

REVIEW: FROM TROCCHI TO *TRAINSPOTTING*

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Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 202 pp, hb, £50, ISBN 0-7486-2233-2, pb, £16.99, ISBN 0-7486-2233-0.

This is an ambitious book. It is more than an account of a particular period in Scottish literary history. It aims also to chart what its author calls the ‘shadow-theory of Scotland’ in the post-war period (p.2). Central to both these aims is an attention to the connections between French and Scottish intellectual and literary life. The figures discussed by Gardiner include, on the Scottish side, Muriel Spark, Alexander Trocchi, Kenneth White, Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay, James Kelman, and Pat Kane. On the French side, the writers are more identifiably ‘theoretical’: Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari provide frequent points of reference.

There is a great deal of interesting factual information in this book. We are informed, or reminded, of the significant interplay between Scottish and French high culture from the 1950s onward. There are detailed chapters on the activities in France of Alexander Trocchi, Kenneth White, and Ian Hamilton Finlay, and a comparison of Muriel Spark’s *oeuvre* with the *nouveau roman*. There are also some intriguing theoretical constructions. One of Gardiner’s concerns is the significance of touch as a source of political resistance. This concept allows Gardiner to link Paul Virilio to the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. It also provides the basis for a reading of James Kelman’s **How Late It Was, How Late** (in which the protagonist is blinded and has to feel his

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way around), an analysis of the 'tactile' qualities of concrete poetry, and an account of contemporary DJ-ing as 'an intimately tactile process' (p.116). Given this emphasis on the theory of touch, however, I was disappointed to find no reference to Ian D. Suttie, the Scottish psychiatrist who in the 1930s argued that there was a 'taboo on tenderness'. For Suttie, non-sexual expressions of affection (pre-eminently touching and caressing) were proscribed within modern Western culture. Suttie would cohere well with Gardiner's argument, and he is one of Macmurray's few explicit references in **Persons in Relation** (1961), a text which Gardiner frequently cites. The absence of this reasonably well-known figure is puzzling, and suggests a lack of depth in the author's research into Scottish ideas.

This impression of superficiality is heightened by the narrative gusto with which Gardiner sweeps over issues of considerable complexity. The focus upon touch is a case in point. Although the concept is promising, its development is disappointing. Gardiner refers to something called the 'ecstasy revolution' (p.167), and reminisces about 'turn of the-1990s raves' where 'it was not uncommon to see complete strangers hug one another with no sense of unease' (p.188). Gardiner implies that there was something politically revolutionary about freely touching people while under the influence of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, rather than a few pints of lager. Yet, if there is indeed something politically subversive about 'touch', then Gardiner's thesis seems problematic. The power of a rave would seem somewhat limited when set against dancing that essentially involves touch. Salsa, rumba, tango, waltz, swing, ceilidh dancing, etc., etc., involve a great deal of touch, do so without pharmacological encouragement, and have their roots in pre-postcolonial times. Why is chemically-assisted touch a postcolonial revolutionary act, rather than a commodified echo of what was freely available in earlier dance forms? The objection is obvious; but it is not considered by Gardiner.

Gardiner's use of the concept of 'touch' is also quite nebulous. For example, in his analysis of concrete poetry, where shapes and figures are *seen* on the page, and in contemporary DJ-ing, where records are *heard*, the focus shifts to artistic production in order to smuggle in 'touch', the book's aspiring master concept: 'most concrete poetry typically involves some kind of tactile process in the making, as in cutting, glueing or ripping' (p.114), while 'the DJ is involved in an intimately tactile process, feeling out tunes by percussion, handling each vinyl' (p.116). I am baffled by this reasoning. Are handwriting and typing not tactile processes? Why is the DJ so especially tactile compared to the violinist, pianist, drummer, harpist, or any other musician who is

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required to touch or strike their instrument? In other places, the seen and the heard are simply redefined as 'tactile'. Thus: 'In [Edwin] Morgan's **News poems**, the imperfections of the text – the tendency to use type not perfectly "black" all the way over, but to have lighter patches – is similarly integral to the aesthetic. This is a visual "crackle", a graininess which arises from the text's tactility' (p.116).

