

## BOOK REVIEWS

*To Relish the Sublime? Culture and Self-realization in Postmodern Times.* By MARTIN RYLE and KATE SOPER. Verso Books. 2002. pp. 224. £18.00

THE FOUNDATION of this distinctive work is Matthew Arnold's assertion that human beings should be compelled 'to relish the sublime'. The authors, Martin Ryle and Kate Soper, are concerned primarily with defending this Arnoldian claim, but they do so in a critical spirit that explores the contradictions between the notion of cultural self-realization and the contemporary world of work and hedonistic consumption. They are critical of the élitism that can be exemplified by notions of cultural self-realization, and like Arnold, advance an egalitarian conception of high culture, which emphasizes both the individual and social value of the cultural ideal. In addition, they defend a notion of self-fulfilment through aesthetic and intellectual means, while offering a powerful critique of the domination of the work-ethic in contemporary society. Overall, the book serves as an impressive and welcome counterweight to the standard post-structuralist scepticism about the significance of high culture.

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold posited the existence of a latent 'best self' that can be realized through the engagement with high culture. We are, however, naturally inclined to opt for low-level cultural activities that yield only trivial pleasures, until we are brought, through education, to an appreciation of more exacting works that offer richer and more valuable satisfactions. Ryle and Soper pick up on these observations of Arnold's and develop them at three related levels. First, they address themselves to those teachers in the humanities who are inclined to dismiss the idea of there being a superior culture, and who therefore reject the distinction between high and low culture. Against this relativist position, Ryle and Soper make an

impassioned plea for a return in the humanities to the canonical works of the European and English traditions, to questions of aesthetic value and judgement, and to the view that some cultural works can rightly be described as superior to others, and can therefore engender a correspondingly higher pleasure. Second, Ryle and Soper identify and examine the tension that obtains between the continued reliance in the teaching of the humanities on some form of the Arnoldian ideal and contemporary society's marginalization—especially in the work world and in the economy—of notions of intrinsic values and conceptions of universal self-development. Third, they claim that the structure of contemporary society impedes cultural self-realization, a contention that culminates in an almost Utopian demand for the social and political changes they claim necessary for the pursuit of cultural values.

Chapter 1 explores some important philosophical antecedents to the notion of cultural self-realization, which Ryle and Soper conceive of as a project of modernity. The most significant of these for the purposes of the book are Kant and Schiller, in whose writings the aesthetic is conceived of as grounded in a common human sensibility, and hence as registering 'something of the aspiration towards a common culture and its universal application' (p. 14). The central aim of Chapter 2 is to defend the formal coherence of the idea of cultural self-realization against post-structuralist criticisms in social and cultural theory. The main objection to cultural self-realization from these quarters is that it involves humanist illusions about the autonomy and substantiality of the self, as well as ethnocentric understandings of culture. In reply, Ryle and Soper offer the valid, if familiar, objection that such positions cannot be consistently sustained from within a relativist and anti-humanist frame-

work. Chapters 3–5 comprise a discursive account of a variety of cultural phenomena that includes historicist readings of a number of literary works. Chapter 3, which provides a review of women's fiction from the 1790s onwards (e.g. Mary Hays's *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*), has a somewhat peripheral relation to Ryle and Soper's overall argument. In Chapter 4, the authors focus on various texts that explore Arnold's claim that culture 'seeks to do away with classes', and that 'the men of culture are the true apostles of equality'. The works under scrutiny here are mainly realist novels, such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. Encouraged by new ideas of cultural equality, the working-class protagonists of these works seek self-development through intellectual and aesthetic means. Ryle and Soper rightly claim that these novels are to be read as criticisms of a society that purports to uphold the cultural ideal while thwarting the cultural aspirations of many of its citizens.

The conclusion of the book largely focuses on the relations between work, free time, and culture. Here Ryle and Soper argue that the domination of the work-ethic in contemporary industrial democracies has resulted in the restriction of cultural self-realization to the artistic and academic domains. Accordingly, they call for a substantial reduction in labour time. Now the claim that cultural self-realization, at least for those whose work does not provide or require it, is dependent on a reduction in work time seems to be self-evidently true. However, the conjecture that an extension of free time would lead to the expansion of the cultural sphere is less obviously correct. For it is open to question whether the additional free time would be devoted to the enjoyment of culture rather than to other leisure pursuits. Relatedly, it is not clear that contemporary society's failure to address itself to more demanding cultural works is principally caused by insufficient free time, rather than, say, a lack of inclination or idleness. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that less work time would at least make possible greater access to cultural works.

Like the Arnoldian ideal, the democratic aspirations of Ryle and Soper's cultural ideal seem unrealistic. For the level of specialism and

education required for full appreciation of works of high culture renders problematic their claim that such works can serve 'as a means to universal self-development' (p. 6). In order to sidestep this objection, the authors emphasize that the democratic potential of the cultural ideal depends on education, as much as it does on more leisure time. But the project of cultural self-realization is surely itself inherently élitist, since it involves traits and abilities that are not attainable through education. Ryle and Soper's conception of the fulfilled life is that of the intellectual or academic, and hence does not represent a shared set of values. It is therefore difficult to see how cultural self-realization can claim any special ranking or universal status over other kinds of need and fulfilment.

