

From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought. By J. BOURG. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xx + 468. Hb £17.99.

In the run up to May 1968, the British antipsychiatrist David Cooper was invited by Félix Guattari to speak at the latter's La Borde clinic. 'The gist of his talk was that patients should stop taking their medication and have sex instead' (p. 174). The death of a patient the following day would highlight La Borde founder Jean Oury's concern that his clinic had been reduced to a tourist attraction for leftist intellectuals indifferent to suffering. Similarly, antihumanist indifference would be echoed over the next decade by (Deleuzian) gay rights activists' dismissals of rape as a bourgeois legal fiction, not to mention the apparent willingness of Foucault *et al.* to consider paedophilia another interdiction it might henceforth be 'défendu d'interdire'. *From Revolution to Ethics* draws drolly and repeatedly on such synecdoches to demonstrate the misadventures of intellectual hubris, the sense that May, for all its effervescence, gave rise to an ultimately ambiguous renewal of ethical discourse. Bourg rejects the oversimplification that, in the absence of long-term changes to the existing institutions of politics, the events of May amounted to little more than a surge of nihilistic individualism legitimated by the philosophical fantasy of a rupture either with or within metaphysics. Rather than a failed revolution, he argues, 1968 changed the terms of revolution, shifting to the register of ethics—questions of how to live, how to change one's stance in relation to institutions—in response to the apparent impossibility of the politics of institutional overthrow. 'The transvaluation of revolution-to-ethics explains the era's continuity-in-change . . . it is indisputable that that 1968 led France on a road toward ethical fascination' (p. 336). By way of illustration, the book traces a line through the fragmentation of the unified left into more specialized *agencements* in the fields of mental health (the institutional psychoanalysis that evolved around Guattari and La Borde); prisoner welfare, in the loosely Foucauldian Groupe d'information sur les prisons; and sexual politics, via the tensions between feminists' demands for legal equality and the more avowedly anarchistic ambitions of the male gay movement. The final chapter deals with the problematic culmination of this ethological turn in the 'ethical Jansenism' of the Nouveaux philosophes, whose retreat from politics was stigmatized as amateurish and insubstantial by the weightier *maîtres à penser* and whose combination of celebrity and political defeatism is often seen as a factor in the late 1970s' breakdown of the left. Readings of the forgotten figures of Maurice Clavel, Guy Lardreau and Lucien Goldmann insightfully draw out the impasse of abandoning politics for ethics suggested to be already implicit in those, including Deleuze, who had so vehemently criticized the upstarts. The claim has been made before, albeit less entertainingly, by Alain Badiou (*Abrégé de métapolitique*, Paris, Seuil, 1998). Bourg's very significant achievement is to have recast 1968 and its aftermath as a paradigm in which the bit-part players symptomatize the risks immanent to the work of the more illustrious, conferring more unity on the events' legacy than others have been willing to concede.

doi:10.1093/fs/knp151

GERALD MOORE
UNIVERSITÉ PARIS-XII (VAL DE MARNE)

Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin. By P. GREANEY. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008. xxiii + 227 pp. Pb \$25.00.

Patrick Greaney's investigation of encounters with poverty in the work of selected French and German creative writers, philosophers and intellectuals pursues an original

and productive line of enquiry. The concept, he argues, is not merely one modern theme among many; rather, it occupies a central position in the development of 'the larger traditions' (p. xi) of modernist writing between the 1850s and 1930s. He starts with the nineteenth-century association of the poor with power, deriving from their labour power and their revolutionary potential. Shifted to the plane of representation, this association is 'a focal point for the modernist aesthetic concern with the representation of potential and virtuality' (p. x). The untimely beggar of the title, soon to be replaced, Greaney notes, by the poor worker, appears in Hugo and Baudelaire less as an object of compassion, and more as 'an omen for a possible future'. This figure of impoverishment, pointing to some imminent, unnameable disruption of known order, is also the figure of the new language that must be created to represent that unknown. The opening chapter proposes a theorization of the politics of poverty. The key is Marx's identification of the centrality to capitalism of the 'reserve army of labour'; in the modern economy, incapacity and non-enactment are fundamental to productivity. Baudelaire is the first to confront the destructive difference of urban poverty, in a language that seeks to return the disturbing gaze of the beggar, and domesticate the experience of shock, but also acknowledges an energy which can't be contained, and which paralyses speech. Maurice Blanchot and Paul de Man are the points of reference for a chapter on Mallarmé that moves from the thematics of his poems on beggars to his invention of poetic forms of absence and privation. Nietzsche's critique of the Christian ascetic tradition of voluntary poverty is shown to work towards a new understanding of poverty; not the figure of a state of sacrifice and loss, but a state of estrangement and openness, the condition for a Dionysian entry into new forms of truth. Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Nietzsche are all influences on Rilke's writing on the urban poor, inspired especially by his visits to Paris, from 1902–3 onwards. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* trace the poet's experience of a community of shared estrangement among outcasts, and link that to a transformation of writing, in which meaning and mastery both dissolve, and everything is seen 'differently'. The closing chapter identifies Walter Benjamin's essay on 'Experience and Poverty' as encapsulating the 'poverty of experience' that characterises the world of the 1920s and 1930s, and explores in that context Benjamin's discussions of glass architecture, Brecht's heroes, and James Ensor's urban crowds. This is not an easy book. The movements of the discussion are sometimes disconcerting; sometimes the close readings feel overly dense and detailed. But overall, Greaney's study is a bold initiative, scholarly and informative, and it brings together familiar themes, and familiar writers and theorists, in a constellation that generates significant new light.

JENNIFER BIRKETT

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

doi:10.1093/fs/knp159

La Mesure de l'autre: Afrique subsaharienne et roman ethnographique de Belgique et de France (1918–1940). By PIERRE-PHILIPPE FRAITURE. (Bibliothèque de Littérature générale et comparée, 73). Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007. 280 pp. Hb €71.68.

Recent years have seen increasing academic opposition, often from anglophone researchers, to a reliance on the 'one size fits all' postcolonial paradigm which developed in response to the experience of the British Empire. Nations' differing experiences of empire have been interrogated within the expanding field of francophone postcolonial studies, while edited volumes, such as *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its Empires* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), have demonstrated a welcome awareness of geographical contingency. As he states in his