to think.

Yet the section of the book that really allows a critical distance is the beginning, where the history of the system is carefully described. For this system, which demands – eternity of truth *oblige* – to be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, has of course a history. Hallward is the first to do full justice to this, and especially to the first, tentative and now abandoned, version of the system, in *Théorie du sujet*. The historical development of the system, away from Sartre into Marx, Mao and Althusser, and then away from Marx, Mao and Althusser and back to Sartre, is in sharp contrast with the principled ahistoricism of the result of that history. There lies the major problem I have with the system. Not in the mathematical turn, not in the resistance to the linguistic turn, with its consequent refusal to ascribe any importance to the question of language (a paradoxical position in a philosopher who is also a novelist and playwright), not in the ultra-decisionist aspect of an 'axiomatic politics' which does not protect the faithful (not least the author of the system) from the most elementary errors of judgement (I am alluding, of course, to Badiou's support of the Pol Pot regime against the Vietnamese intervention), but the absence of a concept of history. For events, as defined by the system, are historical occurrences, they appear in specific conjunctures, and the truths they induce are deemed eternal (as eternal as the charm of Greek art in that famous passage in the *Grundrisse*), but there is no continuity of history, only a dotted line of historical sequences, whose capacity to engender political or artistic truth is soon exhausted. For the system involves

a strange form of temporality. It is not concerned with the past, or with the future, as Hallward acknowledges, but neither is it concerned with the Marxian present of the conjuncture and the social formation. In fact the system is not concerned with the present either, rather with the eternity of truth, outside time, and the future anterior of the event (the event *will have occurred*), the time of decision and conversion (the event *shall have occurred*). Hence the paradoxical statement that each event creates its own time.

This, of course, raises a number of questions. What do we do when we find ourselves between a historical sequence that has done its time (the sequence of the May events is now exhausted, as the meagre results of *L'Organisation politique* amply demonstrate) and an event that is yet to emerge? And since the event, by definition, escapes any formulation in the language of the current situation, how do we prepare for this emergence (that is, how do we justify the choice of stubborn militancy rather than the ivory tower and the sulk)? From this point of view, the religiousness of the system (in spite of Badiou's total atheism) compares unfavourably with that of its natural competitor in that field, Bloch's *Prinzip Hoffnung*. And since there is no way of anticipating the event, of working towards it, as the system does not admit of programmes, intermediate or long-term goals or tactical moves, how do we recognize it when it comes, except through conversion?

Here Badiou does provide some answers, in the form of an array of concepts (the militant construction of truth, the infinite series of investigations, the dangers of betrayal through suture), but they are hardly satisfactory. In particular, they hardly account for the overinterpretation of historical occurrences as events by those who convert to them, the best instance being the pseudo-revolution of national socialism: only the usual facile hindsight makes such things clear. The lack of a concept of society, the lack of an analysis of the economic structure of the situation, preclude any real analysis of the eventual (as opposed to 'evental') emergence of the event. The extent to which Badiou has abandoned Marxism and Althusser, his old master (remember that for him Marx had opened up the continent of history for science), is now clear. It is one of the many beauties of Peter Hallward's book that, even if this is hardly his objective, he allows the reader to perceive this movement of the system so clearly. For the book is not only a worthy monument to the grandeur of Badiou: it is a critical monument in its own right.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle

Ostalgie

Charity Scribner, *Requiem for Communism*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2003. 245 pp., £22.95 hb., 0 262 19488 0.

Charity Scribner's book has a striking cover. It is a photograph of the Platz der Vereinten Nationen in Berlin. In fact, it shows an image of a huge postwar housing block, grey with a little yellow light relief around selected windows, and entirely typical of the Western image of the Eastern bloc. Uniformity, drabness and plainness are what state socialism erected in its perversion of modernist architecture to make mass homes on the cheap for mass man. Invisible in the photograph is the backstory. Platz der Vereinten Nationen was, until 1992, Lenin Platz and it housed East Berlin's Lenin Statue, the breeze-blockish Soviet leader silhouetted against one of the tower blocks in this 1970 complex. Some of the Left today still insist on calling the square Lenin Platz. Such insistence is a form of memory work, as much as it is defiant. It is the fate of memory that Scribner hopes to access in *Requiem for Communism*, through a study of art and curatorial practices in the Eastern bloc and Western Europe. These are represented by critical, semi-dissident works, such as Andrzej Wadja's *Man of Marble* (1977) and *Man of Iron* (1981) and Christa Wolf's novels. She also analyses culture produced amidst the aftershocks of the fall of the Berlin Wall, such as Judith Kuckart's *Melancholia I* (1996) and Joseph Beuys's use of GDR products, at Documenta IX, alleged by Heiner Müller as per se a challenge to capitalist commodification. Scribner also reflects on the 'nostalgia' of the Western labour movement, in works, from the United Kingdom and France, made after the 'fall' of the welfare state: Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* (1981), John Berger's novels and Mark Herman's *Brassed Off* (1996). Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993) features as an engagement with memory in the context of socialist crisis, understood through Lacan's notion of 'foreclosure', which serves also as an apt pun on house repossession after the failure to repay a mortgage. (It is rather odd to have the UK understood as a kind of 'socialist state' because of its National Health Service, but perhaps from the distant vantage point of the United States all welfare states are grey.)

All these and more are seen to register the transition from one type of world to another. This world in dissolution Scribner calls the 'Second World' and 'second' is a freighted term. In the Second World there was a collective that laboured industrially and it

remembered. Its memory and its history were bound up with labour, and also with its refusal or withdrawal. Scribner writes of 'factory seconds', which signify 'downtime' moments in the factory as well as those products that have incorporated flaws. Factory seconds are evidence of the tiny moments that escape The Plan, and so connote the refusal of the subject to be instrumentalized. These moments of opposition, sometimes subtle, relied on worker solidarity. Worker solidarity relied on the factory.

