

by its cruel and tragic fate. To a large extent, this is true. But again: the Cubans, the Czechs, the Yemenites, the Cambodians have had their own, not Russia's history. Why is it that when Marxist-Leninists come to power in any country in the world, they behave like Stalin? Do they, too, copy Tsar Ivan? Do they, too, have a historically submissive nation to deal with, one waiting meekly to be crushed? Historical parallels go a long way to explain political phenomena, but the worldwide horrors of this century were not caused by "Stalin's betrayal of Lenin" in a "counter-revolutionary reaction." They were caused by the nature of Marxism, its godless and inhuman ideology.

Reviewed by THOMAS MOLNAR

Secular Imperialism

The Interpretation of Otherness: Literature, Religion, and the American Imagination, by Giles Gunn, *New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. x + 250 pp. \$14.95.*

LIBERAL THEORISTS, it appears, will never learn that their assumptions are not universally accepted. Giles Gunn's study of the relationship between twentieth-century literature and religion is frankly secular in its theological premises and leftist—if not militantly so—in its social and political orientation. Professor Gunn makes no effort to conceal his biases; he could scarcely be faulted for not playing fair with the reader. Moreover, we should all agree that a critic is entitled to his opinions. What we should not agree upon is that a secular and ideological conception of man has won the day, as Gunn seems to think it has. Because he proceeds upon that assumption, *The Interpretation of Otherness* proves to be a very annoying book. There is about it a certain irritating smugness and presump-

tuous familiarity, for Gunn seems to be saying, "Of course, all of us sophisticated people agree that old-fashioned, supernatural religion is simply out of the question."

Consider, for instance, his criticism of Father William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* for following Allen Tate and T. S. Eliot "in an evaluative or prescriptive direction...." "We are suddenly back with Eliot," Gunn remarks, "in the realm of apodictic criticism, worrying about the kinds of writing that are injurious to belief and treating matters of faith as though they were self-evident and indisputable." It is perfectly clear that Gunn does not believe "matters of faith" to be either self-evident or indisputable, and given that skepticism his aversion to apodictic criticism is altogether understandable. He never, however, takes into account the contrary possibility and its consequences. If one is an orthodox Christian, as Tate, Eliot, and Lynch are, one should most certainly worry "about the kinds of writing that are injurious to belief." Indeed it is a Christian's moral obligation to do so, whether he is a critic or not. Gunn seems simply incapable of imagining such a point of view, and he is so confident of his contrary position that he allows himself some cheap shots at his opponents: "Like the poor, one might say, this kind of 'traditional' criticism...will be always with us." One can only conclude that Gunn considers himself and his readers to be among the rich.

He is just as self-confident in his positive declarations as in his censures. One of his theses is that "just as religion itself...cannot be known apart from its various manifestations in culture, so the most one can say with any assurance about a religious tradition, *no matter what its intrinsic claims*, is that it represents one assemblage of cultural forms among others." I emphasize the phrase in which Gunn's assumptions and tactics are the most evident; he chooses to dismiss all the intrinsic claims of, presumably, all religions and to substitute for them an extrinsic, a cultural or secular, explanation. He assumes, moreover, that

his readers will take such a substitution for granted. The assimilation of religion to culture has been around at least since Matthew Arnold, but Arnold and most of Gunn's predecessors have felt some obligation to argue their thesis. The ease with which he includes us all in the universal dismissal of religious belief is staggering. Is Gunn so completely the product of a secular culture and indeed so provincial in his supposed sophistication that he cannot discern the flaw in his argument—that his claims are just as much acts of faith, unproved and unprovable assumptions, as those religious ones he dismisses? He objects to "theological imperialism" but never seems to recognize that he is guilty of a secular or cultural imperialism which is fully as high-handed as what he attacks.

His dogmatism is just as evident in his treatment of literature as of theology. He objects strenuously to the notion that a literary work can be conceived in terms of an extrinsic end or purpose, "no matter how humanly significant or theologically meaningful that end or purpose may be." In plain English (and Gunn's is infrequently plain enough) a poem should not be in the service of religion. It should not reflect or assert belief, for it does so "only at the expense of sacrificing whatever is internal to its own nature...." In such a pronouncement one detects the same provincialism that informs Gunn's theology; has he never read *The Divine Comedy*, *The Faerie Queene*, or *Paradise Lost*? All these poems are in the service of religion. Dante, Spenser, and Milton believed the "intrinsic claims" of Christianity and conceived their art as ancillary to their faith. One wonders if Gunn would seriously assert that each of these works "sacrifices whatever is internal to its own nature" as a poem. If he would, his thesis stands self-condemned, for the poetry in question is a standard for literature at its best. That equally great poets (including Shakespeare) wrote in a fashion more to Gunn's liking does not

serve to disenfranchise those whose art was intentionally sacred. Gunn's thesis is clearly too narrow.

His ideology is equally limited and just as much an instance of unproved assumption as his theology and his criticism. He believes that the "recent appearance or reappearance" of Marxist and psychoanalytic literary theory has delivered us from the bondage of the New Criticism, and his description of the latter makes it clear why he considered it a bondage. The telling phrase is the "cultural elitism of Anglo-American formalism." If that sounds like the tip of an ideological iceberg, it is no accident; some one hundred and thirty pages later we find the rest of it: "the massive injustices which have been suffered by black people in this country, or the uncountable and unknown outrages we have committed against the native Americans, to say nothing of the discrimination we practice daily against everybody from women to homosexuals to Mexican-Americans." Such language has been around long enough by now that one scarcely need probe its implications. Gunn certainly does not; he employs such "sixties" rhetoric with the same nonchalance that characterizes his secularizing of religion and literature.

The Interpretation of Otherness is as weak in form as in substance. The style, as I have already hinted, is verbose and clouded with contemporary jargon. Worse still, the work is badly put together; Oxford's editing is surprisingly poor. We are told at the outset that "various early drafts of some of the material...were delivered as lectures...." *et cetera*. The grandiose subtitle does not compensate for both the author's (and editor's) failure to make a genuine book out of these fragments. There are very few books of which nothing good can be said. I am inclined to think this is one of them.

Reviewed by HAROLD L. WEATHERBY