

## Bloch's 'Traces': the philosophy of Kitsch

The title *Traces*<sup>1</sup> mobilizes for the purposes of philosophical theory the primary experiences derived from reading Red Indian stories. A broken twig, a footprint on the ground, speak volumes to the eagle eye of the child who speculates about them, instead of resting content with what anyone can see. There is something here, something hidden, in the midst of ordinary, unobtrusive normality: 'There's more here than meets the eye' (p. 15). What it is, no-one knows, and Bloch, taking a leaf from the book of the gnostics, suggests that it may not be there at all yet, that it may be in the process of becoming. But *il y a quelque chose qui cloche*,<sup>2</sup> and the more mysterious the source of the trace, the more persistent the feeling that something is really there. This is the point at which speculative thought seeks a foothold. As if in mockery of the dispassionate, scientific reflections of phenomenology, the speculative thinker sets out in search of the ineffable, feeling his way experimentally towards an interpretation. Indefatigably, the philosophical moth flutters against the pane of glass between itself and the light. The conundrums of what Bloch once called the shape of the

unformulatable question are made to crystallize out into whatever answers they may fleetingly suggest. His traces are survivals of the ineffable experience of childhood which once upon a time communicated everything.

Many friends are quoted in the book. I would like to wager that they date from adolescence, Ludwigshafen cousins of Brecht's cronies from Augsburg, George Pflanzelt and Müllereisert. Here they are smoking their first pipe as if it were the pipe of perpetual peace: 'Wonderful is the approach of evening, and beautiful the conversations of men among themselves.'<sup>3</sup> But these men come from the town of Mahagonny, from a fantasy-America, together with Old Shatterhand and Winnetou from Leonard Frank's robber-band in Würzburg, an odour more sharply redolent between the covers of a book than it ever was on the fish-laden river and the smoke-filled saloon. The adult, however, who recalled all this to mind, wants to win the game he began all those years ago, but without betraying the memory of those images to an all-too-grown-up rationality; almost every interpretation smuggles in some kind of rationalization and then rebels against it. These experiences are no more esoteric than whatever it was about the sound of Christmas bells which moved us so profoundly and which we never wholly outgrow: the feeling that this can't be all, that there must be something more than just the here and now. A promise, however deceptive, seems to have as firm a guarantee as the promise contained only in the great works of art which Bloch, who is impatient with culture, for the most part ignores in this book. Constrained by their form, all the happiness vouchsafed by works of art is inadequate, and is really no happiness at all: 'Here too things grow in more luxuriant profusion than the familiar limits of our subjectivity (and the world) permit; both immoderate fear and "unfounded" joy have repressed what caused them. They are concealed within us and have not yet gained access to the world; joy least of all, even though it is the main thing' (p. 169). Bloch's philosophy aims to capture their promise, to tear them out of their intimate petit-bourgeois cosiness with the grappling hooks of the literary buccaneer, spurning their immediate purpose and projecting what lies at hand into the supreme good, that which has never existed. Goethe's twofold division of happiness into what lies at your elbow and the bliss that soars to the empyrean is forced together again here until it reaches melting point. The happiness close at hand is only real when it is also the highest bliss, and the highest bliss is only present if it is within your grasp. Bloch's expansive gesture wants to burst out from the limits set by its origin in what lies nearest, in immediate individual experience, the psychologically contingent, the merely subjective mood. The initiate scorns to declare an interest in what permanent astonishment can tell us about the person who gazes in wonder, and turns instead to the meaning of that astonishment, regardless of how the poor, fallible individual came to his experience: 'The thing-in-itself is the objective imagination' (p. 89). The calculation makes due allowance for the fallibility of the individual. The inadequacy of the finite

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Sporen*, Berlin, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> 'There is something amiss' (All notes have been added by the translator).

<sup>3</sup> Brecht, *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*.

consciousness turns the infinite, of which it is supposed to be part, into something uncertain and enigmatic; but the infinite receives a precise, compelling confirmation because the uncertainty is nothing but that same subjective inadequacy.