Scribner locates the changes in Europe in a wider framework of deindustrialization, which means that the working classes of the East and the West are disappearing, overcome by automation and scuppered by the death of the factory. Promisingly this book aims to take seriously the experience of labour in societies that claimed to be organized for the benefit of the labouring classes. The real loss that occurs in the collapse of the Soviet satellite states is not the loss of a social-economic system but a loss of collective memory, for memory is tied to collective labour. Scribner writes of an analogy that is also the new labouring actuality. As collective labour is laid off and the factories where workers communed and struggled and worked, in dissidence or in unity with the 'socialist' ideals, new types of memory emerge. These are the memories of computers, random access and decidedly non-human, the 'immaterial' industries of the future. On this terrain, faced with IBM, backed by the US military, the planners in Eastern Europe, who had staked their economies' success on micro-chips and memory boards, were bound to fail. 'In the late nineteen eighties, East German authorities, in particular, found themselves caught in a context between computers and collapse.' Collapse came, and then the Western computers arrived. As memory gives way to computer memory, the field of economic operations also goes international and the 'second world' is subsumed in the one world of global capital. Returning to the analogy, Scribner notes that, instead of human memory, working memory now designates 'random-access memory', and she asks whether the recollection of life under socialism will 'be permanently inscribed into Europe's collective memory or merely deleted from the disk'. Scribner wishes to write 'at odds with postmodern flux'. Her book 'fixes its attention upon the local, the concrete', and insists that, before moving forward, we must take stock of what remains.

Memory remains, and it takes the traditional tools of Freud to dig it out. Recourse is made to the famous essay on melancholia and mourning, and Freud's notion of disavowal is also used. Mourning,

melancholia and disavowal are understood as signal modes of collective memory, once they have been supplemented by Lacan's sixth seminar 'Desire and its Interpretation' (1959) and Negt and Kluge's *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (History and Obstinacy) (1981). These reconceptualize mourning as a collective process. Each chapter of Scribner's book proceeds under a weighty term: the collective, solidarity, nostalgia, mourning, melancholia, disavowal. The ostensibly political cedes to the psychoanalytical. What is mourned? What is melancholically recalled? This is a requiem for dead ideals, for the loss of hope, and the belief in utopia; even if the systems analysed were inadequate, at least they held open a space for such thinking. Scribner is intrigued by the fact that 'real existing socialism' is largely seen as a failure, and yet still intellectuals mourn its passing. And it is this very mourning that releases so much artistic reflection, in the build-up to the collapse of the system and in the aftermath as the shards and rubble of the ruined social experiment are collected and collated in museums, novels and films. Art appears to be a kind of therapy for sad post-communist intellectuals. Scribner too wants to rescue the idealism of the socialist project and to bring out not its actuality but a certain spirit that animated it, be that its political social vision (however distorted) or be it the critique of 'real existing socialism' in the name of what it claimed to be. Scribner wants to salvage something of Marx, while criticizing the Eastern bloc system. In a sense, what is mourned is the possibility of dissidence. With the disappearance of bad socialism, all socialism threatens to disappear. Its space may now be presumed closed, along with the Lenin Shipyards, the collieries and the 'People's Palaces'.

The wider framework of this book is fascinating, and it is true that the culture of the 'Second World' is threatened with obsolescence and forgetting. The second world's culture marks sites of reflection and resistance. There is something intransigent and persistent in culture, which continues to have a material presence, and can be mined for meaning. Culture is the worked-over zone of memory. But it is not the only place of memory, even after the end of Western factory labour. Scribner mentions briefly the concept of 'ostalgie', a term coined to describe the sense of loss felt on the disappearance of Spreewald Gherkins, Ersatz colas and East Berlin's squat traffic-light man. This 'ostalgie' mourns the loss of products that were generally poor but were the stuff of habit. There is something ridiculous about it. Other writers have spoken of the absurd but nonetheless disconcerting panic that set in for some East German shoppers

confronted with a large choice of yoghurts and the like in supermarkets. Thinking about 'ostalgie' – and all its attendant irony and contradictions – gets at the textures of experience of the Eastern bloc. It is what gives the film *Good-Bye Lenin* (made by a West German) its interest, despite or because of the fact that it turns the fate of the GDR into a comedic Oedipal drama suffused with nostalgia for the shoddy and sold-out, which, because of its defectiveness is annexed to innocence.

At Lenin Platz/Platz der Vereinten Nationen, the name and the statue were removed, but the buildings, which were 'showcase socialist homes', remain, and in the late 1990s even had millions of euros poured into them for modernization and asbestos removal. These housing blocks are a landmark and are now protected as architectural treasures. Such are the contradictions of material culture. The overt symbols of a regime disappeared, but aspects of the material fabric of life in the Eastern bloc remained. The memories of the new citizens are stored in a new setting, where new names and new ideologies prevail. These living, walking memories are barely accessed by Scribner's art-oriented project. Most interesting is her discussion of the Open Depot in Eisenhüttenstadt, where citizens of the former GDR give up their old goods, their VEB radios and reel-to-reel machines, which they have now replaced by Chinese stereos. They also submit themselves to interviews for an archive of ordinary experience. It is only here that the voices of participants other than the intelligentsia begin to pipe up conceptually in Scribner's book, allowing a fleeting access to the mass of living, walking memories, without which there can be no political action and no potential realization of the now bruised ideals.

Esther Leslie

Open sesame

Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. xxviii + 290 pp., £60.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 521 80744 1 hb., 0 521 00203 6 pb.

Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003. 4 vols, 1392 pp., £475.00 hb., 0 415 27862 7 (set).

'What will you do with all that I say? Will you record it on a little thing and organize soirées by invitation only? – Hey, I've got a tape by Lacan!' This passage

from Seminar XVII demonstrates that Lacan was well aware of the fact that his teachings would, sooner or later, inevitably be incorporated by what he disdainfully named the university discourse. However, one fundamental question remained open at that time and still remains at least partly open today: *in what way* would such an assimilation occur? Despite the pessimism expressed by the cynical remark above, we now know that it is possible for academia to recuperate his work whilst at the same time preserving its subversive power. It is on the basis of such a productive compromise that, for example, Badiou reads Lacan through the latter's self-professed role of 'antiphilosopher', and describes the contemporary philosopher as 'one who has the unfaltering courage to go through Lacan's anti-philosophy'. Yet the risk of a belated fashion for 'Lacan soirées' and the hegemonic imposition of a 'soft' approach to his work is probably higher than ever in anglophone university circles.

