

Reality and Consciousness

The Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History, by Peter Munz, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1977. xi + 349 pp. \$20.00.

PETER MUNZ, a professor of history at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, tells us that the purpose of his work is to attempt to bridge the gap between analytic philosophy of history and speculative philosophy of history; to distinguish between historicist and non-historicist philosophy of history while defending the latter; and to reconcile ordinary history and speculative philosophy of history, lest the former die of inanition. Few tasks could be of greater importance to the historical profession, to historical amateurs, to all those who read history, and to all of us who make it. This is a difficult task. Nevertheless, it is a task at which Munz has succeeded remarkably well. The major issues are set out concisely, the prose style is generally clear, depth of consideration and breadth of coverage do not appear as mutually exclusive procedures, and the erudition and scholarly

apparatus are impressive but not obtrusive. Yet, as might be expected, there is much to quarrel with in this book.

An initial difficulty lies in the separation Munz makes between "reality" and "consciousness." What is disturbing is that "consciousness" does not seem to participate in "reality" in any way. What actually happened is one thing; various forms of consciousness about what happened are other things. This leaves "us"—that is, consciousness and the tool of consciousness, language—in a false position, in short, outside reality. Herein seems to lie one of idealism's great deficiencies.

The importance of narrative rapidly emerges in Munz's account. Narrative connects events which are not chronologically contiguous. Knowledge of the past comes to us *via* narrative, and such knowledge is therefore inescapably subject to the exigencies of narrative construction.

Narrative, it turns out in this account, is not of *res gestae*, but of *historia rerum gestarum*. Whether the historian is *explaining* (narrating events in terms that would be intelligible to contemporaries of those events), or *interpreting* (narrating events in terms that would be intelligible to contemporaries of the narrator), his pro-

blem is the meaningfulness of the story he narrates or of the narrative he tells. And that meaning comes basically through the story or narrative structure itself, with its abstract universals (general laws) or concrete universals (myths). The abstract universal tends to be the product of sociological method and characterizes modern mass societies. The concrete universal is a feature of traditional societies.

For sociology, as "the ideology of modernity," and social scientists' claims to the universal applicability of their methods, Munz has limited respect. Sociology is not a new science like chemistry, whose findings are universally applicable. The elevation of the "principle of mutual watching into the social bond" reminds him of Tocqueville's suggestion that "the science of sociology is not a universal science, but the science of a new type of society." Historians want to see things *sub specie mutationis*. They wish to see how things change. Scientists, social or otherwise, are wary of change, and tend to want to think in terms of static interrelationships. Modern man is indeed *homo sociologicus*. He understands himself sociologically, and the historian must understand him as such also. But for the study of cultures prior to the establishment of modern mass-societies, sociological method is an inadequate index to thought, which Munz claims, is "the rawest material the historian ever deals with."

Rejecting theories of progress and providence as "too sweeping to be of practical assistance to the historian," Munz suggests Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1806) as a starting point for any adequate philosophy of history. This incipient adequacy Munz sees in Hegel's realization of the profound inner connection between the history of mankind and the logico-genetic development of human thinking. To defend Hegel in the post-Marxian world is no easy task, but Munz is prepared for it. Marxism is dismissed as an inadequate philosophy of history on two grounds. First, Marx thought he was writing of *res gestae* based on empirical study, and was

not only unaware of the mythic infiguration going on in his compositions, but also even made it a pivotal point in his argument that there were no *a priori* elements in his accounts. Though all historians are *a priorists*, Munz argues, Hegel was at least aware of his predilections. Second, Marx claimed to have found Hegelian dialectic standing on its head, and turned it right-side-up. But Munz argues that there is an asymmetry in dialectic: it can only be run in one direction. Dialectic cannot be stood on its head, for we have no evidence that things other than thought behave dialectically.