Thought which tracks down traces is narrative, like its apocryphal model, the adventure story of the journey to utopia, whose radiant image Bloch would like to recapture. Narrative is imposed on him as much by his theory as by his temperament. It would be a mistake to read his story as a parable. The parable's single level of meaning would destroy the tonality of Bloch's narrative whose colours can no more be found in the spectrum than can the trumpet-red of one of Perutz's thrilling novels of suspense.<sup>4</sup> Instead, his aim is to make use of adventure and other outlandish occurrences to construct the truth that we do not have in our pockets. Specific analyses are few and far between; it is rather as if the devotees of Hauff's<sup>5</sup> fairy stories had forgathered in a circle around someone from that Oriental corner of Swabia where there is a town called Backang and an interjection that goes 'Ah-um', and bit by bit this and that emerges; progressively, of course, with a conceptual movement which keeps mum about Hegel, but knows him backwards. Over the chasm separating a concrete datum which actually only represents the concrete, and an idea which transcends the blindness and contingency of the concrete, while remaining oblivious of its greatest merits, there echoes the emphatic voice of a man who has something special to proclaim, something different from what we have all heard before. The narrative tone provides us with the paradox of a naïve philosophy; childhood, indestructible notwithstanding all reflection, translates even the most highly mediated phenomena into the stuff of unmediated narrative. This affinity with concrete data, right down to and including the raw substrata of experience devoid of all meaning, puts Bloch's philosophy into contact with the lower depths, with sub-cultural elements, with the openly trashy, in which, as the late exponent of an anti-mythological Enlightenment, he thinks salvation can alone be found. Like poor B.B., it could be situated bag and baggage in the big cities where he belatedly tells the stories that could never be told before. The impossibility of narrating, which has condemned the heirs of the novel to produce *Kitsch*, becomes the expression of the impossible world which is to be narrated and whose possibility he wishes to proclaim. The moment we sit down, we go to meet the story-teller half-way, not knowing whether he will satisfy our expectations. In the same way, we must make allowances for a philosophy which is spoken and not written. The oratorical style inhibits responsible formulations, and Bloch's writings only become eloquent to those who do not read them as texts. The stream of narrative-thought flows along, sweeping all before it, past all arguments, captivating us as it goes. It is a form of philosophizing in which in a certain sense nothing is actually thought out; it is extremely shrewd, but not at all subtle or ingenious in a scholastic way. What echoes in the narrative voice does

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<sup>4</sup> Leo Perutz (1884–1958) wrote popular historical novels remarkable mainly for their emphasis on the fantastic and the uncanny.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm Hauff (1802–1827), the author of an historical novel, *Lichtenstein*, was best known for his fairy-tales and stories, many of which have a Swabian setting.

not become the material for reflection, but is appropriated by it, and this is even and indeed particularly true of those features which it fails to permeate stylistically and melt down. To ask where the stories came from or what the story-teller was doing with them would be absurd in the light of the anonymity at two removes, the complete absorption into the truth which he intends: 'If this story is worthless, so say the story-tellers in Africa, then it belongs to the man who tells it; if it is worth anything, then it belongs to us all' (p. 158). A critic should not point out errors in them, as if they were the rectifiable mistakes of an individual, but instead should spell out the wounds of Bloch's philosophy, just as Kafka's delinquent must spell out his own.<sup>6</sup>

But the voice of this story-teller is anything but 'authentic' in the conventional way. Bloch's ear, which remains extraordinarily sensitive even in the midst of the raging sonorities of his prose, has noted with precision how little anything which aspired to be different would gain from that worthy concept of pure identity with self. 'A soft, richly emotional story in the musty twilight of the 19th century, with all the cheap romantic overtones of the motif of parting. Its shimmering colours show to the best advantage when bathed in half-genuine feeling. Parting is itself sentimental. But sentimental with depth, it is a tremolo hovering indistinguishably between surface and depth' (p. 90). This tremolo survives in the great popular artists of an epoch which no longer has any time for popular art; it can be heard in the vocal exaggerations of Alexander Girardi,<sup>7</sup> plaintive and inauthentic like a woebegone crybaby; what was genuine about it was the false note, its lack of domestication, the echo of its own impossibility. It is above all the masses who are attracted, sometimes more than is good for them, by an exaggerated mode of expression whose excesses evoke a sense of the authentic in the mind of the average philistine. For example, there was the servant girl who destroyed the rhythm of Scheffel's<sup>8</sup> verse 'Das ist im Leben hässlich eingerichtet'<sup>9</sup> by changing it to 'horribly organized'. Bloch too blasts away like Scheffel's trumpeter.

Naïve philosophy disguises itself by its swagger, like a saloon-bar pianist who plays false notes on the bass, and who sits there poor, misunderstood, trying to make the astonished onlooker who stands him a beer believe he is Paderewski. It is an atmosphere like this that can be suddenly ignited by one of those philosophical aperçus which are Bloch's claim to fame: 'Even when the young musician Beethoven suddenly knew or claimed that he was a genius, he was practising a scurrilous swindle when he felt himself to be like Ludwig van Beethoven, a person he had not yet become. This piece of presumption, which was not justified by anything at the time, was needed to enable him to become Beethoven, and in the absence of the audacity, indeed

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<sup>6</sup> Evidently an allusion to Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* where the torture machine inscribes the victim's crimes on his body.

