

Review

Gary Pearce

Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, *To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-Realization in Postmodern Times* (Verso, 2002)



The opening gambit of the Martin Ryle and Kate Soper's *To Relish the Sublime?* involves a defence of Matthew Arnold's association of culture with "sublime" experiences, and an associated argument for the importance of the cultural sublime on self-development. At one level, this is intended as a provocation to those humanities academics who have bought into the postmodern critique of universalism, development, humanism and so on. Presumably, cultural and literary studies has become so parlous that the authors feel compelled declare: "some cultural works can be defended as better than others, and the engagement with better works is likely to prove rewarding." At another level, while recognising that cultural self-realisation is problematic -- note the question mark in the title -- Ryle and Soper want to understand the still unresolved historical tension between cultural value and societal development.

In a certain respect, Arnold is less important for a defensible set of ideas and positions than for the historical moment his work engages. This was the time of the Second Reform Bill, which saw a generalising of cultural value and self-realisation beyond an élite. Like Raymond Williams, whom they occasionally cite, Ryle and Soper value the "long revolution" in cultural democracy while also being attentive to the divisions and inequalities that accompanied it. Like Williams also, they are more interested in shifts in meaning and value than ideological critique. Tracing the tension between the universalisation of the cultural idea and its actual material limits leads them

to treat culture not as "hypocritical and oppressive" but as a source of "immanent critique" of modernity's unmet promise.

Unsurprisingly, then, Ryle and Soper do not join in postmodernism's rejection of the Enlightenment, preferring instead to trace its fractures and ambivalences. Not least of the important developments occurring with the Enlightenment was the belief that reason emerges from self-directed thought. This meant that self-realisation appeared democratically available to all. Subsequent developments saw thinkers like Kant employ "the aesthetic" as part of a concept of self-realisation that harmonises reason and sensibility. Throughout its early formulation the integrative role of the aesthetic could not but draw attention to a society that failed to provide the material means to achieve genuine integration. If the aesthetic had a social harmonising role this quickly opened to problems of how the majority was to attain the necessary cultural education to participate. Schiller looked to the aesthetic as the means to overcome the capitalist division of labour, but the idealism of his position was to beg more questions and raise more problems than it resolved.

The book notes briefly further developments with the Romantics, who saw aesthetic integration as concerned mainly with the individual imagination or artwork. The *Bildung* tradition of Schlegel and Goethe also saw aesthetic wholeness and development as necessarily divorced from worldly concerns. It is Marx that provides, for Ryle and Soper, a key moment of realisation. Marx shares Schiller's desire to overcome capitalist division and even the wider aesthetic vision of his goal. Marx also brings, however, the understanding that social division will not be overcome by cultural means, but will require economic transformation: the "immanent critique is activated: the cat is entirely out of the bag." His grounding of his hopes in a "disembedded" proletariat focuses attention squarely on the necessary social and economic change, and removes all traces of nostalgia from his position. Ryle and Soper also identify the major problem with Marx's developmentalist schema when they question its lack of definition and specificity in outlining which potentials are to be developed.

As with Jürgen Habermas, Ryle and Soper defend the project of modernity, whose ongoing impulse they identify in the space between capitalism's economic imperatives and its cultural and ethical ideals. Rather than treat art and culture as "false consciousness," they allow it to engage and reveal self-critical tensions between "system" and "life world." It might be pointed out, of course, that there is a diminishing gap between economics and culture in our own period of globalisation. Nevertheless, this type of observation needs to be counter-balanced by Williams's argument that no hegemony encompasses all human practice, energy or intention. One of the current ironies noted by Ryle and Soper is that as economic rationalism reaches for greater control, its distance from ethical and cultural value is likely to become all the more stark. This often seems to result in greater cynicism, but it is also liable, at key moments, to invigorate new forms of resistance.

Ryle and Soper regard cultural self-realisation as a kind of ultimate horizon for all that is valuable within aesthetic modernity. It encompasses even those aesthetic and philosophical viewpoints that explore the alienated aspects of the self. After all, modernism's radical experimentation sought a more authentic rendering of experience and selfhood than that supplied by inherited modes. If there is a break with this modern undertaking, they perceive it not in those positions questioning the selectivity of inherited subjectivities but in those denying selfhood altogether. Ryle and Soper rehearse the accurate but surely too familiar arguments against poststructuralism: What are the truth claims of a position that denies truth claims? What are the political credentials of a

position that denies itself a notion of human need? More important is their holding to both sides of the constituting and constituted subject: the idea that the subject -- self-critical of its own formation -- can be made to oppose totality from within.

