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Book Reviews

Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism by Michael Sprinker. London and New York: Verso, 1987. Pp. 302. \$14.95 (paper).

Is a general theory of aesthetics incompatible with a thoroughgoing materialist criticism? Some, like Tony Bennett, have surveyed the field of aesthetics only to conclude that the category, given its history of metaphysical and epistemological affiliations, constitutes little more than "really useless knowledge." On the other hand, Michael Sprinker's recent study, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism*, attempts to recast the problems posed by aesthetic discourse for Marxist analysis, but in terms of an Althusserian *problematic*.

By rendering the aesthetic a proper theoretical object in the Althusserian sense, Sprinker sets out to track the play of an internal discrepancy at work across a selection of texts in the history of aesthetic discourse from Ruskin on. By locating such a displacement, Sprinker hopes to identify those historical productions of the aesthetic as imaginary relations, following a well-known formulation of Althusser's theory of ideology. Sprinker's project involves, in large part, a consideration of the various ways in which the "tension between the aesthetic as a model of transcendental cognitive power and the aesthetic as a historical and ideological social practice remains a constitutive and productive feature of Marxist theory down to the present moment" (p. 14). The fundamental incompatibility between the aesthetic understood as a species-specific capacity to ground thought in stable intuitions (the legacy of Schiller and Kant) and experienced as a "contingent moment in the history of understanding" (p. 91) is the source of the theoretical dislocation or *décalage* which, as it were, generates the history of aesthetic discourse, a history which demands a symptomatic reading of the type formulated by Althusser in order to disengage and identify its genuinely materialist component. But Sprinker's strategy here is also largely indebted to Paul de Man's analysis of the tension between symbol and allegory in literary history as developed in "The Rhetoric of Temporality."

The innatist or epistemological view, characteristic of humanist Marxism, draws much of its impetus from Marx's own remarks on Greek art at the conclusion of the introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Here, Marx seems to posit the aesthetic as a universal capacity which suggests, if not promises, the transcendence of the alienating everyday conditions of human activity and production under capitalism. At this level, Sprinker argues, Marxism continues to image art as a privileged mode of access and simply reproduces one of the fundamental tenets of bourgeois aesthetics. But hidden in what has often been dismissively termed "bourgeois aesthetics" is what Sprinker calls (again, following Althusser) the "rational kernel inside the mystical shell of the bourgeois theory of art" (p. 15). It is this rational kernel which offers us the possibility of a *coupe épistémologique* with such a tradition, according to Sprinker.

Part One of *Imaginary Relations* attempts to traverse, in part, the history of

bourgeois aesthetics from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In the texts of Ruskin, for example, Sprinker locates a contradiction between imagination, rooted in a naturalistic theory of mimesis, and allegory, as figural representation. In a reading much indebted to de Man, he concludes that Ruskin's ruminations on the grotesque in terms of imaginative excess and intrusion finally disrupts the unity of signifier and signified, a unity central to any totalizing understanding of Ruskin's theoretical project. Ultimately, this privileging of allegory over symbol (specifically in the writings on Dante) generates what Sprinker calls a "dialectic of non-transcendence," an irresolvable contradiction between Ruskin's mimetic theory of the imagination, outlined most explicitly in his commitment to the "truth of natural optics" and developed in the essays on Turner, and a semiotic theory of representation which postulates "an irreducible heterogeneity between the meaning of signs and their phenomenal features" (p. 32).

This leads Sprinker to conclude, in his symptomatic reading of Ruskin's texts, that what presents itself as a unitary theory of aesthetics is based finally upon the "necessary co-existence of two radically incompatible modes of representation, one of which is, paradoxical as this may sound, non-aesthetic" (p. 32). This break in Ruskin's seemingly seamless recapitulation of bourgeois aesthetics as totalizing and cognitive—here, imaginative—allows the materialist kernel to emerge, particularly in one of Ruskin's later characterizations of the artist as akin to a bee building a comb: "But the bee knows nothing about [such things as angles]. It builds its comb in a far more inevitable way. And, from a bee to Paul Veronese, all master-workers work with this awful, this inspired unconsciousness" (p. 33). This short portrait of artistic production prefigures, according to Sprinker, the mature Marx's notion of the subject as a product of history, as well as Althusser's suggestion that artistic subjects are often little more than the bearers of imaginative structures.

Sprinker finds a similar set of contradictions at work in the prefaces and criticism of Henry James, breaks which render certain totalizing readings (specifically those of Blackmur and J. Hillis Miller) untenable in their ordering and "aesthetic" impulses. Focussing upon James's notion of revision as writerly effacement (again, shades of de Man), Sprinker takes issue with those critics who would find in James's texts either instances of figural totalization, on the one hand, or hermeneutic progress, on the other. Likewise, Sprinker's subsequent readings of Nietzsche, Hopkins, reception theory, and the critical apparatus of the Chicago School (specifically R. S. Crane) all lead him to conclude that certain texts are able to yield a genuinely materialist aesthetic insofar as they are finally able to resist the totalizing impulse "which is part and parcel of the explicit ideology of the aesthetic as an epistemologically reliable mode of cognition" (p. 92).