Munz insists that if, with Marx, one holds that being cannot be reduced to consciousness, but that one can nonetheless really know being, then, in whatever way such a belief may be useful, it is of no assistance in constructing historical narratives or a philosophy of history. Though Munz may be right about the philosophy of history in this connection, one suspects him to be in error about historical narratives.

The book is marred by errors in spelling and grammar, some of which may be typographical. More serious, however, are difficulties which inhere in some of the central contentions of this work. Space restrictions limit us to citing one example here. A typically Bronowskian passage from *The Ascent of Man* is cited with apparent approval, and reads in part as follows: "There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility. That is the human condition; and that is what quantum physics says. I mean that literally." Like so much else in that prestidigitatious work, this passage leaves one aghast. Where does one start on such an incoherent hodge-podge of pontification and pomposity by this servant of the servants of man? The first sentence is autophagic. The second certainly sounds absolute and appears to be meant to be "scientific." The self-destructive third sentence obliterates the entire context in which it is embedded. The fourth proposes the practice of a vir-

tue which can hardly be said to be observed in the next sentence. The fifth sentence introduces two more pontifications which, to have their intended impact, presume a species of infallibility on the part of the speaker. The last sentence simply leaves one flabbergasted. Bronowski starts out by telling us absolutely that there is no absolute knowledge, moves on to make several absolute statements, including ones about humility and "the human condition," and then tells us that he means what he has said literally! He must mean *that* figuratively.

Munz then proceeds to hoist himself upon the petard Bronowski used. "As Bronowski's lucid argument conclusively shows," Munz writes, "it is not correct to think that truth eludes us because we are too stupid or too biased. It is more correct to think that there is no truth to be grasped." Although the comparative ("more") is used by Munz and gives his clause ("it is more correct to think that...") a modest Pyrrhonic appearance, the verb is in the indicative rather than the subjunctive mood, and the statement is thus categorical and "dogmatic." Dogmatic skepticism has ever been, at best, oxymoronic, and at least, sophomoric. Or Bronowskis and Munzes could do better with the more modest Pyrrhonist variety. But that might not suit their metaphysics. Bronowski's *dicta* and Munz's musings can be reduced to these primitive and autophagic syllogisms: First, there is no absolute knowledge. This is absolutely true. Therefore this is (absolutely) false; and, second, there is no truth to be grasped. This is a truth. Therefore, this cannot be grasped. (Intellectual suicide does not appear to be a disease that eliminates itself. Instead, it becomes positively modish.)

Works such as Munz's are stimulating. They promise to break the iron cage in which positivism and analytic philosophy appear to have imprisoned the imagination of man. It may turn out after all, for example, that species originate through a process of natural selection. Yet, that process may be one which does not take place exclusively between physiologically com-

peting, empirically identifiable species in a physically "real" world. Rather it is a process that takes place there *and* between ideas about species in the minds of men, which in their turn are reducible neither to necessary fictions nor to simple servo-mechanisms of matter. We may have, as it were, a participative rather than an exclusive polarity of reality and consciousness.

Reviewed by JOHN LYON

The Far Side of Appearances

St.-John Perse: Letters, translated and edited by Arthur J. Knodel, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (*Bollingen Series LXXXVII: 2*), 1979. xxvi + 719 pp. \$20.00.

IT WAS with no great enthusiasm that I sat down to read these letters. The self-absorption and literary self-consciousness in the letters of many modern writers, particularly in France, quickly becomes both irritating and wearying. Are there not those, after all, who write not with their correspondent but with posterity chiefly in mind? Are there not those, too, who depart from spontaneity and naturalness to such an extent that they make careful copies of their draft letters as well as of those contrived and final missives which they actually place in the post? Very happily St.-John Perse does not come into this category. In the very first letter in this collection we find him asking: "...isn't any letter that goes beyond one's true feeling an absurdity?" Shortly after this he claims to hate nothing more than "cultural or dilettantish design" and adds: "I hate 'art' for being an end and no longer a means."

The further one reads the more one is impressed by the personality which shows