

better artist than is Fairbairns. There is something unmistakably Southern about this novel, in the intense concern it shows for place, for family, for tradition, for the problem of trying to come to terms with one's identity in relation to the past. Also Southern is the intricacy of its narrative, in which one can see Faulkner's influence. Young-Bruehl is a masterful writer, and the praise she has drawn is well deserved. Her style is rich and concentrated. She must be read slowly to be fully appreciated.

The ending of the novel is reminiscent of the ending of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*; thus, *Vigil* seems very much within another tradition. The last glimpse we get of Hemingway's Frederick Henry he is in the immediate aftermath of the deaths of his child and his wife, walking away from the hospital through the night rain, alone, stunned, trying to come to grips with a despair which he lacks the moral wherewithal to overcome. At the end of *Vigil*, the narrator finds herself in comparable circumstances. She is left to cope with the suicide death of a young woman whom, after several fits and starts, she felt she was just coming to know and beginning to love. Here we have two novels written many years apart, but each reflecting a theme which has been almost a commonplace of American fiction since the post-World War I period: young life extinguished, the frustration of love and promise. It is a theme which points to a people who, for better than six decades now, have been running low on hope.

Precisely because *Vigil* is a successful work of fiction, what it has to tell us about ourselves, about our culture, is just that much more emphatic. The novel is about three women, the elder Elisabeth Maupin, who succeeds in coming to terms with her past and survives, her niece, who bears the same name but does not succeed in coming to terms with her past and does not survive, and the narrator, who is interestingly ambivalent. She seems to be neither as firmly grounded as the elder Elisabeth nor as rootless as the younger; her very ambivalence may

bring with it its own dangers. Little Elisabeth, as the younger woman is called, is in many respects typical of her times, of our times. She is intelligent but shallow; she is sensitive, but indiscriminately so; she is sophisticated but studied in her dealings with others. She is obsessively preoccupied with self. She is utterly lacking in wisdom and does not have the slightest idea of the ways in which it might be pursued. One of the ironies of her predicament is that her relentless self-scrutiny is, in the final analysis, to no avail. Following the Delphic admonition to Know Thyself is beneficial, it seems, only if there is a self which is substantive, that is, which is worth knowing. But Little Elisabeth is a vacuous person; though she is impressively well-spoken, she has nothing to say.

At first glance, the position of the narrator would seem to be a safe one; that is, she appears to have a fairly firm grasp on reality. But a closer look shows this not to be the case. The narrator, in fact, is rather precariously balanced, liable at any moment to topple into the abyss, because reality for her is constituted almost completely in terms of language. This is not so with the elder Elisabeth, who lives very much within the world of language—writing for her is a way of realizing experiences—but for whom language is not *the* world. She is also

capable of moving outside the world of language and touching real people, and this capacity in great part explains the peculiar kind of salvation she attains. The narrator, like the two Elisabeths, is an intrepid examiner of life. But to what purpose does she examine life? She does so only to be able to say in the end, carefully, in a precisely qualified manner, with a kind of Jamesian completeness and at times not without a kind of Jamesian fulsomeness, that there is not much there, that life, if not exactly meaningless, is ultimately reducible to words, words whose meanings are uncertain. The narrator has a marvelous way with words, but she seems to be dealing with language as a self-enclosed world, as if words themselves were the total reality. One has the impression that the symbolic potential of words is something which she believes a speaker can choose not to take into account. The narrator and Little Elisabeth have in common the fact that they speak profoundly, but about the surfaces of things only. This gives the illusion that they have actually penetrated the surfaces and are digging deep. In truth, they are frightened to death of what lies beneath the surfaces. They talk to be heard, not to be listened to. Language for them is not a means of getting to the heart of the real but of keeping the real at arm's length. □

Philosophical Sleight of Hand

Leonard Peikoff: *The Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America*; Stein & Day; New York.

by Gordon M. Pradl

That a medium of language exists between us and external reality is not generally recognized. Yet once we recognize that the genius of our mental capacity is

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precisely the fact that our linguistic representations of reality are never exact replications of what's actually out there, we can entertain a more complete notion of why experimental or empirical approaches to existence are potentially of such power.