At the end of chapter five, Sprinker outlines four characteristics of what he believes to be a properly materialist theory of art. First, and hearkening back to his discussion of Ruskin's occulted materialism, Sprinker argues that the human subject is a text which is produced rather than a natural entity "with historically invariant features and capacities" (p. 146), a position consistent with Althusser's theory of interpellation. Sprinker then offers three additional claims which will remain to be tested in part two of *Imaginary Relations*: 1) that poetic texts "persist as things (in part) because they are reproduced in

the interpretive labor of readers"; 2) that readers, in turn, "acquire the requisite skills to interpret texts by means of institutional apparatuses"; and, 3) that these institutional apparatuses "have histories which play a role in and are therefore conditioned by the more encompassing history of social formations . . ." (p. 148).

In keeping with the Althusserian displacement of economism as determinate in the first instance, and the rejection of the notion of expressive totality in favor of structural causation (i.e., the cause understood as "absent" save for the structural articulation of its effects), Sprinker qualifies his third point on the coincident histories of institutions and social formations by observing that they are not unilaterally determined by, or wholly coincident with, the expansion of the forces of production. This grants art, then, a relative—or relational—autonomy with a distinctive time, rhythm, and history of its own. This history is not, however, the kind of totalized and teleological history, qua historicism, operative in much Marxist theorizing about the arts.

At this point, Sprinker begins his considerations of Jameson, Sartre, and Perry Anderson armed with the Althusserian axiom that history proceeds without a subject or goal. He faults Jameson for his somewhat uncritical appropriation of Lukacs's notions of reification and totality, and identifies the residual Hegelianism informing much of the agenda of *The Political Unconscious* with its emphasis upon the "semantic richness" of Marxism as a totalizing master narrative. This latter claim leads Jameson to a mode of theoretical pessimism, according to Sprinker, due to his regnant humanism, a humanism so deeply suffused with Sartrean existentialism and voluntarism that it can only lead to a ceaseless dialectic between ideology and utopia (p. 174).

Likewise, Sartre's own attempt to ground history in praxis (understood, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, as the capacity of a historical subject to engage in supersession or *dépassement*) simply reproduces the Hegelian dialectic in its continual negation of negation (i.e., in memory, transcendence, and anticipation). This, Sprinker opines, merely reinstatiates political programs rather than produces strategies for political intervention. Only Marxist ideological laborers, according to Sprinker, can ultimately provide the masses with the necessary (theoretical) tools for intervention for, after all, it is the masses who make history. Finally, Sprinker invokes Althusser's oft-neglected study, *Philosophie spontanée et philosophie spontanée des savants*—a text based upon a series of lectures given at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1967–68—in order to counter Perry Anderson's charge that the Althusserian theory of ideology is paralyzing in its functionalism.

Following this extended consideration of current trends in humanist Marxism, Sprinker effects a fascinating rapprochement between two ostensibly irreconcilable figures—Althusser and Paul de Man. As was noted above, de Man is a significant presence throughout *Imaginary Relations*, and Sprinker cites several of his essays and studies throughout the ten chapters of the book. It is de Man's considerable contribution to rhetorical and textual theory which Sprinker often deploys in an attempt to expose the irrepressible nature of language as it wells up, in figural frenzy, to subvert all speculative totalizations. Despite de Man's own rather negative appraisal of Althusser, specifically in his own reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Sprinker discovers a surprising congruence between Althusser's theory of ideology and de Man's understanding of textuality.

After a prolonged treatment and comparison of these two texts on Rousseau, Sprinker is forced to conclude that, while Althusser's concept of ideology and the de Manian "text" share several features, the latter's pantextualism always and already pre-empts the necessary distinction maintained by materialist criticism between science and ideology. While allegories of reading, for de Man, may always narrate the impossibility of reading, they cannot expose the "outside"—economic structures as determinate in the last instance. De Man's interpretive interventions will always remain "incomplete," according to Sprinker, insofar as they can never approximate the theoretical rigor of a properly symptomatic reading.

After cutting such a long and erudite path through the often coincident histories of bourgeois and Marxist aesthetics, Sprinker merely returns to Althusser's treatments of Bertolazzi, Brecht, and Leonardo Cremonini. Here, like Althusser and Macherey, Sprinker opts for a theoretical middle-ground, placing art in a position somewhere between science and ideology. A rather lengthy, and often suggestive discussion of the problematic relation between *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung*, recast in terms of "scripting" (as in the scripting of a performance, contrary to Jameson's "master narrative") represents Sprinker's final attempt to provide a tentative model for history which remains within the field of poetics while, at the same time, supporting Althusser's claim that interpellated subjects are both produced by, and remain bearers of, imaginative structures.