<sup>7</sup> Girardi (1850–1918) was a celebrated Austrian comic actor.

<sup>8</sup> J. V. von Scheffel (1826–86) was known chiefly for his narrative poem *The Trumpeter of Säckingen*, a romantic adventure story modelled on Heine's *Atta Troll*. The verse Adorno quotes from this work became proverbial.

<sup>9</sup> Things in life are badly organized.

brazenness of such anticipations, nothing great would ever be achieved' (p. 47).

Like the pianist, popular philosophy has seen better days. Ever since it began to boast of having found the Philosopher's Stone and of having the key to a truth which would for ever remain a mystery to the majority, it has been tainted with the stigma of charlatanism. From this taint it has been absolved by Bloch. He vies with the showman from the unforgotten fairground; his voice reverberates like the juke-box in an empty saloon which is still waiting for people to show up. He scorns the jejune intellectuality which draws a veil over such things, and issues invitations to those who have been locked out by the fastidious exponents of idealist philosophy. His habit of hyperbole acts as a corrective by its implied philosophy that he does not know what he is saying, and that his truth is untruth, when measured by existing reality. It is impossible to separate the jubilant tone of the narrator from the content of his philosophy, the salvaging of appearances. Bloch's utopia makes its nest in the vacant space between appearances and that which merely exists. It may be that his objective, the experience which has never been honoured by any experience, can only be conceived in hyperbolic terms. The theoretical salvaging of appearances is at the same time Bloch's own form of self-defence. In this respect he reveals his deep-rooted affinity with the music of Mahler.

Of the whole edifice of German idealism what now remains is a sort of noise with which Bloch, a man of music and a Wagnerian, intoxicates himself. His words become heated as if he would like them to flare up for one last time in the disenchanted world; as if the hidden promise they contain had become the driving force of thought. From time to time Bloch becomes entangled in 'all that is powerful' (p. 39), he rhapsodizes about 'open and collective battles' which will 'force fate onto our side'. This strikes a discordant note in the general anti-mythological tone, in his attempt to reverse the judgment in the Icarus case. But his impulse to dispute the rights of the eternal sameness of Fate and Myth, to resist being trapped in a natural order, is in fact dependent on the latter for nourishment; it depends on the force of a drive to which philosophers have seldom allowed such free rein. Bloch's slogan of the breakthrough of the transcendental is not spiritual. He has no wish to spiritualize nature; instead he wants the spirit of utopia to create the moment in which nature, assuaged and at peace, would be free from domination, would cease to be dependent on it and could clear the way for some alternative mode of being.

In the traces which emerge from the experience of the individual consciousness, the salvaging of appearance has its centre in what Bloch's book on utopia<sup>10</sup> termed the encounter with self. The subject, man, was not yet his true self; he becomes manifest as something which is unreal, which has not yet left the realm of the possible, but which is at the same time the reflection of what he might become. Nietzsche's idea of man as something that had to be overcome, is modulated into a non-violent key: 'for man is something which has yet to be discovered'

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<sup>10</sup> *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918).

(p. 32). Most of the stories in this volume are concerned with man's non-identity with himself, and cast a more than affectionate and understanding side-glance at wayfaring folk, fairy-tale characters, mountebanks and all those who are led astray by the dream of a better life. 'What we see here is not so much self-seeking as a love of finery, unappeased amour-propre and sheer folly. When such vain people assume aristocratic forms, they do not do so in order to kick those lower down, as would the parvenu or even the servant-as-master; nor does it even mean that they actually approve of the aristocracy, since the self-styled seigneur is not class conscious' (p. 44). On the contrary, utopia strains at the fetters of identity, sensing in it the outrage of being this particular person, and this person alone.

