How Stanley Fish Works

Matthew Jordan

Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, 632pp; £23.95 hardback.

Stanley Fish is probably best known as a literary theorist and public polemicist, the man who brought us 'affective stylistics', 'interpretive communities', and essays like 'There's No Such Thing as Free Speech (And It's a Good Thing Too)'. However, he made his name with a book on Milton, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in* Paradise Lost (London, Macmillan, 1967), and has continued to be associated with the poet ever since, writing a series of essays which bring an acute if paradoxical critical sensibility to bear on Milton's prose works as well as his verse. Last year much of this work was published in a volume which bore the marks of a summation of this career, and the forthright title *How Milton Works*.

Like all Fish's work, this has met with a mixed reception, especially in Britain, with detractors complaining that Fish's idea of how Milton works is simplistic and reductive. Fish has always stressed the uncompromising and otherworldly implications of Milton's Christianity. In *Surprised by Sin*, often deemed an early example of 'reader-response' criticism, Fish describes *Paradise Lost* as seeking to educate the reader through humiliation. Fish is certainly interested in the responses of his assumed reader, but these are understood as in the absolute power of an author whose intention is to make us fall, again and again, into attitudes which were responsible for The Fall. The point of all this is to ensure that 'we' learn to distrust our abilities and perceptions. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this schema was that it enabled Fish to reconcile 'Romantic' readings of the poem, which responded to the attractions of the rebel, Satan, with 'Neo-Christian' orthodoxy: Milton, according to Fish, was deliberately soliciting such readings in order to rebuke them.[1] In the light of Fish's later considerations of academic professionalism, in which he equates critical insight with the seizing of a professional opportunity, this must be described not only as a brilliant critical hypothesis but as a stunning tactical coup.[2] Fish's framework has arguably remained the dominant paradigm for understandings of the poem.

In the acknowledgements to *How Milton Works*, Fish dates the beginnings of the book to 1973 and an analysis of an early Milton poem, from which 'everything followed … and continues to do so'. He goes on:

> It may seem strange to acknowledge that one's thoughts have not changed much in more than a quarter-century, but since one of my theses

1. See, for instance, John Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, esp. ch. 1.

2. Stanley Fish, 'Anti-Professionalism', in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989; Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*,Oxford, Clarendon, 1995, e.g. p60.

> is that Milton himself changed very little, except to offer slight variations on a few obsessions that were his from the very beginning, I am comfortable with the notion that I keep discovering the same patterns and meanings over and over again (vii).

Ultimately, there's only one basic pattern to Fish's reading of Milton, rendered alternatively in theological and Freudian vocabularies. When he is interested primarily in Milton's intention, which is most of the time, this takes the form of the idea – broadly continuous with *Surprised by Sin* – of an absolute imperative of obedience to God and an understanding of the world which depends on an 'inner light'. Milton, he writes, 'works from the inside out …Truth and certainty are achieved not by moving from evidence gathered in discrete bits to general conclusions, but by putting in place general conclusions in the light of which evidence will then appear' (23-4). Thus for figures such as the Lady in *Comus*, or the Son of *Paradise Regained*, 'it is never a question of altering one's sense of obligation or changing one's loyalty in the light of circumstances', but only ever of figuring out how to affirm this loyalty in different situations: 'This is what passes for a "plot" in Milton's poetry' (32-3). Milton changes 'very little', says Fish, although in the course of Milton's career something apparently quite significant does occur: in his tracts arguing for an extension of the grounds for divorce, Milton shifts from regarding interpretation as an unholy supplement to Scripture, to seeing strenuous reading, guided by the 'inner light' in its attempt to determine the intention informing particular passages, as essential to Biblical understanding. Because any interpretation of intention will depend for support on one's understanding of other intentional acts, also the product of interpretation, there is in principle no end to this process. Thus Milton's *Areopagitica* proclaims an ongoing quest for Truth which will not end until the Second Coming. In *Samson Agonistes* in particular, attempts to construe the will of God, or to gauge what is going on within Samson, repeatedly come to naught – the aim supposedly being to teach the reader to live with uncertainty about everything. This applies to Samson as well: according to Fish it is an instance of 'striking self-revision' on Milton's part that Samson's declaration that he stands on his conscience now appears not as a triumphal moment of unwavering commitment, but as an unfortunate closure to future possibilities (459). However, this emphasis on uncertainty and openness is not as fundamental a change as it might appear. It represents, rather, one of Milton's 'slight variations' on a dominant theme, since he was never truly able to provide grounds for making choices:

> … by interiorising the landscape of choice, he has detached it from the realm of empirical evidence and set us on a journey much like that of Abraham, who, in response to God's call, went out not knowing whither he went. The result is a life like Samson's, made up in equal parts of certainty … and hazard … At times in his prose and poetry Milton

> emphasises the certainty; at other times he confronts us with the hazard; but in either mood, the basic imperative he urges is the same: refuse external guides and work from the inside out (477-8).

