

raised by critics. Lacey presents the critical response in all its breadth instead of focusing on a sustained and consistent line of criticism, so the book often reads like an annotated bibliography. The treatment of *ASU* is especially disappointing: That book was in many ways a direct response to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), but Lacey gives Rawls versus Nozick a mere two pages. In fairness, Nozick made a point of not responding to critics or revising his views in light of objections. He didn't want to become "defensive" about his work, and he often joked that he didn't want to spend his life rewriting *ASU*—a dig, perhaps, at his colleague Rawls, who made a career of revisiting *A Theory of Justice*.

Regardless, the philosophy that emerges from Lacey's study has an unfinished feel to it. That feeling persists in Nozick's last book, *Invariances*. He again tackles some big questions—necessity, objectivity, consciousness—and the book demands a lot from the reader. Nozick was a stupendously learned man, but that learning was not always lightly worn. In justifying once again his rejection of philosophical proof, he compares his method to that of physicists who use messy mathematics to make quick progress in a new area. He casually invites the reader to "recall the state of the calculus before [Karl] Weierstrass, and the path to renormalization methods in quantum field theory"—and this is only the introduction. Still, there is some great philosophy here. The discussion of evolutionary cosmology and how it might give us objective worlds is state-of-the-art metaphysics, both new and exciting.

Nozick is an important philosopher who led an interesting life. With his passing, what we need, and what he deserves, is an intellectual biography with the scale and scope of Ray Monk's book on Ludwig Wittgenstein.

—ANDREW POTTER

AS I LAY DYING:

Meditations upon Returning.

By Richard John Neuhaus. Basic.
168 pp. \$22

It would be nice to forget all the baggage that accompanies Neuhaus's lovely

new book. For some, the book will have to carry the weight of its author's famous conversions: from Lutheran vicar to Catholic priest, and from liberal social activist to one of our more temperate and stylistically gifted neoconservatives. For other readers, the weight of doctrinal purity implied by the nihil *obstat* and the imprimatur on the copyright page might compromise the book. The audacious literary allusion in the title could cause a few knowing heads to shake, and the book's willingness to present itself as a quiet and well-informed self-help volume might prompt others to ignore it.

Almost hiding in the subtitle is the best clue to the book's intent: meditations. Several years ago Neuhaus, whom the popular press labeled one of the most influential intellectuals in America, almost died. A misdiagnosed colon cancer ruptured his intestines, necessitating major surgery. During the operation, doctors unwittingly nicked his spleen, causing internal hemorrhaging that required a second operation a day later. One of his doctors later told him, "It was as though you had been hit twice by a Mack truck going 60 miles an hour. I didn't think you'd survive."

In the tradition of great meditations, in which momentous events throw life into focus and place its purpose, or lack of purpose, under intense scrutiny, Neuhaus reflects on the meaning of death. He invokes Augustine, Michel Foucault, Hamlet, and Big Daddy from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, among many others. On one page, he moves from a poem by W. S. Merwin (which he summarizes as "poetically pleasing, but not . . . a rewarding line of inquiry") through Descartes to Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, and ends up most comfortable, not surprisingly for a priest, with Thomas Aquinas. Although one might disagree with one or another of his summaries (for instance, I find the Merwin more interesting than he does), Neuhaus's ease with a broad range of references can be breathtaking.

But the most vivid and memorable moments in *As I Lay Dying* come from his own experiences. Of course, there is his near-death experience, which he nicely

relabels a “near-life experience,” and which he recounts without self-pity and with a wonderful sense of humor. I was most moved, though, by those moments when his pastoral vocation takes him to the bedsides of the dying. I found myself wishing this little book were just a bit longer and carried more of this kind of authority.

Neuhaus is satisfied neither with an objective understanding of the condition of death nor with a purely subjective response to the event. While recognizing that such arguments can be “endlessly fascinating,” he knows that meditations don’t have to reach firm conclusions. He understands—and persuades us, too—that “death eludes explanation.” He is finally content with an understanding of the correlation between brain and thought, between matter and spirit, that can only be explained as mystery. Despite what might sound like an overtly Christian ending, it is a measure of the success of this meditation that it can convince, at least for a moment, even the nonbeliever.

—KEITH TAYLOR

***THE ELECTRIC MEME:
A New Theory of How We
Think and Communicate.***

By Robert Aunger. Free Press. 334 pp. \$27

If the brain is an alphabet soup, according to Aunger, “memes” are the alphabet letters that spell out our most fundamental beliefs and values—in effect, our culture. Richard Dawkins coined the word to help explain cultural evolution in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In the years since, the concept has spawned a thriving field called memetics, complete with academic conferences (Aunger organized the first one) and rival theories.

Mememes are abstractions rather than tangible objects, and many memeticists are philosophers by training. In this captivating if sometimes challenging book, Aunger, a biological anthropologist, approaches the subject with scientific precision.

He differs with those who view mememes and ideas as synonymous. A mememe, in his

view, is far smaller, the most basic building block of understanding. “You can’t equate meaning with mememes,” he writes. “Meaning comes in the contingencies of their expression.” Mememes are mere nuances: cognitive morphemes whose sum equals a word and, in accumulation, an idea. That is, it takes a bunch of mememes combined with a bunch of context to produce a single thought, let alone a fully developed concept.

Some memeticists liken mememes to viruses; others say they’re closer to genes. Aunger rejects both models. To him, a mememe is more like a benign parasite that’s incapable of reproducing without a host, the host being the human brain. In the brain, mememes are both fecund and redundant, generating multiple copies to ensure against cell death. Out of sheer repetition, the mememe eventually embeds itself in long-term memory. From there, it transmits outward in search of another brain.

How do mememes bridge the gap between minds? They don’t fly through the air like “magical darts,” Aunger writes, or spread like germs. According to his model, the mememe expresses itself as a signal—utterance, writing, semaphore—that “searches for a place to create a brother mememe elsewhere.” Without actually leaving the brain, the mememe seeks to lodge a duplicate mememe in another host. The mememe proselytizes. But, as human proselytizers know, the message may not be faithfully reproduced—“noise in the chain” may modify or corrupt it.

Originally, Aunger says, mememes probably came along to influence behavior. In shaping behavior, they seem to be governed by natural selection. Mememes compete, he writes, “to be selected for the good effects they produce in the host.”

One of Aunger’s most compelling arguments is that mememes can store cultural information in the external environment. While a mememe stays in the brain, its message can be buried in an artifact, such as the Rosetta stone, that awaits a signal to replicate itself in a new brain—a signal that may not come until the mememe’s living hosts all are dead. The symbiotic relationship between mememe and artifact is especially rich concerning books, paintings,