### The Myth of Necessity

At the stage he had reached when he wrote this book thirty years ago, Bloch wilfully and bluntly juxtaposes two theories of non-identity. One is materialistic: it is the view that in a society based on universal exchange, human beings are not themselves but the agents of the laws of value; for in all previous history, which Bloch would not hesitate to call 'Pre-history', mankind was only object, not subject. 'But no-one is what he means to be, much less what he represents. And it is not that they were too little, but on the contrary, they started out with too much for what they subsequently became' (p. 33). The other view is mystical: it is the belief that the empirical, psychological ego, one's character, is not the self intended for every human being, it is not that secret name whose redemption is worth seeking. Bloch's favourite metaphor for the mystical self is the house in which one would be at home, from which all alienation would be banished. But security is not to be had, there is no ontologically embellished condition in which life might be livable; all we have is a reminder of the way things should be but aren't. Bloch's traces are in complicity with happiness, but he refuses to allow this to harden out into any positive form; instead it stays open-ended, waiting for a happiness which remains in the offing and any actual happiness comes under suspicion of a breach of faith. He makes no effort to defend his dualism against the hostile critic. The sharpness of the opposition between the metaphysical self and the social self that has yet to be created declines to take cognisance of the fact that all the attributes of that absolute self derive from social and human actuality. It would be simple to convict the Hegelian Bloch of the charge of breaking off the dialectical process at a crucial point by means of a theological *coup de main*. But such a hasty criticism would evade the issue of whether dialectics can ever manage to avoid negating itself somewhere along the line; even Hegel's own dialectics had its limits, in the identity thesis. However that may be, Bloch's *coup de main* enables him to adopt an intellectual stance which normally fails to thrive in the climate of dialectics, whether idealist or materialist: nothing which exists is idolized as necessary; his speculations even launch an attack on necessity as a figuration of myth.

That narrative and argument revolve around the world of appearances stems from the fact that Bloch refuses to respect the boundary between finite and infinite, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between

the limitations of reason and the unreality of faith. Behind every word stands his resolve to break through the solid barrier which ever since Kant common sense has inserted between consciousness and things-in-themselves. The very ratification of this barrier is assigned to the realm of ideology and is interpreted as the expression of bourgeois society's acquiescence in the reified world it has fabricated, the world of commodities, the world for the bourgeois. This is the meeting point of the positions of Bloch and Benjamin. The sheer love of freedom makes Bloch tear down all the boundary posts and in the process he does away with the now ossified 'ontological difference', so beloved of German philosophy, between essence and mere existence. In the recuperation of motifs derived from German idealism, and ultimately from Aristotle, existence becomes force, potentiality, propelled towards the absolute. Bloch's taste for cheap romance has its systematic roots, if we may be allowed the phrase, in an alliance with the lower depths, by which we mean both unformed matter and also the social strata which have to bear all the burdens. The upper reaches, however, culture, form and what he calls the 'polis'—all that is in his eyes in hopeless complicity with domination, oppression and myth—a true superstructure: only that which is pushed down to the bottom retains the potential of whatever is above it. This is why he goes foraging in the rubbish for that transcendence, the path to which is obstructed by culture as it exists. His thought functions as a corrective to contemporary philosophy, and not least because he does not think that actual reality is beneath him. He resists the modern German habit of demoting Being to a mere branch of philosophy, and so reducing the latter to the irrelevance of a resurrected formalism. He is equally reluctant to take part in the process of degrading thought to an actuality whose sole function is the mental reconstruction of reality. The base is neither volatilized, nor, as in classificatory thought, is it simply cocooned and left to its own devices. Instead, it is swept along like the thematic elements of certain types of music. Music in Bloch's thought occupies more space than in almost any other philosopher, not excluding Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. It reverberates through his works like a station orchestra in your dreams; Bloch's ear has no more patience for the niceties of musical technique than he has for aesthetic discrimination. Nor is there any transition, any 'mediation' between the childish delight in a merry-go-round and its metaphysical recuperation: 'Above all, when the ship arrives with music; then we find hidden in the (unpetty-bourgeois) *Kitsch* something of the jubilation of the (possible) resurrection of the dead' (p. 165). Even in such extravagant extrapolations as this, Hegel's criticism of Kant is still tacitly presupposed, the criticism, namely, that to set limits is already to transcend them; and that if reason is going to confine itself to the finite, it must already be master of the infinite in whose name the limits are imposed. The main current of philosophical tradition distinguishes between thought and the unconditioned, but a thinker who refuses to go along with this tradition may yet be unwilling to renounce that insight—though his aim is to bring it to fruition. He does not knuckle under in despair. The triumphant note, 'Success is ours', of the last scene in *Faust*, Kant's idea of perpetual peace as a real possibility, dismisses the critical element of philosophy as prevarication and failure. Thought of this type imagines fulfilment in terms of actual delight, *ἡδονή*, not as a