Milton's desire to be obedient to God's will enjoins an activity much like Fish's conception of the task of the critic. Both seek to divine the interiority they postulate as encrypted in the textual surface.[3] What is more, a Milton who becomes conscious of the inevitability of hermeneutic uncertainty looks even more like Fish, who has himself shifted from the notion that it was possible to access a pristine experience of the text prior to the distorting accretions of critical commentary, to the belief that texts are the products of the assumptions we bring to them, and that we must learn to live with what, from an absolute perspective, would appear uncertainty.[4] There is considerable difference, however, between the two with respect to their *attitude* to this change. Fish regards the later Milton as 'continually in dialogue with himself', addressing 'the challenge represented by his former selves to the position he would now espouse' (238). But while there is plenty of - mostly implicit - evidence of Miltonic self-doubt, Milton does not tend explicitly to wrestle with the erroneousness of his earlier positions; indeed, it could be said that he tends to gloss over issues on which he had changed his mind. It is Fish whose career has been marked by an openness about changes in his beliefs and the reasons for them, classically in the Introduction and headnotes to *Is There a Text in This Class?*

3. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, op. cit., pp1-8; 'Appendix: The Folger Papers' in *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*,Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

4. This change is narrated in 'Interpreting the *Variorum* ', collected in *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1980.

For Fish's critic, the assumptions brought to bear on a text, and the positions produced with respect to it, are a function of socialisation as a member of a particular interpretive community. Inadequacy to questions of 'ultimate' truth is palliated, or perhaps obscured, by social success in the form of professional recognition by this community. That Fish professes himself 'comfortable' with this state of affairs may testify to his awareness that this could be regarded as a rather 'bourgeois' attitude toward what has been for some a matter of existential angst (unsurprising, perhaps, in the man who famously mocked the moral masochism of academics in 'The Unbearable Ugliness of Volvos'). It does, however, threaten to cast him in the role of Samson's dull-witted father Manoa - for Fish a man in search of false consolation – with Milton's Chorus as his interpretive community ('It is the Chorus and Manoa who introduce and foster the notion of a deity whose ways cannot be comprehended; yet in the end they are busily comprehending them and him within the framework of their national vision' – p424). Milton, by contrast, appears to be alone with his God, much as he presents many of his characters. There's some warrant for this; however much faith he may have had in his own justification, for Milton his salvation was at stake. But Milton is much less preoccupied with this issue than many of his contemporaries. This may be due to self-confidence, but it is also a result of the markedly public and political nature of most of his work.

Indeed, much of the history of Milton criticism has consisted in an effort

to understand the nature of the various interpretive communities in which he was implicated, and to stake claims for relations of priority among them (the generally 'Christian' framework in which Fish locates him is a bid on behalf of one such construct). Fish's interest, however, is in the *mechanism* of belief, as this is played out in Milton's texts, rather than in particular beliefs. Implicit in this emphasis is the slighting of history and historical criticism which has probably earned Fish his sharpest criticism in recent times. In a way, it is strange that he should be so prepared to grant Milton his 'own' perspective on his activity, given that he (Fish) has shown himself so adept at historicising interpretive decisions – although he has also been criticised for remaining within the limited horizon of the interpretive community, for being overly respectful of its 'relative autonomy', rather than tracing its wider social filiations.[5] It is even stranger, given his repeated debunkings of claims to critical transcendence, whether in the name of the aesthetic object or a political cause – both held to be in hock to the myth of an authentic, unitary self – to find him arguing here that personality transcends history.[6] In *How Milton Works* Fish concedes 'the historical nature' of Milton's concerns, only then to prioritise the way they are 'structured by habits of thought that persist through every vicissitude of his literary and political life' (254). This explains the initially surprising appearance of Freud in the opening pages of *How Milton Works*. In Fish's account of the death drive as the urge toward restful non-being which pulls against the impulse to individuation, Freud is the last redoubt against history, mediating between the present and 'the source of the energy that makes Milton's writing (on every subject) so powerful', that is to say, the tension between Milton's desire for and fear of submission to God (p254). The introduction of Freud allows Fish to subsume the perspective of *Surprised by Sin* while quietly disavowing part of it. This is arguably quite a Miltonic strategy with respect to interpretive change. (*Surprised by Sin* features only once here, in a footnote to the second edition in which Fish argued, among other things, that attacks on the book only served to perpetuate its paradigmatic status. So perhaps this relative silence is to be explained not as a falling-off from the standards of interpretive disclosure he has previously established, but as a desire to see the paradigm fade from history.) If Milton was seen in the earlier book as in charge of every aspect of his great poem, including its reception, here it is conceded that he can't master its effects on the reader. Further, Milton himself is seen as divided (although Fish seems to want to maintain a distinction between a conflicted consciousness and a singular intention). In principle this does not invalidate the readings in *Surprised by Sin*, but it does represent a departure from that book's absolutism about meaning (it might be argued that it stands in a similar relation to Fish's later work as Milton's early writings do to his). This opens a way – one which Fish still at times seems to see as closed – to readings of the poem in terms of a 'modern' interest in paradox, polysemy, and so on, rather than the affirmation of moral certainties (p14). Milton is to be found not only in the harsh parental-superegoistic voice of

5. For an example of Fish's historicization of criticism see 'Transmuting the Lump: *Paradise Lost,* 1942-1979' in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, op. cit.

