

# Comment

## *Borders open and closed*

What has been happening in Eastern Europe has made us think harder than for a long time about where our borders actually are. Asking ourselves whether we in the West are capable of meeting this massive change, or whether (to quote the fear voiced by the Viennese actress Gail Gatterburg in this issue) we have nothing to offer the people of Eastern Europe except 'colour TV and MacDonaldis', makes us aware how tightly closed our personal borders—the borders we erect around ourselves—can be. And if our personal borders are closed it does not matter how many territorial borders are flung open.

In a November letter to his supporters, Charles Simpson of Charles Simpson Ministries, an Alabama-based missionary organisation of strong right-wing and evangelical tendencies, says born-again Christians may be in the majority in several Latin-American countries by the turn of the century. Where born-again Christianity spreads (aided by the US Government) appear firmly closed personal borders—an extreme individualism.

But Western Europeans (Vatican officials included), in protesting at the closed personal borders being multiplied by Mr Simpson and his friends, only too easily overlook the extent of their own closed personal borders. Talking about the need for change brought about by the opening up of Eastern Europe's borders, Cardinal Hume said in his address to the North of England Education Conference at the beginning of this month: 'If democracy itself is not to degenerate into new forms of tyranny it needs values and vision.' He is not the only Western European talking about the need for values and vision at this moment. How, though, can these troubled Western Europeans touch their fellow human beings' hearts? What commonly-acknowledged values are there left to appeal to in a world in which everything is so relativised? In other words, are their hearers' personal borders not too tightly closed?

Tories excluded, the British are now in the habit of putting all the blame on Thatcherism for the currently widespread self-centredness and reluctance to become involved more than necessary in the world 'out there'. But in doing this we run the danger of overlooking the deeper causes of these rather unattractive features. There are grounds for thinking they are partly linked to the loss of absolute values, absolute truths, accompanying that breakdown of a 'correspondence between articulate consciousness and the matter of our perceptions' which George Steiner writes about (p. 91) in his much-discussed latest book, *Real Presences* (Faber, London 1989, £12.99).

Interestingly, Steiner's book, which is on the future of the creation and appreciation of literature and the arts, has something to contribute to the question whether our internal borders are now impenetrably closed.

He claims the breakdown 'between word and world' to be 'one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history'; in fact one which 'defines modernity itself' (p. 93). It would seem that we live now in a 'house of mirrors' (p. 141) and the claim of Deconstruction that this in fact is all there has *ever* been would 'seem irrefutable' (p. 132).

But, says Steiner, the arts contradict this claim. He argues 'There is language, there is art, because there is "the other"' (p. 137). And the serious work of art 'queries the last privacies of our existence' (p. 142) and seeks to change us. Why? A better question is: why are there works of art at all? Steiner argues that artistic creation 'is *counter*-creation. The human maker rages at his coming *after*, at being, forever, second to the original and originating mystery of the forming of form' (p. 203). So 'there is in the art-act and its reception ... a presumption of presence' (p. 214). The arts mediate the inexplicabilities at the core of our being (p. 215). The basic questions about art are, then, 'ultimately theological questions' (p. 226). Furthermore, where God's presence (or, if one prefers, the absent 'thereness' of Beckett's *Endgame*) is no longer a matter of concern, then 'certain dimensions of thought and creativity are no longer attainable' (p. 229).

These are courageous things for an agnostic to say, albeit a Jew. But what is important about his book for us here is that, in reaffirming the link between the transcendent and the humanising forces in life, he is pointing out, to people who have largely lost faith in traditional religion and in the possibility of ultimate values, that the arts (which seemed so 'safely secular', so firmly part of everyday life) in fact lead us to engage with a reality outside that 'house of mirrors', relating us 'most directly to that in being which is not ours' (p. 226). They can, we might say, 'pull us out of ourselves'.

If this is true, our personal borders are not quite so tightly shut as people have come to assume. Already, inside the lives of all sorts of people who would call talk about the 'the transcendent' 'so much gobbledegook', there are keys to seemingly closed personal borders ... or so George Steiner would have us believe. That is consoling. But will those keys be found and used in time?

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