

ble for an Englishman born after the war to travel through Germany without a sense of shame, seeing Hamburg and Berlin, seeing medieval Nuremberg, which Allied aircraft burnt to the ground and where Allied prosecutors later had the effrontery to accuse Goering and Kesselring of bombing Coventry and Rotterdam; seeing, worst of all, Würzburg (not mentioned by Hastings), once the baroque gem of Europe. It was a town of such complete unimportance that it was left alone. Until, that is, March 16, 1945, after Dresden, less than nine weeks before VE Day, when the German armies were on the point of final collapse and when there was nothing else left to destroy. That night, using considerable resources of human ingenuity and inventiveness, Bomber Command razed the town to the ground in slightly under twenty minutes. Würzburg, like 600,000 Germans, had surrendered unconditionally. □

THE STATE OF THE LANGUAGE, ed. by Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks. University of California Press. 609 pp., \$14.95.

Status report

NOEL PERRIN

SO WHAT IS THE STATE OF the English language? Ask twenty people and you'll get—not twenty different answers, but still, variations on three or four sharply differing ones. One group, comprising most of the older people you ask, will say that English is in a bad way. Standards have fallen, Webster's heirs have abdicated, chaos is loosed. People no longer distinguish between "uninterested" and "disinterested"; every dialect is as good as every other dialect; those whose job it should be to maintain correctness are instead actively fomenting trouble.

Another group, which would include most of the optimists, will say that English is in a vital, growing phase. Free at last from the formality and prudery that have characterized it for the past two centuries, it is the true language for a

NOEL PERRIN, formerly chairman of the English department at Dartmouth, wrote Dr. Bowdler's Legacy: A History of Expurgated Books in England and America.

democratic age. At some cost in elegance, to be sure, it has become responsive, open, sincere. And that's cool.

Still a third group, best described by the absence from it of many white males, would make an answer that simply ignores both the positions described above. Members of this group would be concerned not so much with actual changes that have occurred in the lan-

(weak), of lawyers (so-so), of America Presidents, of philosophers (another winner), of computers. There are essays on black English (three of them), on Irish English, on the interaction of English and Yiddish. There is a gem of an essay on the language of psychotherapy—an essay so illuminating that you win up understanding more about what transactions occur in analysis than you

The book includes a gem of an essay on the language of psychotherapy.

guage, but with a discovery that they have made about it: that it is sexist, elitist, patriarchal. A weapon to destroy other people's cultures. A consciousness-molder that stamps the consciousnesses of more than half of all its users with a little label that says INFERIOR.

Finally, a fourth group (which would include, I guess, very few readers of this magazine) would greet the question with a truly sincere shrug or a "be fucked if I know." (Either of these responses would give some support to the claims of group two.)

All those not in the fourth group will be interested in *The State of the Language*. It is a fascinating book. It doesn't quite live up to its title, but it still has more to say about how English is used, and why, and by whom, than any book I have ever read.

If it were to live up to its title, it would have to be quite a different kind of book altogether; it would have to have a point of view. *The State of the Language* doesn't. It comprises fifty-five essays on different aspects of English (well, actually, about fifty-three, plus a couple of irrelevancies such as an essay on the effects that modern English has had on modern Russian; a charming essay, too, but concerned with the state of quite another language). These are punctuated at intervals by eight poems having to do with language, and preceded by a very brief introduction that is the weakest piece of writing in the book. It not only gives no overview, it doesn't really say anything.

Most of the fifty-five essays, though, have a great deal to say. With a few exceptions, they seem to have been written especially for this book, and they cover an enormous range. There are essays on the language of architecture (one of the best), the language of doctors

do by actually having been in therapy. There is a fine essay on the evolution of our own time of a language to describe states of consciousness—if you want to learn its vocabulary, listen to the next several teenagers you meet. (But you have to read André Kukla's essay to understand the language; the teenagers merely use it.)

And—to use the language of advertising—there is much, much more. Even I single out all the other especially good essays would take more space than have. Instead I will just tease you on mentioning Edmund White's outstanding "The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality" and Angela Carter's equally good discussion of the language of feminism. And Ian Robinson on dignity in language, Marina Vaizey on the language of art criticism, Walter Ben Michaels on formalism. I could go on for paragraphs with this praise if I weren't saving the rest of my space to talk about two flaws in the book.

THE FIRST IS A CURIOSITY limitation. English is, of course, a world language, and the structure of the book reflects this. The book has two editors: one English and one American. It has sixty-four contributors (one essay has joint authors); and of them thirty-one are Americans, twenty-six are English, one is Irish, one Australian, one Canadian, and the other for Anglo- or Canadian- or Irish-American. So far so good. But the contribution from the Australian is a bad poem—and New Zealand, the West Indies, English-speaking Africa, and India are nowhere. Scotland doesn't fare too well, either. This is really a book on the state of the language in England and America, with a brief nod at Ireland.