But Sprinker's conclusions are, in the end, disappointing. The final chapter, as provisional and anticipatory as it must be given the Althusserian underpinnings of the project, offers little more than theoretical brinkmanship: "We must be content here merely to suggest the moment of possible articulation in the Althusserian corpus between aesthetic representation and the production of scientific knowledge, and to project from this moment some of the consequences for a materialist inquiry into the history of aesthetic production" (p. 288). One wonders, finally, whether Sprinker's solemnity at this juncture is due to his firm belief in an impending ideological crisis in the historical and philological disciplines (n. 12, p. 283), or whether his provisionalist impulse has finally caught up with him, rendering *Imaginary Relations*, always and already, a prolegomenon to a prolegomenon . . . *ad infinitum*.

While alluding to Althusser's *Philosophie spontanée*, Sprinker also fails to engage Perry Anderson genuinely on the issue of Althusser's functionalism. This is, perhaps, the weak link in Sprinker's project, and may account for the theoretical paralysis of *Imaginary Relations*. His vanguardist leanings, as well as his distrust of populist or punctual politics (see his stinging denunciation of the Democratic Socialists of America, n. 5, p. 211), lead Sprinker to simply reinscribe other theoretical totalities lifted uncritically from Althusser, namely the "complex social whole" and economism in the last instance.

In spite of Althusser's recovery of Mao's theory of contradiction and his approval of Marx's 1857 rejection of an abstract notion of production, the economy remains intact in Althusser's discourse as an abstract universal object, an end or telos which structures the social whole by essentially determining its laws of motion and reproduction. This bears directly upon Sprinker's trust in the transformative power of the "masses," his faith in academics as a theoretical laboring class, and the unexamined theory of class informing

the study overall. While problematizing some totalities, *Imaginary Relations* finally fails to problematize its own, especially as these relate to questions of aesthetic production and the relative autonomy of art.

One wishes that Sprinker had, in fact, actually dealt with the issue of performance and representation only hinted at in the concluding chapters (this might have required something of a detour back through Kant and Schiller, as well as a thorough treatment of the problem of aesthetic judgement). Sprinker also fails to foreground the often interesting tension at work in his own study between de Man's treatment of temporality (as it relates to the generation of "text") and the Althusserian understanding of history and contradiction. Overall, *Imaginary Relations* remains uneven and incomplete—an often illuminating book much in need of a theoretical coda.

University of Pennsylvania

Gerry O'Sullivan

New Vico Studies, Volume III, edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene. New York: The Institute for Vico Studies, 1985. Pp. xi + 252. \$19.95 (paper).

Since the inception of the yearbook *New Vico Studies*, the editors have made it their business to publish articles, reviews, abstracts, and notes on Giambattista Vico, and to record meticulously in a bibliography or otherwise all those textual instances which in some form or another make a mention of Vico. In short, they have made it their business to offer a broad variety of all kinds of information of interest to Vico scholarship and the present volume indicates that they are going to keep it that way. The first 160 pages or so of the third volume thus contains no less than 12 articles, and the remaining roughly 100 pages are dedicated to reviews, abstracts, reports, and a bibliography. So apart from the lengthy lead article, "Toward a History of Recent Anglo-American Vico Scholarship, Part III: 1974-1977," authored by one of the editors, Giorgio Tagliacozzo, many of the articles are kept in the concise form of a 10 to 12 page note, and the subsequent section of abstracts and reviews etc. registers about 35 additional individual entries. The point of the yearbook, then, it seems to me, is not so much to engage in a discussion of a specific and or a well delineated problematic in Vico scholarship, but rather to welcome exploratory, perhaps conjectural, associative relations between Vico and other thinkers, cultivating thereby an almost infinite prolegomenon to any future study of Vico. In that *New Vico Studies* is, compared to other yearbooks in philosophy, quite unusual. No doubt, the complexity of the Vichian text, the many legal, philosophical, historical, linguistic, anthropological, aesthetic issues he raises, and the many disciplines, and critical discourses which can rightly claim him as an inspirational force, all these factors lend themselves to view him in multiple lights. So it seems legitimate that the present volume focuses on articles which associate Vico with a broad and heterogeneous range of discourses, with the contemporary logic of Hintikka (Horst Steinke), with the philosophy of Susanne Langer (David W. Black), with the literary critic Frye (Timothy Bahti), with the symbolic system of Cas-

sirer (Donald Phillip Verene), with the Rabbinic Tradition (Jose Faur), with a philosophy of ethics (Nancy S. Struever), with the literary theories of Bakhtin and so forth.