The Cambridge Companion to Lacan and the colossal four-volume *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory* both witness and – given their editorial format – tacitly delimit a particularly vibrant period for Lacanian reception in anglophone academia. The articles they contain are, with a few exceptions among the cultural studies-oriented contributions to the *Companion*, of a very high standard. The declared intent of Rabaté's 'specially commissioned essays' is to bring 'fresh, accessible perspectives' to bear on Lacan's work. Although the texts in *Critical Evaluations* are all reprinted and, due to their theoretical density, could hardly claim to 'accompany' students in their initiation to Lacan, Žižek's goal similarly consists of proposing a work 'which proves that Lacan is still *alive*, able to trigger debates that matter'. It is significant that forty essays out of fifty-six in this enormous enterprise were written (or translated) in the last fifteen years.

This temporal specification highlights what is probably the most obvious failure of these two collections: they both neglect to assess in an adequate manner what made them possible – that is, the specifically anglophone renaissance of Lacanian studies during the 1990s. Neither of the editors asks himself, why is a critical evaluation of and/or an academic introduction to Lacan in English possible precisely at the present time? And, more importantly, what remains to be done in order not to confine this unexpected revival to drawing-room gossip? What should have been made more explicit is, in the end, the existence of a *global* reinterpretation of Lacan as a key theoretical figure beyond the specific domain of psychoanalysis; a reinterpretation which is similar, in its wide scope, to



the one that Nietzsche underwent during the 1950s and 1960s. Despite often writing in English, many of the authors collected here are from outside the anglophone world – as are the editors of the two collections. However, it is surely not a coincidence that this English-language renaissance of the 1990s was concomitant with the release of four seminars – out of the ten published – and of the *Autres Écrits* in France. (Oddly enough, although some of the best secondary literature available on these works – or even on unpublished seminars – is in English, they still await official translation: publication of Seminar IV and Seminar XVII has been forthcoming for years.)

The merit of Rabaté's collection is emphatically to proclaim that the sterile controversy concerning Lacan's alleged impenetrability should definitely be laid to rest. The clear-cut statement according to which 'if Lacan is difficult, he is perhaps not *so* difficult', contained in the preface, should be regarded as its most appropriate epitaph. However, the reader who wants to engage philosophically with Lacan might find it difficult to agree with Rabaté when he goes on to infer from this that 'the time of simple exegesis [of Lacan's oeuvre] has passed'. On the contrary, given that Lacan is at last no longer deemed forbiddingly gnostic and, despite the renaissance of Lacanian studies, his reception has thus far often been less than satisfactory, one is inclined to believe that the time for serious exegesis can finally

begin. In order to be fruitful, editorial initiatives like the *Companion* and *Critical Evaluations* should ultimately be interpreted as an invitation to read Lacan without the prosthesis of secondary literature. Colette Soler is therefore perfectly right when, in her excellent contribution to the *Companion*, she distinguishes ‘true [Joyce] and false [Lacan] unreadables’. Lacan has been reputed unreadable because he undoubtedly is difficult to understand. However, as Soler maintains, ‘in twenty years, we have greatly reduced the unreadability of Lacan, except of course to people who do not want to read him’.

Mentions of Lacan’s irreverent style and openly contradictory pronouncements are usually an alibi for mental laziness. At least, the (inconsiderate) critic who has not yet found the ‘unfaltering courage’ advocated by Badiou should be humble enough to admit what two of Lacan’s best-known friends had the honesty to admit: as Lévi-Strauss confessed, despite sensing the importance of Lacan’s theories, ‘I’d have had to read everything five or six times. Merleau-Ponty and I used to talk about it and concluded that we didn’t have the time.’ Interestingly enough, the position according to which ‘Lacan is impenetrable’ (even after having read him six times) is adopted by two opposing categories of scholars: aprioristic anti-Lacanian, for whom, as Chomsky stated not long ago, ‘Lacan was a conscious charlatan’; and aprioristic pro-Lacanian, for whom Lacan is a sort of prophet who has to be interpreted rhapsodically. In both cases, what is rejected is the working hypothesis, if not the assumption, that Lacan is a paradoxically *systematic* thinker.

It is precisely the problematic character of Lacan’s thought qua ‘open system’ that Rabaté’s call for an end of exegesis overlooks. Contributors to his collection do not necessarily share his views. If, on the one hand, a loose exegetical approach leads Feher-Gurewich’s highly misleading theoretical essay on perversion to rely on empirical oxymorons such as ‘my patient’s unconscious intent was...’, on the other, Leader’s piece on Lacan’s use of formal structures as a particular kind of mythical construction, and Burgoyne’s related essay on ‘Lacan’s scientific method’, should both be considered excellent examples of a textual confrontation with the Lacan’s ‘proto-mathematical’ challenge to philosophy.

Why is Lacan a *paradoxically* systematic thinker? Because, despite formulating a highly elaborate and consistent theory, he decided to present it to us through the work in progress that led to its emergence (in his seminars) and the inherent questions, doubts and dead-ends that all consistent, ‘closed’ and completed

philosophical systems end up silently confronting (in the *Écrits*). This is why Lacan can appropriately define himself as an ‘anti-philosopher’. As Burgoyne reminds us, Freud (and Lacan after him) thought that ‘philosophy, while using much of the methodology of the sciences, has a tendency to gloss over incompleteness in its results ... it lacks this scientific ability to bear incompleteness.’

Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluations offers a clever selection of what most Lacanians would definitely consider ‘the best of’ existing secondary literature. Contributions range from seminal essays by (‘orthodox’ and ‘unorthodox’) members of Lacan’s inner circle (Jean Laplanche, Serge Leclaire, Octave Mannoni, Jean-Claude Milner, Moustapha Safouan) to the work of authors who initially introduced Lacan to the anglophone world (Fredric Jameson, Jacqueline Rose) and those who subsequently disseminated his thought (Joan Copjec, Darian Leader, Bruce Fink). Considerable space is reserved for the Žižek-inspired Ljubljana school (besides two important articles by the editor himself, pieces by Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar and Miran Božovič are included) which played a key role in its renaissance in the 1990s.

The four volumes of *Critical Evaluations* correspond to the four main domains of the Lacan debate: psychoanalytic theory and practice; philosophy; social science (with particular emphasis on the critique of ideology); cultural studies. The volume dedicated to philosophy is judiciously selected: apart from influential contributions by Badiou, Milner and Žižek himself, the editor also proposes a sample of a hermeneutic reading of Lacan (Lang), as well as some examples of a long-established but usually underestimated Heideggerian approach (Boothby, Casey and Woody). However, not enough is said in the introduction to assess the current state of the relationship between Lacan and philosophy: Žižek’s indication that ‘almost all of today’s main philosophical orientations ... propose their own Lacan’ may be considered more as an optimistic encouragement than as a de facto reality. (Who would dare to persuade a Wittgensteinian that Lacan’s reading of Wittgenstein in Seminar XVII is convincing?)

The volume on cultural studies is opened by Žižek’s unashamed admission of ‘purposefully neglecting the feminism/cinema theory/literary studies complex that almost monopolized the reception of Lacan’. We can imagine that he might be referring here to terrifying post-mortem encounters such as the one which is analysed in ‘Lacan’s Afterlife: Jacques Lacan Meets Andy Warhol’, possibly the worst essay of *The Companion*. Despite directly quoting Lacan only a

couple of times – and in the most disparate contexts – Catherine Liu deems to have located sufficient evidence for a comparative reading of these two figures in the fact that ‘they [both] represent different faces of masterful opacity in their relationship to recording devices’. In this case one cannot but agree with Jacques-Alain Miller’s remark: ‘if at their best [Lacanian cultural studies] disclose one of the bearings of discontent in civilization, at their worst they are simply being part of it’. Nevertheless, even a reader who is entirely sympathetic to this attack against ‘soft’ (or simply bad) Lacanians could not avoid the suspicion that Žižek’s provocative choice to start the tome with an article by Badiou entitled ‘Complementary Note on a Contemporary Usage of Frege’ may be too bold. The decision is well motivated by the necessity to explain correctly the notion of suture (key for Lacanian cinematic theory), but one can guess that it will deter many a cultural studies adept from even opening the book.

If the overall quality of the articles and the crafty way in which they are grouped is indisputable, considerable doubts persist about the general aim of Žižek’s anthology. This concerns three main aspects of the project. First, there is the editor’s decision to include extracts from easily available texts such as Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* and Althusser’s *Freud and Lacan*, which provide idiosyncratic re-elaborations of Lacan’s work rather than a ‘critical evaluation’ of it. In the case of Deleuze, it is difficult to see what the reader will make of two paragraphs about Lacan extrapolated from twenty dense pages almost entirely dedicated to discussing other intricate issues. In that of Althusser, his highly misleading ‘ideological’ reading of the Lacanian Imaginary would probably be of use only to those readers who are already well acquainted with Lacan’s own arguments on the topic. (For a preliminary interpretation of Althusser’s inconsistent appropriation of Lacan – and not, as its title deceptively claims, for Lacan’s own ‘Marxism’ – one should refer to Joseph Valente’s contribution in *The Companion*.) Second, there is the decision of the publishing house to leave in the original French a couple of articles which had not yet been translated into English. A chance was therefore missed to make available to a wider public Mannoni’s essential ‘Je sais bien, mais quand même’ (whose main tenet about fetishist disavowal has been proficiently resumed in Žižek’s own theory). Finally, there is the ludicrous price, which remains unjustified, even if one takes into consideration the prospective overseas library market, the elegance of the binding and the total number of

pages (or, as my invoice specified in bold type, the net weight of 3.190 kilos).

It is well known how Lacan defended his subversion of the psychoanalytic establishment by advocating a ‘return’ to the true spirit of the Freudian revolution. Lacan’s inventive additions originate from his insistence in confronting and partially overcoming the many deadlocks of Freud’s oeuvre. In a similar fashion, in order to be constructive, the return to Lacan we have been experiencing for the last fifteen years, and which is somehow implicitly monumentalized by these two collections, should avoid dogmatizing Lacan’s work. It is essential to encourage what Rabaté defines as a ‘dynamic usage’ of Lacan in several contexts. What is nevertheless needed in order to (re)direct properly this interdisciplinary endeavour is a detailed analysis of Lacanian concepts: this would probably show that they are less deliberately elusive than they may initially seem. Soler’s *mot d’ordre* is more than ever timely: ‘We just need to read Lacan closely.’

Lorenzo Chiesa

Reading Hegel’s entrails

Christopher M. Gemberchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel*, SUNY, New York, 2003. 291 pp., £58.25 hb, £20.00 pb., 0 7914 5631 5 hb., 0 7914 5632 3 pb.

From the very beginning of this book Gemberchak argues that he is responding to our ongoing failure to read Bataille properly. Part of the reason for this failure may lie within the challenging and labyrinthine nature of Bataille’s work itself, which Gemberchak memorably describes as resembling more ‘a midnight journey through a ravaged city than a body of philosophical thought’. However, this study argues that a much more significant reason for our failure is a lack of understanding of the way in which Bataille’s thought became mobilized as a very specific type of reading of and challenge to Hegel – ‘Without fully understanding Bataille’s profound intimacy with, and *détournement* of the work of Hegel, one quite simply fails to fully comprehend Bataille.’ Yet Gemberchak acknowledges that his ‘theoretical’ study inevitably misses the radical experience that Bataille had ceaselessly sought to communicate, and as such even his attempts to read Bataille

properly represent a profound 'betrayal'. For Gernerchak what remains important, despite this 'betrayal', is the repetition of Bataille's fundamentally religious gesture – 'like a living Zarathustra, he urgently tried to communicate a religious feeling that has been lost.' Gernerchak's study is orientated by what he argues is Bataille's religious reconfiguration of Hegel's notion of determinate negativity as *gratuitous* negativity.

