

IN BRIEF

and under "Wallpaper" we learn that such decoration began to appear in Italy and France in the 1480s.

What distinguishes this dictionary from others like it is the extent to which it brings into play the material culture of the Renaissance. Numerous entries on pottery and potters, glass-makers, furniture, and textiles are especially valuable. There is something here for everyone.

PAUL BAROLSKY

Music

Garth Cartwright

PRINCES AMONGST MEN

Journeys with Gypsy musicians

310pp. Serpent's Tail. £11.99.

1 85242 877 5

Garth Cartwright is a reporter with a mission: to tell the West about the Romany musicians of East Europe. They are fortunate, because *Princes Amongst Men* is a valuable chronicle of their personal histories and musical development, lightened with a little gossip about famous Balkan figures such as Ceca, the pop-star wife of the late mafia don Arkan, and Emir Kusturica, the film director.

Cartwright starts by describing a magnificent Gypsy springtime festival of a type few readers will have seen. He writes lyrically and builds steadily to create a sense of anticipation. Soon the reader is being swept along by Cartwright's enthusiasm, but his narrative gets bogged down with travel problems; even repeated complaints about the heat. In the Balkans, in summer . . . what did he expect? Worse, he allows himself to digress stylistically, resorting to clunking Americanisms. Soon, he is writing "Damn, this is one funky shack", and later, "one heavy week-end . . . 'bout to be served up".

When he puts more trust in his natural style, his social observation and political analysis of the post-Communist, post-war Balkans are helpful, occasionally acute, and his Romany history, unobtrusively woven into the narrative, never tedious. But clichés abound, and misspellings of Romany words also let him down.

A limited musical vocabulary prevents meaningful description of the music he hears, from thumping brass orchestras such as Fanfare Ciocaria, lively string bands like Taraf de Haïdouks and legendary singers such as Esma Redžepova. So notes are "fat", swing is "funky" and clarinets "shriek". Jason Webster's *Duende: A journey in search of flamenco* (2003) did it much better.

DAVID ALTHER

Literary Criticism

Timothy Clark

THE POETICS OF SINGULARITY

The counter-culturalist turn in Heidegger,

Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer

186pp. Edinburgh University Press. £50.

0 7486 1929 1

Timothy Clark's *The Poetics of Singularity* examines the seemingly simple idea of reading a text as a piece of literature, rather than as a mere representation of reality. Against the dominant school of cultural criticism, in which a text is considered in terms of its construction of identity, Clark attends to the unclassifiable uniqueness of a text. Instead of reading a work by Dickens, say, as a reflection of gender roles or social position, Clark is interested in the idio-

syncratic "something" that sets this book apart from others, but cannot be placed in words. Clark names this peculiar "something" the "singularity" of literature, and he traces its elucidation through the writings of Martin Heidegger, Hans Gadamer, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida.

Clark states clearly what "literary theory" often succeeds in rendering complicated. According to this group of thinkers, he explains, our dominant mode of reading is human-centred and privileges rational thought: texts are taken as objects to be deciphered according to the way in which we generally think – that is, conceptually. Instead, Clark suggests, these thinkers allow literature to arouse a kind of "pre-conceptual experience". He shows how this forestalls instrumentalism and allows "acceptance of what we can't fully understand".

In their accounts of "singularity", the nuanced differences between these writers is illuminated with impressive subtlety and incisiveness. We learn that for Heidegger "singularity" is found in the latent meanings that words acquire outside their universal, dictionary-bound sense, while in Gadamer singularity pertains to the tone of the poem as a whole or the certain effect produced when a poem is learned by heart, as opposed to taking lines apart. For Blanchot, the otherness of the text encourages respect for the otherness of people, whereas for Derrida, it enables a new form of political decision: one which is not prescribed, but responds to individual events in their specific contexts. Offering everyday examples for a complex thought (the singularity is that something lost in translation or when a joke is explained), this book succeeds in rescuing a fascinating idea from the depths of the impenetrable.

CATHERINE HUMBLE

Derek Attridge

J. M. COETZEE AND THE ETHICS OF

READING

Literature in the event

225pp. University of Chicago Press. \$19;

distributed in the UK by Wiley. £13.50.

0 226 03117 9

J. M. Coetzee makes his readers work hard: his novels invite allegorical readings, but convey the sense that to read allegorically is to miss an important point; he invites empathy with figures of extreme otherness (such as the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the drifting lodger in *Age of Iron* and the dogs in *Disgrace*) only to reveal the expensive complexity of such easy emotional identification. Derek Attridge sets out to explore the experience of engaging with Coetzee's writing – in his words, to "describe a few moments in the continuous experience of reading". This is brave, for his detailed discussions of short passages may strike some as old-fashioned close readings which do not offer much insight into the South African contexts of the work. Nonetheless, this attention to detail is frequently illuminating. Attridge dissects Coetzee's sentences, suggesting how tense, tone, voice and the smallest detail contribute to the demands and rewards of the text. That Coetzee's novels are difficult is a virtue, he suggests: "the formally innovative text", he argues, "the one that most estranges itself from the reader, makes the strongest ethical demand".