That so many different quarters have some claim to Vico in the present volume is not a surprise to anyone who has followed the adventures of Vico studies in the Anglo-American world. Heterogeneity is the trademark of Vico scholarship on this side of the ocean, and it seems that it is going to stay that way. Yet there is no need to suspect that we have to witness a heuristic *tour de force*. Far from it. For most of these articles are short, introductory, exploratory, hypothetical. Some are written under the aegis of a principle of hope: "The recent death of Langer will certainly rekindle interest in her important philosophy. It is my hope that part of this new research will include a study of the relation of her ideas to Vico. Such research would not only be good for its own sake; it would also help introduce Langer scholars to Vico, and Vico scholars to Langer" (p. 118). Others are premised on the echo-effect: "It is the purpose of this paper to present an update on certain aspects of current theoretical work in the philosophy of logic that seem to echo a number of Vichian lines of thought" (p. 147). And others don't deliver what they promise. So Nancy S. Struever's "Rhetoric and Philosophy in Vichian Inquiry" is not on rhetoric and philosophy in Vico, as the title indicates, but a diatribe against Michael Mooney's *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric*—in favor of Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. That diatribe is somewhat unfortunate, I think, not just because Mooney has presented us with one of the few truly integrated books on Vico in English, which in itself is not an insignificant event, but because Struever's intransigent imposition of a post-Nietzschean masterprogram on Vico does not lead to new, much less radical insights into the Vichian text, something Mooney has done, as much as one might disagree with his interpretation. Startlingly meager is Struever's textual evidence, oversimplified, reductive, and confusing is her use of terminology (why presume that "philosophy" in Vico is a construct devoid of natural philosophy, or why presume that some things are ideological and others are not) and the self-reflective posture she authoritatively demands—in the traces of her master philosophers of pessimism—from all interpretative gestures and in particularly from Mooney (but not from Williams) is premised on her own totalitarian exclusion from such self-critique. All use of dazzling adjectives notwithstanding, to bring Vico in line with the contemporary trend of what people like to call an anti-humanist and anti-enlightenment position, to bring him in line with an interestingly pervasive belief in pessimism does perhaps tell us more about the feeling of powerlessness of large segments of the American intelligentsia of the last few decades of the 20th century, living the demise of America's geopolitics, than it tells us about Vico's text. And in fact, if one feels the need to enlist Vico into a contemporary philosophy of ethics, of ethical pessimisms and pessimist ethics, that is, I don't really see why to juxtapose Mooney to Williams, and I don't really see what the problem is. Both Mooney and Williams are marvelous examples of a civilized adherence to the docta of the enlightenment and of the Anglo-American liberal tradition, though in different configurations, and they both believe, not only the Vico scholar Mooney, but in particular and more so the philosopher of ethics Williams, contrary to what Struever claims, in the ability of ethics to make a

difference, in the ability of the individual to assume a disposition to make a choice. And there are certainly passages in Vico's text which fit that bill: *Scienza nuova* (1725), Book Four, p. 305 (Cristofolini edition): "Alla stessa fatta si trovano i gradi dell'utilità della sapienza riposta, che deve servire alla sapienza volgare, perchè ella è nata dalla volgare e per quella medesima vive, a fin che la volgare dalla riposta, indebolita, sia retta e sostenuta, ed errante, sia guidata e condotta. Talchè, come i popoli s'appressano o si discostano da queste tre massime e come i filosofi loro assistono o l'abbandonano, ciò sia regola di giudicare dello stato delle nazioni." Yet there are also many other passages in Vico's complete works which would not fit that arrangement. That is to say, while Vico is far from primarily ringing the humanistic pre-enlightenment bell of democracy and individual freedom, of brotherhood, equality, and the power of the rhetorical will to run the fate of nations, as Mooney would have it, Vico is also far from primarily setting the ultimate limits of what can be done, of establishing finite determination, of subverting the realm of free will. The problem with the Vichian text is that it does both and more, that Vico, for whatever reason, did not, or perhaps could not, or did not want to decide for one or the other, for either determination or free will, and thus it is simply incorrect to state, as Struever does, that "Vico's account of the etiology of social action as a tissue of unintended results, deceptions and self-deceptions, and discursive interstices, subverts the premise of voluntarism which assumes the perfect efficacy of the agent's free will . . ." (p. 139). Who, having read the *Scienza nuova*, can forget the powerful passages on the sociality of the golden age of humankind which Vico creates on the basis of his analysis of Greek mythology and Roman Law? who can forget his evocation of an era when language, poetry, symbolic systems, religion, rituals, legal systems, political systems came into being? when the heroes (or, as Vico also calls them) the first poets, the priests, the sages, the paterfamilias, the first artists, the first scientists, the first astronomers, the first lawgivers, the first authorities—and Vico uses all of these appositions and more—when the first poets invented symbolic systems to mark the extent of their property, their land, and when they invented ever more symbolic systems to maintain their dominion, in order to mark their difference from the ones who did not possess the land, the non-heroes that is. And who can forget the passages on the creation of institutions, when the heroes created for themselves, but not for the non-heroes, the rights to burial, to religion, and to marriage, and when they dispersed discourses concomitant with these rights in order to prevent all non-heroes from the claim to participate in these institutions, from the claim to knowledge, from the claim to power, and the claim to the land. And who can forget how in Vico's story the history of Roman law reflects the moment in which the heroes' poeticity came to an end, not because of the heroes' doing, but because of the doing of the innumerable famuli, or non-heroes, that social class of no land, of no apparent language, no symbolism, no religion, no beauty, no ethics, no knowledge, and no power. For when the famuli recognized themselves to be of equal nature to the heroes, they ushered in the transformation of the poetic to the prosaic, of the pre-rational to the rational, of the few in power to the many in power. The human age of humankind had thus begun. No longer were there just "Pauci . . . quos aequus amavit Jupiter." How that first phase of Vico's de-

