Book Reviews

Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp.192.

Zangwill raises some very essential questions the answers to which are indeed necessary for explaining the validity of the art works that have evoked remarkable response in the last century such as that of Duchamp and Worhol. Shifting his attention from the theories and appreciation of avant- garde arts he prefers adherence to analytic trend of art criticism inaugurated by Morriz Weitz (1956) and brought out into its full blossom in Beardsley's classic work *Aesthetics* (1958). All the seven chapters in this book were published earlier in different journals, and are now correlated into a coherent argument: issues such as philosophy of art, aesthetic creation, counter examples to aesthetic theories of art, aesthetic functionalism, audience, sociology, essence, identity and survival of art are all of correlated interest that contribute toward an integrated vision of art work and its theoretical formulation, appreciation and evaluation. In an attempt for answering the question "What is Art" Zangwill prefers a methodology of *rational explanation* rather than a metaphysical one such as searching for the common characteristics of art works that are their differentia not found in other objects man-made or natural, i.e., the Wittgensteinian 'family' theory, and thus considers the issue of aesthetic purpose, aesthetic properties, instrumentalist view of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic intention for developing an *aesthetic theory or art.*

The notion of the term aesthetics derived from the Greek *aesthesis* meaning sensation in general, and drawing upon the Kantian notion of aesthetics that refers not only to sensation in general, but to a specific kind of sensation with a disinterested attitude, that might be correlated with the Aristotelian idea of non imitative *techne*, creates a problematic network that had been the concern of the philosophers of the last century who wanted to do away with the notion altogether. But Zangwill disagrees with such rejection and states that those philospheres have failed to reject it in practice or have produced theories that are unilluminating : "The notion of the aesthetic is in fact indispensable in understanding art", because it is "essential if we are to *explain* our attitudes to art, and it is essential if we are to *justify* our attitudes to art." (p.3) Thus one is not compelled to accept the avant- garde art as "art" and forced therefore to redefine art for accommodating these arts. One might simply reject Duchamp's *The Fountain* as an art work. Similarly the attempts for defining art in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (other than common characteristics) are also futile, simply because these conditions are the defining factors only in some cases such as mathematical theorems and scientific principles, i..e., in case of modal equivalence, but certainly not in case of semantic equivalences that are only arbitrary. If Zangwill is correct, and so he appears, then the attempts for understanding art in terms of language (Hagqberg, 1995) must fail. Each cultural phenomenon must have its own criteria of definition and mode of understanding, appreciation and explanation, although several cultural phenomena might be correlated relevantly. Ethics, language, art, religion, politics and economics are all branches of a cultural area interrelated differently in different courses of history. But it never means that one can / should be interpreted in terms of the other. Zangwill thus refers to the Renaissance Europe and Japan where there have been radically different categorizations that apply to very different things. With such a belief the present reviewer argued for different modes of experiencing different forms of art (*Art and Experience,* 2003) endorsed upon by Martin Jay (*Songs of Experience,* 2005). Zangwill suggests that a rational definition of artworks should take four issues into consideration: common characteristics, modes of production, essence and affect on the audience although the last two of these issues have been highly controversial- both of them originating from the analytic philosophy (Beardsley and Wimsatt, "The Affective Fallacy"; Sukla and Davies, ed., *Art and Essence*, 2003). Further, Zangwill does not agree with George Dickie that there is no bad art; in suggesting an *explanatory* criterion (rather than *extensional*) of adequacy he agrees with the evaluatory approach of Plato, and asserts that natural material might be value-neutral, but art, as a man-made object, is intentional and hence is subject to evaluation, although he does not agree with Plato that art's value is only *apparent*, not real - may be that some avant-garde arts differing from the mainstream works have only apparent value not accepted generally. Boldly enough, Zangwill criticizes two very influential theorists of art – Ernst Gombrich and Arthur Danto who forwarded anti-formalist and contextualist (socio-artistic/the art world theory) theories respectively. He writes, "The particular aesthetic that I develop – the Aesthetic Creation Theory – does that (accounts for the rationality or art-activities) by seeing art as having the purpose of embodying values of a certain sort. These values are aesthetic values – typically beauty and other valuable aesthetic properties… Aesthetic theories of art have a great advantage over theories that privilege ideological, cognitive or emotional purposes of art. Aesthetic theories appeal to *pleasure;* and the desire and pursuit of pleasure is familiar and understandable. The kind of pleasure that aesthetic theories appeal to is likely to be a special kind of pleasure: a pleasure with greater value than more pedestrian kinds of pleasure. Nevertheless, it is pleasure. Around the pursuit of pleasure is an intelligible and rational pastime." (p.11)