Gernerchak begins the work with a brief overview of the complex texture of Bataille's life. He identifies Bataille's decisive philosophical encounter with Kojève's lectures on Hegel in the 1930s at the École des Hautes Études. Gernerchak argues that before one can proceed to any genuine analysis and evaluation of Bataille's specific challenge to Hegel, one must excavate Bataille from 'the layers of Kojévian sedimentation through which we must pass'. As part of this effort at excavation, he traces Bataille's transfiguration of Hegel's notion of the 'Sunday of Life' (a notion derived from Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*). For Hegel, religious faith was the realm where one's worldly concerns (those governed by the 'labour of the negative') are humbly suspended and subordinated to an elevated region free from the critical reflection intrinsic to the 'labour of the negative'. Within Kojève's lectures on Hegel this notion of the 'Sunday of Life' lost its religious characteristic and was subjected to a secular reconfiguration. For Kojève it was the world of the well-educated and bored individuals who simply have nothing to do at the 'end of history' apart from 'filling their mouths' and 'watching time pass'. Gernerchak shows how Bataille adopted this bleak picture of the post-Hegelian age from Kojève as his own starting point. Bataille reconceived the Hegelian/Kojévian 'end of history' as a moment of messianic suspension holding an eschatological promise of deliverance from 'the homogenous course of history'. Gernerchak convincingly demonstrates that for Bataille such post-Hegelian deliverance will *once again* take on a religious form. Bataille became obsessed with exploring radically different possibilities for humanity with regard to its intrinsic negativity once the 'labour of the negative' had been completed. For Bataille there remained a post-Hegelian possibility for the revelation of ourselves and that it could only occur after the working week, on Sunday – the day of rest. For Bataille this was never simply a matter of straightforward worship but of what he called the 'inner experience' of risk, chance, eroticism, play and laughter. From the Hegelian perspective of the labouring determinate negative these things have no meaning and are essentially gratuitous and useless.

However, to remain constrained within the Hegelian perspective was, for Bataille, radically to subordinate our lives to a degrading and somewhat impoverished chain of secular utility.

Gernerchak's text consists of two distinct parts. The first part concentrates on the anthropological, economic, religious and philosophical elements that form the basis of Bataille's work. He begins by analysing Bataille's 'laughter' in response to Hegel, but argues that it was a laughter provoked by a deep sense of recognition and affinity with Hegel. Bataille had realized that he was obliged to take Hegel seriously, and that he had to immerse himself within the entrails of Hegel's rational immanence and engage in a sophisticated form of haruspical reading. From within the entrails of that immanence Bataille discloses a profound but hilarious pretension within the activity of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, in particular its attempt to master conceptually every event it encounters, and to recover meaning even in the meaningless. What Gernerchak's study admirably explores is the degree to which Bataille's reading sought to reveal the profound and inescapable truth of Hegel, whilst fundamentally challenging its sense. So Bataille's haruspical gesture involves reading and communicating the essential truth of Hegel in order to demonstrate how it ultimately leads to non-sense – 'Hegel against the immutable Hegel'. At various points throughout the book Gernerchak mobilizes some distinctly Derridean insights in order to explain how Bataille's reading proceeds through a method of appropriating Hegelian concepts and reversing them, a *détournement*. He concludes the first part of the book with a detailed analysis of Bataille's economic theory, concentrating on the influence of a certain genealogy of 'sacrifice'. In particular he traces the influence of Mauss's discussion of potlatch in *The Gift* and Weber's analysis of the movement from the religious to the economic.

The second part of the book attempts to present a consistent account of how Bataille proceeded to apply his thought, together with an assessment of the relative success of these applications. The main focus here is Bataille's attempt to reveal the elusive 'religious' experience of what he termed 'intimacy'. Gernerchak emphasizes the degree to which Bataille's thought repeatedly challenges the mastery of rational philosophical discourse with a specific notion of poetry – a notion that for Bataille indicated the dispossession of the subject by language itself, leading the poet into a profoundly mystical or religious type of silence. For Bataille the space of the poet was one where the philosopher's discourse of knowledge fell silent. In

the final chapter Gernerchak brings together many of the major elements excavated from Bataille's thought into a powerful assemblage of mysticism, eroticism and sacrifice.

Throughout the book Bataille's thought is presented as the ceaseless search for religious 'intimacy', for an unknowable depth to Being. Gernerchak shows how his challenge to Hegel was governed by an insistence upon the disturbing awareness that something irreducibly 'sacred' remains regardless of thought's claim to completion, which defies inclusion within the systematic parameters of speculative reason. For Bataille Hegelianism remained utterly blind to this sacred remainder. Whilst Bataille clearly acknowledged Hegel as a thinker of difference, he claimed that difference is only ever thought in order to 'eliminate' it, to 'absolve' absolute knowledge from a dependence on anything 'other'. Hegel's Absolute permits nothing outside it, so its notion of difference is no real difference at all. The Absolute generates differences like a type of machine, a machine constructed simply to reconcile itself to its own generated differences. Hegel's machine logically coerces negativity into collaboration with meaning through the *Aufhebung* and its process of conversion of every negative into a positive, through its activity of generating sense from the senseless. However, for Bataille (and for Derrida also) Hegel's machine simply cannot work. So when we try to think through or read the workings of this calculative machine, a machine that seemingly functions through and is fuelled by the impossible activity of the incorporation and transfiguration of the energetics of negativity, it will always destroy itself – it will always explode. Bataille insisted that if a state of complete knowledge is claimed in the style of Hegelian philosophy it is only ever a false *sense* of completion achieved through a complete assimilation of the other to which it is in relation. This is an inadmissible operation for Bataille in so far as the radical other always remains the locus of something not merely unknown but utterly unknowable. For Bataille genuine self-consciousness emerges from an acknowledgement of a necessary relation to that which is eternally beyond us (the impossible), that which escapes conscious knowledge, eludes our grasp, and indeed calls our self-certainty radically into question (death, God).