The second part of *To Relish the Sublime?* moves on to a discussion of the forms of self-realisation offered by various literary works. The authors' defence of the sublime here challenges contemporary theoretical approaches that view literature as just one element within a wider discursive formation. They take altogether more seriously literature's distinct modes of signification, and the transcendent perspective involved in symbolic representation of character and the surrounding world. Using as their example Mary Hays's late-eighteenth-century novel, *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, they argue that recent literary critical methods would likely proceed by tracing its intertextual associations with the radical Jacobin formation that Hays was associated with. By contrast, the form of self-realisation they look for in literature does not just involve identification with various subjectivities, but engages with complex acts of representation, drawing together mimesis and poesis, truth and imagination.

The conclusions they draw when contrasting Hays's novel with Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* are not those expected from Left-leaning critics. They identify a certain equivocation in the way both novels work to warn against excessive emotion while displaying a degree of identification with the characters displaying this sensibility. Ambivalence is resolved in quite different directions, however, with the more radical Hays finally rejecting convention, while Austen displays considerable scepticism towards the attractions of spontaneity. In Ryle and Soper's opinion, the dominance of Emma's emotionalism disables Hays's narrative, producing "unmanaged contradictions." In Austen's novel, Marianne Dashwood's heroic sensibility is mediated by Elinor's more modulated perspective, allowing a cohesive rendering of character and situation. Ryle and Soper can enlist Marx's well-known preference for the aesthetic and historical cognitive value of Balzac's fiction over more apparently radical novelists in support of their own emphasis here. And while we may accuse Austen of conservative politics, it is just as well to acknowledge that there is a limit to the usefulness of such criticism. As Williams and Edward Said also realise, it is the writerly aspects of Austen's novels that allow focus on some of the key historical contradictions of her times.

Ryle and Soper then move onto a group of novels written during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries that test further the "complex relationship between cultural aspiration, social mobility and personal fulfilment." Works like Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* reflect this period of expanding educational opportunity while exposing the actual limits of cultural self-development. The issues are further complicated by novels like George Gissing's *In the Year of Jubilee*, revealing the ambiguities between the cultural mass market and received forms of cultural education. Written at the point of dissolution of confidence and coherence that had characterised novelists like Dickens, these works foreshadow modernist uncertainty over authorship, representational claims and audience. Like Williams, Ryle and Soper regard Hardy as significant, not because of what he tells us about timeless rural worlds, but because of his insights into change and modernity. Hardy refuses to distance himself from the aspirations of *Jude the Obscure*'s eponymous hero, thereby registering, in the novel's "destructive denouement," how far beyond material conditions were Jude's cultural aspirations.

Contradictions coalescing around cultural self-development at this time achieved their greatest intensity in twentieth-century modernism. Not that this has been particularly evident in the work of those critics who associate the cultural realm in modernism with a specialised aesthetic rather than its social or developmental aspects. Sociological or

postmodern assessments often relate this to a social and aesthetic élitism. Ryle and Soper's necessary corrective here is to take artistic agency and practice seriously and understand the way in which modernism is both élitist and radical: it excludes those without the cultural capital to engage it, while drawing attention to the constructions underpinning literary and social convention. Modernism spoke to an élite audience, but we should also recognise the risk and marginality of its literary practices. The contradiction between culture and wider civilisation "plagues and energises" modernism. If Joyce's *Ulysses* presents aesthetic consciousness in the character of Stephen Dedalus and the everyday in the form of Leopold Bloom, these are not binary oppositions but are interdependent positions engaged in a difficult and dynamic struggle.

Jude's aspirations would have achieved greater realisation in our own period where "learned culture" has become much more widely available. Ironically, grand narratives such as those associated with cultural development have also come under intense criticism by postmodernism. Ryle and Soper observe that the cultural saturation of our everyday lives means there is no "cultural lack" in a quantitative sense. However, there is a distinct caution, particularly on the part of intellectuals and teachers, towards making cultural judgements and distinctions in a qualitative sense. *To Relish the Sublime?* urges cultural and literary critics not to discard the evaluative aspects of culture in pursuing its historical and sociological implications. This is particularly important given that the contemporary universalisation of economics and the resulting division between culture and work continues to frustrate and block the democratisation of culture. While some look to cyberculture for new forms of self-realisation, these authors are not yet ready to forego the critical understanding and perception gained from an intellectually demanding cultural education.

Ryle and Soper have written a work of considerable ambition, scope and critical judgment. Their mode is not the overconfident manifesto but the less spectacular negotiation of tensions. In contradistinction to some strains within contemporary critical practice, they recognise that to speak from particular social positions and viewpoints does not preclude us from engaging with wider meanings and values. As with Said, they look to the literary not for confirmations of identity but for those "contrapuntal perspectives" on identity and the universal, the political and the evaluative. As with Walter Benjamin, they understand that civilisation and barbarism must be thought together. And as with many of the greatest modernists, they realise that these conjunctures, while not leading to reassurance and certainty, provide us with important and authentic -- not to mention "sublime" -- renderings of our continuing development through the modern world.