6. See Fish's 'The Folger Papers' in *Professional Correctness*, op. cit.; also 'Commentary: The Young and the Restless' in H. Aram Veeser (ed), *The New Historicism*, New York and London, Routledge, 1989.

the narrator of *Paradise Lost,* demanding obedience to the divine will, but also in the egoistic desire of all parts of creation to escape a monism that everywhere tends towards absorption in God (489-94).

It is difficult for us to imagine a consciousness which would not know the tension between separation and subsumption in some form, and so quite a lot of Fish's readings really do seem to provide insights into a significant part of what is going on in Milton's texts (they could not have prospered otherwise). Fish's framework enables what he pines for in *Professional Correctness*, readings which evince an imaginative response to literary texts (in Fish's case, a strong if narrow one). Moreover, its translation into the freer terms of psychoanalysis reveals more clearly the key to the historical significance of Fish's reading, allowing as it does a fuller and more specific equation of critic and critical object. It is surely a significant fact about Fish that he is so alive to Milton's need repeatedly to assuage the anxiety that his desire for a glorious career may not be entirely compatible with selfless service on God's behalf. Psychoanalysis troubles, if it does not undo, the opposing terms of consciousness; Milton's insistent disavowal of ambition converts into Fish's assertive flaunting of his own. Fish is quite right to say that one cannot help but historicize, although the 'periodisation' produced by such readings may not correspond to that of the historians.[7] His hermeneutic concerns register the horizons of our inevitably humanistic apprehension of consciousness, and also highlight the concerns of the class (to which both he and Milton belong) which mapped this field of vision: career intellectuals, on some readings the very definition of the modern middle class.[8]

7. See *Professional Correctness*, op. cit., p128.

Psychoanalysis allows Fish to cast *his* career – the single abiding preoccupation of this class – in a less merely materialist mould. In the past, Fish has seemed to present himself as a postmodern Benjamin Franklin, not earnestly and unreflectively enacting the redirection of spiritual task towards material gain, but ironically concerned to claim the full credit his careerist dedication is, in fairness, due: the structure of behaviour is identical, so each must be equally pious (there might be something to be said here about intention). For instance, his argument that critical interventions are expressions of a subjectivity constituted by the professional community finds support from the poet's left (prose-writing) hand: 'In the words of John Milton, "from a sincere heart" - that is, a heart embedded in a structure of conviction - "unimpos'd expressions" will come "unbidden into the outward gesture"'.[9] In *How Milton Works,* however, one is tempted to feel that Fish's notion of literary criticism as a spiritual discipline has gained from the pathos of Freud a more tragic timbre. Its rewards appear not in the sociological form of worldly reassurance (for Fish's critic, professional success was both a means of self-assertion and evidence of unity with a community), but in the psychological terms of spiritual commitment, at a time when Fish finds himself compassed round with historicists. Just as inner prompting was a more significant spur to Milton's public interventions than the prospect

8. This is a notion suggested by Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse in *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1992.

9. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally*, op. cit., pix.

of worldly efficacy (570-71), so Fish cannot do other than counsel the profession against, as his epilogue has it, 'The Temptation of History and Politics'. In the acknowledgements to *How Milton Works*, Fish equates himself with Milton in terms of the consistency of their preoccupations, and at the close of the book, history is described as representing, for Milton, a seductive realm which the self must not allow to distract it from duty and the Paradise within.

Like Milton, Fish now feels somewhat beleaguered, with literary criticism as his 'Good Old Cause' against, say, the politics of cultural history. But this is not quite the subordination of self to principle Fish likes to play with: one of the more revealing *errata* in *How Milton Works* substitutes the definite for the indefinite article in Milton's famous dictum regarding the duty to think for oneself. If one fails in this regard, then, as Fish has it, a 'man may be *the* heretick in the truth' (208). To be such a man would be to obtain prominence espousing a position by which one was not fully 'possessed'. One cannot help but ponder Fish in all his subjective Samsonicity: what will he think of next?

Postcolonial Dialectics

Karyn Ball

Keya Ganguly, *States of Exception: Everyday Life & Postcolonial Identity*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 226pp; £33.50 hardback, £13.00 paperback.