scription of history relates to subsequent phases is one of the many difficulties of Vico's work. It is again related to the problem of free will and determination and the mandarins of the Vichian establishment here and abroad have dedicated to that problem thousands of pages over the past two to two hundred and fifty years. It cannot be worked out on a dozen odd pages or so, as Struever would like to do it, and to claim something simply and forcefully does not help us much either. What I don't understand is that there seems to be too much at stake for some Vichian scholars to opt for one or the other when it comes to free will or determination, without taking into account the many contradictions and inconsistencies that riddle the Vichian text. So in spite of the contemporary lipservice to decentralization and dehierarchization, to heterogeneity and multiplicity, to the effacement of totalities and continuities, to subversive strategies and the destruction of Western logocentricity, there is an almost pathological anxiety to get the total picture of Vico right or wrong, once and for all. And that march into the finite kingdom of eternal solutions in Vico scholarship continues under the banner of Vico's anti-Cartesianism, and of Vico's isolation in his time—two theses which have long been problematized by the international Vico community—and that march often clutches tight to the banner of banning any involvement of Vico with the natural sciences of his era, the history of science, and the philosophy of science. Certainly, in Struever's case, this should come as no surprise, since in her understanding of humanism, philosophy, and rhetoric the natural sciences do not figure, and as anti-Mooneyian as she would like to be, her resistance to relating rhetorics to the problematics of the natural sciences during the Renaissance, Vico's age or our own, is a heritage she very much shares with Mooney.

The agenda of *New Vico Studies* does not enlist a specific item or specific problem in Vichian studies that the editors would like to be worked out in detail and at length. What the agenda has been and remains is the distribution of all kinds of knowledge concerning Vico, and the many individual entries no doubt reflect that inclination. That much is readily acknowledged and it is certainly very useful for anyone interested in Vico. What is not that readily acknowledged is the anti-historical bias of the editors. Since the inception of something of a wonderful Vico renaissance in the Anglo-American academic community, a renaissance which is unthinkable without the organizational skills, the enormous efforts and the unmatched dedication to Vico of one of the editors of the journal under consideration here, Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Vico has appeared as a contemporary rather than an eighteenth-century thinker, a modernist, and sometimes even a postmodernist, with whom to dialogue on a myriad of philosophical and epistemological issues perhaps more apposite to our times than to his. It is this conviction, that Vico has much to contribute to philosophical issues of our era, which makes the editors of *New Vico Studies* purview the horizon of what the philosophical issues of our era are. And here it becomes quite interesting: for we are treated to reviews on all kinds of contemporary thinkers, on Rorty as well as Toulmin, on Robert Darnton and Levi-Strauss, on Popper and Megill, on Peter Bürger, Mary Douglas, Foucault, and Habermas. I am not going to dwell here on the question to which extent Vico has something substantial or useful to offer to these thinkers: Vico is probably flexible enough to accommodate most rela-