task or an idea. To that extent it is anti-idealistic and materialist. Its materialism prevents Bloch from spinning a seamless Hegelian web composed of the identity of the subject and object, however mediated, a construct which in the last analysis insists that all objectivity should be absorbed into the subject and reduced to mere 'Spirit'. While Bloch heretically repudiates the [Kantian] barrier, he nevertheless insists, contrary to Hegel's speculative idealism, on the unreconciled distinction between immanence and transcendence, and he is as little tempted towards mediations on a large scale as he is on individual points of interpretation. The Here and Now is defined in terms of historical materialism, the yonder is glimpsed through its refractions, in terms of the traces that might be found here. Without ironing out the contradictions Bloch's thought proceeds in a manner which is at once utopian and dualistic. Because he does not conceive of utopia as a metaphysical absolute, but in terms of that theological manoeuvre in which the hungry consciousness of the living feels itself tricked by the consolidation of an idea, he is forced to think of it as something which manifests itself. It is neither true, nor is it non-existent: 'Even the most blatant mirage at least mimics, infamously and mendaciously, a splendour which nevertheless must be inherent in the tendency of life, in its bare, but real "possibilities"; for in itself a mirage is barren, and without palm trees in the remote distances of time and space there would not even be a Fata Morgana' (p. 240).

The initial situations which Bloch describes are plausible enough: 'On falling asleep most people turn their face to the wall, even though this means exposing their back to the darkened room whose familiar outlines are rapidly fading away. It is as if the wall suddenly exerted some attractive force, paralysing the room, as if sleep had discovered something in the wall which normally only befits a better death. It is as if sleep too, like interruptions and strangers, were a preparation for death; of course, the stage then takes on a different appearance, it creates the dialectical semblance of home. And in fact a dying man, who was rescued at the last moment, has explained the phenomenon in this way: "I lay down facing the wall and felt that the things outside, there in the room, no longer concerned me, but that what I was looking for was there, in the wall"' (p. 163). But Bloch himself calls the secret of the wall a dialectical semblance. He does not allow himself to be seduced into taking such insights literally. But this semblance, these appearances, are not psychological, not subjective illusion, but something objective. Just as with Benjamin and for that matter Proust, the plausibility of appearance is a sort of guarantee that the most specific experiences, experiences which melt into the particular, are transformed into the general. The narrative style of philosophy cultivated by Bloch is inspired by the presentiment that such transformations slip through the net of dialectical meditation. Even though the content owes a great conscious debt to dialectics, the style is essentially undialectical. The story Bloch has to tell is of existing things, even though their existence may still lie in the future; it is a form that pays no heed to the process of becoming, proclaimed by the content, and instead merely tries to emulate the process through its tempo. But the chances that this promise will be fulfilled are as uncertain as in any dialectical materialism. Bloch is both theologian and socialist, but he is no



religious socialist. Neither history nor any rational organization of history is credited as being meaningful on the mere authority of the fragments of meaning that haunt immanent reality and whose divine 'sparks' point to some messianic end. Positive religious dogmas are not used to justify existing reality, nor are they credited with transcendental powers. Bloch is a mystic in the paradoxical sense that he has achieved a synthesis of theology and atheism. In contrast, the mystical meditations in which the tradition of the divine spark had its roots, presupposed dogmatic teachings which they then set out to destroy by some novel interpretation; this was true both of the Jewish tradition of the Torah as a sacred text and of the Christological tradition. Mysticism which lays no claim to any core of revelation stands revealed as mere cultural reminiscence. Bloch's philosophy of appearance, for which any such authority is irretrievably *passé*, no more fears the consequences of this than did the latter-day mystics of the great religions in their enlightened end-phase. He does not postulate religion in order to construct a philosophy of religion. The contortions this leads to form the subject of his own speculations. But he would rather put up with them, he would rather think of his own philosophy as mere semblance, than lapse either into positivism or into a positive religious faith. The vulnerability this form of thought so diligently displays is a consequence of its substance. If the latter were to be perfected and represented in all its purity, then the world of appearances, in which it has its being, would be conjured away into thin air.

It is easy to point out to Bloch that absolutes cannot be perceived by relatives: his philosophy is itself not proof against the very apocryphal writings he presumes to reinstate. His stories burn up in the course of telling; when the unthought-out thought is ignited the result is a short-circuit. It is for this reason, and not through any deficient logic that the interpretations often lag so far behind the stories, like a sort of antinomian sermon on the text: Lo, I shall give you stones instead of bread. The higher he wishes to soar, the more the very effort intensifies our sense of futility. The mingling of spheres, no less characteristic of this philosophy than the dichotomy of spheres, casts a shadow over it and challenges all established ideas of pure being in itself, all Platonic ideas in short. Even though Bloch wants to maintain that the sublime and the trivial are one, a gulf opens up between them often enough and the sublime becomes trivial. 'Is it good?' I asked. Children find that things taste better in other people's houses. But they soon see that all is not well there either. And if things were so lovely at home they would not be so pleased to leave. They often sense early on that both there and elsewhere much could be different' (p. 9). This is simply the platitudinous reformulation of the gnostic doctrine of the inadequacy of creation. Bloch's magisterial style does not allow itself to be thrown off balance by unconscious humour. 'At all events, it is not always the expected that knocks at the door' (p. 161). Culture is not enough for this philosophy, but on occasion proves too much for it and philosophy falls flat on its face. For just as there is nothing between heaven and earth that cannot be taken over by the psychoanalysts and given a sexual interpretation, so too there is nothing which cannot be regarded as a Blochian trace, and this indiscriminate use of everything comes close to meaning nothing. The traces are at their trickiest when they