Over the past two decades, literary critics in the embattled canon camp guarded their power to reproduce traditional periodisations, while others fell under the rule of various 'posts': poststructuralism, postmodernism, post-Marxism, postcolonialism, and posthumanism. The 1980s and 1990s was an era of bad writing suffocated by requisite qualifications: the multiculturalist recognition of gender, sexual, racial, cultural and socio-economic differences and the subsequent nod to hybridity; the post-metaphysical repudiation of origin, essence, authenticity, absolute presence, singular truth, and self-same sovereign identity; the vigilance against a hypocritical progressive humanism and a still more insidious liberalism; the anxiety over 'totalising' or normative systems; the distaste for Hegelian dialectics and binaristic, unilateral or deterministic logics (including the Marxist capitulation to 'the mode of production in the last instance').

The immediate climate of cultural criticism is distinctive in contrast by virtue of the absence of a reigning paradigm to reorient voices flailing for a new angle on long-term struggles over local and global inequities. Here, *virtue* is meant in the strong sense of the word; for while the 'posts' continue to influence the humanities, literary and cultural critics are wary and bored of bowing to what Keya Ganguly has referred to as deconstructive 'vigilantism' to highlight the hegemonic force of the anti-foundationalist critique of essence and identity.

In the midst of this dust storm, Ganguly's *States of Exception: Everyday Life & Postcolonial Identity* (2001) is a patch of sanity. Ganguly takes on the Herculean tasks of rigorously redefining critical terms that have been muddled through years of dilettantish deployment, and of remapping the trajectory for a project of cultural critique paralysed in the straits between the Scylla of objectivism and the Charybdis of subjectivism. If *States of Exception* suffers from any weakness, it lies in those occasional moments when it is too clever for its own good: the lines Ganguly draws are sometimes too fine when the position she is articulating does not represent a genuine departure from the perspective under her lens. Nevertheless, for critics seeking to recover a sense of the stakes of adopting a materialist standpoint in the society of the spectacle, Ganguly's keenly insightful book offers an elegant model of self-reflexive cultural analysis that is respectful yet critical of its own

intellectual inheritances.

Ganguly's introduction to *States of Exception* specifies her agendas, which she subsequently concretises through her analysis of interviews with Indian (and mostly Bengali) emigrants to the United States. One agenda is to reclaim the critical tradition of social and cultural theory (Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Antonio Gramsci, and Raymond Williams, among others) from the trash heap of 'pomo' repudiations. Drawing on these critics, and the more celebrated members of the Frankfurt School, she navigates her vision of cultural critique between the two poles of a methodological 'antinomy' (and their respective infinite regressions). On one pole, there is the spectre of a positivist or empiricist reversion that haunts cultural criticism yearning for the authority of a hard scientific method. On the other pole, there is the depoliticising tendency of some post-structuralist analysis that leaves the stakes of its own critique of humanism and the grand narratives awash in semiosis. While Ganguly does not always adequately acknowledge her own debt to poststructuralism in the course of exposing its excesses, her analysis of this antinomy does produce some hard-won wisdom about the limits of a critique of representation that loses sight of its object either in its purported nearness or proclaimed distance.

Ganguly sidesteps such pitfalls by turning to Lukács, who helps her to rethink the antinomy itself as a formal logic that sustains tensions between contradictory yet coexistent premises. This move bypasses the postmodernist recourse to incommensurability to signify the ontological or epistemological impossibility of cultural translation, and frames her theory of the affective contours of everyday life and the symbolics of desire that shape memory. It also finesses the inadequacies that she attributes to Williams's definition of 'structures of feeling'. Admittedly, her critique of Williams is not convincing on this point. She observes that Williams 'compacts or even implodes the tension – or what is more properly an antinomy – between subjective consciousness and objective conceptualisation of self-interest and social character' (68). Yet her own dialectical analysis begs the question of whether one might avoid such an 'implosion' in practice. Her agenda to redeem dialectics from its totalitarian spooks is more provocative as an intervention into the superficially post-Hegelian milieu of literary and cultural studies (which, in North American English departments, is belied by a reactionary and anti-intellectual refusal to read Hegel because deconstruction has, ironically, 'always already' superseded him). Her defence of dialectics is also crucial because it allows her to recover an understanding of the object's materiality without resorting to naïve notions of presence, and without reinstituting Lukács's implicitly 'Archimedean' standpoint in relation to the pessimistic prospect of total reification.

To this end, she enlists Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno on the side of a materialist dialectics that is responsive to the reciprocity between object and method. Following Adorno's lead in *Negative Dialectics*, she argues

for the need to respect the 'determinately' negative dimensions of an object as a reflection of and reaction against the historical and social forces that enter into its existence and which render its particular form and prospect of freedom unthematisable. From Benjamin's ambivalent speculations on the atrophy of aura and storytelling in the era of mechanical reproduction, Ganguly conceptualises the 'expressivity' of experience as a potential to illuminate (or 'snapshoot') historicity. This concept animates her reformulation of 'actualisation' as the modality of a critically authentic relation to the object, whereby the past is allowed to shine through the lived detail as 'a presence in the present'. She thus outlines a dialectical approach that promises to be at once historical and materialist in spurring the critic to theorise 'the abstract concretely and the concrete abstractly'.

