

THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE by Ernst Bloch. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight. *Basil Blackwell, 1986, 3 volumes, pp xxiii + 1420, £120.*

It is all too much really. Impeccably translated, beautifully produced in three handsome volumes, *The Principle of Hope* belatedly appears now in English, the *magnum opus* of another of that immensely productive generation of German thinkers that included such diverse figures as Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger. Ernst Bloch, who died in 1977 at the age of ninety two, published his first major work, *Geist der Utopie*, in 1918: an exhaustive rummage through poetry, art, myth, and above all music, in search of the spirit of utopian thought: in effect, a vision of an almost gnostic-Christian mystical socialism. In 1933 he had to move to Switzerland, since he was both a Jew and a Marxist. In 1938 he migrated to the United States, where he wrote *The Principle of Hope*, supported financially by his third wife who worked as a waitress and then in an architect's office. Bitterly anti-American and never fluent in English, Bloch found himself intellectually very isolated. In 1949 he returned to Germany as professor of philosophy at Leipzig, and for a few years he figured as a major thinker in the German Democratic Republic. In 1961, when the wall went up in Berlin, he happened to be in the west, where he decided to stay. By then aged seventy five, he started a new career as a treasured figure in the intellectual life of the Federal Republic. His Marxism had become much too heretical to interest leftwing people, but his imaginative research into utopian ideas found much sympathy among the student generation of the late 'sixties. With the appearance in 1965 of Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, soon translated into many languages, Bloch's vision of utopian thinking as permanent discontent with the *status quo* returned home to its roots in Judaeo-Christian eschatology, and, from Moltmann and others, his emphasis on the revolutionary potential of hope passed into liberation theology.

Although somewhat revised in the 1950s, *The Principle of Hope* is substantially the text that Bloch wrote in 1938. Paul Tillich, as the translators tell us in their admirable introduction, was among those who were trying to have the work translated and published in Oxford in the 1940s. As one might expect, the translators say that its appearance after all this delay is in no sense an anachronism. It seems very unlikely to prompt much fresh thinking among leftwing thinkers either in Britain or in the United States. For one thing, impossible as this is to convey in a short review, the course of the book meanders so widely and circuitously that the reader is easily tempted to give up. Within twenty pages taken at random, for example, we go from Bacon to Eldorado, Eden, Sinbad the Sailor, Jules Verne, the Golden Fleece, the Grail, and Brendan the Navigator to Prester John. Indeed a single page covers women, Zionism and Rosicrucianism. The clashing of references inspires vertigo. Bloch seems to have thought that Sinclair Lewis's character Babbitt summed up all that mattered about the United States. Of course he came to reject Stalinism, probably as early as the 1950s, but *The Principle of Hope* still has a very positive attitude to Soviet Russia.

For readers whose primary interests are theological, Bloch's basic idea has already passed into our consciousness since Moltmann's book. It would be unfair to put anybody off investigating these beautiful books, but they do not contain much that a student of Moltmann does not already know. Most of the often bizarre and fascinating learning, drawing on a variety of traditions in which hope has been a theme, but returning again and again to western theology and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, remains frustratingly without footnotes, so that little of what may be unfamiliar can be pursued.

A monumental work, then, by a maverick thinker in the grand Hegelian style—but all too much, really, so late in the 'Western Marxist' day.

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