tions of that nature, provided we don't argue all that much on textual grounds. What the Vichian text could not accommodate, though, are problems which most of the intellectuals listed above are dealing with, whether acknowledged or not by the community which constitutes their discursive event: and these problems have to do with the turn the sciences have taken towards information systems and information technology. The philosophical challenges of our time are deeply linked to problems of the systems of information and systems of production, to the relation of the surveillance societies to the third world, and I am a bit skeptical as to how much Vico will help us to meet these challenges. On the other hand, though, by surveying the state of contemporary knowledge in the humanities, the editors have tapped, perhaps inadvertently, a link which they generally don't emphasize when it comes to Vico: the link between the sciences and the humanities. Of course, *New Vico Studies* does occasionally publish information on Vico and his relation to the natural sciences, such as Gustavo Costa's review of Paolo Rossi's *The Dark Abyss of Time* (1984), or Badaloni's *Introduzione a Vico* (1984). Costa does, as usual, an outstanding job of focusing on that which is important, of explaining the Vichian problems these two extraordinarily credentialled Vico scholars are working out—both have written extensively on Vico since the early sixties—and it is a pity that not more of that kind of information arrives at our shores, that not more of the grand divide between those who see "Vico with" and those who see "Vico without nature" reaches our eyes and ears. The first step would be to have Badaloni translated, not just the volume of 1984 but his earlier *Introduzione a Giambattista Vico* (1961), a book which solidly places Vico in the scientific discourses of his era. And essays by Costa, including a new distribution of the ones he has already written, would also do well. In the present volume, Costa works at the margins when it comes to Vico and the sciences, and the knowledge he has on the subject is fragmented between the various reviews. From a Foucaultian point of view, such fragmentary sites are not discouraging at all, however, for marginal notes can always be added to marginalities. And if Kuhn is right as to how a paradigm comes about, if it is correct, as he says in the *The Essential Tension*, that 100 voices can carry the day, then a discourse on Vico and the natural sciences might well be about to be born not inspite but because of these traces of marginality. That discourse, I am afraid, would not have all that much to say about contemporary philosophy at first. It would have to begin by returning Vico to where he primarily belongs: to the discourses of Naples, Italy, Europe of the early eighteenth century. Yet a lot could be gained by such a discursive adventure. For one, it might enlighten us on Vico's participation in and resistance to many discourses relevant to modernity. And for another, it might shed some light on how pro-Cartesian Vico, and how pre-Vichian Descartes might have been. And who knows, perhaps it would show us that the separation of the humanities and the sciences, so non-negotiably proclaimed in recent years whenever the name of Vico orbits the horizon, was as much of an ephemeron for his time as it is for ours.

Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition by Ann Bermingham. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Pp. xviii + 254, 88 figures, 8 plates. \$35.00.

In *The Dark Side of the Landscape* John Barrell a decade ago brought into interdisciplinary focus some of the ways in which, to borrow a memorable phrase, the shepherds of Arcadia were exchanged for the ploughmen of England in British landscape painting. He described how the Claudean glow that Wilson and Lambert cast over the native scene during the mid-eighteenth century was gradually clarified in the detailed gaze of Gainsborough, Morland, and Constable, so that in a phenomenon paralleled by the pastoral and georgic of literature and dictated by cultural laws of supply and demand the dim figure of the rural laborer could emerge ever so slowly from the painted ground of the English countryside. Barrell concluded that the decade most central to the change in sensibility was the 1790s, when nationalism and war with France spurred the Royal Academy to encourage the representation of traditional rural occupations. Not until the following decade did the artist who closed Barrell's survey, Constable, wean landscape from the false consciousness of arcadianism in anticipation of the aesthetics of social realism. Although Barrell was clearly impatient with the pace of the social changes he described and often stepped away from the painting to make his point, the movement of his brief study distilled from the development of British landscape art a limited progress in both the modern and historical sense of the word.

In her recent book Ann Bermingham covers much the same territory with much the same *marxisant* perspective. Bermingham also concentrates on Gainsborough and Constable and locates a paradigmatic shift in the 1790s, which she calls the picturesque decade. Because the terms of her discussion are so novel and complex, however, especially in the treatment of Constable and the picturesque, the argument of *Landscape and Ideology* takes the socio-historical consideration of the artwork into a dimension as yet unrealized by other studies. The gains of the approach are both intrinsic and extrinsic; they allow landscape to say many things at once, dialogically, about the artwork, the artist, the countryside, and the otherwise less visible social relations which art helps to shape. There are also costs involved. Where Barrell points us implicitly towards William Morris, Bermingham extends the scope of her study through the suburban landscapes of Ford Madox Brown, and hints at a link between the development of Milton Abbas and the Thatcherite planning of a Milton Keynes. Where Barrell locates in Constable an epistemological turn from an illusory to a progressive mode of depiction, Bermingham understands the investments of Constable in the picturesque to be just as illusory, finally, as those of his predecessors in the genre. In other words, the shift in emphasis from the illusory subject matter of pastoral to an illusory medium charged with contradictory personal, professional, and social ideologies lends the study of landscape a certain social pessimism as well as an unexpected challenge and interest.