For Bataille from this necessary relation to the unknowable comes another form of knowledge – 'knowing non-knowledge', a type of conscious unknowing that marks various forms of religious comportment. From an examination of the very entrails of Hegel's system comes the irreducible awareness of this

unthinkable remainder. Bataille's fundamental insight upon reading Hegel was that the very ground upon which he had staked his claim to full self-conscious being or knowledge was in fact no ground at all. It was always a dark abyss over which he was suspended by his knowledge claims. Bataille's challenge to Hegel illuminates the way we are intrinsically bound to something 'in us' that we can never know or master; there is something 'in us' that always fundamentally exceeds us. For Bataille the active component in the search for intimacy with this fundamental excess (what Bataille called the 'sovereignty' of beings) is the religious 'sacrifice'. For Bataille the gesture of religious 'sacrifice' was to be understood as a much more profound effort to achieve some type of 'genuine' or 'authentic' experience of the impossible beyond than Hegel had ever acknowledged. By reading Bataille reading Hegel, Gernerchak manages to show Bataille as a twentieth-century haruspex, crouched over the very entrails of Hegel's system in search of the impossible.

Darren Ambrose

No novel

Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980)*, ed. Nathalie Léger, Seuil/IMEC, Paris, 2003. 478 pp., €25.00 hb., 2 02 047845 5.

Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003. xvi + 169 pp., £45.00 hb., £8.99 pb., 0 415 26361 1 hb., 0 415 26362 X pb.

The publication of *La Préparation du roman I et II (1978–1980) (Preparing for the Novel)* represents the completion of Éditions du Seuil and the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine's collaborative issuing of Roland Barthes's lecture courses and seminars at the Collège de France, given between 1976 and 1980, and made possible by the entrusting of Barthes's manuscripts to IMEC in 1997. These volumes present us with a scholarly edition of Barthes's own lecture notes, in conjunction with MP3 recordings of the lectures themselves. These last two lecture courses have a shared focus on Barthes's desire for a new life and a particular form of writing: the 'romanesque' or 'novelistic'. As such, they can be read as the tentative culmination of Barthes's ethical reachings toward a peaceful and non-doctrinal intellectual life in the previous Collège de France courses, *How to Live Together* (Spring 1977) and *The Neutral* (Spring 1978).

However, it seems more useful and compelling to consider the *Preparing for the Novel* courses in the context of Barthes's more familiar work from the same period, which can perhaps be seen as the 'practice' of the lectures' 'theory'.

Reading the courses one realizes, for example, that Barthes's celebrated Proust lecture, 'Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure' – repeated almost word for word in the first lecture of this series – is no less than the incipit and kernel of these two years of research and speculation. The primary object of this work is the personal and ethical imperative that the writer find a form that will express 'la vérité d[e ses] affects' without attenuation or gloss. This imperative is worked out in the public sphere, with varying degrees of success, in Barthes's *Chroniques* for the *Nouvel Observateur* (contemporaneous with the first *Preparing for the Novel* course), which he saw as being 'like test starts for a novel', and in *Camera Lucida*. *Camera Lucida* – written between the delivery of the two lecture courses, in the summer of 1979 – appears from this perspective as the hinge that holds together and illuminates these two courses, and fulfils the hope for new and truthful form, a hope that is often frustrated within the courses themselves.

Preparing for the Novel opens with Barthes's insistence (reprising 'Longtemps') that he needs a new form for his writing. The origin of this imperative is located in his grief for his deceased mother: the certainty of the reality of death cuts him off from his former self and his former writing (of which, in any case, he has grown weary, comparing his situation as constant essayist to that of Sisyphus '[who] is not content'). There must be a new departure, and, 'for he who writes ... a *Vita Nova* can only come about with the discovery of a new writing practice'. Hence the preoccupation of both courses with the choice and execution of a form of writing which, by truthfully presenting affect, will encompass and thereby transcend suffering. Barthes's ideal of this form is named 'romanesque' (the word is familiar to us from *Roland Barthes* by Roland Barthes and *The Pleasure of the Text*): here we discover in detail the hope – and 'preparation' – for a novelistic work which is not a novel, that is, a work which consists, intensely, of 'moments of

truth', emotion and constative description, undiluted by any apparatus of narration or characterization.

For Barthes, the extant formal encapsulation of the 'moment of truth' is the Japanese haiku. Much of the first course is taken up with analysis and description of the composition and effects of the haiku. Barthes's affinity with the haiku takes the form of an almost breathtaking faith in the ability of these tiny poems to designate, and resonate with, the truth of the human's being in the world. 'With the haiku', he asserts, 'I am in the *Sovereign Good* of writing – and the world.' He then goes on to explain that the haiku's project is coextensive with that of this course, which seeks to 'clarify...the transition from *Life* (and the haiku is taken straight from life, *without remainder*) to a form which constitutes it after the event as memory, emotion, intelligibility, kindness.' The haiku, for Barthes, cannot but be true – rather like the photo, the *noème* or 'inimitable feature' of which is the subject of a three-page section here, which prefigures *Camera Lucida*.

The course in its entirety figures a perhaps rather naive equation of contingency, subjectivity and authenticity:



indeed, contingency reinforces one's certainty that this is real: the more [the writing] is contingent, the more it is authentic. Haiku: a type of Testimonial. The paradox is this: it is upon subjectivity (of enunciation) that the authenticity of the testimony is founded.

This citation illustrates to what extent the unabashed assumption of personal taste ('I am interested in the haiku *for myself*') is employed by Barthes, after Nietzsche, as both criterion and guarantor of truth and rigour. This tactic will be familiar to readers of *The Pleasure of the Text*. In the context of the course, Barthes's elaboration of *his* certainty of the haiku's 'goodness' (in every sense) does not go far enough, however, given the implicit belief that the haiku perforce represents a 'sovereign good' for everyone who reads it: the means by which a delight in the aesthetic of the haiku morphs into ethical benefit for writer and reader are simply not made sufficiently clear.