Worse is to come. Of the thirty-one Americans, sixteen are Californians. Of the sixteen Californians, twelve are from Berkeley. Similarly, a very large number of the English contributors are from Oxford and Cambridge. The Berkbridge-Oxbridge slant is pronounced. Perhaps that is why, though the language of the arts and the professions is so well represented, there is almost nothing about the language of the factory or the military base or the filling station. (There is a fairish report on English prison language, and a miserable if well-meant attempt, written by a leading California banker, to describe business language.)

The other flaw, as I have already suggested, is that the two editors didn't edit enough. They obviously did something right, or there wouldn't be so many good essays in this book. But they seem to have been nervous about controlling, much less rejecting, their more prominent contributors, so that most of the really bad pieces are by well-known people. Kingsley Amis on malapropisms is perhaps the worst, but Anthony Burgess on the technical problems of dubbing films comes close—he is readable but wholly out of place in this book—while the brief piece by Ishmael Reed amounts to an extended raspberry. Reed's rude noise sounds especially foolish coming right after the two excellent pieces on black English by Geneva Smitherman and Monroe Spears.

And, what I mind most—these two editors pull absolutely nothing together. Leonard Michaels at least contributed a good essay of his own (not up to his namesake Walter's, however); and Ricks, though his piece on clichés has that painful hyperself-consciousness that is the mark of the English intellectual in the post-Imperial age, certainly understands why clichés are to be defended. But when, back in Cambridge, he writes the tiny preface (Michaels in Berkeley must have been busy on a new novel), he can think of no better way to end it than with a feeble personification: "A preface is always tempted to assure others and itself," he writes, "that 'here is no random collection of, etc., etc.'"

If that preface was to become a person, able to suffer temptation and offer assurances, Ricks shouldn't have aborted it after the fourth paragraph. That's no preface: It's an embryo, a miscarriage. And it comes before a book that, while no random collection, is no living whole, either. If the editors had made it one, this book would be a stunner. As it is, it's merely very good. □

THE BIOLOGY OF PEACE AND WAR: Men, Animals, and Aggression, by Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt. Translated by Eric Mosbacher. Viking Press, 294 pp., \$15.00.

Heart of darkness?

MARY MIDGLEY

IS MAN AN APE OR AN angel? Is aggression a cultural or a biological matter? Polarized readers, determined to enforce this kind of sharp, simple antithesis, can of course make up their minds about this admirable book without reading it. For them there can be no biology of peace and war, since these are cultural matters. But the reasons for this polarization are most obscure. Nature and society do not compete; they are not alternative but complementary sets of causes. And, as Eibl-Eibesfeldt points out, they are themselves intelligibly connected, since society is a natural growth, not something imposed by supernatural forces. A full account of any complex phenomenon should refer to both. Anthropologists, when describing some unfamiliar piece of behavior, do not just report it flatly, as if human beings might in principle do or want absolutely anything. They try to explain the point of the action, to relate it to a natural structure of motives that their readers share. Admiration of alien cultures would be impossible without such a structure.

The human emotional repertoire, though vast, is finite. Of course it expresses itself through culture, and it would be absurd to neglect this. But then no serious person ever has neglected it, least of all ethologists like Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Konrad Lorenz, to whom that neglect has, so strangely, been attributed. They have in fact always stressed the crucial importance of culture, and have been careful to distinguish sharply between natural motives and the institutions that express them, before going on to consider the relationships between them.

MARY MIDGLEY is senior lecturer in philosophy at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. She is the author of *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*.

In the present case, they fully understand the difference between war and aggression. War is a complex and specific institution. Aggression is a general motivational pattern, a wide range of behavior with a common emotional backing and a common general function. That function—as ethologists have always insisted—is not to kill, nor even to harm, but to drive away. Aggression is not necessarily destructive. An angry creature is usually satisfied when its opposite number vanishes or shrinks into insignificance. The function of attack here is to space social creatures out in such a way that they can carry on



their complex lives without too much conflict and confusion.

The relation of such a general motive to the many particular institutions that can partly express it in human life is neither close nor simple, but it is still vital. In general a human institution, whatever its practical merits, can hardly thrive if it fails to appeal to some natural taste. Many activities, such as joking and dancing, art and religion, can be of great practical use to a group because they are bond-forming. But they could never have been imposed, cold, by rulers who simply wanted to form bonds among their subjects. They work because they appeal to natural tastes.

Such social forms owe their initial shape and their strength to a natural feeling, and must still depend on it even when they have taken on other functions. Thus we cannot argue, as Marvin Harris does about war, that because it has an economic use there is no need to consider its emotional appeal. Primitive war is not conducted simply as an economic device: The emotions surrounding it are strong, specific, and clearly expressed. Warlike display, threat, and battle are enjoyed and celebrated for their own sake, not just as a means of