

by Fred Inglis

The Myth of Popular Culture: from Dante to Dylan

by Perry Meisel

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Perry Meisel is clever, flashy, garrulous, conceited, perhaps entitled to be. It's hard not to quote Samuel Johnson, much quoted here, back at him. Johnson famously retorted to Berkeley's idealism and the prelate's agonising as to whether the tree in the quad was really there when he, Berkeley, couldn't see it, by kicking a pebble to one side. "Thus I refute him".

Meisel puts a lot of pebbles in our path. His devilish purpose is to seduce us into accepting that all great art feeds off and on non-art and bad art, and that the history of culture must (it's a smart, imperious book, like many in the series) be understood as the dialectic of high and low language and morals.

'Dialectic' is made to work far too hard, and turns out to mean hardly more than unHegelian borrowing from all over the place. Nor does history get much of a look in, for all that Meisel has Dante in his alliterative title. Dante's only use here is as author of the *Vulgari* which always turns up in Lit Crit 101 as the first apology for common speech.

Anyway, Meisel flashes past Dante, ignores George Puttenham and the noisy Elizabethan arguments on just his topic, in order to join all pious democrats in berating Matthew Arnold for being so stuck up about the philistines, and his failing to understand either Wordsworth's embracing the pop of his day or Keats's shame at his own lower class origins and the "surpassing tackiness" of his high Miltonic aspiration.

Meisel's characteristic trope is less the paradox which he flourishes like the dandy's whangee than the paradiastole, the rhetorical weapon which redescribes vices as virtues. This is his deep Americanism, and about this latter he is quite straight. For once he has got his quarrel with Arnold and Arnold's high-theoretic stepson, Theodor Adorno, out of the way, with a breezy indifference both to capitalism and to the Frankfurter's longing for Alban Berg and

impossible difficulty, Meisel is intent on blessing America from his chair in Greenwich Village.

The line of his argument – I almost wrote his Great Tradition – is then surprisingly familiar, ratified not by the old New Critics of American literature but by a disappointing line-up of postmodern has-beens: Louis Althusser, Mikhail Bakhtin, Susan Sontag, Frederic Jameson and (one greets the name with a heavy heart) Jacques Lacan.

These equip him as typologist of forms, but the formalist may be every bit as flatfooted and self-satisfied as the philistine, except that he over-privileges types, whereas the philistine, knowing what he likes, is all for the experience. Art, however, is at its most popular as well as its greatest when art-object and experience are at perfect poise.

Such a poise is presented by the artist to the reader or audience. Meisel is quite right to make as much as he does of what Gombrich called "the beholder's share", and this is the cue for noticing the excellent secondary book hidden in this one beneath the swanky typologising and effortless chiasmus.

In this suppressed and succinct study, Meisel hurtles through a short history of the American novel from Fenimore Cooper to Thomas Pynchon, watching it gradually shake off its cultural cringe before its English origins, and then attaches this to a parallel history of the stars of Hollywood, here correctly understood not as the characters they played but as the people they were, and were made into.

This bravura short history not of types but of the life that fills the types, is then topped off by, first, a splendid potted narrative of rock as a succession of intertextual thefts, and second, a long, subtle and extravagant encomium on Bob Dylan. Meisel would have been well advised not to patronise Christopher Ricks's monumental study of Dylan's poetry, nonetheless his own rich interpretation of music, verse and performance is his winning testimony to his talent and to his admiration.

The best criticism of any art by any scholar puts true talent to the task of justifying admiration. When Meisel puts off his demon self, he writes criticism of this order.