When we persist in believing or acting as though our words precisely match reality, rather than being some ongoing approximation, we become prisoners of that reality. The reason is this: invention and change, transformation and progress are all a result of man's ability to alter his

linguistic representations of the world and thus make the world different from what it was previously. This should not be surprising. Still, most people continue to believe that language merely provides a way of transcribing reality, not of constructing it. When societies act as though "transcription" were true, they become static and new innovations or technologies for both the physical and behavioral spheres of existence are impossible.

The discrepancy between language and reality is the paramount recognition of Western civilization, one which makes possible our dynamic way of life. But there is a high cost we must pay for this discrepancy and the individual freedom that it fosters: insecurity, or a lack of certainty, as Dewey would describe it. When the locus of control is external to the individual, he knows his place. He may be less free, but he suffers no anxiety about predicting events. Security reigns, even when people are not happy with their circumstances. Indeed, people will persist with something intolerable simply because they feel certain about how events will transpire: we have all met persons who have invested in their own impotency.

Yet many in the West live knowing that the representations of reality that they perceive are simply their own and thus subject to alteration, and so they try to improve their condition. In America this restless energy has seemingly known no bounds. And so infinite experiments that needed fresh language even to describe them have led to wondrous new forms and expanded liberties. Yet simultaneously came heavy responsibilities and an ever-widening gap between reach and grasp, between imagination and reason.

Reason is finally what allowed man to perceive the discrepancy between language and reality; this discrepancy is but another name for freedom. Citizens are free when they have choice, ownership, and liability. While reason fosters these conditions, it paradoxically generates a counter urge for submissive control. In fact, we might say that every age of reason

contains within it all-too-fertile seeds for subsequent crops of irrationality. Just when man makes significant gains through the freedom manifest by his reason, he feels the need to consolidate these gains and so turns in on himself and in a fit of paralysis snuffs out the flame of reason.

Leonard Peikoff's excursion, *The Ominous Parallels: The End of Freedom in America*, is rightfully understood in the context of the contradictory tensions released by the powers of reason. Ostensibly about the philosophical conditions that gave rise to Hitler's Germany, the book really uses its analysis to hammer home dogmatically the message that America is on a similar road to evil and disaster. Peikoff's descriptive thesis runs smoothly: "To liberate humanity from intelligence, Hitler counted on the doctrines of *irrationalism*. To rid men of conscience, he counted on the morality of *altruism*. To free the world of freedom, he counted on the idea of *collectivism*." In other words, ideas govern men's actions, and so Hitler was able to exploit the long-standing tradition of German idealism for his own sinister purposes. Tracing a line from Plato to Kant to Hegel, Peikoff seeks to establish the typology of the totalitarian regime and the psychological states that make it possible. The Third Reich as contrasted with our own experiment of 1776 suggests three contrasting polarities: idealism vs. reason, self-sacrifice vs. selfishness, and collectivism vs. egoism. In each case the tyranny of the left seeks to overwhelm the dynamic self-interests of the

right. Thus when the necessary supporting ideas which allow force to triumph over reason are in the air—as they were in Germany during the period Peikoff examines—any atrocity is possible.

Peikoff devotes the majority of his presentation to demonstrating how the political and social structures and conventions of Germany inevitably paved the way for a Hitler. He provides much detailed and interesting information on subjects from the vulnerability of the Weimar Constitution, born as it was in the tradition of German militarism, to the psychic conditioning of the brownshirts, heirs to those roaming bands of vigilante soldiers and students ironically called the Free Corps. His chapter on the concentration camps is particularly forceful in clarifying how the system deliberately broke down the identity of prisoners by denying them any access to rational order. Human survival rests on some set of meanings which when tested are more or less confirmed; the prisoners had every normal social expectation undercut and so all values were inverted.

In characterizing the cultural climate of pre-Nazi Germany, Peikoff sees villains under every stone working diligently to undermine individual autonomy and to consolidate bogus altruistic state centralism. Oswald Spengler, Richard Wagner, Arnold Schönberg, Vasily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, Gerhart Hauptmann, Thomas Mann, Werner Heisenberg, and Kurt Godel all contributed to the "emotionalist republic" that destroyed the fragile connection between self-expression and external real-

In the Mail

Problems & Prospects of Presidential Leadership in the Nineteen-Eighties, Volume II, edited by James Sterling Young; University Press of America; Washington, DC. The President and Congress encompassed in just 79 pages. Imagine.