The study is marred at times by the feeling

that Coetzee's work merely provides opportunities for testing ideas about literariness explored at greater length in Attridge's theoretical study, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). Why, then, write about Coetzee in particular? Might Attridge have written equally pressing about another writer? As the imperative to apply this theory's assumptions and elided choices to Coetzee's work recedes, however, Attridge delivers some timely insights. Chapters on *The Master of Petersburg* and the memoir-fictions, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, are particularly compelling, as is a revision of his 1991 essay on *Foe* which explores Coetzee's engagement with the idea of the canonical. The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Coetzee in 2003 suggests that his work is itself, arguably, very nearly part of a "canon". Attridge is candid, even rueful, about the role his and other critical work might play in this process, making Coetzee's writing less strange by grappling with its strangeness. Nonetheless, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* treats Coetzee less as a "South African" novelist than a major international writer, concerned with abstract ideas of ethical responsibility, confession and identity – an intelligent way of reading him.

ANDREW VAN DER VLIES

Military History

David Lister

DIE HARD, ABY!

Abraham Bevisstein – the boy soldier shot to encourage the others

186pp. Barnsley: Pen and Sword. £19.99.

1 84415 137 9

Of some 20,000 Field General Courts Martial convened to try British and Dominion troops charged with the most serious military offences on active service during the Great War, about 90 per cent resulted in convictions. Of these, 3,000 men received death sentences; most were commuted. Just over 300, however, suffered the ultimate penalty, *poir encourager les autres*.

Under age when he enlisted in the Middlesex Regiment (the Die Hards), the East End Jewish youth Abraham ("Aby") Bevisstein served on the Western Front from July 1915 to March 1916. In conditions that included numerous tours in waterlogged and collapsing trenches, intense shelling, gassing, sniping, and mining, and inadequate provision for rest and billets – conditions, in other words, that would have tested the mettle of the hardest of old sweats, let alone a seventeen-year-old New Army volunteer – Aby did his bit. Hospitalized with "wounds" and "shock" in December 1915, he returned to the trenches near Sully Labourse in early February 1916, where he was defeated and disoriented by the explosion of three rifle grenades. Directed to the rear, examined by a medical officer, and ordered to return to the trenches, Aby hesitated when German shelling blocked his path. It was a decision that would cost him his life. While the 11th Middlesex, whose morale and discipline were already in doubt, suffered dozens of casualties repelling a local German attack, Aby found refuge in a former billet some ten miles away. Arrested later the same day, the boy soldier was eventually charged with desertion, convicted by an FGCM, and shot at dawn on March 20, 1916.

Marshalling the available evidence for what he hopes will result in Aby's formal pardon,

David Lister builds a strong case. There were mitigating circumstances, he insists, or at least firm grounds for commuting Aby's sentence. These included the absence of a prisoner's friend at the FGCM, a damning (and largely erroneous) statement by his CO, conflicting eyewitness testimony, the mismanagement of the file up the chain of command, and the lack of consideration due to a man who had recently (and perhaps prematurely) returned from wounds. At the time, none of this made any difference. By the prevailing military standards, Aby deserved his fate. By any other measure, his was a harsh and unwarranted end.

CRAIG GIBSON

French Literature

Robert Gibson

THE END OF YOUTH

The life and work of Alain-Fournier

370pp. Exeter: Imprints. £45

(paperback, £14.99).

0 95475 864 1

Alain-Fournier has been a major obsession for Robert Gibson, formerly Professor of French at the University of Kent. As a student, he devoted his doctoral dissertation to the author of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and his first biography, *The Quest of Alain-Fournier*, appeared in 1953. After this went out of print, he revised it as *The Land without a Name* (1975); and now, after a further thirty years, he has published *The End of Youth*. Despite the changes of title, these are in essence the same book, though with additions and modifications to take account of new material and the writer's changing views – the conclusion to a formidable fifty years of work on an author who was killed in 1914, shortly before his twenty-eighth birthday, and is remembered for just one quite brief novel.

The new material is mainly biographical and has to do with Fournier's relations with Jeanne Bruneau and Simone Casimir-Perier; after the First World War, the second of these women was involved in a nasty dispute over Fournier's papers with his sister's family, the Rivières. As well as material relating to these two love affairs, Gibson draws on fresh evidence from the writer's correspondence with André Lhote, his journalism and drafts of his previously unpublished writings. A final chapter, assessing the importance and influence of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, has been considerably expanded and rewritten; yet Gibson is arguing very much the same case as in his previous book, against charges of inconsistency and incoherence in the novel, and he cites almost no critical writing that has appeared since the mid-1970s. Oddly, too, given that many of his readers will not have access to the French text of the novel, he does not try to analyse Fournier's nervy style, with its suspension points and hurried subordinate clauses, that contributes so much to the "poetic" feel of the novel. He mentions only *Le Grand Meaulnes*'s "divinely romantic rhetoric". On the other hand, in the worthy conclusion to a lifetime with Fournier, he tells us a little more, from book to book, about the intellectual climate of the writer's time and the influences on his work of Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, André Gide, Maurice Barrès and others whose stars were rising over the lost domain that was Europe just before the First World War.

ROBIN BUSS