

Soft City is a book by one of those farmer's children, with London as the wicked uncle. Its strengths as well as its limitations are provincial—Raban doesn't seem afraid to be seduced or over-impressed, or perhaps he just doesn't know when he appears to be. He is, as I hope I've shown, an extraordinarily complex and unpin-downable person, highly self-conscious, sometimes a chatterer, sometimes absurd; perceptive, fascinated by quiddities, a stylist who picks away almost irritably at styles, trying them on and discarding them. I wonder what segment of the Dewey System (or whatever it is they use now-

adays) librarians will fit the book into. I suppose it will sit on the shelf with Banham, Crosby, Geddes, Mumford *et al.*, but somehow that isn't where it belongs. In my own mental compartmenting, I see it uneasily muscling in among such heterogeneous companions as St Augustine (not *The City of God* but *Confessions*), Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and *Walden*: unclassifiable books, full of disarming but sometimes irritating poses, pretending to a tidiness and orderliness they constantly belie, compounded of insight, rapture, common sense and chaos. In fact, very like Raban's picture of the City itself.

Ideas, On Stage & Off

From Rousseau to Marx—By KENNETH R. MINOGUE

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY is much the most difficult kind of history, not because the material is less abundant but because ideas are abstract and do not date in the same obvious way as events. The battle of Waterloo is obviously gone beyond recall, but an assertion like: "Man is born free but everywhere is in chains" can still quicken the contemporary pulse. We respond to the possible truth of the idea; and, truth being timeless, we treat Rousseau as our contemporary. For 18th-century readers, however, such ideas meant something significantly different. Hence it is that the main problem of the intellectual historian is to prevent Rousseau (and any other past thinker) from popping up anachronistically in 20th-century contexts. The problem is to get him back to 1762 and keep him there.

The commonest way of writing intellectual history evades this problem by setting up some abstract distinction, often itself derived from topical intellectual dispute, in terms of which past thinkers may be classified and understood. Progressive and reactionary, organic and mechanistic political theories, Open and Closed Societies, Totalitarian and Liberal Democrats, and similar distinctions have often been used as principles for ordering the thoughts of our ancestors. These distinctions often produce popular and stimulating books, but they usually make for bad history because abstract classification has obliterated genuinely historical considerations right at the very beginning. Dr Shirley Gruner¹ has now provided us with another such scheme, one

which traces in French social thought the fortunes of two intellectual tendencies called "economic materialism" and "social moralism."

The theme which she calls "economic materialism" derives from Condillac's doctrine that man is entirely made by his environment. Condillac developed this view by pushing Locke's epistemology to a point that Locke, being a Christian, preferred to avoid. Locke had presented a view of the human mind as a *tabula rasa*, something purely receptive to information. Condillac in effect recognised that one could not attribute original sin to a *tabula rasa*. Man was, he suggested, a statue called to life by the kiss of impressions deriving from the five senses. It is a simple doctrine, and it has turned out to be an influential one. Henceforth, as Kingsley Martin once put it, "The divine gift of grace counted for nothing, and human methods of education for everything." Locke's philosophic doctrine had been transformed into a key to the human situation, which is to say, into an ideology. Man was taken by Condillac to be essentially a pursuer of happiness, but an inefficient one. What this meant to men of the 18th century can best be seen in what the impressionable Stendhal wrote in his Journal:

"Presque tous les malheurs de la vie viennent des fausses idées que nous avons sur ce qui nous arrive. Connaître au fond les hommes, juger sainement des événements est donc un grand pas vers le bonheur."

Nearly all the miseries of life come from the false ideas we have about what happens to us. Really to understand men, sensibly to judge events, is therefore a large step towards happiness.

One implication of this line of thought was to turn all moral questions into the technical

¹ *Economic Materialism and Social Moralism*. By SHIRLEY M. GRUNER. Mouton (The Hague).

question of how happiness was to be attained. To argue in this way is, of course, to deal with many of the same questions as those to which religion has generally supplied the answers. It tells us how and why the world is in a radically unsatisfactory condition; but it has a view of the solution altogether different from the Christian answers which surrounded Condillac. Whereas the Christian diagnosis was in terms of original sin and lack of faith, the Condillacian diagnosis was that mankind was suffering the consequences of ignorance. Knowledge had already given men vast powers over nature; here at last was fully explicit the exciting programme of transforming human life itself.

Any one of a variety of academic inquiries might in terms of this project grow into vehicles of salvation, truths turning into saving truths. Condillac had taken off from epistemology. Some of his successors preferred to make physiology, or economics, or psycho-analysis the fundamental science; but all the inheritors of the Enlightenment project equipped some academic inquiry with a theological resonance. Dr Gruner is too concerned with following her theme of economic materialisation to push the matter this far; but some such understanding of Condillac and his contemporaries seems necessary to explain what followed.