If the juxtaposition of two such fine critics and historians seems unfair it should be said that Bermingham often engages Barrell directly or indirectly during the course of her argument, and that her study begins where his

leaves off, in the definition of nature. The central critical term in *Landscape and Ideology* names a complicated intertwining of nature with culture. The *naturalization of the sign* is the "implicit derivation of social convention, practice, and attitudes from the natural structure of the world." An *alfresco* conversation piece from 1757, for instance, demonstrates how "a subjected nature refers to culture because nature is part of a pictorial code that tells the viewer that the subjects of the painting enjoy a certain status, that they possess both property and taste; at the same time, a subordinate culture refers to nature for its ultimate justification. . . . Thus nature signifies class while class signifies a universal, classless nature" (p. 15). The designation *naturalization* develops the notion grounded both in the post-structuralist arbitrariness of the sign and in the psychology of perception popularized by E. H. Gombrich that the artwork necessarily represents representation rather than nature, which can never be seen for itself in art. The remainder of the term refines the semiotic lesson that painting is a double sign in which meaning is constituted by the alternate foregrounding of social and aesthetic values. The morphology of landscape involves a double articulation in which distinctive natural units of the genre like trees, terrain, and water are defined in terms of the distinctive social units of individuals, dwellings, and occupations, and vice versa. Mediating between the two is the landscape garden, where the worked surface is of course the land itself. Sometimes signifier and sometimes signified, the naturalized landscape painting is both the screen onto which social and aesthetic values are projected and the commodity through which they are expressed. In a way that can be likened to the period defense of subordination by appeal to the great chain of being the depiction of an apparently natural division of labor comes to stand for the (un)natural class structures of society at large.

After the introduction an initial chapter, "The State and Estate of Nature," applies and extends the concept of the naturalized sign to social gesture in outdoor conversation pieces by Zoffany, Mercier, and Gainsborough by placing the iconography of the pose against the normative codes of illustrated etiquette books. Bermingham then goes on to consider Gainsborough's role in pioneering and abandoning the rustic landscape. The chapter treats in especially convincing detail the well-known *Mr. and Mrs. Robert Andrews*, a painting unusual for Gainsborough and one which for Bermingham represents a false step in the development of landscape painting, like the *ferme ornée* in landscape gardening. Each was rendered unpopular by the explicit presence of labor, according to Bermingham. Abandoning the conversation piece, Gainsborough went on to domesticate the empirical gaze of Dutch landscape in the woods and lanes of East Suffolk, inventing the English rustic landscape. Because his own native environs had been divided since the sixteenth century into small tracts, Gainsborough could ignore for the most part the single most important social fact which the century brought to bear on the countryside, large-scale enclosure. Here Bermingham arrives at the intersection most crucial for her study, that of individual psychology and a socially determined aesthetic horizon: the alienation of Gainsborough from both rustic values and the truth-telling role he assigned to landscape becomes visible in the late turn through voyeurism toward "explicitly sentimental" (p. 52) paintings of childlike innocence. Summary account actually does little justice

to the subtle interweaving of social, political, and psychological threads of historical interest throughout the chapter.

In her second chapter Bermingham takes up the burgeoning of the picturesque in the last decade of the century as contextual prelude for her discussion of Constable in the third. The term *picturesque* signified both an appreciation of the visual potential of a countryside increasingly subject to urban demands and the legacy of rustic landscape painting left by Gainsborough; each definition answered to the other, for a picturesque landscape was one suitable for painting, and a picturesque painting was a landscape faithful to the countryside it depicted. As if to underscore the point, Bermingham quotes the literature of travel to show that travellers came to see the countryside through the eyes of Gainsborough. In appreciative responses like Reynolds's in his fourteenth discourse Gainsborough was generally understood to be a new sort of artist, one who had taken his inspiration directly from the genius loci. Naturalized through the picturesque, however, the range of response to landscape painting was more complicated than that: writers on the picturesque could follow Edmund Burke in stressing its empirical sources, as William Gilpin did; or they could center the picturesque aesthetic in the conservative politics of estate gardening, with Uvedale Price; or like Richard Payne Knight, applying the associationism of Archibald Alison, they could place the picturesque within the realm of mental perception. Each point of view gives a particular ideological spin to the difference between a natural and an artificial picturesque. The net effect of the theory of the picturesque was to "extend . . . naturalization to . . . art criticism" (p. 60), while the popular cult of the picturesque served mainly to romanticize the English countryside before enclosure and to disguise the historical effects of social change. Bermingham thus understands the picturesque sensibility to be imbued with elitism, nostalgia, and pessimism: the worker who emerges from the art of the 1790s celebrates mainly the success of the enclosure movement, which by the turn of the century had brought into production more than two million acres. Bermingham quotes contemporary documents extensively and convincingly to show just how intensely alienated farm workers became as agriculture shifted from a "labor-intensive to a capital-intensive pursuit" (p. 76). The discussion is probably the best account of the picturesque and its political implications now available.