Another problem – of which Barthes is fully aware – is that the perfect intensity and clarity of the haiku form are unsustainable. Barthes notes the paradox of focusing on this shortest of forms and wonders, throughout, how the leap will be made to the longer form of the novel. If we have not begun to doubt already, it is here that we realise that in fact the leap will not be made; that the novel for which we are preparing (or being prepared) will not be written, precisely because of Barthes's need and desire to preserve 'moments of truth' without sequence, narration or omniscience. He sees himself as 'assuming the futility' of 'not giving a meaning, any meaning' to any of these moments. He refuses to envisage a 'novel' which, by linking together 'novelistic moments', would confer 'a general, systematic or doctrinal meaning' on the whole work. Such a construction, by Barthes's lights, would be both arrogant and false. He therefore explicitly renounces the idea of writing a novel. 'Finally, then, the resistance to the novel, the incapacity for the novel (for its practice) seems to be a moral resistance', he announces at the end of the first course.

Thus, before the second course of *Preparing for the Novel* is opened, the reader knows that these endeavours are a 'preparation' for nothing, no novel, but themselves. This fundamental gap should not, however, be regarded as a flaw in the courses' construction. Barthes has given us to understand, in 'Longtemps', that he regards the process of production as being more important than any possible product. What counts is that one thinks prospectively, utopically: 'I must act as if I am going to write this utopian Novel.' It is postulation or simulation that informs the work, rather

than any actual 'thing' (novel). This accords with the emphasis, throughout, on questions of form rather than content. (Perhaps bizarrely, Barthes at times appears to regard the issue of content as incidental, if not petty.) This emphasis holds true for both the course at hand and the postulated but impossible novel.

The second course is more rigidly constructed than the first, with its 'plan' set out in the manner of a dramatic piece: the prologue, treating 'the Desire to write', cedes to a study of the three 'trials' faced by the would-be writer. The trials are those of choice (choice of form), patience (in one's everyday endeavours) and separation (the writer must, says Barthes, accept that his chosen mode of life sets him apart from the majority of his fellows). The discussion of the second trial consists largely of examples of Barthes's favourite writers at work. Thus the timetables, menus, drugs of choice, rooms, quirks and habits of all kinds of such writers as Chateaubriand, Kafka, Flaubert and of course Proust are examined and described in detail. Finally, the course closes with 'a Conclusion? An Epilogue? No... a Suspension, rather'.

The opening section, on the desire to write that stems from reading ('amorous reading' engenders 'a fertile writing') reiterates a familiar Barthesian theme; it is most strongly reminiscent of *Criticism and Truth* (1966). In the context of the Collège courses themselves, the issue of the writer's desire for writing – for the word – becomes more fraught and contradictory as we see Barthes explaining and interrogating his own opposing impulses towards writing and towards silence. In the *Neutral* course, as elsewhere, he figures his life as a permanent oscillation between the blissful exaltation of language and the desire for a rest from language, for a suspension. The first *Preparing for the Novel* course gives us another take on this problem. We now realise that the suspension of writing, from having been the subject of occasional weary wishful thinking, has become Barthes's overwhelming realization that what he wants to write – the novel of 'moments of truth' – is *not possible*. The 'suspension' is therefore imposed upon him in the form of his inability to attain the desired sustained truth in writing. A concomitant cause for the sadness and regret infusing the end of this course is Barthes's perception that the desire to write – frustrated or otherwise – is no longer recognized as worthwhile in a world in which, he asserts, literature is dying. This belief informs the pained tone of the section on the third trial, the moral test of the writer's anguished separation from the social world. The necessity for these courses, as it appears to Barthes, becomes apparent:

Perhaps this great drama of the Desire-to-Write can only be written in a time of decline, when literature is fading away: perhaps the 'essence' of these things only appears when they are dying.

Barthes writes elegantly, if perhaps melodramatically, of his sadness at feeling that his own desire and need for literature render him 'out of time'; he feels 'viscerally excluded from the contemporary. My whole being is rejected by current History, sent back, passionately and desperately, to an abolished History, to the Past.' This seems profoundly pessimistic. The postulated novel, the acts of speculation and reflection, and the assurance of ethical benefit which may be derived from the writer's personal redemption through the assumption of a 'Vita Nova' – all seem rendered pointless by Barthes's belief that the realm of literature now belongs to the *inactuel* (irrelevant to the present day) and the past. However, in the last ten pages of the course, Barthes recuperates his own position and the postulative trajectory of both courses with an audacious flourish: the old becomes new again, he affirms: 'We should no longer consider *classic writing* as a form which we must defend in so far as it is an outmoded, legal, conformist, repressive form. Rather, we must think of it as a form which the rotation and *inversion* of History is rendering new again.' The 'classic' becomes new: 'Classic Writing, no longer part of the Durable ... becomes *Fresh*' – or, the *inactuel* becomes *actuel* again. Barthes hereby justifies his own faith in the saving powers of literature, and his avowed ultimate desire, in the aftermath of avant-garde discordancy, to 'write a work in C major'. As the course closes with this statement, it may occur to us that Barthes had already written this C major work; reactionary and unique, 'banal and singular', momentary and continuous – the impossible novel, *Camera Lucida*.

Preparing for the Novel will be of most interest to those already familiar with the oeuvre it extends and illuminates. Graham Allen's monograph provides a concise and unintimidating introduction to the work of Barthes, aimed particularly at students who have read little, if any, of the original. Allen's *Roland Barthes* forms part of Routledge's *Critical Thinkers* series. Allen writes lucidly and fluidly within the confines of this structure. Evidently at ease with the many subject areas through which Barthes's work slides, the author manages to convey without reduction Barthes's complex positions in relation to the thinkers and theories of his own time. Such is Allen's skill, in fact, in presenting the trajectory of Barthes's career, that

this introductory guide brilliantly exceeds its limits. It deserves to be read by those familiar with Barthes, as a timely reminder, analysis and interrogation of his cumulative significance.

