Peter Rabbit and the Grundrisse
by Rosa and Charley Parkin

There can be no such thing as an innocent reading of the Tale of Peter Rabbit. As that most perceptive analyst of the later manuscripts, Enid Blyton, puts it: "We must pose this work the question of the specificity of its object, its relation to its object. The only reading of Peter Rabbit which speaks to us through the conceived layers of the past-becoming-present is a symptomatic reading—a reading in which we listen attentively to Beatrix Potter's silences."

So much is of course clear to the average reader of this epochal work, this work which has not only transformed our collective perceptions of rabbitness (Kaninchenlieheit) but which has contributed a new chapter to the political economy of the cabbage patch. It is our contention in this brief monograph that Peter Rabbit marks a watershed in Potter's philosophical development, a distinct epistemological rupture from the earlier problematic of the Herne Bay manuscripts (above all, The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin and Jemima Puddleduck). Nothing more tellingly illustrates the completeness of this scientific metamorphosis than the contrast between the rather schematic hermeneutics of the Nutkin-Puddleduck period and the sure grasp of the principles of comparative political economy manifested in Peter Rabbit. The dramatization of the conflict between Peter and Mr. McGregor in the celebrated garden scene brilliantly pinpoints, in a so brief episode, those acute contradictions and levels of overdetermination characteristic of pre-capitalistic cabbage production. The revelatory instance (Potter's favoured methodological device) is that 'moment' when Mr. McGregor, chasing Peter from the garden, seizes the rake and aims a blow at the fleeing creature. Through an inspired stroke of transformative symbolism, in which the essence of the rake changes from that of tool to that of weapon, Potter lays bare the irresolvable antagonisms of a sub-feudal order in which the role of producer and the role of warrior are indissolubly linked yet totally incompatible in their binary opposition.

It is quite clear from our reading of the unpublished drafts and revisions of the early manuscripts that Mr. McGregor is to be understood as an embodiment (Träger) of that class of small peasant proprietors from whom baronial landlords extracted in direct and unmediated forms surplus value in the dual forms of military service and corvée labour.

However, we must state quite emphatically that despite certain surface similarities the role of Mr. McGregor in the productive process is not to be equated with that of the Seven Dwarfs, as so many theorists from Schumpeter onwards have argued. The extraction of surplus from the productive labour of the Seven Dwarfs by the Royal household (Snow White) was a mediated political form, though ultimately backed up by terror, which is a condition more akin to the Asiatic mode of production than to sub-feudalism. Failure to appreciate this crucial distinction has led to quite understandable confusion among the readers of these works—though unfortunately we cannot go into the important question of whose self-interests are in fact being served by these not accidental attempts at mystification and concealment.

The thesis we wish to advance is that the entire episode between Peter and Mr. McGregor, quite apart from the 'rake' scene is decisive in marking a conjuncture in the transformation of Peter Rabbit from an object of history to
the real subject of history. It is precisely at that 'moment' when Peter is threatened by the 'rake' that he gets his blue jacket caught on the fence, and can only make good his escape by abandoning it. Again, in this capsule statement we have Potter's brilliant portrayal of the self-emancipatory act—the shedding of the 'jacket' conveys to us of course the throwing-off of servile, anthropomorphic status imposed by the structures-in-dominance of the ideological state apparatus. It is during Peter's tearful monologue in the potting shed that the full significance of his act comes home to him: i.e. that he has finally and irrevocably entered the realm of history as a reflexive agent. From this moment on he will be marked out by his kinsmen, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail (who chose to remain in the ever-pre-given-structure of the wren) as a figure of destiny: the singular and heroic figure for which all Potter's earlier works have in a sense prepared us.

Our attempt to produce a correct reading of Peter Rabbit deliberately poses the problem of what it is to read. Only in answering this question can we feel confident in our task of rescuing Potter's contribution to science from the hands of those who seek to reduce this work virtually to the level of a fairy tale.

FOOTNOTES

4 Adorno's biting comment is here very much to the point: "The thought to which a positive hypothesization of anything outside the immanence of the dialectic is forbidden, overshoots the subject with which it no longer simulates as being one." T. Adorno, *Spasmus*, Frankfurt, 1972. This passage could have been written specifically with Mrs. Tiggy Winkle in mind.