A History of the World's Great Religions by Ward McAfee; University Press of America; Washington, DC. To quote one: "Amen."

The White House Press on the Presidency: News Management and Co-option edited by Kenneth W. Thompson; University Press of America; Washington, DC. News co-option? Could this be an attempt at clarity through obfuscation?

ity. Nihilism and the unleashing of hatred as the dominant responses to experience served to eliminate personal confidence in individual existence; not unexpectedly, Peikoff discovers Freud and his followers at the center of this antiperson, antivalue morass.

The half-truths that make such a view appealing must be faced squarely; however, Peikoff's credibility slips when he becomes swept up in his own rhetorical excesses which manhandle the subtle complexities of the events and the psychology that determine human behavior:

Man's science, they say, requires the dismissal of values (Max Weber), his feelings require the dismissal of science (Heidegger), his society requires the dismissal of the individual (the Frankfurt Institute), his individuality requires liberation from logic (the Bauhaus)—logic is oppression, consistency is an illusion, causality is dated, free will is a myth, morality is a convention, self-esteem is immoral, heroism is laughable, individual achievement is nineteenth-century, personal ambition is selfish, freedom is antisocial, business is exploitation, wealth is swinish, health is pedestrian, happiness is superficial, sexual standards are hypocrisy, machine civilization is an obscenity, grammar is unfair, communication is impossible, law and order are boring, sanity is bourgeois, beauty is a lie, art is s[——].

Isn't such reverse sloganeering an anathema to reasoned judgment and

presentation regardless of its galvanizing effect on certain readers?

What Peikoff fails to attend to adequately is the fine line between reason and loss of faith. Because it is two-edged, reason must be construed as a human power worthy of exaltation, not as a flaw which spells despair and leads to the kind of antilife "solutions" so well documented in the work of David Holbrook, especially in his *The Masks of Hate*. Peikoff, however, is insensitive to these subtle tensions surrounding the gift of reason and so he would polarize, rather than seek to synthesize, human intention. Alas, even in America, according to his view, we may already have slid over the brink.

We must, of course, resist the continual erosion of individual authority by the state, but Peikoff's assertion that such erosion is solely the result of philosophical idealism is at best suspect. And his assertion is based on rhetorical strategies that permit him to glibly attack American philosophers from Emerson to Dewey and to see pragmatism as the intellectual disease responsible for current welfare trends. The assassination of pragmatism is efficiency itself—guilt by association:

[Kant and Hegel concluded that] the essence of mind, is not to be a perceiver of reality, but to be a *creator* of reality. This is the heart of German idealism, and this is the heart of the pragmatist metaphysics . . . the truth

of an idea, according to pragmatism, cannot be known in advance of action. The pragmatist does not expect to know, prior to taking an action, whether or not his 'plan' will work . . . Aristotle, and the Enlightenment shaped by his philosophy, had held that reality exists prior to and independent of human thought—and that human thought precedes human action . . . Pragmatism represents a total reversal of this progression . . . First, action—second, thought—third, reality.

Unfortunately, these concepts and their interrelationships are much more complex than Peikoff's slippery movement here would indicate.

Although Hegelian ideas have influenced American pragmatic philosophy, Peirce, James, Dewey and their followers were attempting a new synthesis of idealism and experimental empiricism. "Action to thought to reality" sounds impressive but is empty because the real issue is the relationship between knowledge and action in which thought is the ongoing dialectical mediator, both initiator and evaluator. We can't know reality in advance of some sort of test; however, the pragmatists hardly advocated a program of blind feeling action in isolation of reasoned prior expectations as Peikoff's characterizations imply.

Peikoff's analysis of America's "susceptibility" to German idealism might have been better served had he pondered, for instance, the experience of the immigrant John Roebling, reputedly one of Hegel's prized students. Coming to America to found a utopian agricultural community, the reality of the American experiment eventually took hold of his consciousness. The end result, the majestic Brooklyn Bridge, celebrates the vital connection between an aesthetic reflecting past traditions and a technology pointing to the genius of future engineering innovations. Such achievements give substance to the claim of America's destiny soaring beyond the limited imaginations of sinecured bureaucrats.

