

THIEVES OF FIRE, by Dennis Donoghue. *Faber & Faber*. £2.95.

It was appropriate, almost in a way predictable, that Denis Donoghue should follow W. H. Auden, Dame Helen Gardner, Conor Cruise O'Brien, George Steiner and Richard Ellmann to become the sixth T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecturer at the University of Canterbury. The inclusion of Donoghue in the list reveals retrospectively the covert (certainly non-conspiratorial) ideological consensus which sustains the project; in a neatly Eliotic re-ordering of the past, these latest Memorial Lectures illuminate certain coherent trends and predilections in what has come before.

Ellmann, surely, is the misplaced name: for Ellmann is a thoroughly secular critic, shy of the political and metaphysical, a tenaciously pragmatic worker brilliantly bowed (as in his own Canterbury lectures, *Ulysses on the Liffey*) to the dense detail of a text. Not that his inclusion is wholly misplaced: his Joyce lectures, after all, fastened primarily on mythical patterns in *Ulysses*, and that provides a frail link with his *confrères*. The world of the Eliot Memorial Lectures, suitably enough in view of the man they honour, is a world of ambitious comprehensive themes and ultimate concerns—a morally engaged universe in which literature easily cross-breeds with religion, metaphysics and myth, a sphere of discourse pledged to the protection of certain privileged, besieged habits of perception and so suspicious of the secular humanism and materialism of a liberal democracy. Its tones, accordingly, are conservative, patrician and (in Steiner's case) élitist; and though Conor Cruise O'Brien might be thought to stand askew to that consensus, it doesn't seem fortuitous that his own contribution to the series (*The Suspecting Glance*) revealed a depressing turn to the political right. The Memorial Lectures' panoramic scope, their exciting ambience of broad intellectual cross-connections, prizes them loose from the withered pragmatism of critical technocracy, releasing them from that drab secularity into the domain of the sacred; yet that clear gain is in my view coupled with serious losses. Tragedy and the transcendent, the word and the *Word*, literacy and evil: stimulating as these lines of enquiry unquestionably are, they move restrictedly within that idealist Eliotic world where absolute dovetails with absolute, literary insight feeds into and out of reflections on the nature of man, in a sealed, elegant realm radically closed to historical and social reality. No critic writes more elegantly than Denis Donoghue, and nowhere is that stylish verve, that exact but unfastidious blend of lucidity and metaphorical *brio*, more obviously the reflex of an incorrigibly literary mind, sublimely un-

tainted by the sordidities of the social, more at home with the history of mind than the history of men. The politics of that style manifest themselves only once, explicitly, in this book, but the instance is telling: Donoghue rejects the demand that Milton's *God* should make credibly, compassionately *human* sense as a liberal-democratic distortion, comfortably counterposing to that imperative an oriental quotation to the effect that God allows evil in the world 'in order to thicken the plot'. That particular dovetailing of the metaphysical and aesthetic, resolutely squeezing out merely 'ethical' questions, has a long heritage in the kind of conservative Christian criticism epitomised by Eliot; and the Canterbury Lectures have played their part in perpetuating it.

Even so, *Thieves of Fire* is a fine work, as which of Donoghue's isn't. Its concern is with that recurrent imaginative mode which Donoghue terms Promethean: that radically adventurous, supremely wilful, infinitely demanding creative impulse which commits itself abandoningly to outside bets and hair raising risks, which battles contentiously with its recalcitrant material in order to override its inherent properties and stamp on it the always-inadequate image of its own turbulent, limitless energies. It is a sacred, violent, sublime form of imagining which deeply engages one facet of Donoghue's extraordinary subtle sensibility, as what he calls 'Hermes'—the urge to settlement and social civility—possesses the other. (It isn't difficult to find that tension directly inscribed in the title of one of his previous works: *Connoisseurs of Chaos*). Four writers—Milton, Blake, Melville, Lawrence—are selected as exemplars; and of these the Milton chapter seems to me the most original and distinguished, in its application of the general thesis to the poetic detail of *Paradise Lost*. Viewing the poem through his Promethean prism, Donoghue is able to elicit whole dimensions of the work repressed in much Miltonic criticism—its assertive harshness and strain, its absolutist rigour and fascination with the unaccommodated and arbitrary, the sheer internal torsion by which given materials are painfully, heroically wrought into approximate imaginative adequacy.