The title of the book is instructive in its play on the word *exception* to refer to the everyday experiences of immigrants to the United States who frequently find themselves singled out and forced to occupy their perceived ethnic categories in odd ways, but also to the current state of emergency that vexes contemporary theory ensnared in its own nets. What makes *States of Exception* itself 'exceptional' in the positive sense is Ganguly's endeavour to 'actualise' her own critical agendas through an ethnographic study of the everyday lives of Indian emigrants to the United States who are joining the ranks of the middle class. Her treatment of a New Jersey community circumvents the accusation of empiricism that goads ethnography by rubbing its ostensive aims against the grain of its anthropological attachments while assiduously interrogating Ganguly's own position of enunciation as a cultural critic and an immigrant herself.

Among the chapters focusing on her interviews with informants on the subjects of memory, food, and spectatorship respectively, I found the third (on 'Personal Memory and the Contradictions of Selfhood') and the fifth (on 'The Dialectics of Ethnic Spectatorship') particularly illuminating, but also useful for the purpose of teaching advanced students how to conduct a theoretically sophisticated cultural analysis that asks the right questions while remaining sensitive to absences and contradictions. The memory chapter elucidates how Indian immigrants differentially negotiate the widening gap between their memories of existence in India and their everyday lives in the United States. Her analysis reveals that both men and women develop narratives about the past that allow them to configure a 'postcolonial' identity in the US; however, while the women create nostalgic screen memories of their former lives (which they are less inclined to discuss in front of the husbands who contradict them), Ganguly's male informants often focus on past hardships as a means of shoring up their successful self-image in the present. 'The Dialectics of Ethnic Spectatorship' is invaluable as a model for how to relate the 'inside' to the 'outside' of a text – in this case Peter Brook's six-hour television adaptation from 1991 of the classical Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. Ganguly evaluates specific features of the film itself (the choice of actors, the use of music, its overly literal treatment of the

text) in the light of her immigrant community's reactions (which, predictably perhaps, culminate in a sense of cultural alienation). She also reflects on the film as both a commodity and an allegory of global capital. Hence an oil company with a sinister reputation such as Exxon will finance a mini-series that reifies cultural difference yet nonetheless serves to link the company's name to a desirable ideal of cosmopolitanism.

Shortly before the publication of *States of Exception* early in 2001, the authors of *Empire* stepped into the vacuum of paradigms to give us 'the next big idea'. This idea derives from their conversion of a Deleuzean cosmos into a 'corrected' vision of contemporary political economy, and turns out to be still another grand narrative – this time one that promises to reveal the immanent and deterritorialising logic of late capitalism as a contingent result of an age-old struggle between transcendence and immanence in the discursive history of nation and state. The phallic pomp and splendour of their narrative notwithstanding, Hardt's and Negri's emphasis on the fluidity of labour migrations within and against rhizomatic patterns of capitalisation and information flow is too elliptical to yield either an abstractly concrete or a concretely abstract picture of today's world. They would do well to heed the lessons of *States of Exception*, in which Ganguly resolutely refuses to abstract her global subjects as a 'macro flow' or 'the multitude', but chooses instead to listen to them.

BIG A PETIT A

Alan Finlayson

Saul Newman, *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2001, 208 pp; £70.00 cloth.

We have had 'post-structuralist' philosophies for over thirty years, but questions concerning the politics that derive from them are still open. We know they belong to a loose 'left' critical project; that Foucauldian and Derridean concepts can be employed in the mass production of politicised readings of texts, while Deleuzian rhetoric is hostile to hierarchy. But post-structuralisms have failed to generate a convincing, broad-based political theory that might supplant (rather than merely snipe at) neo-liberal hegemony. Post-structuralists have tended to create commentaries on, or adaptations of, the political thoughts of others, congratulating themselves on their addition of a prefix such as 'post' or 'radical'.

Saul Newman has chosen Anarchism as his specialist subject, and duly manufactured a post-anarchism. His book aims to convince contemporary anarchists that, even though it challenges the humanist subject they want to liberate, post-structuralism has something to offer them. Both anarchism and post-structuralism are anti-authoritarian, and the latter can improve the former by freeing it from the essentialism which renders it complicit in domination. Newman begins by returning to the dispute between anarchists and Marx, showing that these differ over their understanding of the 'place' of power in the polity. Marxists, he argues, saw the state as explicable primarily by reference to the functioning of economic power. If freed from the clutches of the capitalist class, the state would be available for use by the proletariat, so the point was to seize it. But the anarchists saw the state itself as the problem. It stood in opposition to, and contaminated, social relations that were essentially good. Society had to be liberated from the state, not merely its incumbents. But both anarchism and Marxism rely on a genre of theory that locates power in a particular place and then points to an 'outside' from which radical resistance can launch its attack.