The centerpiece of the book is the consideration of Constable, who was heir to all the contradictions of rustic landscape and who, in Bermingham's absorbing account, eventually came to ambivalent personal terms with them before making the genre an outsized impossibility. Bermingham first remarks upon the timeliness of an amply documented artistic career, one which witnessed in the full industrialization of the economy, increasing class consciousness, and Luddite riots an extraordinary degree of social transformation. The narrative then goes on to discuss several dimensions of Constable's complex personality as the artist found his way among the traditions he chose to work in. For Bermingham Constable reveals in his always autobiographical rustic views a continuing streak of initial avoidance and eventual approach; he rejected his father's trade as mill operator and married the daughter of his father's enemy, for instance, only to assimilate the mill and its surroundings again and again into his painting and to adopt his father's

paternalism in his own life as husband and father. His response to the picturesque likewise constituted an anti-political politics.

The notion of the picturesque that persists in the nineteenth century is the materially-based associationism of Knight. In "Mapping the Self" Bermingham argues that Constable unconsciously substituted personal sentiment for the recognition that his father's mills and locks were property pure and simple. His emotional investment was in part guaranteed by a veiled awareness of the difference between the propertied and non-propertied classes, but there was also an "Oedipal legacy" (p. 129) to deal with. Through his novel use of the *plein air* oil sketch, Constable transmuted both class consciousness and his father's holdings into a preliminary personal beholding in which conflicting emotions could be sorted out before being made public. In something of the same way that Gainsborough used the vignette, Constable used the preparatory sketch to suggest, misleadingly, a "completely personal fusion" (p. 129) with landscape, a retrospective naturalization of the sign that asked the viewer to collude with the artist in a sense of personal loss. Bermingham illustrates her argument not only with the five oil sketches titled *Flatford Mill from the Lock* (pp. 130-34) and the completed painting they were shaped into, *A Water Mill*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1812 (pl. 4), but also with Constable's letters to his fiancée, Maria Bickell, who had earlier sketched the same view. The result is a *tour de force* of critical analysis, uncovering layer by layer the texture of emotional involvement in the painting. The discussion of the Academy six-footers that follows is a worthy pendant.

After the Constables were married they moved to Hampstead and in her last chapter, "Middle Grounds and Middle Ways," Bermingham follows them to the suburbs. By the mid-nineteenth century the naturalization of the sign shifted from "an imperative cultural confusion to a confused cultural imperative" (p. 158), meaning that the uniform values that the propertied classes projected onto landscape became at once more general among the English and less uniformly capitalist. The middle class began to cast upon the countryside a scientific and recreational gaze that could only wither the rustic landscape. Bermingham notes that for Brown the suburban landscape painting was a potboiler, a distraction from Victorian history paintings like his *Work* and *The Last of England*, and that for his contemporary John William Inchbold it was largely an experiment in minute observation. The narrative of landscape finally tells an incidental story of diversion or states flatly the results of placing nature under a microscope.

This reader has a few related reservations about Bermingham's study, amounting to a large question. The analogy between landscape and history painting raised in the discussion of Brown might have been explored in more detail throughout the book, especially since it also surfaces in quotations at several earlier junctures (e.g. pp. 43, 58, 62, 95), once with a vengeance (p. 70). Geertz's notion of ideology understands it to function in a cultural system of implicit generic interplay. As brilliant as Bermingham is on the definition of *picturesque*, preliminary terms like *iconoclastic* (meaning innovative) or *empirical* (meaning illusory) fare less well, a bit oddly in this last instance since Bermingham's is a densely and eloquently empirical project. Closer to home, Bermingham is surely correct to say that "Constable would have been

incapable of criticizing the plight of the laborer in an industrialized, capitalist economy" (p. 144), but the claim that Constable was anti-political needs qualification. Recognizing that Wordsworth harvested images as political silage for his poetry, Constable wrote an 1835 sonnet to Wordsworth calling him a second Milton. In it he urged Wordsworth to maintain the national cause and ended by saying that he himself would keep faith in English freedom

While lays like thine are framed to glad the strong
And give the lowly surest hope from wrong.

Sentiments like these offer more than a purely personal politics, and participate in the Lockean discourse of liberty that Barrell has seen subsumed in the discourse of civic humanism. What then can landscape tell us about the English ideology that a transplanted and abstracted history painting must of necessity remain mute about?

In consequence of her magnificent achievement in *Landscape and Ideology*, questions like these will now have to be referred to Ann Bermingham. Beautifully written and nicely paced, her study has several local virtues: an ingenious use of Roland Barthes paralleled in gender studies only by Linda Kauffman; the creation in Constable of a cautious iconoclast as original as Svetlana Alpers's entrepreneurial Rembrandt; and a period eye as finely attuned to nuances of value as Michael Baxandall's is to quotidian epistemology. The larger excellence of her study is its conviction that neither the work nor the art of the artwork is immune to the concerns of politics.

Rutgers University

Timothy Erwin