There is an attractive piece on Melville, which slides its subject persuasively into the Promethean mould by interpreting Moby Dick, not as a symbol of evil, but as the 'hard circumference' of the actual against which voracious human desire lunatically beats; and then there are the lectures on Blake and Lawrence. Both of these seemed to me faintly disappointing—'faintly', because the sheer sweep and intricacy of Donoghue's critical command would

make his account of *Three Blind Mice* a document worth having. But I found myself listening less to what he said than to the way he said it; the central thrust of argument in both cases—perhaps inevitably for such prototypical Prometheans, such ideal types of the theme—is fairly predictably. Both chapters, nonetheless, are studded with gleaming *aperçus*: ‘To Blake, writing is a revolutionary act. . . . If it is easy to think of these poems as forms of violence, the reason is that their energy is organised as a sequence of acts. Every sentence . . . is an exercise of moral conviction’.

Treating of one myth, the book perhaps secretes another at its heart. Lurking uncon-

fessed at the core of this book is the shadowy shape of a general case: that something called ‘the imagination’ is timelessly dichotomised between Hermes and Prometheus, the ‘creative impulse’ eternally torn between chaos and civility, the settled and the sublime. The casual appropriation of four writers from remarkably different historical phases, and the spotlighting of a single ‘consistent’ feature of their work, justifies the suspicion of such an idealist, de-historicised, suitably Eliotic strategy. It would be more interesting to ask why the notion of the Promethean is now, in the 1970s, back on the literary agenda: but the book, regrettably has no such dialectical self-consciousness.

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GRUNDRISSE. KARL MARX. Translated with a Foreword by Martin Nicolaus. *Penguin Books* (in association with New Left Review), Harmondsworth, 1973. 898 pp. £1 (paperback).

We cannot, as Marx himself might have said, escape our history. This first full English translation of the *Grundrisse* enters a world structured by accident and controversy, and does not thus dictate its own significance. Until the Thirties we knew the Marx of *Capital*, who was taken to be a hardheaded but pessimistic economist. Then there appeared the *Paris Manuscripts*, which prompted, under the compulsions of scholarship and political interest, the creation of a ‘Young Marx’ who was a philosopher, a humanist, a democrat: at all odds, quite unlike the author of *Capital*. The *Grundrisse*, Marx’s working notebooks of the late fifties, which thus were written precisely halfway between the *Paris Manuscripts* (1844) and the publication of Volume I of *Capital* (1867), must stand, Janus-like, between the two poles of controversy; their greatest, and best, effect will be to render these less extreme.

Looking forward to *Capital*, we see that it is as a preparation for that work that the *Grundrisse* have perhaps their chief interest. In his thought-provoking Foreword, Martin Nicolaus pinpoints the contrast: the *Grundrisse* as the *working-out* of what is more systematically presented in *Capital*.

The *Grundrisse* can indeed be seen as the long and at times weary search for the concept of capital: the understanding of capital as a fundamental social element, and the social presuppositions required for its emergence and persistence. One of the ways in which this search differs from the finished product is in the fact that the *Grundrisse* are far more clearly ‘Hegelian’, not only in language but in method, than *Capital* appears on the surface to be. Thus, as Nicolaus quoting in support Lenin, tells us. Hegel’s *Logic* is a vital key to Marx’s method. Apart from weakening the

case for an early total definitive rejection of Hegel, this fact raises a related problem. To read Marx’s 1843 *Critique* of Hegel’s political philosophy is to get the impression of a young empiricist iconoclast, totally scorning all abstract and conceptual methods, demanding ‘the facts man, the facts’. But if this impression is valid, then Marx systematically breaks all the rules he here lays down, in his own later work. A careful reading of the 1843 *Critique*, and, even more, of the ‘Introduction’ with which Marx prefaces the *Grundrisse*, will make it clear that the impression is in fact quite misleading: Marx combines a rejection of Hegel’s use of abstract analysis with a sophisticated account of how to use it properly and with empirical respectability. On this topic, the *Grundrisse* provide much material.

We may say, roughly, that the first half of the *Grundrisse* builds up the many and complex strands, nuances, levels and presuppositions necessary to an adequately developed and historical concept of capital/capitalism. The more we learn, the worse it gets: the worker’s creation of value through labour is buried under the slag-heaps of circulation, profit, interest, stocks and shares and ground-rent. Then, in one of his most electrifying passages ever, Marx shows how all this complex arose upon, and is supported crucially by, the exploitation of the creative activity of labour (452-8). On this point, it cannot now be doubted that Marx carries the concept of *alienation*, not simply as a ‘birthstain’ of the emergence of his theory, but as an integral element crucial to his analysis, through into this work of the late 1850s. (See, for example, pages 197, 266, 307 and the already-cited 452-8.) Following on this development, Marx gives a detailed analysis of the *contradictions* within capitalism which will make it less stable, and thus more