Newman then embarks on a basic post-structuralist critique, showing how anarchism is premised on a flawed humanist essentialism that produces the very problems it aims to resolve. He is not simply dismissive of anarchist thought; Stirner, notably, emerges here as a proto-Deleuzean, theorising domination through subjectivity. Newman demonstrates a similarity between Stirner and Foucault especially with regard to the critique of 'man' and, interestingly, links Stirner's conception of freedom as 'own-ness' with

Foucault's views on the ethical construction of the self. This leads on to Deleuze and Guattari's 'anarchism of the body' which shows how authority resides not only in the state but elsewhere in society, rendering the theorising of an outside problematic. But, Newman argues, while these thinkers extend and deepen the anarchist critique of authoritarianism, they reintroduce a form of essence (labelled 'power' or 'desire') and remain unable to theorise the outside from which resistance is derived. What is required is a non-essentialist theory of resistance. Since Foucault and Deleuze find only 'false exits' leading to a void filled with essentialism that, like anarchist oppositionalism, reaffirms the system, we must look for it elsewhere.

At this point Newman is ready to introduce onto the stage that form of thought he thinks will help answer this problem. Since the foreword is by Ernesto Laclau it is perhaps not hard to guess where this might come from. We begin with Derrida who, Newman argues, shows the limits of the post-structuralist position. Anarchists are right to argue that the erasure or dispersal of the subject leaves theories of resistance without a point of departure. Derrida reinstates the subject as a limit or a moment of undecidability that still leaves room for a non-essentialist 'outside'. But Derrida is only John the Baptist to the true Saviour who comes bearing the wisdom of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan enables Newman to understand the outside from which resistance will come as the constitutive 'lack'. Society and subject are the mark of a failure on which they are dependent but which produces an excess on which we can ride out beyond post-structuralism. From here Newman outlines his 'post-anarchism' which takes the form of a politics without ground engaged in the pluralisation of points of struggle and antagonism. Classical anarchism is outmoded and flawed, but it has use as an ethic and a resistance strategy; so we should retain its ethical and rational claims in the form of commitment to a 'singularity' which is always anti-essentialist and thus always anti-authoritarian.

Some of Newman's claims are large, and they deserve a little more discussion than they receive. While Marxism was and is 'state-centric', it did not imagine the proletariat as an 'outside' but as the immanent contradiction of capitalism. Foucault and Deleuze are accused of reintroducing essence in the form of power/desire, but the vast secondary literature on them (which might refute this) is not fully examined, and their strong criticisms of psychoanalysis are not considered, denying Newman the chance to take them on. This is unfortunate, since to outsiders the Lacanian emphasis on lack seems to be a kind of transhistorical essentialism and the rock of the real rather too immovable.

But these are minor difficulties compared to the major issue which Newman, in a lively and readable book, fails to address. Throughout, the text is addressed to anarchist theorists and post-structuralists who are, it must be admitted, few in number. A general interest in these issues, and a broad commitment to anti-authoritarianism are taken for granted. The book never seeks to offer a justification of any kind for this sort of politics. Faced

with Newman's critical operation, the liberal will immediately respond that humanist essentialism, however fictive, has been most useful in establishing an expanding framework for the conceptualisation of human rights, and move on to discuss matters deemed of more practical importance. The conservative would find nothing to convince him or her that authority is a bad thing *per se*, or any reason to discard the idea that without it the world would collapse into a mass of contending and antagonistic singularities – a situation likely to resolve itself into some form of authoritarianism worse than the present. Marxists would no doubt aver that they have been here before, point out that their theory has never been simply reductionist, and ask Newman to address the issues raised by the nature of globalising capitalism. In seeking a solid ethical ground for his theory, Newman falls back on anarchism itself and its generalised declarations of a belief in freedom and equality, yet redefines the relationship between these terms as 'undecidable' – a resolution that is unlikely to satisfy the average member of the black bloc who just wants to know in which direction to chuck the Molotov.

These are, to be fair, not entirely theoretical errors, and Newman's book presents much of interest, especially the discussion of Stirner. But in running through the various stars of French theory something seems to be lost. In these times we need more books that eschew the engagement of text with text in the endless production of a 'critique' that simply shows how one argument does not match up to the theoretical demands of another. We need the kind of books that an anarchist might produce – written out of anger, polemically or poetically persuasive, relegating theoretical nuance to the academic nursery. The politics of poststructuralism (if there are any) are still to be properly written, and the question remains: what is to be done?

