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Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed (review)

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the use of allusion, the recycling of literary form, or the importance of political or aesthetic influence who will find stimulation and frustration in equal measure with this collection. Where too much theory can often be restrictive in the elucidation of literary texts, too little grounding in theoretical method returns study of a corpus to extensive naming of the same tropes (or intertexts) with undue interpretation or qualification. For such a highly intertextual and referential writer as Gracq, whose works span so many important schools and movements in French literature, this collection of essays does and does not do justice to the span of his aesthetic practices.

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Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed. By B. C. HUTCHENS. New York — London, Continuum, 2004. viii + 191 pp. Pb £12.99.

Aiming to achieve ‘a balanced clarity of insight and intuition that is much needed in the study of Levinas’s thought today’ (p. vii), this advanced introduction describes Levinas as ‘undoubtedly one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century’ (p. 12). In a series of short, often dense chapters, it then runs through some of the principal issues with which Levinas deals: freedom, violence, language, scepticism, time, good and evil, suffering, justice, religion, technology, art, eroticism and gender. The stakes of Levinas’s work are high, and Hutchens displays an assured philosophical touch across an impressive range of topics. Throughout, he endeavours to give clear, judicious definitions of problematic terms, emphasizing the ambitious nature of Levinas’s thought but never simply accepting him on his own terms. In fact, this study turns out to be more polemical than one might have expected of an introduction, as Levinas’s shortcomings are scrupulously exposed. Hutchens argues from an early stage that, ‘treacherous as it may sound in an introduction to a fine visionary thinker, it is respectable to entertain that Levinas’s masterly vision is not relevant to contemporary ethical theory’ (p. 35); Levinas’s notion of ethical responsibility may be no more than an empty caricature (p. 54); and his influence on the philosophy of religion is ‘even less substantial than his influence on ethical theories’ (p. 112). Readers might begin to wonder why they should bother with Levinas at all. Hutchens finds a few intriguing, even fascinating ideas, but has little sympathy for the grander claims sometimes made by Levinas’s admirers. The final chapter outlines some of the ‘massive difficulties in interpreting [Levinas’s] thought as relevant and contributive’ (p. 155); there are problems of scale, relevance and detail, his notions are ‘hazy’ (p. 156) and his concepts are ‘nebulous’ (p. 157). The chapter ends by outlining Alain Badiou’s devastating criticisms of Levinas, and a brief Conclusion summarizes a few ideas that might be worth taking further, but which Levinas himself did not or could not develop. This is a very challenging approach to Levinas, perhaps too challenging to fulfil the role of an introduction. Rather than assisting uninitiated readers to tackle the extraordinary difficulties of Levinas’s prose, it might persuade them that the effort is barely worthwhile. Its demand for intellectual clarity might also miss the fundamental point that Levinas’s obscurities, ambiguities and hesitations contribute to the philosophical importance of his

writing rather than diminishing it. In the end, it may be that different philosophical outlooks remain incompatible, despite everything that has been done to bridge them. What Derrida and others so admired about Levinas — his restless, relentless, inconclusive probing at the very foundations of thought and ethics — is what for some makes him frustrating and unreadable.

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Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction. By NICHOLAS HARRISON. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003. iv + 221 pp. Hb £50.00. Pb £15.99.

Nicholas Harrison's wonderfully subtle, engaging and theoretically engaged reflection on many of the most resonant questions of postcolonial literature and criticism is a refreshing departure from the tendency within postcolonial studies to continually seek out undiscovered voices in the name of expanding diversity. Harrison's approach is, instead, to select a small number of well-known 'classic' texts and authors — principally Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Camus's *L'Étranger*, Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple*, and Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* — and to subject them to sustained close reading, in order to tease out and force us to reconsider the critical assumptions underlying the use of such terms as 'representative', 'identification', 'racism', 'realism', 'universality' and 'historical context'. A significant part of his strategy is to guide us more attentively through the history of the critical reception of these texts, and to broaden his discussion to encompass larger questions of interpretation and readerly expectation. The result is always enlightening, and often stunningly effective: Achebe's charge of racism in Conrad opens out onto a rethinking of the relationship between fiction and the historical circumstances of its composition; Harrison's reading of *L'Étranger* (as good an account as any of the status of the 'realism' of Camus's text when read in the context of its highly problematic racialism) is in itself an important intervention in Camus criticism; and his reading of Djébar is constantly alive to the complex textuality of her autobiographical writing. There is a restless intelligence at work throughout, as well as a refusal to settle for easy resolutions of theoretical tensions and aporias, and I would recommend this text emphatically to anyone wanting not just to understand what is at stake in postcolonial theory today, but to see a fine example of fluent, attentive reading in action. Harrison rightly questions the 'conscience-salving' aspect of the appeal of postcolonial studies, and indeed the very status of postcolonial criticism as a viable independent field of scholarship, insofar as it can be seen in fact to deal somewhat inadequately with broader questions of literary interpretation that have been more powerfully theorized by apparently non-postcolonial writers such as Barthes, Genette and Blanchot. To my mind, the truly interesting moments of Harrison's text are those points at which it hesitates, as it were, on its own theoretical threshold, such that at the far end of his readings we often find him straining to push the discussion towards larger, quasi-philosophical concerns (literature, or criticism, or theory 'as such'), although never quite wanting to abandon his own postcolonial 'interest'. I was left wondering as I put this book down whether something called 'postcolonial criticism' is even possible; but the fact that this is perhaps the