In relation to these points, Ryle and Soper consider the objection that democratic cultural self-realization is unachievable, since the fulfilments of high culture are necessarily a matter of competitive self-distinction. Against this view, the authors offer a Utopian image of collective and harmonious development of individuality through cultural experience. The main argument for this claim is difficult to discern. Ryle and Soper suggest that the democratic potential of high culture is 'intimated in the continued commitment of contemporary society to the values of the "symbolic" domain' (p. 90). This latter phrase, while clearly freighted with significance for the authors, is never clearly defined or elaborated upon. They claim further that the democratic possibilities of cultural self-realization are revealed by its socially and ecologically benign nature, which stems from its inherently incorporeal character: 'It has democratic and ecological credentials . . . precisely because it is essentially a matter of the spirit, and few intrinsic material and resource limits stand in the way of its extension' (p. 90). It may well be that material resources do not impinge on the possibility of the democratic extension of cultural self-realization, but this alone does not show that it is capable of such extension.

Ryle and Soper offer various additional remarks in support of their claims on behalf of the democratic potential of the cultural ideal, none of which is ultimately conclusive. For example, they

claim that, unlike material or consumptive forms of self-realization, cultural self-realization is dependent on few material resources. As such, it does not depend on an unequal distribution of wealth or divergent socio-economic conditions. On the Nietzschean view, however, it was, among other things, the divergent socio-economic conditions of ancient Athens that allowed it culturally to thrive. Moreover, it is unclear how Ryle and Soper's claim is meant to support the further proposition that cultural self-realization is 'indefinitely extendible' (p. 90). The fact that the democratic pursuit of high culture may not be precluded by socio-economic factors does not show that it is not ruled out on other grounds.

Ryle and Soper also claim that cultural self-realization can be said to be democratically oriented because of its 'encouragement of reflexivity' (p. 90). 'Reflexivity' is used here to denote the capacity for empathy or to place oneself imaginatively in the place of another. The authors contend that such a capacity is strengthened by the engagement with fictional works. But this too does not avoid the objection already raised that the engagement with high culture cannot be divorced from self-distinction. Ryle and Soper imagine a structuring of society in which 'social relations of production and forms of consumption might best promote the conditions of a more reciprocal development of individuality' (p. 91). And under these conditions, they suggest, a communal and democratic pursuit of cultural values will be possible. Yet the notion of cultural self-realization, with its emphasis on individuality and self-love, is incompatible with the aspiration of the self-realization of all. Accordingly, rather than being democratically oriented because of its 'encouragement of reflexivity', the immersion of the self in culture encourages a striving for individual excellence that entails its own forms of social stratification.

At times, Ryle and Soper tend to pass over the more pressing philosophical concerns that arise in the course of their discussions. For example, like Arnold, they say very little about what a culturally realized self is like. They do say that cultural self-realization requires 'intellectual effort' and the deferral of 'easier and less exacting types of engagement'; and this engagement is said to do

with 'attaining to a self-transcendent mode of understanding' (p. 9). In addition, some interesting parallels are drawn between cultural self-realization and both the German tradition of *Bildung* and the quest for personal salvation through religion. On the whole, however, the reader is left with a sense that a lot more still needs to be said about this central concept of the work.

Notwithstanding these objections, Ryle and Soper have written a compelling monograph that is refreshing in its passionate defence of the overall educational and social value of cultural engagement. In addition, much of their case for the importance of cultural self-realization is sophisticated and persuasive, and always well-informed. Stylistically, the book is eloquent, though at times obscure, and will probably be inaccessible to those who are perhaps most in need of its central thesis.

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*Tolstoy on Aesthetics: What Is Art?* By H. O. MOUNCE.  
Ashgate, 2001. pp. vii + 115. £35.00.

I BELIEVE that there have only been three monograph-length studies in English of Tolstoy's *What Is Art?*, my *Tolstoy's What Is Art?* published by Croom Helm in 1985, Rimvydas Šilbajoris's *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and his Art* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1991), and now Mounce's book. None of these (chronology permitting) makes any reference to the others. Each author begins anew in a solo engagement with Tolstoy, although all have bibliographies that include aesthetics literature (in Mounce's case not very much). Mounce's book, appropriately dedicated to the memory of Dick Beardsmore, is well worth reading. The exposition 'is critical where this is appropriate' but its 'chief aim has been to bring out what is valuable and important in the work' (Preface).

In my book I presented Tolstoy as holding a two-stage theory of art. First, that something is art is determined by its capacity to infect the audience with the artist's feelings, which has nothing to do with morality. Secondly, if something is