



Ernst Bloch. *Traces*. Nassar. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006. xii +180 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4118-7; \$20.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-4119-4.



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It's good to think in stories too

In an age in which public culture, from electronic entertainment and advertising to politics and education, is increasingly permeated by what might be called a “will to stories,” it is quite fascinating to encounter a text by a philosophical critic who seriously sets out to “think in stories” (p. 6). It seems as if it would be easy enough to do. Bloch’s way in *Traces* is to start with an uncanny occurrence, a fleeting image, an enigmatic twist in the tale, and then develop it into a little fabulistic essay. Despite its apparent simplicity, this approach proves to be challenging. *Traces* is an undeniably cryptic book, at first sight often baffling, for Bloch’s tales effectively, perhaps almost too effectively, resist what we have come to know as normal story-telling. Narration is broken; linear development all but absent; imagery sometimes minimal and sometimes chaotic; characters sketchy; the moral of the story almost always obtuse. All of this tests the reader’s powers of comprehension. One impulse is to approach these stories as parables that illustrate a moral or a lesson; yet, as Theodor Adorno wrote in his review of the 1959 edition of *Traces*, “to read Blochian narrative as mere parable would be to misunderstand it.” Unlike a parable, which is uttered by a knowing oracle who is trying to

lead the reader or listener to a greater truth already in his possession, the stories in *Traces* seek understanding of that which still lies beyond the horizon, anticipated but not yet quite grasped, let alone actualized.[1] The crucial purpose of Bloch’s narrative method is to stimulate an imaginatively critical, questioning, even questing, attitude that can read clues and signs from ordinary lived experience in ways that reveal the mutually determining relationship between existential and social being.

Just at the time he was completing *Traces*, Bloch praised the way that Walter Benjamin approached philosophy in *One-way Street* (1928) as a “form of interruption, as a form for improvisation and sudden cross-glances,” which enabled his thought process to escape the well-worn paths of the “bourgeois rational principle a priori.”[2] Bloch could have been describing his own efforts in *Traces* to stimulate awareness of the ways in which human subjectivity is formed and deformed by the alienation endemic to capitalist society, much in the spirit of Georg Lukacs’s contemporaneous *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), by reading “traces” (or in German, *Spuren*, which can also mean tracks, footprints, or

even clues) found in the European *Lebenswelt* of the early twentieth century. From here the challenge is to uncover fragments of the possibility of something better, which is understood to involve some sort of socialist revolution that would overturn not only the means of production and ownership, but also patterns of social being and indeed consciousness itself. In this, *Traces* stands as a companion piece to Bloch's *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918, rev. ed. 1923); both books proceed with firm awareness that revolutionary change must involve subjective consciousness and sensuous experience before anything can be brought to objective, material realization. Unlike *Spirit of Utopia*, however, *Traces* seeks utopian moments in the stuff of common life—quotidian scenes, urban life, Karl May, folk tales and legends—rather than in Beethoven, Wagner, scripture, Marx, or Goethe.

Traces is divided into five parts, consisting of an untitled introductory section and four sections entitled "Situation," "Fate," "Existence," and "Things." Each consists of a suite of between ten and twenty-four short essays that range from a few sentences to seven pages. Each section starts with one or two brief oracular utterances (the book opens, for example, with the characteristic lines "One is alone with oneself. Together with others, most are alone even without themselves. One has to get out of both" [p. 1]), moves through a constellation of thematically related essays before arriving at a concluding essay or two that provide a relatively more direct statement of the essential point of the section. The introductory group of essays limns the state of mind of the critical observer—presumably Bloch himself—that animates the project, who sees that one must look "to the side" and "observe precisely the little things" in order to break through the ideological framework of good habits and customs that pervade bourgeois life and make it tolerable (p. 5), for it is only at the margins of things that intuition retains freedom of insight. The method must be to follow "an impression that will not let us come to rest over what we heard. An impression on the surface of life, so that it tears perhaps" (p. 6). Thus, the subject matter of *Traces* is to be that which is marginal, often subaltern, that which can tear, disrupt, overturn. A number of the stories Bloch recounts graphically depict random acts of social rebellion, perhaps most memorably in the account of the efforts of a bourgeois gentleman driving a car in a straw hat to push his way with "a certain grim reactionary sportsmanship" through a crowd of proletarian revelers on a Paris street on Bastille Day 1928. "The straw hat," Bloch writes, "must have annoyed them—usually nothing special, but here, remarkably, a symbol of the rul-