DR GRUNER'S SECOND TRADITION stems from Rousseau, and although it appears as the major ancestor of socialism, it is generally referred to here as "social moralism." Rousseau earns his place as the fount of social moralism by insisting upon man's need for a moral transcendence which could find no place either in materialist philosophies such as that of Condillac, or in the society Rousseau saw around him. Man has, on this view, a will, moral sentiments, and what she calls "the longing for good and the sense of moral failure in not striving for it", all of these things being part of his humanity and not depending upon environment and sensation. Indeed, the modern state actually repressed these tendencies by encouraging egoism and greed, and only a more elevated community would be able to draw out these atrophied moral capacities by means of a General Will. It was Rousseau, then, who first drew up in social and political terms that indictment of modern societies which has become a contemporary cliché. The tradition of social moralism which stems from him is as radical in its political effects as Condillac's materialism, but it has very different preoccupations.

There is nothing very new about this contrast, but it is serviceable enough to provide Dr Gruner with the plot of her story. Social Moralism, as represented in the next generation by



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Robespierre, enjoyed a political triumph early in the French Revolution, but was discredited with his fall. The *idéologues* developed Condillac's materialism and in the aftermath of Thermidor swept all before them. Although their fortunes subsequently suffered decline, many of their ideas flowered after 1814 in the idea of *industrie*, a vision of society as evolving into a huge co-operative factory in which all members would make their contribution and parasites (such as the aristocracy) would disappear.

"Industrialism [Dr Gruner tells us] was the end of men's strivings, the state when he will freely exercise his faculties, when he will realise freely his happiness in production, when all men will live peacefully together without war and oppression for it will be the interest of all to be peaceful because their happiness depends upon it."

Yet social moralism managed to sustain itself, partly in alliance with some contemporary Christian ideas, and reconstituted itself among Saint-Simon and his followers. And in the next generation there appeared, as the climax of the story, the young Marx, who jerked sentimental socialism into the course of economic determinism. "Socialism became 'scientific'. It was a victory of the Condillac man over the Rousseau man."

Within the corsetry of this scheme, Dr Gruner manages to be extremely illuminating about the movements of French speculation during the period that concerns her. She is so good on the detail that one cannot but regret the tiered manner of exposition in which French thought appears as a succession of intellectual inventions. Thus the economist Say is credited with introducing the notion of "class" into serious social theory—it had previously been loosely attached to attacks upon idlers and parasites. Destutt de Tracy features as the man who resolved the study of morals into economic impulses; it was Babeuf who took the step beyond criticism of *excessive* wealth to the belief that the actual institution of private property was inherently evil. After 1814, Constant and Thierry arrive to add a historical dimension to this tradition of thought. "It was then merely a matter of time before the new history, now grafted on the new economy, would also be grafted on to the Condillac man." The plant that grew from this grafting was, of course, historical materialism, and Dr Gruner quotes from Charles Comte remarks which any experienced reader will regard as irresistibly prefiguring Marx:

"*Les moyens que ces peuples sont capables d'employer pour se procurer les choses nécessaires à leur existence, déterminent la forme de leur organisation social.*"

The means that people are capable of using to procure what is necessary for their lives determine the form of their social organisation.

By this time, the *idéologue* concept of man elaborated in terms of physiology had begun to be displaced by economics and the study of production. Marx was thus a mere toddler when the French had advanced to the view that "Society has its own laws, it evolves, it moves to its predetermined end whatever man or government does. This is what makes all *political* revolutions senseless for that results only in a change of oppressors." Saint-Simon and his followers were already beginning to use the term "*bourgeoisie*" to refer to the idlers who had stolen the revolution from the people who had actually made it. And finally Marx himself appears, equipped with the sophistication of German philosophy and looking for something that would provide him with a lever on what he took to be reality itself. In fact, Dr Gruner comments, he had broken through not to reality, but merely to "another level of thought—a more common-sensical one, perhaps, but certainly . . . no more real."

SO FAR AS intellectual history is concerned, then, this is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. We are invited to consider the spectacle of thinkers whose significance revolves primarily around their relation to a largely off-stage Hamlet. But life can be sliced in many ways, and all the thinkers with whom Dr Gruner deals have in other contexts an existence in their own right; they have, indeed, histories in terms of which the Marxian synthesis is but a minor feature. Even within the history of Marx himself, the triumph of the Condillac man over the Rousseau man is not a climax but an episode, and the line of thought Dr Gruner calls "social moralism" merely succumbed to positivist fashion before reappearing in new forms even within Marxism. But to say this is merely to indicate the difficulty of trying to subsume a complicated succession of thinkers under a simple abstract distinction.

