

4 CHARS WORKING CRITICAL + CULTURAL THEORY

CRITICAL THEORY: GENERAL

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charges of determinism which poststructuralism is called upon to answer. Belsey's readings of Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Spenser, Donne, Keats, Tennyson, Jeanette Winterson, A. S. Byatt (her chapter on 'Postmodern desire' featuring Winterson and Byatt also appears in *New Literary History* 25.iii: 683-705) and Marge Piercy tell us stories about the cultural history of desire which flout chronology and celebrate discontinuity. The readings offered are always energetic and illuminating. However, Belsey's professed terrain of cultural history has elsewhere been characterized by the production of theoretically informed and contextually nuanced period-based work of late. *Desire* tends to take its contexts as given: the nineteenth century is presented as 'the great age of the family'. Moreover, in being premised on a rather rigid opposition between on the one hand fiction, which privileges the play of the signifier, and on the other inflexible Enlightenment-led ideologies of official culture, Belsey's book is, from this perspective, a somewhat limited contribution to cultural history.

Pamela Fox's *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890-1945* situates romance writing in a more carefully delimited cultural history focused on the historical complexities of class and gender formations. Her book offers readings of major novels from the canon of British working-class fiction, including *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* and *Love on the Dole*, but it also gives ample consideration to forgotten texts. In doing so Fox develops a theoretical framework for assessing the forms of cultural reproduction and resistance engendered by this genre which argues against the positions established after Althusser and Bourdieu. (Another version of this theoretical framework can be found in Fox's essay 'De-re-fusing the reproduction-resistance circuit of cultural studies: a methodology for reading working-class narrative', *Cultural Critique* 28: 53-74.) Fox argues against anti-realist poststructuralist approaches which comb the novels unconvincingly for signs of ideological resistance in formal contradictions and defamiliarizations. In place of these strategies Fox does not seek to re-establish a naive realist aesthetic: instead she reads for an identity politics based on class-shame, which she holds to be the generative generic principle of working-class fiction. Fox's account of class-shame derives from a number of sources, which includes the recent work of Carolyn Steedman and the work of Helen Merrell Lynd from the 1950s: pejorative anthropological accounts of shame as a 'primitive' emotion are rejected. For Fox episodes of class-shame in working-class narratives are complex moments of surprise revelation where one's own class-identity is exposed. While one's lack of cultural capital is revealed, the experience of shame figures as the basis on which a critique of class relations can be built. Fox pursues this insight convincingly in her readings of the novels, and she skilfully clears a space for her readings through her gender-inflected critical assessment of the historiography of class in social and cultural history and literary criticism.

* If Fox's book is tightly focused, Maria Rosa Menocal's highly unusual *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric* constructs, by contrast, a

very wide and dramatic narrative within which to account for the origins of the lyric. Menocal begins her book in Cadiz August 1492 and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain – the second diaspora which prevented Columbus from gaining access to the best equipped Spanish port (he sailed from Palos instead). Columbus's departure for what turned out to be the New World also coincided with the Spanish conquest of Islamic Granada, and the publication of the first Castilian grammar. For Menocal these events – contemporaneous but seldom analysed together – constitute a watershed moment in cultural history. The Columbus voyage – often represented as the birth of modernity – is instead for Menocal the moment at which a vibrant and polyphonic multicultural medieval world was threatened with closure by the centralizing drives of Renaissance humanism. This was a threat posed by philology – a discipline crucial to humanism and Menocal's own discipline: if Jews and Arabs were physically deported and conquered, it was no less significant that Columbus's rough polyglot account of his voyage was later re-written in the smooth register of official Castilian.

It is in this context that Menocal produces a genealogy of the formation of the lyric. As a philologist, Menocal's argument about the subversive status of the lyric form places her in the position of gamekeeper turned poacher, for the early lyric is characterized by 'bastardy' and a 'hybrid' mix of Arabic, Hebrew and Provençal languages, and it was 'very much the young and bad rebel' in its preoccupation with love and mysticism. In an unconventional move Menocal links this formation to present-day rock lyrics, particularly Eric Clapton's 'Layla' which, it emerges, was shaped by a transmuted account of the very formation whose genealogy Menocal is tracing. Menocal uses this link between early lyric and present-day rock lyrics strategically in an attempt to think through some of the problems of origins and anonymous cultural transmission which leave the traditional paradigms of philological explanation silent.

This is, as I have said, an unusual book, not least in the way in which its style is often speculative and indeed poetic. The references are made up of another narrative commentary on readings and sources, and they do not always acknowledge the figures you might expect – Bakhtin, for instance. But then this is an anti-authoritarian thesis, and Bakhtin has become something of an authority on transgression. Finally, its unusualness is confirmed by Menocal's insistence that medieval culture was profoundly postmodern, which asks us to consider the possibility that the postmodern condition has deeper roots than hitherto has been perceived.

5 Postmodernity, History and Foundationalism

Valentine Cunningham's *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts and History* also urges us to re-think the history of what has come to be known as the postmodern condition of reading and interpretation. For Cunningham,