ing class, perhaps because of its light color and because machines tend not to be operated with straw hats" (pp. 11-12). The partying crowd refused to let the car pass, blocking it, holding it, and taunting. Because the "ruling classes capitulate only falsely, abstractly, and undialectically" the driver fights the crowd, instead of "sublating himself" into the situation. The "provocateur" as Bloch now terms him, throws the car into reverse and barely escapes. In the scrum "one lucky fellow" knocks the straw hat loose and threw to his mates, whence it became an impromptu frisbee tossed about the dance crowd until "it lay on the ground, ragged and flattened, a very slight, very allegorically trampled representative of the Bastille" (p. 12). Bloch allows the image of a seemingly incidental object, a straw hat, to carry much of the symbolic weight of the tale. Also noteworthy is Bloch's slightly awkward use of then-conventional Marxist lingo, which reflects his ongoing efforts, which never fully succeeded, to reach a working accommodation with the political dogma that grew up around the system of dialectical materialism that he found so philosophically stimulating.

Each of the four titled sections of *Traces* has a different emphasis. "Situation" imagines the ways in which the life of the proletariat is infiltrated down to its roots by the mechanisms of capitalist alienation, so that, for example, two chess players whose game becomes the object of eager betting find that "while business is pleasure for some, pleasure easily became business again" (p. 14). "Fate" tells stories about the many ways in which our social roles are products of the accidental in life, deflating the privileged class's claims of entitlement. In one, a count ("one who was stuck in a good skin"), who sees a "quite pitiful man going before him," realizes that "all this would be my body and soul, my identical twin, if things had turned out as they should" (p. 25). The following section, "Existence" returns to the theme of the social determination of subjective existence, tacitly rejecting the existential premise that essence precedes existence. The concluding "Things" suggests that if we can remain alive to the amazement of things and our experience of them, we can sustain our "questioning wonder past the first answer" so that it may become possible that "the many great riddles of the world will not entirely conceal their one inconspicuous mystery" (pp. 170-171).

Any effort to render *Traces* into another language faces serious difficulties. Bloch's writing is unusually resistant to translation. The relationship between his ideas and his words is fraught; as he puts it at one point, "there aren't the right words for" the uncanniness that fascinates him (p. 170). The language of *Traces* does not sit

comfortably on the printed page; rather, it tries to capture the immediacy of utterance, often seemingly improvised on the spot, evocative of tale-spinning, late-night discoursing, or even the inner dialogue of the thinking subject. If Anthony Nassar's translation is not always completely felicitous nor, upon comparison with the German text, always unquestionable on details, it is still an admirable job. One could, I suppose, quibble almost endlessly on details, but it is not easy to imagine a translation that could be on the whole much better. If anything, Nassar errs at times in being too literal, but this is hardly a grave failing, and anyone who becomes seriously involved with Bloch will naturally need to consult his work in its original form, because his use of German is quite artful, if at times eccentric in the ways in which it exploits the grammatical and syntactical opportunities of that language.

Given the difficulty of Bloch's work and his unfamiliarity in the English-speaking world, it is unfortunate that this edition does not include any sort of introduction or explanatory commentary. In fact, the volume provides no critical apparatus beyond some ninety-five footnotes added by the translator that identify the sources of some but not all of Bloch's numerous allusions and quotations, as well as occasional comments on fine points of German usage. The present translation is based very closely on the text of *Spuren* included in the Bloch *Gesamtausgabe* (1969). This is surely an authoritative text, yet it

would have been nice if Nassar had been able to elucidate the genealogy of the text somewhat more fully. He faithfully reproduces the asterisks in the table of contents that identify the twenty essays that, as the footnote reads, "appear for the first time in this edition [i.e., the 1969 German edition]. Most are from the years when *Traces* was being written (1910-29); a smaller number were written for this edition" (p. ix). This statement raises questions rather than answering them.

Despite any minor reservations, Nassar's translation of *Traces*, like his translation of *The Spirit of Utopia*, published in the same series in 2000, is indeed valuable. It makes available in English a thought-provoking text by a thinker whose work has been overlooked in many circles. *Traces* may well have some special things to say to those of us living under the star of late capitalism, if we can take the time and make the effort to begin unraveling its tales and realizing its lessons.

Notes

[1]. Theodor Adorno, "Bloch's *Spuren*: on the Revised Edition of 1959," in *Notes to Literature, Volume 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 200-215; here, 202.

[2]. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of our Times*, tran. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 335.

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