

to books@thes.co.uk

by FRED INGLIS

*Perpetual Euphoria: on the duty to be happy*

by Pascal Bruckner

Princeton University Press 244pp

ISBN 978-0-691-14373-6 hb \$29.95

Pascal Bruckner is yet another of that long line of French intellectuals which stretches out to the crack of doom. His generation – Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann, Alain Badiou, Bruckner himself (though not a *Normalien*, formerly the key qualification), have stepped into the shoes of the ghostly masters, Raymond Aron, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and, if they appear a bit smaller on the vastly enlarged agora of global thought competition, they retain the breezy French self-confidence to tackle without embarrassment the topics on the self-help and spirituality shelves, and tell us what is wrong with our domestic passions.

Following up his timely rebukes in *The Tyranny of Guilt*, Bruckner now addresses his minatory sternness to what he sees as our fatal tendency to expect happiness as a right and, in a frantic tumbling together of our moral oppositions, to assign ourselves the duty to be and feel happy.

No-one could say that Bruckner lacks evidence for his generalisations on our frenetic attempts to transform the consumption of trivialities and transience into the meaning of life, or not if one truly supposes that the awful scum of advertisements floating on top of the culture and the harmless froth of unreal mockery in the quiz and talent shows are superficialities which go deep. Bruckner is, after all, very intelligent, and the mere fluency of his chapter headings constitutes a simple malediction rousingly uttered on behalf of all misanthropists over the signs of the times: 'the disciplines of beatitude', 'the bittersweet saga of dullness', 'the bourgeoisie, or the abjection of well-being' ( the left intelligentsia can't renounce the 200-year-old habit to beat up the bourgeois ), 'the preferable and the despicable', 'warriors of the useless'.

Each section gives rise to bitter, accurate aphorisms. His warriors of the useless are those who imagine that in virtue of submitting themselves to acute physical exactions (crossing Antarctica, running weekly marathons) their client sponsors owe their preferred charity money payments according to some arbitrary moral tariff. Communism, in 1848 a supreme effort to realise universal happiness, "died from the abrupt telescoping of the miracles

predicted and the ignominy achieved" (Bruckner's translator, Steven Rendall, is racyly adequate to his author's rhetoric).

The trouble with all this is not that Bruckner is wrong, nor that he waffles, although he has his vacuous moments, grasping as he is for nationwide inclusiveness. But he makes what Bernard Williams once called "the force of 'we'" do much more work than it is capable of. When any reasonably independent-minded reader is told for the umpteenth time what 'we' do or feel or think, he or she very properly recoils and asks to be counted out.

Bruckner needed to make his book grip and search a great deal more. Of course he is right to say that the concept of happiness has become gross and gluttonous, as witness the Prime Minister's commission on the topic, a rancid titbit from the PR cookbook. Of course he is right about the sickening omnipresence of money-worship these past thirty years, and the revolting irresponsibility of those who have lots of the stuff. But his book called for the sweets of the novelist Bruckner also is, for close instantiation from particular lives of the sins and stupidity he names. He surely needed to go back to Ancient Greece and sort out what has been made of their grander and more boisterous, penetrative idea of *eudaimonia* or 'human flourishing'. He might have learned much from taking to heart Dickens's marvellous definition of those things that lucky dispositions retain from the pure happiness of childhood, 'freshness, gentleness, and a capacity of being pleased', and weighed these lovely qualities against the mendacities of the advertisers and the daily delusions he chronicles with such contempt.

Above all he needed to heed Henry James's creaking call to the novelist's colours, "Dramatise, dramatise", and to take from another novelist, John Berger, a lovely little reminiscence about gazing, in a vacant mood, at a delicious piece of landscape, and its gentle accommodation. "Suddenly, an experience of disinterested observation opens at its centre and gives birth to a happiness instantly recognisable as your own."