The Wisdom of Little Narratives

Graham Pechey

Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire,* Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave, 2001; 232pp; £42.50 cloth.

To say of any writer that she is 'ahead of her time' is less to bestow upon her a compliment than to indulge in that egregious 'condescension of posterity' against which we were long ago warned by E.P. Thompson in another connection. If it is true that the South African writer Olive Schreiner was more consistently 'progressive' in her social vision than any of her metropolitan contemporaries, it is also the case – eloquently argued in the book under review – that Schreiner's gender, location, and skills in literary experimentation together prompted in her a critique of the trajectory of that very 'progress' which she espoused. Let us be clear: any writer we truly value is by definition 'ahead of' *our* time, indeed of *all* 'times'; and Schreiner is certainly that. In making this case, Carolyn Burdett has put in her debt all of those who are interested in the ethical and political dimension of that aesthetic counter-culture of late modernity which we call 'modernism', and of which Schreiner herself was an early, highly self-conscious representative. Entering deeply into the particularities of Schreiner's South African history, Burdett disposes of yet another condescending conditioned reflex: namely, that which sees such colonial places as merely passively undergoing the remote effects of a larger process originating elsewhere. As she herself puts it, 'the so-called "margins" were often more central than the "centre" in articulating and enacting what might loosely be called issues of modernity'.

The Story of an African Farm is read here as the exemplary *literary* declaration of this independent agency of the periphery. Interweaving the relevant history of ideas with a sensitive attention to narrative and textual detail, Burdett shows how – in resolutely thinking with the landscape of the Karoo farm, exploiting to the full its force both as an emblem of our cosmic condition and as marked by a specific history of colonisation – Schreiner was already thinking beyond even the most innovative thought of her time. Neither for the hero nor for the heroine does the imperial centre provide any kind of solution or resolution; the world away from the farm is no better for either of them. With the help of these narrative disappointments, Schreiner opens a space in which the binaries besetting metropolitan thinking and writing may be eluded. 'Science' and 'romanticism' constitute one of these, 'intellect' and 'conscience' another. Most arresting, though, is Burdett's demonstration of how Schreiner's

protagonist Lyndall moves beyond an ambitious feminist will to an abstract sisterhood, or a conservative notion of love-as-service, towards a 'feminine' (almost proto-Levinasian) ethic of the relishing and cherishing of *difference*, of the other's otherness – an ethic which is then developed in *From Man to Man* 'as an extended critique of the West's appropriation of "civilisation"'.

Just as the first great literary-intellectual effort gave Schreiner a position from which she could criticise the individualism of Herbert Spencer, so in the next phase, Burdett argues – that of her 'sex book', which was to retell the story of civilisation from the perspective of the gender upon whose loving self-sacrifice it was founded – Schreiner now polemicised implicitly with the socialist eugenicist Karl Pearson. Schreiner's theory of 'sex parasitism' in *Woman and Labour* not only contests Pearson's rationalised (and racist) notion of motherhood as a guarantee of 'race-predominance' by supplementing the latter with 'other forms of labour', but also brings out the romantic traces in his otherwise icily scientistic edifice. Grand narratives fashioned in polemic with implicit male interlocutors seem on the whole to betray Schreiner into their own binary terms. All that can rescue her from their grip is the little narrative form which she calls 'dream' and 'allegory', and in whose superior truth-telling she came more and more to believe. These short pieces which 'do not seek to resolve or redeem so much as to suggest forms of consolation' achieve with their brevity what *African Farm* does with its discontinuity, occupying a realist economy of representation only in order to undo from within the limits it would otherwise impose upon her radically countercultural imagination.

Burdett's skill in controlling the contextual material of intellectual history in the first part of her book is demonstrated again with another order of history in the latter part, where Schreiner's work is read as a complex fictional intervention in the events leading up to and on from the Anglo-Boer War and the founding of the South African state. Whilst *From Man to Man* may have failed as a delineation of the 'New Man', through it we can see how Schreiner's 'sense of what the changing world might mean for women' is 'tied to the novel's South African setting and consequently to the issues of race and power in South Africa which were increasingly the focus of [her] concern'. A particular triumph in this latter half is Burdett's analysis of the anti-Rhodes satirical allegory *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*. The logic of Schreiner's stance as a public intellectual in early twentieth-century South Africa is explained and largely defended. This is a tricky question. In the face of a modernity compromised by the violence of capitalist modernisation – a process more condensed and visceral in its effect there than anywhere else at the time – Schreiner finds herself 'tactically' supporting the Boer republics, in the full knowledge that these states gave no civil rights to the black majority which (by then) she saw as most in need both of those rights, and of protection from that same rampant capitalism. Burdett might have observed how speedily Afrikaner urbanisation and nationalist mobilisation after that community's

defeat made Schreiner's choice seem tragically wrong; but who are we to say? There is no virtue in hindsight. The ineffaceable *fore*sight of those fractured, fragmented, vulnerable (often very small) things that she has left us as her literary *Nachlass* is unaffected by easy point-scoring. Carolyn Burdett has provided us with a map by which we can reach and explore for ourselves the inexhaustible wells of Olive Schreiner's wisdom.

