

Barbara Weiss

THE HELL OF THE ENGLISH: BANKRUPTCY AND THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Cranbury, N.J.: Bucknell University Press, 1986. Pp. 208. \$29.50

Reviewed by A. Leslie Harris.

Barbara Weiss examines the depiction of English economic life in early and mid-Victorian novels. Given the preoccupation of the major novelists with a rapidly changing social order, Weiss's focus on the shakiness of an industrializing society is sound. Her discussion of the effects of bankruptcy on the middle class explains its pervasive fear and shame of economic catastrophe.

For a nonspecialist, "The Reality of Bankruptcy" (Chapter 2), "The Development of Corporate Capitalism" (Chapter 7), and "The Trouble with Bankruptcy Statistics" (Appendix) will be a revelation: not merely that the "great fear of economic failure that appears to have haunted the Victorians was solidly grounded in reality" (23), but that economic failure was as common as it was and as constantly in the public eye. Even more revealing is the conflict between moralizing public rhetoric blaming the bankrupt for his problems and pragmatic attempts at legal reform. Weiss's dissection of the efforts to reform the bankruptcy statutes (and to define exactly what bankruptcy means) is one of the strongest points in her study. By the 1880s, through an admittedly tortuous route, bankruptcy was no longer a criminal offense. In fact, while the bankrupt was still publicly condemned as a greedy wastrel, the law had moved to protect him from "the failures of the capitalist economy" (47) because the much-discussed shift from an agricultural to an industrial society also meant the emergence of modern capitalism, in both its individual and, more radically, its corporate forms.

The third chapter discusses bankruptcy in popular art, excluding the novel. Although her examples show the pervasiveness of bankruptcy as an artistic motif, Weiss's discussions of painting, melodrama, and "sentimental popular fiction" (64) lack a rigorous definition of "popular." While distinguishing the "'higher' art of historical or religious subjects" from nineteenth-century narrative painting and explaining the Victorian stage's fondness for such low subjects as the "desperate need for economic security" (56), being "sentimental" (65) and having a "high 'moral' tone" (63) do not adequately define popular fiction, especially when several of the novelists later discussed must be considered popular, no matter how one defines popular.

Before turning to individual novels, Weiss attempts a brief overview of bankruptcy as theme, structure, and metaphor in the novel—too brief to be satisfactory. The discussion of bankruptcy as metaphor is especially muddy, not really distinguishing plot or subject from manner of presentation.

Her discussions of the individual novels, however, redeem in their specific analyses the generalities of the overview. The chapter titles describe the use of bankruptcy in the novels: "Bankruptcy as Metaphor: The Threatened Self (*Mill on the Floss* and Others)," "Bankruptcy as Metaphor: Moral and Spiritual Rebirth (*Dombey and Son*; *The Newcombes*)," "Bankruptcy as Metaphor: Social

Apocalypse (*Little Dorrit; The Way We Live Now*)." Weiss's interest lies less in bankruptcy itself in fiction than in its metaphorical possibilities for charting changing attitudes toward a capitalist society. Her treatments of the novels support her argument that as bankruptcy is treated less as a plot of convention and more as a social barometer, the worldview of the novels becomes darker, leading to novels such as *Little Dorrit*, in which a morally bankrupt world makes it difficult for goodness to survive, much less thrive.

Stratis Myrivilis

LIFE IN THE TOMB

Translated by Peter Bien

Introduction by Peter Levi

Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 1987 Pp. xxiv + 328, \$12.95

Reviewed by John Taylor

Stratis Myrivilis's *Life in the Tomb* (1923-1924), a classic well-known in Eastern Europe, Italy, and France, is, as the translator Peter Bien remarks, "the single most successful and most widely read serious novel in Greece in the period since the Great War, having sold 80,000 copies—an astonishing figure for that small country" (xv). This excellent translation (a first edition appeared in 1977) could not be more welcome. To date only two other works by Myrivilis (1892-1969) have been available in English, *The Schoolmistress with the Golden Eyes* (1933) and *The Mermaid Madonna* (1949), novels which with *Life in the Tomb* form, in fact, a trilogy.

The novel consists of fifty-seven short chapters, every chapter except the first purportedly a letter written during the trench warfare on the Macedonian front in 1917-1918, by one Sergeant Anthony Kostoulas, "a university student, tall and olive-complexioned" (2), to his beloved. In the first chapter (or "prologue") the author employs the literary artifice of claiming that he himself had fought with Kostoulas during the war—Myrivilis indeed spent the decade 1912-1922 fighting in the Balkan Wars, the First World War, and the Asia Minor Campaign—and that while rummaging through an old chest he had come across a bundle of copybooks, the Sergeant's manuscripts. (Kostoulas, the reader learns, had been accidentally incinerated by a flame-thrower while in battle with the Bulgarians.) The author resolves to publish the manuscripts, remarking that if the "girl is real, not imaginary, and if she is still alive, I must ask her to forgive my audacity" (3).

This rather sophisticated narrative structure—the author finds not a bundle of letters, but indeed a bundle of copybooks containing the manuscript of an epistolary novel—has other subtle qualities. Many of the letters can be read independently, as if they were short stories, to the extent that while in the early midst of a first reading one might sense that the book, as a novel, exemplarily lacked "the immense force derivable from totality"—to recall Poe's criticism of novels in general. Yet it is precisely this heterogeneous aspect of the anecdotes, vignettes, and transcribed thoughts which verily mirror the