

BOURGEOIS CULTURAL IDEOLOGY

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Pamela McCallum: *Literature and method: Towards a critique of I.A. Richards, T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis*. Gill and Macmillan, 270pp.

Taken together, the three cultural theorists who form the subject of this excellent critique represent a rich repository of bourgeois literary wisdom — one which came into being in a period of severe socio-cultural crisis (the 1920s and '30s), and which conventional cultural thought has still in some ways not surpassed. If it has not, however, it is less because of the profundity of these critics, than because, as Pamela McCallum argues, their work displays in various forms the symptoms of an historical and intellectual impasse.

That impasse, to summarise Professor McCallum's closely-knit argument much too hastily, is one between consciousness and society: more particularly, between an industrial capitalist society recognised by each of these thinkers as spiritually devastated, and the various styles of transcendental consciousness they offer as a response to this alienated condition. Unable to transcend the limits of a very English empiricism in their actual critique of their society, Richards, Eliot and Leavis are consequently driven into disconnected, idealist solutions to the historical ills they identify. This curious amalgam of empiricism and idealism (one without which, one might claim, no major bourgeois ideology has managed to survive for long) is traced back by this book to a central contradiction in the liberal bourgeois heritage, between a sourly disillusioned, appetitive empiricism on the one hand (Hobbes, Bentham), and a richer but always ineffectual liberal humanism on the other (Mill, T.H. Green). Trapped in this static polarity, bourgeois cultural ideology is forced to cobble together a range of always disintegrating solutions to the problem which is itself, pressed into a series of complex intellectual acrobatics whose course this study deftly charts.

Professor McCallum's treatment of I.A. Richards is to my mind the most interesting section of her book. Richards has received surprisingly little sustained attention of late, and has much of a 'period' feel about him; so it is illuminating to read of the influence on his thought of the psychologist G.F. Stout, or to map his doomed attempts to reconcile an essentially behaviouristic theory of mind (and hence of poetry) with those more 'creative', humanistic elements of bourgeois thought he discovered in Coleridge. Taking her cue from an apposite quotation from Georg Lukács, Professor McCallum notes the combination in Richards of an atomistic empiricism with a purely formal, empty network of rational laws. The handling of Eliot is, perhaps not surprisingly, rather less original; it is difficult to know how seriously to take a thinker whose

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particular form of transcendentalism lay in nostalgia for a mainly rural society governed by great families and a handful of intellectuals somewhat like himself. Leavis, deeply influential in England though much less so in America, is altogether a tougher nut to crack, superbly sharp as many of his insights were; in the end, as this book argues, he was left with little but a form of critical consciousness sublimely uncontaminated by the very historical conditions it analysed, and so effectively marooned with its own self-validating spiritual absolutes.

What is lacking to all three critics, as Professor McCallum acutely argues, is any adequate concept of totalisation. Culture in their hands tends instantly to fall apart into a range of stubbornly discrete particulars on the one hand, and a set of purely formal laws or elusive spiritual essences on the other. It is no wonder, then, that this book's epigram is Kant's celebrated warning against empty thoughts and blind intuitions. But before others are too brusquely lambasted for their failure to achieve such totalisation, one or two awkward questions arise. Professor McCallum judges these thinkers, rightly in my view, from the standpoint of a dialectical thought at once processual and relational; yet there is nothing materialist about such thought in itself, and indeed this study, though its implicit politics are clearly Marxist, is in effect a good deal more Hegelian. There is little, for example, about the concrete politics of these thinkers, though this, in the light of what seems acceptable as a doctoral thesis at Cambridge these days, is perhaps hardly surprising. Francis Mulhern's seminal study of *Scrutiny* receives, no doubt in some anxiety of influence, a single passing mention. Nor is it at all clear that the concept of 'totality' is without its severe problems. Indeed, it can well be argued that such central concepts of it as we have been traditionally offered, not least within the Marxist-Hegelian heritage from which this study emerges, have themselves been guilty of essentialism and covert transcendentalism.

Given these limits, Professor McCallum has produced a powerful, eloquent piece of work which represents a valuable contribution to the study of the English cultural formation. It relies a little too heavily, perhaps, on some unargued Marxist humanism, which would view the full development of human 'capacities' as an unquestioned goal in itself. Whether this includes the undoubted capacity to murder, exploit and appropriate is, as usual with such left-humanism, left obscure. The book is for the most part lucidly enough written, though there are spots of computerese ('mediated reciprocities and interactions of a diachronic relational process . . .'; what is a *non*-diachronic process?), and 'method' and 'methodology' are occasionally used as synonyms, which in British English at least they are certainly not. Such quibbles irritably vented, the final word should be one of praise for the intellectual rigour, judiciousness of judgement and tenaciousness of commitment which distinguish this valuable study.

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