Dr Gruner is certainly not uncritical, but she is often critical in an unhistorical way. Hers is historian's *esprit d'escalier*, the contribution to the party made after the lights have gone out and the guests have gone home. She berates Rousseau for thinking that a society can have a will apart from each man's will, and she tells us that "the attempt to apply the new knowledge to society in the same way as the new science was being applied to technology was to my mind a case of misdirected zeal. . . ." These are eminently sensible remarks, no doubt, but they are a contribution to a non-existent discussion. One of the things we purchase by death is that our zeal, even our misguided zeal, is water under the bridge; it has gone by. Historically speaking, the dead don't make mistakes: they merely reveal themselves.

“Embusqué Havens”

New Poetry—By DOUGLAS DUNN

ROY FULLER'S CAREER as a poet has been one of frequent overtakings by public taste. In poetry, this is particularly galling when one realises that by “public” very few people indeed are involved—a crowd of nay-sayers and yeasayers standing, glass in hand, on the peripheries of writing, neither audience or participants, but the nearest poetry gets to a “public.”

In the 1930s, Fuller was insufficiently brilliant in comparison with MacSpaunday, as well as humbly provincial in that last exclusive Oxbridge decade. His name appears to have lapsed in the 1940s as if itself remaindered, overshadowed by midgets who followed in Dylan Thomas's footsteps, making what now appear controversial marks look like the prints of Seven League Boots. In the 1950s, the Movement—all, with the exception of Larkin, lesser poets—pinched his headlines; and in the 1960s glamorous arrivals achieved the same, in a context heightened by new journalistic coverage of the field, so that what, like Geoffrey Grigson, he might have felt entitled to expect, swam past him at Olympic speed doing a stroke he never knew had existed, let alone been declared legal by a new generation of entrepreneurs who were laying down the definitions.

If an examination of Fuller's career is a particularly bracing way of approaching the fortunes of poetry since about 1936, his recent work, apart from its own merits, is externally useful only as a starting point for an examination of contemporary poetry by those who are already sufficiently old or disenchanted to feel that the entire future of literature is in the hands of obvious wastrels.

For Mr Fuller has pensioned himself off from the world and become a Horatian. Still, it can be said in his favour that he is not one of “the British branch of the family” as defined by Auden, being neither obliged to the Maecenas of the Anglican Church, nor an organist in a trollopish English town. But, as Auden continued to say in “The Horatians”,

*in all
labyrinthine economies
there are obscure nooks into which Authority
never pokes a suspicious nose, embusqué havens
for natural bachelors
and political idiots,
Zoological and Botanical Gardens. . . .*

For many years Mr Fuller succeeded in combining the life of writing—novels as well as poems—with life as solicitor to a large Building Society. And now he has retired to his gardens, with what appears like Augustan inevitability. Yet for years one had lived with the impression that Mr Fuller was something of a left-winger; and it was this person whom one had admired as the Auden Auden left behind on native soil to protect the verse forms and the (vaguely) left attitudes Auden dumped into the Atlantic, or ditched in that dive on 52nd Street. Instead, the entire pattern of Fuller's career is like that of a man who has had one of the keys to the labyrinthine economy and refused to let it go; his obscure nook was liberalised into nothing more than a cushioned corner in which art could be comfortably made, and in which the elegant features of that art would at least look elegant rather than display the exaggerated counter-refinement of much contemporary poetry whose authors deplore the lethargic acceptance by the many of off-hand, free forms engendered by ideas of counter-culture.

There is a good deal too much comfort to our British cultural society. Warning us, in an uncollected poem, not to take him too seriously as “the bird poet”, Fuller says

*he thought himself the poet of birdless or
Simply mechanical-canaried emperors,
Warning of the doom both of winged and wingless
fry.*

In these lines, Fuller imitates the circumlocutions of later Auden; and what is usually meant by “warning” is dissipated by a self-consciously witty idiom, which comes across as an unattractive and unproven knowingness.

Whatever political measure Fuller's poetry attempts to live up to, both its comprehensiveness and its incision suffer from a continually elegiac tone. In “One September”, for example, he asks,

*What is that late bird, the blackbird, doing
Chuckling alone in leaves inked on the West?*

To some extent, these lines contain almost the whole of Fuller's cultural summation. They are, or can be, loaded with possible interpretation. The poet, “that late blackbird”, is seen as someone threatened if not yet obsolete; who sees himself as alone in a declining culture; who pads