Such superficiality is the central problem in **From Trocchi to Trainspotting**. Whether because of the author's decision, or a demand from the publisher, there is an absence of detailed exposition. This absence is all the more frustrating because of the author's occasional, perhaps humorously intended, asides, to **Viz** comic, **Star Trek**, **Only Fools and Horses**, **Rab C. Nesbitt**, and other slightly outdated popular references. Every sentence devoted to these unhelpful interpolations could instead have been employed in rigorous exegesis and argumentation. As things stand, the reader is often presented with merely a series of suggestive analogies, and the compression of complex texts into paraphrase. Deleuze's lengthy monograph on Hume, for instance, is compressed into four pages, with little direct quotation. The result is an argument that defies comprehension, and takes no critical relation to its materials. It is all very well to echo Deleuze on Hume on the fictionality of personal identity, and then to relate the argument to Macmurray; but how does or would Deleuze deal with Kantian arguments? Following Deleuze, "[t]here are no objects in the world other than impressions which are themselves not referable to other objects" (p.11), 'the subject itself [...] is an invention, a habit formed over time by association' (p.14). Very well: but how do different sensory modalities come together in a single personal experience; and what 'keeps apart' the experience of different persons? In a noisy café, I raise a cup of coffee to my lips and sip it. How do sound, touch, vision, smell, and taste come together in a single and distinct consciousness if not by the existence of the subject, person, or agent? Why don't I taste the tea being drunk by the person at the neighbouring table? Why are there not five distinct 'mini-mes' – a Gavin-smelling, and his four estranged brothers, -seeing, -touching, -tasting, and -hearing? Such objections may or may not be insurmountable. Yet to expound Deleuze, Hume, and Macmurray, without anticipating such responses, merely renders the source materials yet more opaque.

Although the Deleuze-Hume connection is well-founded, other of the analogies offered by Gardiner are *prima facie* improbable. His allying of R.D. Laing with Gilles Deleuze is symptomatic:

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Many of Laing's concerns pre-date those of Deleuze, and indeed are referred to by Deleuze, though this fact seems to have been little noted by Scottish intellectual historians. By 1972, when the links between capitalism, subject-interpellation and paranoia were sketched in Deleuze and Guattari's **Anti-Oedipus**, Laing had been pushing similar connections for over a decade. (p.164)

Laing, Deleuze and Guattari were indeed concerned in some way with 'schizophrenia', and **Anti-Oedipus** certainly cites Laing several times. Yet this is far from evidence of any fundamental continuity. Can Laing's work indeed be translated into the vocabulary of 'capitalism', 'subject-interpellation' and 'paranoia' as employed in **Anti-Oedipus**? Laing himself certainly disclaimed any connection. Though a Francophile, and effusive in his praise of Sartre, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and many others, Laing did not see his own ideas in **Anti-Oedipus**. In a series of interviews from the 1980s, he describes **Anti-Oedipus** as 'just intellectual wanking', and characterises the 'Guattari crowd' as 'the phoney radical salon revolutionary left' (Mullan 1995, p.365).

This is not some ill-considered outburst on Laing's part. There seems no apparent way to translate the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari into the interpersonal idiom preferred by Laing. The latter was insistent that psychiatry should not dehumanise patients. Even in Laing's work from the mid-1960s, which Gardiner treats as proto-Deleuzian, there is an insistence that 'psychotherapy must remain an *obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them*' (Laing 1967, p.32). Yet, the authors of **Anti-Oedipus** are emphatic in their non-personal idiom of mechanical body fragments: 'The breast is a machine that produces milk, and the mouth a machine coupled to it'; elsewhere, 'It [the breast] exists, rather as part of a desiring-machine connected to the baby's mouth, and is experienced as an object providing a nonpersonal flow of milk' (Deleuze & Guattari 1984, pp.1, 47). Deleuze and Guattari deny utterly that the child conceives 'partial objects' (such as the breast) in personal categories, 'as being his parents, or even different parts of his parents' bodies' (Deleuze & Guattari 1984, p.47).

Of course, it is conceivable that some continuity could be established. But footnotes and abstract paraphrase cannot substitute for detailed exposition and argument. The recklessness of the comparison of Laing with Deleuze and Guattari suggests something about the true ambition of **From Trocchi to**

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Trainspotting. Inattention to detailed argument allows the author to present any number of Scottish ideas as anticipations of a currently dominant French critical theory, or as instantiations of a pre-existing French literary or philosophical movement. The phraseology is telling: for example –

‘a specifically Scottish philosophy kicks in, with proto-Deleuzian undertones’ (p.88)

‘Scotland chimed with Foucauldian and Derridean thought sooner than has generally been appreciated’ (p.66)

‘Spark [...] seems to have slyly domesticated the *nouveau roman*’ (p.48)

How can you get a largely indifferent international academic market to pay attention to Scottish ideas and literature? The easiest way is to suggest that they in some way anticipate the ‘cutting edge’ of the market. Macmurray is Virilio *in nuce*; Laing the *anlage* of the full-grown Deleuze; and so forth.

The strategy is tempting, but it carries risks. Many of the connections offered by Gardiner are suggestions; it would be unfortunate if they were taken as well-founded by an academic market that might include postgraduates keen to theorise Scottish Literature. Nor does it seem likely that such tenuous connections will make Scottish ‘critical theory’ any more interesting to an international market. The international market will always prefer the ‘real thing’ from France to the unreliable Scottish prototype, or the second-rate Scottish copy. Ironically, although Gardiner promotes a philosophy of Becoming rather than Being, his own method treats French critical theory not as a heuristic device with which to approach Scottish theory, but as an archetype to which Scottish ideas must conform.

From Trocchi to Trainspotting contains interesting theoretical readings of post-war Scottish literature; but its subtitle, **Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960**, is inappropriate.

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