

They try harder, perhaps, like Avis: but, by heaven, they need to.

AND LITERARY THEORY? Glamorous as it now is, and indispensable to the career of any Associate Professor of English, I can't beat up a modicum of passion for it. In the Middle Ages, patient copyists acted as pre-printers, slowly multiplying the sacred texts. Cleverer men wrote Biblical commentaries; those cleverer still wrote commentaries on commentaries; and so it went on. The resultant edifice, superposing theory upon theory upon theory, came to be known as "scholasticism." The Renaissance sneered at its excesses. Not all the sneers were justified: many of the schoolmen were struggling to express sophisticated ideas—an increase in the rate of increase, for example—in language ill-

adapted for them, and hence sounding bizarre. It's good to bear that in mind when wrestling with critical jargon. Remember the days when "bookmen" ridiculed Dr Leavis's "style"? It may not have been Georgian "elegance" in its heyday—but it was muscular, versatile, argumentative, and subtle. Above all, it forced one to think.

It could well be that future readers will find comparable quality in some of today's apparently rebarbative literary theorists. They certainly compel close attention. My fear is that, while life is short, they may pre-empt the timetable. Art is long, but critical theory's longer. And in the last resort, my sympathy still lies with those quiet, anonymous copyists, their pens and noses brushing the holy pages. If I really had to choose a slogan to carve for a student of English literature, it would be that stalest of truisms: READ THE BOOK.

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The Realists

The rows. Remorse. The birthday guilt
It seemed we'd always waited for.
How quickly childhood makes itself
The subject of all pain. At least
Unhappiness was made to match.

We can talk of the fear on the landing,
Empty shops and lightless Sundays,
Bare legs and cold knuckles. The voices
Transmitted their coded distress
From room to room, half-audibly.

Conspirators in adult hurt,
We were given an atlas to look at.
The globe like a clockface described
Its true circle and all the routes
Guided us back to this room

Where we share an impoverished tongue—
What's wise, what's best, what shan't be thought
By persons whose business is penance
For lives that were never begun.
This evening is an afterlife:

Looking and carefully looking away
We rehearse the responsible half-truths
Like adults, with habits of fiction.
The words will be all we can make,
So that meaning deserts them, then self,

Until only the voices are left
For the listeners awake on the stairs,
Who have learned to believe this is how
These affairs are conducted, and think
Of a day they will speak for themselves.

Sean O'Brien

NOTES & TOPICS

Forty Years On

Germans, Russians & Other Strangers—By EDWARD PEARCE



PRESIDENT REAGAN has failings, an excess of uplift, not as much modern history as would be useful, a certain tendency to fixed-faced good will of a compulsive sort. Even so, at the conclusion of his visit to Western Europe last month it has been hard not to feel that the President's enemies do him great credit.

One picks at random: the French President (speaking for the West German Minister of Agriculture) administers a shrivelling snub—not only on the Strategic Defence Initiative but on the far more immediate issue of liberalising Europe's incestuous, indefensible agricultural trade régime. The Portuguese Communists in the Lisbon parliament bring along a white dove by way of reproof from the peace-loving elements. The yobbish tendency inside the Strasbourg Assembly (almost to a man British) first heckle Mr Reagan and then march out on him. He is patronised, and the Americans with him, by that large part of the British media which cannot get buckskins and film cameras out of its constrained mind after four-and-a-half years of contentious but probably rather successful government. One sweet old Irish lady writes in a serious daily of the American government as "cretinous." A Mr von Hoffman writing from New York for a British weekly tries odiously to link the soft-spoken anti-Semitism which made F. D. Roosevelt so impervious to the truth about the extermination camps with a supposed moral indifference on the part of Ronald Reagan; the oppositional Democrats play the 49 graves at Bitburg like a concert grand; the President is everywhere untruthfully described as "laying a wreath on SS graves." He is mocked, patronised, and derided.

What a good thing it is then that we have television pictures so that a dim East Coast Liberal like Nicholas von Hoffman, and his counterparts here, could see your actual East German and Soviet Armies, the hardware they paraded in the street, and the step they marched to. What a good thing that Mr Gorbachev—cultured, sophisticated, and different—should have told us so frankly that we colluded with the Nazis. Ugly faces are best seen close up. And the face of Mikhail Gorbachev is much of a prettiness with the goose step to which his armies march. Nobody, but nobody, marches

through London, Washington, or Bonn carrying missiles on trailers and smashing jackboots down on the asphalt. And, of course, nobody, or hardly anybody, accuses the Russians of colluding with the Nazis between 1939 and 1941. As for the American presence in Nicaragua, it deserves minute comparison with the Russian presence in Afghanistan. How many helicopter gunships? how much gas? how many dead? how many foreign divisions? how much pressure for withdrawal from dissenting Soviet parliamentarians?

The festival of stupidity to which parts of our media, on both sides of the Atlantic, treated themselves, was heart breaking. We are all liberal democracies. We all want to stay that way. Russia is the same uninviting, crass, iron-knuckled despotism which, piling Lenin upon the Czars, that country always has been. Any contrary view is for children.

We were invited during the President's trip and the celebrations of VE Day to see it differently through the eyes of Hitler's Russian victims. The brave, terrible story of Russian defence of Russia ought never to be forgotten and ought never to be used as a psychological weapon against Western defence of the West. A moral distinction to be drawn between the ruler of the USSR in 1941 and the ruler of the Third Reich cannot be made. Beside the extermination of Jews stands the extermination of class enemies in the same range of numbers. The ciné-cameras did not stand at the gates of Kolyma and Vorkuta as they did at those of Dachau and Belsen. We rely upon the spoken word, upon Solzhenitsyn, Mandelstam and Varlam Shalamov—mere words, a light and little-regarded currency, but one tied to an equal truth. Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* must have been read by one person for every five hundred thousand who have seen the newsreels of skeletal Jews and Poles in striped pyjamas, but his account of the bulldozing of a hill made up entirely of frozen human corpses is worth the reading.

It is not, however, a reason for hating Russians. Yet the most melancholy aspect of the entire visit and celebration has been the resolute determination of so many people to hate Germans. We had better get out of this self-pleasing delusion *subito*. Russia is not Stalin; Germany is not Hitler. One regrets the use of platitudes but some people evidently stand in need of having platitudes read to them . . . very slowly. It was a proper and fitting thing that, the War forty years gone, the President of the United States should lay a wreath upon the *Denkmal* at a German military cemetery. I am mightily weary of crude anti-Germanism. The Germans are entitled in 1985 to be judged upon what they are now, upon what they