lead to the occult: once it becomes a matter of principle that any intelligible world is fair game there is no possible antidote to the dreams of a ghost seer.<sup>11</sup>

A whole host of superstitious stories are recounted; the sterility of backstairs gossip from the spirit world is indeed hastily underscored, but no adequate theoretical distinction is made between Bloch's metaphysical intentions and a metaphysics dragged down to the plane of fact. Nevertheless, even here, where the *Kitsch* threatens to engulf its saviour, there is something to be said in Bloch's favour. For it is one thing to tell ghost stories, while believing in ghosts is quite another. One is almost tempted to say that the only person who can really enjoy ghost stories is someone who does not believe in ghosts, since by entering into the stories he can more purely enjoy his freedom from the myth. This freedom is what Bloch hopes to achieve by reflecting myth through narrative and by his philosophy as a whole. The remainder of the discredited ghost stories simply expresses his astonishment at that inadequacy of the unfree world which he never tires of rehearsing. They are means of expression, and what they express is alienation.

The primacy of expression over signification, his concern not simply that words should interpret concepts, but that the concepts should make the words tell, makes it clear that Bloch's is the philosophy of Expressionism. Expressionism consists for him in the idea of breaking through the encrusted surface of life. Human immediacy wishes to make its voice heard directly: like the Expressionists, Bloch's philosophy protests against the reification of the world. Unlike the artists he cannot rest content with giving form to that which subjectivity could fill, but his thought goes beyond that and enables us to see how that immediate subjectivity is socially mediated and alienated. Moreover, unlike Lukács, the friend of his youth, he does not, in the whole course of his work, ever extinguish the moment of subjectivity in the fiction of a supposedly achieved state of reconciliation. This preserves him from a second-order reification. Thanks to the strength of his philosophical nerves he can hold fast to the point of view of subjective experience even when, in a Hegelian sense, he has transcended it theoretically. His philosophy points in the direction of objectivity, but his speech remains consistently Expressionistic. Since it is thought, it cannot remain at the level of pure unmediated utterance; but equally, it cannot eliminate subjectivity as the ground of knowledge and as the source of language, for there is no objective order of being which could incorporate the subjective within itself without contradiction and whose language would be identical with his own. Bloch's thought cannot spare itself the bitter experience that, at the present time, any philosophical attempt to transcend the subjective lapses into the stage of presubjectivity, and hence acts in favour of a collective order in which subjectivity is not protected but merely held down by external force. His perennial Expressionism is a strident refusal to accept that reification, too, is perennial, and that the claim that it has been abolished is no more than an ideological gesture. The dislocations in his speech are the echo of an historical conjuncture in which any philosophy of

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<sup>11</sup> *Dreams of a Ghost Seer* is the title of Kant's pamphlet against Swedenborg.

subject and object is condemned to proclaim the enduring gap between subject and object.

