The search for Enlightenment

Roy Porter's last book examines eighteenth-century morals and mores.

Flesh in the Age of Reason

by Roy Porter

Allen Lane: 2003. 574 pp. £25

Patricia Fara

Roy Porter was not afraid of tackling the big issues. "Who are we?" he demands at the beginning of *Flesh in the Age of Reason*. Unlike some philosophical conundrums, the great puzzle of human existence has never been the privileged preserve of arcane aca-demics, but has been repeatedly chewed over by ordinary people questioning what it means to be alive — or dead. With vivid prose and well-chosen quotations, Porter recreates the arguments of the men (and the occasional woman) who pontificated about the mind and the body, and about Heaven and Hell, during his favourite period, the Enlightenment of the 'long' eighteenth century from the Restoration to the Regency.

Enlightenment philosophers are famous — or notorious — for championing rationality, so his title's deliberately arresting contrast between flesh and reason immediately reveals that Porter is, once again, about to undermine conventional views. In his earlier works, Porter controversially moved the focus of enlightened thought several decades back in time and also transferred it over the Channel, away from France and into Britain.

Now he is fulfilling the promise he made in this book's companion, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (Allen Lane, 2000) to "examine the triangle of the moral, the material and the medical in the anglophone Enlightenment". Porter tells a story of gradual but uneven secularization, as the traditional immortal soul preached by Christian orthodoxy gave way to a personal but transitory psyche. By the end of the century, prescriptions for good behaviour were no longer imposed from above as safeguards against eternal torture, but were generated internally by rational minds that could be schooled into disciplining rebellious bodies.

The first quarter of this magisterial yet light-hearted tome is a tour de force in its own right — an ambitious yet accessible survey of attitudes towards souls, people and the afterlife stretching from the Greeks through to John Locke. Writing in his customary colloquial style, Porter expertly, if at somewhat breakneck speed, summarizes two millennia of Western thought, keeping readers of every background on board by tactfully defining words such as 'eschatology' or 'soteriology' in parentheses. Because Locke relocated the self in the mind, Porter concludes, his successors ran up against the Church authorities, who clung to the central Christian doctrine of

A view of the Enlightenment: William Hogarth's engravings for *Tristram Shandy*.

resurrection and the afterlife.

Switching into an even more enthusiastic gear, Porter then embarks on his tripartite analysis of Enlightenment Britain. Empathetic enjoyment seeps out of every sentence. What splendid examples he chooses: the Earl of Shaftesbury's worries about the propriety of blowing his nose in private ("the squalor of snot", Porter explains); Italian physician Santorio Santorio's determination to live in a cage-like weighing machine so that he could constantly monitor his state of health by comparing input and output; and William Godwin's prediction that rational training would not only vanquish death but also suppress sexual desire (thus conveniently preventing the problems of overcrowding that universal immortality would bring).

To leaven the abstract ideas he expounds, Porter provides engaging verbal portraits of his Enlightenment subjects. He describes the obvious candidates, such as David Hume, who found that reading the work of the Stoics only worsened his depressive symptoms, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who tried hard to convince his wife that overdosing on opium was less damaging than drinking tea. But there are also lesser-known characters here, including the "bossyboots" Mary Coke, who insisted on throwing open all the windows in her friends' houses for the good of their health; Viscount Halifax, who

informed his daughter that "Men, who were to be the Lawgivers, had the larger share of Reason bestow'd upon them"; and Miss Beswick, who bequeathed 20,000 guineas to her doctor on condition that she was never buried (in case she were not really dead). Fictional figures also feature strongly, especially Laurence Sterne's creation Tristram Shandy. Porter was one of Sterne's most devoted fans, and his exposition of the multiple allusions and puns is — like *Tristram Shandy* itself — superbly scholarly but also achingly funny.

"Life is understood backwards but it is lived forwards," declared the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Porter revels in recreating the controversies and sentiments of eighteenth-century people, but he was also committed to studying the past in order to understand the present and improve the future. He declares in the introduction to this book that "the sense of self needs rethinking".

As in *Enlightenment*, Porter turns to the eighteenth century for help in elucidating the twenty-first, and he roots modern pre-occupations with mental well-being and physical appearance in earlier health fads. Then as now, he points out, England was becoming "a nation of fatties", and he pinpoints the obsessional fashions of the 1790s as a "lifestyle watershed" that marked the beginning of the current infatuation with youthful beauty and slimness.

