

Satirical as Swift

Vail

Trevor Hoyle

John Calder £4.95

TREVOR Hoyle's *Vail*, published in 1984, encapsulates the grim mood of our times with an incisive accuracy. It's as depressing as Orwell's 1984, and much nearer to the bleak Thatcherite bone.

Set in the not-too-distant future, the novel describes the travels and trials of Vail as he progresses from unemployment in the poverty-stricken, radiation-poisoned North of England, to megastardom in a London peopled by voracious media personalities and politicians.

Unable to deal with nationwide unemployment, poverty and discontent, the Government secretly introduces the U.M.P.S. programme ('Unwashed Masses Prefer Suicide'). This involves dumping toxic waste near densely populated areas, discharging radioactive effluent into waterways, and reducing healthcare to the point at which it breaks down completely.

"On the one side, several thousand tonnes of toxic and radioactive waste to be disposed of; on the other, large urban populations that had outlived their usefulness and quite frankly were a pain in the arse. Bring the two together and—hey presto! Both problems solved at a stroke," boasts the Minister for Environmental Pollution. For the mutants and deformed imbeciles spawned by this treatment, the most revolting fate of all is in store.

Hoyle describes the victims with a detached and pitiless clarity which is a hundred times more effective than pathos, and which reminded me strongly of that greatest master of political satire, Jonathan Swift. In tone and indeed subject matter, and in sharpness of execution, parts of this book call to mind Swift's *Modest Proposal* for the disposal of the unwanted babies of the poor.

The novel's weak spot is an insertion in italics, seeking to explain why everyone goes along so willingly with evil:

"These are very clever lies, cunningly designed to seduce and take advantage of those base impulses that lurk inside all of us... that to protect the weak you have to be repressive, that to show compassion you have first to demonstrate brute strength, and, above all, that by helping yourself you are, by some impenetrable, convoluted piece of schlock logic, helping others."

Worthy stuff, but the rest of the book does it without preaching; this reads like it should have been edited out. It's a small fault. *Vail* is funny, compelling, and enormously depressing. Read it.

Jane Rogers