### The Miner and the Millionaire

Its innermost theme is something it shares with literary Expressionism. We recall a sentence by George Heym.<sup>12</sup> 'It could perhaps be said that my poetry is the best proof of the existence of a metaphysical land whose blackened peninsulas extend deeply into our transient days'; a land whose topography was charted in the works of Rimbaud. In Bloch the wish to provide such proof is to be taken seriously; that land is to be retrieved conceptually. It is this that distinguishes his metaphysics from the traditional pattern. Even though the question of the nature of Being, the true essence of things, of God, freedom and immortality is still ubiquitously present, it cannot be reduced to such issues: its aim instead is to describe, or as Schelling would say 'construct', that alternative realm. This metaphysics is the phenomenology of the imaginary. The transcendental has been secularized and is thought of as a 'space'. And the reason why it is so hard to distinguish between it and spiritualist romances from the fourth dimension is that since it has been stripped of every connection with existence it becomes a symbol and his transcendental realm becomes an idea. In consequence, his philosophy returns to the prison of the very idealism from which it was designed to escape. 'This space, it appears to me, is always around us, even when we can only feel its edges and no longer notice how dark the night is' (p. 183). It is into this space that Bloch's 'motifs of disappearance' wish to usher us. Dying becomes a gateway, as in certain moments in Bach. 'Even the nothingness that the incredulous foist on us is unimaginable, even more obscure indeed than the idea of a possible survival' (p. 196). Bloch's obsession with the quasi-existence of the imaginary is the source of the remarkably static nature of his thought, at the heart of all his dynamism; it is the paradox of an Expressionist epic. It also explains the surplus of purblind, unresolved material. On occasion it reads more like Schelling than Hegel, more like the pseudo-morphogenesis of dialectics than dialectics itself. Dialectics would be unlikely to stop short at a dualistic theory of the world reminiscent of [Schelling's] system of ontological strata; nor would it content itself with the chiliastic antithesis of immanent utopia and a revealed transcendental sphere. Bloch, however, tells the anecdote of a young worker who is temporarily given a luxurious life by a benefactor who then sends him back down the mine, whereupon the worker kills him. Bloch comments: 'Life plays with us and in doing so does it behave differently from that kind millionaire? It is true that such a man is removable, and so the worker shot him; the merely social fate that the wealthy class imposes on the poor is likewise removable. But the rich man nevertheless stands as a sort of idol of that other fate, our natural one which ends in death, whose brutality the rich devil impersonates and incarnates until he falls victim to it himself' (p. 50f.). Or in another variation: '... death, which never is nor by definition can be the right death for us (since our proper space is in life or something more but never less than life)—even death has something of that rich cat which

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<sup>12</sup> A poet of the first Expressionist generation, 1887–1912.

first lets the mouse run awhile before eating it up. No-one could take it amiss if a "Saint" were to shoot God down, as the worker shot the millionaire' (p. 51f.). Bloch constructs a grinning antinomian analogy between the fact of social repression and the mythic reality of a life doomed to death; but the Platonic choir is as remote as ever and the establishment of a rational order on earth would be no more than a drop of water on the molten rock of fate and death. The incorrigible naïveté which renders him impervious to argument makes him an easy target from opposing sides, both for the exponents of dialectical materialism and for the philosophers of Being as the meaning of what exists. As with every advanced philosophy which always gets stuck behind the very position it has superseded, there is something crude and unrefined about Bloch that distinguishes him from the sophistications of official philosophy, a jungle-like quality which sets him apart from the aseptic administrative approach which neatly pigeon-holes everything. The result is that he sabotages his own acceptance by the cultural establishment, but at the same time smoothes the way for an apocryphal, cult status.

The all-too architectonic scheme leaves its imprint on the ideas. Even though Bloch's philosophy abounds in materials and colours, it does not succeed in escaping from abstraction. Both its variety and its emphasis on particulars serve in great measure as exemplifications of the single idea of utopia and breakthrough, an idea he cherishes as dearly as Schopenhauer had cherished *his* insight: 'For in the final analysis everything you encounter and think of is the same' (p. 16). Utopia has to be distilled into a universal concept that subsumes all the concrete data which alone could be utopian. The 'shape of the unformulatable question' is made into a system and allows itself to be impressed by the grandiose in a manner which chimes ill with Bloch's rebellion against the power and the glory. System and appearances work together in harmony. The universal concept which obliterates the trace and which can scarcely incorporate it in itself is nevertheless forced to speak as if it were present within it. The universal concept is thereby doomed perpetually to exceed its own capacities. This drowns out the Expressionist din: the violent efforts of will without which no trace can be discerned thwarts his overall aim. For by its very nature a trace is the involuntary, the unobtrusive and the unintended. Its reduction to something intended violates it, just as on Hegel's account of phenomenology, examples violate the nature of dialectics. The colour that Bloch intends becomes grey in its totality. Hope is not a principle. But colour must not be allowed to reduce philosophy to silence. Philosophy may not move in the medium of thought and abstraction and then refuse to confront the implications of such movements.

For in that case its ideas would be conundrums. This was the solution which Benjamin chose in *One-Way Street*, a work closely related to *Traces* in many ways. Like Benjamin's book Bloch's traces, even down to their titles, sympathize with the microscopic. However, unlike Benjamin, Bloch does not surrender wholly to detail, but uses it quite intentionally (see p. 66f.) as a category. Even the microscopic remains abstract, too big for its own boots. He resists the fragmentary. Like

Hegel, he advanced dynamically, transcending the very substance on which his experience feeds. To that extent he is an idealist despite himself. As an older philosopher once put it, his thought aims to strike roots in mid-air, it wishes to be the ultimate philosophy yet retains the structure of the first philosophy, while his ambition is to grasp the whole world. He conceives of the end-product as the ground of the world, something which moves whatever exists, while dwelling within it as its ultimate purpose. He makes the last into the first. This is his innermost, irredeemable antinomy. This too he shares with Schelling.