Booknotes

Nick Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* Oxford, Berg, 2002, 270pp; £42.99 hardback, £14.99 paperback.

That guards in the National Gallery of Scotland currently wear trousers made from tartan - the fabric woven by aristocratic exploitation and popularised by Queen Victoria - indicates in itself something of art museums' conservative and bourgeois inheritance. *Museums and the Making of Modernity* is however cut from a different cloth, offering the story of how European art museums took technologies of aristocratic display and moulded them to create stratified realms of bourgeois distinction and 'professional' competencies. Focusing primarily on the eighteenth century background and nineteenth century 'golden age' of national art museums, this detailed and lucid study foregrounds how public art galleries evolved as key ammunition in 'the struggle of the bourgeois class to elevate its own world-view whilst appearing to rise above the realities of material life'(p56).

The book is split into two sections. The first provides a useful survey of the emergence of national art museums in Europe and a case study of the formation of England's National Gallery. The second focuses on the National Gallery of Scotland as it 'stuttered into existence' from the Scottish Enlightenment through to the nineteenth century, taking in the Romantic repackaging of the Highlands and the social geography of Edinburgh's New Town *en route*. With such a large section devoted to one specific gallery, the book might also be seen as providing a broader context for this particular institution as much as an excavation of the relationship between museums and European modernity.

As Prior points out in his introduction, 'no longer is the museum deified as a neutral storehouse of civilisation's most cherished values' (p4). What Peter Vergo once termed (in his book of that name) 'the new museology' (London, Reaktion, 1989) is now a vast body of literature interrogating any area, object or person museums have touched. *Museums and Modernity* makes a major contribution to this ever-burgeoning area of study, partly through its theoretically astute *long* readings of these museums' existence, a practice serving to highlight the changing social biographies of art museums themselves, as well as the meanings they help fabricate for the objects within. Most importantly, however, this Bourdieu-inspired cultural/sociological history considerably expands existing understanding of the formation of the modern European art market and museum, and of the strategies deployed by its urban bourgeoisie to gain cultural dominance.

Jo Littler

Peter Buse, *Drama + Theory: Critical Approaches to Modern British Drama,* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, 204pp; £12.99 paperback; £40.00 hardback.

Peter Buse's often daring project is to present familiar texts from the post-1956 dramatic canon and offer fresh readings by placing them in face-to-face confrontation with a particular area of contemporary theory. The resulting mutual interrogation reveals, on many occasions, not only original, sometimes startling, insights on the plays but also some surprising consequences for the theoretical positions themselves, questioned and read in their turn by a chosen partner drama-text. In each case, with one or two exceptions, theory is represented not by an entire 'ism' but by a single work. The drama-texts proceed chronologically through the familiar icons, from Osborne to Kane, making the additional reading – necessary where the theoretical positions are unfamiliar – manageable. Thus, *Look Back in Anger* finds itself grappling, somewhat mischievously, with Lacan's considerations of the nature of desire ('The Signification of the Phallus', 1966) while, less surprisingly, Freud's essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) is set to work on Pinter's *The Homecoming*. The chosen theorists are, with the exceptions of Freud and Benjamin, drawn from broadly post-structuralist areas of thought. Buse does not concern himself unduly with justifying the project, despite an engaging introductory discussion on the often vexed question of the validity of theory's intervention in drama and theatre studies.

Nine examples of this interactive process are offered with varying degrees of expectedness: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* alongside Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), *What the Butler Saw* / Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), *Comedians* / Althusser's essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', (1969), *Top Girls* / Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), *Pravda* / Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) (including some pointed observations on the irony of Baudrillard's comments on the archaic irrelevance of theatre), *Our Country's Good* / Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and an extremely valuable and humane reading of *Blasted* juxtaposed with Shoshona Felman's (and Dori Laub's) work on trauma theory in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992).

The approach necessitates omissions of both plays and theoretical works, and, as Buse points out, among the more notable absences are semiotic analysis, feminist theory and Derridean deconstruction, all of which, the author suggests, are adequately covered elsewhere. The book also suggests that these losses can be made good by the reader's continuing use of the 'cross-interrogation' technique, which leads to the question of who the intended reader is. While probably daunting for the average first-year undergraduate, lecturers involved in teaching 'post-Anger' modern drama in English and Theatre Studies will find this an

invaluable and refreshing resource; it will also be useful for final year undergraduate and postgraduate students. Although it makes occasional and welcome forays into the territory, *Drama + Theory* does not address performance in any detail, which will limit its appeal, perhaps, in some fashionable quarters.

Mike McCormack