The clincher comes in the conclud-



ing chapter when Peikoff finally presents us with the philosophical solution for America: Ayn Rand's "objectivism." Peikoff's remarks become aphoristic, as though they were the irrefutable wisdoms of some Eastern mystic. Logical contradictions thus need not be addressed. Although the central role in human affairs of ethics and values is properly acknowledged, Peikoff provides no program for discovering the origins of those ethics and values and for showing how they dynamically mediate the tension between the individual and the group. Selfishness and reason as necessary active processes are applauded and the discrepancy between immediate concrete perception and later abstract conception is recognized, but Peikoff never concerns himself with how one

could possibly represent once and for all that absolute truth and reality to which he constantly refers.

All this does not mean that the book will not trigger a host of useful connections. The concepts Peikoff dashingly juggles must be dealt with by any conservative setting out to specify a moral conception of reality and existence. Still, it is important that we continue to recognize that our peculiar American landscape, however imperfect, can continue to resist tyranny as long as the various "knowledges" its reason releases do not cause the majority of us to lose faith in the original enterprise. As long as we remember the necessary balance between assertiveness and humility, we can live comfortably with reason. □

Of Poetry, Pseudo-Psychiatry, and Prophecy

Peter Medawar: *Pluto's Republic*; Oxford University Press; New York.

Arthur Janov: *Imprints: The Lifelong Effects of the Birth Experience*; Coward-McCann; New York.

by Bryce Christensen

At least since William Blake, most poets have been decidedly hostile to science. And with good reason: scientific paradigms expressed in flatly denotative formulae have greatly constricted the breadth of accepted reality, consequently deadening appreciation for the creative imagination. Indeed, when Charles Darwin confessed in his *Autobiography* that his own analytical habits had made him utterly incapable of enjoying Handel or Shakespeare, he anticipated a parallel observation made by I. A. Richards concerning the typical 20th-century reader.

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Poetry, warned Richards, is in serious trouble because moderns cannot respond emotionally to any "pseudostatements" repugnant to an empirical and mathematical Weltanschauung.

This antipoetic reduction of the culturally certified universe was hardly necessary. Sir Isaac Newton, the repeated target of Romantic scorn, was anything but a thoroughgoing empiricist. A fervent believer in Scripture, Newton abhorred the conception of the world as an autonomous machine. He supposed that angels superintended the movements of planets and metaphorically described gravity as the music of a divine Piper. Though Newton was himself not especially fond of poetry, his world view could have richly nourished a poetic sensibility. Unfortunately, post-Newtonian scientists have since used Occam's razor as a scalpel for severing the optic nerves of all eyes which see seraphs anywhere. Moreover, they have amputated all ears which hear the celestial strains: long before the cosmos was so termed, its inves-

tigators had thus become voluntarily *absurd* (from Latin *absurdus*, "deaf").

Although lacking much that Newton embraced, the modern scientific world view, with its attendant inability to bifurcate emotional and intellectual responses, is nevertheless the attenuated heritage of Judeo-Christianity. Unlike the deities of the East, the biblical God of the West is a jealous God. In the Old Testament, Joshua demanded that the people make an absolute choice between Yahweh and the pagan gods of Egypt, while in the New Testament, Jesus denied admittance to His strait and narrow way to any not willing to forsake, if necessary, even father, mother, and spouse for the Truth's sake. In the light of such exacting doctrines, the West developed an exclusive and self-consistent understanding of reality. In contrast, under the influence of religions which recognize as equal many different paths to nirvana, the Eastern nations developed eclectic philosophies, ignoring—often failing to apprehend—logical inconsistencies. The East therefore provided a most bountiful harvest of gods (India alone has tens of thousands), but wise men looking for Christ or science had to travel west.

Blake was not a wise man. Arguably a talented madman, he led the vanguard of poets who declared allegiance to "the Devil's party" and waged war against both Christian belief and scientific method. Like Milton's Devil, such poets sought to create their own "private systems of salvation" (Keats's phrase) rather than humbling themselves before religious doctrine or physical fact. They wanted their mysterious rainbows undisturbed by optical analysis and refused to subordinate the capricious spirits of Imagination to the angelic heralds of revelation. Unlike Milton, the Romantics failed to recognize that subjective affirmation is soon obscured in the gloomy chaos of nihilism or contorted into the serpentine coils of Blakean myth. In Blake's "four-fold vision," the scientist and the scriptorian are identified together as Urizen and cast into hellish underworld dens, while his