The idea of the repressed, of the pressures from below which will put an end to the mischief, is political, This too he talks about as if it were all a foregone conclusion; changing the world is a fixed premise, regardless of what has happened to all the traces of revolution in the 30 years since the first publication, and regardless of the effects of social and technological developments on both the notion and possibility of revolution. For him it is enough to note the absurdity of the existing order; he refuses to squabble about what ought to happen. 'In the rue Blondel a drunken woman was lying in the street. A policeman tackles her. *Je suis pauvre*, says the woman. That's no reason for vomiting on the pavement, shouts the policeman. *Que voulez-vous, Monsieur, la pauvreté, c'est déjà à moitié la saleté*, the woman replies and goes on drinking. With these words she described, explained and justified herself at a stroke. Whom or what should the policeman have arrested?' (p. 17). Bloch has the strength not to quibble about what is reasonable; but this goes hand in hand with the tendency to beg the question of politics, a procedure which can be exploited at moments when world history is declared to be at an end, a foregone conclusion. At the same time Bloch does not allow himself to be tamed by the repressive and the authoritarian. He is one of the very few philosophers who do not blench at the thought of a world free from both domination and hierarchy. It is inconceivable that he might deprecate the abolition of evil, sin and death from some approved vantage-point. The fact that it has not been possible to abolish evil hitherto does not lead him to the perfidious conclusion that it could and should not be done. This endows his promise, his celebration of a happy end with the feeling that despite everything all is not in vain. His traces have nothing mouldy or mildewed about them. As a heretical dialectician he refuses to let himself be fobbed off with the materialist thesis that it is wrong to try and describe a classless society. With an unwavering sensuousness he takes pleasure in imagining it, though without overdoing it. The sight of a French workman eating lobster or the popular festivities on the 14th July reflect the glow 'of a time to come when money will have stopped barking for goods or frolicking in them' (p. 19). Nor does he reel off the whole abracadabra of the immediate unity of theory and practice. To the question 'Ought we to think or to act?' he replies, 'Philosophy won't keep the wolf from the door, so it is thought. But that, as Hegel pointed out, is not its task. For it is philosophy that creates the world in which things can be transformed and not just botched' (p. 261). No more apt retort to vulgar materialism could be made by a real humanism which allows thought its due at a time when it is being universally reduced to a mere adjunct of action. Even today such a

humanism makes possible what Benjamin once said of Bloch, namely that he could warm himself at his thoughts. They are indeed like those great green-tiled ovens that are heated from outside and suffice for the whole house, comfortably powerful, without the need for a fireside seat and without smoking out the room. The man who tells fairytales preserves them from the humiliation of outliving their time. His expectation that something is coming is combined with a bottomless scepticism. Both are united in a joke from a Jewish legend. Someone tells of a miracle he has experienced and then denies it at the moment of greatest excitement: 'And what does God do about it all? There's no truth in the entire story' (p. 253).<sup>13</sup> Bloch spares us further exegesis, but adds, 'Not bad for a liar, not a bad universal motto, better people might say' (Ibid.). And what does God do about it all?—the sloppy question masks the persistent doubt in His existence, because 'there is no truth in the entire story', because, *pace* Hegel and the whole dialectic, the history of the world is still not the history of truth even now. Thanks to the joke, philosophy can see through its own deception, and this makes it greater than itself: 'One must be both witty and able to transcend reality' (Ibid.). The joke opens up the awe-inspiring perspective contained in Karl Kraus's lines: 'Nothing is true/And perhaps other things will happen'; it may well be that the appearances dispelled by the joke may not in fact contain the last word. Even where philosophy has not succeeded, it has no need to allow itself to be decried just because men have not yet succeeded either.

*Translated by Rodney Livingstone*

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<sup>13</sup> The story is told by a man recalling his journey in the North of Siberia. He tells of wolves, runaway horses, cracking ice, the whole sleigh sinking in the lake—and? the audience asks with bated breath, as the man falls silent, he cannot utter another word, his mouth is full of water, he has long since drowned—'and?' says the traveller, breathing a sigh of relief: 'and what does God do about it all? There's no truth in the entire story.'