Near the beginning of this book, Porter evokes our common fearful uncertainty by quoting the English fever specialist Thomas Sydenham: "How my soul, which I look upon to be an immortal Being in me, that is the Principle of thinking, should extinguish with my Body I cannot in any reasonable way of thinking conceive." By focusing on the implications of mortality, Porter courageously chooses an emotive theme which, for his readers, is rendered still more poignant by the knowledge that this is a posthumous publication. Although he had finished writing the text, this book sadly lacks endnotes and illustrations. As some compensation, Porter's magnificent last work does amply demonstrate that his own "principle of thinking" will live on to illuminate future generations. ■

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A base in space

Leaving Earth: Space Stations, Rival Superpowers, and the Quest for Interplanetary Travel

by Robert Zimmerman
Joseph Henry Press: 2003. 528 pp.
\$27.95, £19.95

Asif A. Siddiqi

Ever since humans first dreamed of exploring the cosmos, the concept of the space station has stood at the forefront. Yet it was only in the early 1970s, nearly 15 years after the beginning of the space era, that both the Soviet Union and the United States launched their first modest space stations. The United States abandoned its impressive Skylab station in 1974, but the Soviets doggedly continued to build incrementally improved space stations of the Salyut series, until they discarded these to assemble the multimodular Mir space station in the late 1980s. These efforts were the forerunners of today's International Space Station (ISS), a continuously manned facility that has unfortunately inspired more headaches than hopes for future exploration.

In his substantial work *Leaving Earth*, Robert Zimmerman tells the story from the early missions of the Salyut and Skylab stations all the way to the current operations on the ISS. His focus is not on the science but on the human experience of developing and operating space stations and its attendant political context. He capably narrates stories of the numerous Soviet crews that visited the Salyut and Mir space stations in the 1970s and 1980s, an exercise that could have been repetitive and monotonous in less adept hands.

He engagingly describes how the Soviets

gradually extended the endurance record in space — from a modest three months in 1977–78 on the Salyut-6 station to a year-and-a-half in 1994–95 on board Mir — and how, in so doing, they gathered enormous experience in maintaining human life beyond Earth. We learn of incompatible crews, repair expeditions, psychological problems, failed visits to stations and innovative refuelling exercises — all part of a decades-long learning experiment.

Zimmerman shows how, as missions grew longer, Soviet crews became more self-reliant in fixing problems, and ground control became increasingly flexible in reacting to unforeseen situations. By contrast, in the 1980s and 1990s the Americans, who were flying relatively short space-shuttle missions, planned astronauts' activities down to the last minute, with little of the flexible planning that characterized the early ground-breaking Skylab of the early 1970s. As Zimmerman explains, these different approaches to mission planning were highlighted most starkly during the final eventful missions to Mir when Americans worked as guests aboard the Russian station. Yet by the end, the Russians had learned to respect the capabilities of US astronauts, who in turn acknowledged that their approach to mission planning was far from optimal.

The book works on a narrow level, as an engaging narrative of human experiences with longer and longer space missions. But as a whole, it is deeply flawed. Zimmerman's explanations of the political imperatives and implications of the Soviet and US space-station programmes are naive. The extraordinary claim that "the [Soviet] space program that the communists supported and funded in their futile effort to reshape human nature helped wean Russia away from communism

and dictatorship and toward freedom and capitalism" is so absurd that it undercuts much of the value of the book. Most Russians who experienced the fall of the Soviet Union or who study such things would be surprised to learn that space flight had anything at all to do with their path to a democratic society and the ultimate disintegration of the communist empire.

Also out of place are Zimmerman's frequent digressions about Leonid Brezhnev's alleged interference with the Soviet space missions of the 1970s and early 1980s. Reliable revelations from the past ten years or so — all of which Zimmerman ignores — seem to suggest exactly the opposite, that the Soviet space programme was not micro-managed at the topmost level.

Zimmerman also directs much vitriol against NASA, which he feels has lost direction since the halcyon days of the 1960s when it managed to accomplish such an extraordinary achievement as the Apollo Moon landings. Lamenting NASA's transformation into a top-down centralized bureaucracy that is incapable of innovation, he notes that "like ships passing in the night, the Russians have become freedom-loving capitalists, while the Americans have become control-loving freaks."

NASA deserves criticism for many things, but Zimmerman's conclusions betray his simplistic understanding of NASA during the Apollo years. As Walter McDougall has pointed out in *The Heavens and the Earth* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), NASA won the Moon race for many reasons, but underlying the success was its functioning as a centralized, top-down bureaucracy with a single, highly politicized goal (to land on the Moon before the end of the decade) and a lot of money.

If Zimmerman's work is undone by his

Warm welcome: new crew members arrive on MIR from Soyuz.

NASA/AP