Allen sets out Barthes's 'Key Ideas' in nine chapters. The thread is run from Barthes's first book, *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), to his last, *Camera Lucida* (1980). The theory of literature set out in the former – the idea that all writing is permanently assimilated by the dominant culture – is seized upon by Allen as the dialectical 'thesis' informing Barthes's overarching theoretical strategy: because 'writing as defined ... in Barthes's first book ... is threatened, if it does not regularly change itself, by a general and irreversible acculturation', the writer must constantly shift expectation by altering his focus and method. Following this logic of 'acculturation', Allen's exegesis follows a similar path to that taken in studies by Jonathan Culler, Michael Moriarty and Rick Rylance; as such this volume is complemented by a reading of those longer-established monographs. Its advantage is that, in being more recent, it is in a better position to analyse Barthes's 'legacy' as it has crystallized in the twenty-odd years since his death. For example, Allen rightly emphasizes and debunks misconceptions which pinpoint Barthes's 'killing' of the author as the originary articulation of poststructuralism, by pointing out that 'with its focus on system ... structuralism had already dispensed with the figure of the author'. Other important moments include the analysis of hedonism and its implications for literary criticism, and the inspired juxtaposing, in the commentary, of Barthes's *S/Z* and his articles on Sollers. In tracing the connections between Barthes's criticism of classic and avant-garde texts, Allen hints at the fundamental tension between taste and engagement which is played out in the later works.

The analysis of *Camera Lucida*, towards the end of the text, acts as a summing up of Barthes's career and ideals, in line with the author's justified belief that acculturation was *the* demon fought by Barthes. With this work on photography, Allen argues, Barthes manages to balance in language and retain a singularity of affect which usually is lost: 'Barthes's last book is a stunning act of defiance, a text which defies (writes in spite of) the knowledge of its own impossibility. It is a text written against the force with which he had struggled all his writing life: language's power to assimilate the new and the particular into that which is culturally accepted, generalized and thus disembodied.' It is a powerful conclusion.

Lucy O'Meara

Reading lessen

Warren Montag, *Louis Althusser*, Palgrave Macmillan, London and New York, 2003. 192 pp., £45.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 0 3339 1898 3 hb., 0 3339 1899 1 pb.

For Althusser there was no such thing as an innocent reading, and Warren Montag's book is no exception. For what is presented as a general monograph on Althusser is in fact centred on his contributions to literary theory. Montag attempts a new reading of Althusser's work and applies its theoretical insights to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Althusser's own autobiography. Montag is both sympathetic to and knowledgeable about his subject. However, there is something misleading about presenting Althusser as a literary theorist. While the author validly insists on the significance of Althusser's pieces on theatre and art, the accuracy of his overall presentation of Althusser's work is more questionable as he neglects central texts, such as 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'.

Montag attempts to read Althusser's work in a new way. How can we produce a reading that is genuinely new? Through reading Althusser's work 'to the letter', in the same manner as Althusser read Marx. Althusser's work remains unexplored territory, Montag claims, in so far as nobody had paid attention to its text in its literal, material existence. 'To read his work carefully, to the letter as he liked to say, is to retrace voyages on waterways that, however promising their beginnings, proved finally to be impassable; it is also however to rediscover rivers still open and unexplored before us, perhaps leading to seas still to be found.' Montag's originality is his orientation towards the materiality of the Althusserian texts rather than the ideas or arguments that can be abstracted from his writings.

Reading Althusser in this 'materialist way' is, first, to recognize that texts in their historical existence are irreducibly real. They are a 'surface without depth' irreducible to anything else, internal or external, such as the intentions of the author or the world-view of a social class. They do not express, reflect or represent something more real. This irreducibility constitutes the material existence of the work. Second, it is to recognize the essential contradictory nature of the text. Far from finding a 'system' of Althusserianism, with the predicates of order, coherence and homogeneity of meaning and style postulated by both admirers and detractors alike, Montag is interested in lacunae, inconsistencies and contradictions in his work. He says of Althusser's work what Marx could point to in

Adam Smith: 'the text does not see all that it does'. Every literary or philosophical text says more than it wants to say or knows that it says. A symptomatic reading presupposes the existence of two texts, one of which becomes visible only when we notice the gaps of the first. To produce knowledge of a text is to grasp not only what it says, but what it does not and cannot say: 'The silences, these empty spaces are the signs of the work's incompleteness, the signs of its relation to history.' Of the text's incompleteness, discrepancies and absences, Montag concludes: 'it is not only what Althusser says, but the way that conflicting tendencies of thought coexist without the conflict being addressed or even acknowledged, that constitutes the dramatic experience of reading Althusser.' Finally, a materialist reading insists that the text is incomplete and unfinished. A text is not reducible to the historical conditions of its emergence and can never be explained once and for all.

This 'new reading' of Althusser is in fact the thinker's own practice of symptomatic reading, which is also, according to Montag, his major contribution to literary studies. However, Althusser's thought is at once valorized and displaced in Montag's book. Althusser's originality was to extract a number of ideas present in the classical Marxist tradition – the 'relative autonomy' of superstructures, 'differential temporality', the 'over-determination' of historical conjunctures, the distinction between 'real objects' and 'objects of knowledge', the permanence of ideology – and to construct from them a distinctive problematic for historical materialism which would enable it to produce new knowledge, both theoretical and empirical. However, if Montag correctly shows the similarities between Althusser's approach and Spinoza's reading of the Scriptures, at worst he neglects and at best he does not insist enough on the links of Althusser's writings with Marxism, at the levels of both theory and practice. Althusser's theoretical intervention 'for Marx' was framed within the debates of the world communist movement. If insisting on the reality or materiality of texts and their contradictory and incomplete nature produces a new concept of literature and identifies many of the theoretical obstacles that block the way of knowledge, it is not clear how this is intrinsically related to the problematic of historical materialism. Althusser was not simply a materialist: he was a Leninist. One can only make sense of his work if it is placed within the critique of the capitalist mode of production from the point of view of labour. However, the only labour in Montag's book seems to be the 'labour of reading'.

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