

To transcend anonymity and oblivion

Serge Liberman
A Universe of Clowns

Phoenix Publications, 272p., \$9.50 pb
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BY GRAHAM BURNS

Never judge a book by its cover they say, or even by its title. For those adept at the code of titles, Serge Liberman's collection of sixteen stories called *A Universe of Clowns* will probably suggest a sardonic, satirical overview of human folly. Nothing could be further from the truth. Liberman's clowns are not figuratively disparaged people but part of a distant, ideal vision in which humankind may at last find relief from the limitations of existence in a universe of childhood delights and innocence. But such Blakean moments are rare in Liberman, although he shares Blake's fervent commitment to life. He is a realist who writes with psychological insight and moral passion in the great European tradition of the short story.

Over half the pieces in this admirable collection deal with Jewish figures and the rich sub-culture of Jewish life in a contemporary Melbourne whose institutions, streets and turns of the weather he records with a vivid and intense factuality. He is concerned with lives brought to the condition of psychic crisis, not only by the pressure of unexpected circumstances but also by the prior accumulation of the myriad events, physical and psychological, which make up a personal destiny.

There is little that is purely anecdotal in his work; the story for Liberman is a history made visible. More than one passage in the stories, in fact, worries over this matter of determinism, questioning whether we can ever make sense of the countless ifs and buts which deliver the present out of the choices of the past.

Liberman seems to see three main factors as conditioning the lives of his characters in their search for meaning and value in existence. First, there is the felt weight of modern history itself as it is internalised by those who have most consciously endured it, while always there is the unpredictable alliance of personal temperament with cultural inheritance. Finally there is the drama of the individual's own biological destiny: the fate of the body and its fallibilities. Liberman, a doctor himself, reminds one of Samuel Johnson in his pitying awareness that we live haunted by our mortality in the forms of accident, the arbitrariness of illness, and the inevitability of ageing and decline.

His concerns are thus philosophical and weighty. The deep attraction of these stories lies in their inherent seriousness, steadiness of exploratory vision and depth

of enquiry. In literature there is a sense in which each generation, in moral matters, is obliged to re-invent the wheel; and for Liberman this involves dramatising, in the Australian urban setting, some basic questions prompted by his flexibly held religious humanism. For some of his characters, the survivors of the camps and others, God has retreated to the remoteness of an inexplicable abstract principle. Or worse, as for Keppel in 'Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh' he has become "a God who made a mockery of mercy and grace and loving-kindness and truth that men in their fear and superstition had fastened upon him for their own salvation". In 'The First Lesson' a young boy learns from his grandmother a definition of God and goodness different from the pious orthodoxies of the Rabbi or the sceptical views of his mother. "God is the goodness that is in men and there are those who by their love preserve Him and those who by their evil kill Him in their Hearts". Just so, the book as a whole seems to say. Most of the stories, in their flexibly communicative prose, could be described as elaborations, testings and celebrations of this belief.

Rosalie, a deserted actress in 'To Moscow, To Moscow' is made aware in one dark night of the body and soul of the "brutality and dissipation and rankness and waste" in elements of her own life as a victim, and in the furtive life of a city. In a dream echo from Chekhov she finds at last the strength to affirm her own life and the principle of social existence itself in a fervent acceptance of her own battered identity. 'Kitty Cat', one of the most harrowing stories I've read, reminds us of the brutality waiting at the edge of lovelessness and of the sad human tendency to equate the aesthetic polarities of beauty and ugliness with the moral properties of goodness and evil. Other stories take up a concern with loneliness in its different forms, as well as the poignant theme of the generational conflict between those survivors of the holocaust who cannot comprehend it, and who, in any case, must free themselves from its psychic burden.

In Sartre's notorious dictum—Hell is other people—relationship is a torment, the price we pay for the possession of civilized consciousness and moral awareness. Modern literature since Dostoyevsky has painstakingly mapped that infernal territory in the paradoxical knowledge that it is also other people who confirm our existence, ratifying the value of our lives and achievements. Against the human longing for connectedness, with individuals and with a culture, stand the barriers erected out of the relative incompatibilities of particular human needs and competing conceptions of reality. In the long title story an ageing professor of medicine seeks direction in life, a turning away from the biological clock, not in success and achievement as has been his way, but in an emotional involvement with a young woman who is his patient. The story is not a success, although the medical detail is dauntingly real. Surprisingly, both the central figures lack the depth of character-

isation of most of the other stories, while Liberman, who is usually good at dialogue, has given to Elizabeth, the patient, lines that are disappointingly cliché and soapy. Yet the story asserts something that is central to Liberman's work at its most moving. Art, indeed all endeavour in his vision, is an attempt "to transcend the harsh threat of anonymity and oblivion, a frantic reverberating protest" that cries out "through wealth, honours, books, journals", works of all kinds: "I have been! I have been! World, know my name"! These valuable stories endorse that claim and resonate with its meaning.

The poverty of nations

Richard A. Higgott

Political Development Theory
Croom Helm, PO Box 391, Manuka 2603,
124p., index, \$11.75 pb
0 7099 1252 8, 0 7099 1257 9 pb

Peter Limquenco & Bruce McFarlane
Neo-Marxist Theories of Development
Croom Helm, PO Box 391, Manuka 2603,
220p., \$18.25 pb
0 7099 1641 8

BY MIKE BERRY

Nowadays people rarely refer to the nation states of the third world as developing countries. Continuing and intensifying poverty, oppression, instability, violence and wars have seen to that. Few people really believe that foreign aid—money, military hardware, technological and scientific skills—supplied by countries like Australia is contributing to third-world development, either in effect or by design. Optimistic views of universal development have been largely replaced by the grim realities of international *realpolitik*. It is, therefore, perhaps surprising to recount that until relatively recently the dominant traditions in Western social theory, both conservative and radical, held fast to the development scenario. Marxists, no less than the proponents of 'modernisation' and industrial 'take-off', expected that the fruits of capitalist development would inevitably be consumed throughout the world (albeit with different long-term consequences), the third world countries virtually retracing the developmental trajectory of the West. In the past fifteen years, social theorists of right and left persuasion have come to question this large assumption. Interestingly, the questions were first raised by theorists and activists from within the third world.

Higgott's book is an attempt to describe and critically understand this developmental process of development theory, to identify the theoretical schools, place them in historical context, demonstrate their similarities, differences and, above all, interrelations in both the logical and