The ideas of Zangwill sounds quite traditional, and appeal, as many would complain now, to the taste of bourgeois ideology. His idea of aesthetic value as a delight of special kind, not meant for or available to the common pedestrians, echoes the Victorians and modernists like Matthew Arnold and Thomas Eliot and their followers who plead for an elite culture, the arguments much debated by Raymond Williams, his disciple Terry Eagleton and the sociologists of the Frankfurt School. Zangwill is well aware of this contemporary sociological perspective of art as a commodity of mass culture, that is skeptic about the aesthetic properties as well as our appeal to these properties in experiencing them and judging their values. Zangwill calls both these phenomena as *production skepticism* and *consumption skepticism* respectively, and

states emphatically that they are based on "multiple uncharitable misunderstandings of the category of the aesthetic" that he has highlighted in his earlier work *Metaphysics of Beauty* (2001). Art is undoubtedly a social product, but both its production and consumption are certainly not commodified as other material productions are: ghee, paper, cement, cosmetics, although one can explain why they are produced and consumed. The value of their production and consumption is not the same. All kinds of production do not have the same kind of explanation.

Zangwill distinguishes between *strong* and *weak* programmes in the sociology of art. In the former case art production is completely determined by the socio-economic conditions under which art is produced without any reference to the way artists retain their individual taste whereas in case of the latter both the social factors and the artists' individual tastes explain the production of art: "In so far as post-modernist Marxist and feminist aesthetics assume the strong sociological programme, they are defective." (p. 173).

Aesthetic Creation manifests its author's clarity and comprehensiveness in understanding and presenting seminal problems in art creation, interpretation and enjoyment. His stress on the pleasure principle might be considered a revival of the traditional views. But the author rightly consults the tradition, because the tradition of art criticism violated by the philosophers is indeed intended for finding /founding new traditions. Boldly enough Zangwill challenges these ambitious "ground breakers" – Goodman, Danto, Dickie and many others including the sociologists and feminists – who break the ground itself on which they stand, and warns them politely that they might do so at the risk of their own existence. How long can a shooting star or a meteor illuminate the sky? Ultimately come back to the same Luminaries who illuminate the day and the night - the sun and the moon are our life-long lamps to see the world both in its reality and illusions. Art is, after all, an aesthetic creation that promotes our understanding and enjoyment of reality, the tension of both a type and a token rich in properties not available in any other man-made objects, provided the epithet "aesthetic" is not trapped in any verbal circularity or semantic ambiguity : Art as an aesthetic creation must be aesthetically appreciated by an aesthetic perception. If this is the hard truth, then why the aestheticians dabble in exercises that probe into exploring unaesthetic factors in aesthetic objects? Only two answers are there to meet this ticklish question – because they understand or propose to understand aesthetics as an unaesthetic area of human exercise, or perhaps, they propose for an unlimited semantic extension of the epithet itself.

Geoffery Samuel, *The Origins of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp.422.

The book ,as the author suggests, origins in his direct association with some of the relevant areas of the Tibetan and Indian religious systems as well as in a scholarly insight into the social and anthropological perspectives of these cultural contexts.

Another important reason behind the author's undertaking of this project is the immense growth of sincere interest in these areas noticed among the global population. So the "impetus behind this book is the desire to understand what these developments mean, and what yoga, meditation and tantra have become and might still become within their new global context". (p.2) What is immediately realized is the difference between the present work and the legendary work of Late Mircea Eliade under the supervision of Surendranath Dasgupta at Calcutta University during the first half of the twentieth century. The author confesses that he is not a Sanskritist and his approach to the subject is anthropological as he does not explore new facts and cults, but *re-examines* the facts already explored in the history of these religious practices keeping the relevance in view in the present context of our global culture.

The first five chapters focus on the early growth of Buddhism, Jainism and the renunciation traditions within Brahminical religion (4^{th}-2^{nd} c B.C.), and the chapters 10-12 cover the period from the 5^{th} to 12^{th} centuries, the former phase dealing with the development of yogic and meditation techniques whereas the second phase dealing with the growth of tantric practices and the interrelationship of yoga and tantra. These are the two key periods, the author thinks, that reflect the origin and development of the techniques for training and controlling the human mind-body complex, reshaping the human consciousness for attaining higher values than the workaday life proposes. Thus, yoga and tantras presuppose to identify a meaning of human life as against the skepticism, nihilism and materialism of the Western world that altogether reject the issue of meaning of human life simply as an illusion and therefore meaningless- a deception, a false consciousness called ideology.

The author traces the history of religion in the Indian subcontinent back to its Indo-Aryan period, because yoga and tantra, his subjects of research, form parts of this religious tradition, and it is this religion that provides a scope for attaining values higher than what humanity attains through other areas of activities and practices. He traces how the Vedic values culminated in *mok¾a* or liberation that involved observation of moral and ascetic rules (*vratas*) and practice of austerity (*tapas*) both counted as necessary parts of yoga and tantra *sâdhana* processes of the Buddhist and Brahmanic traditions. The historical and practical dimensions of the terms such as *brahmacârin, tapas, dharma* and *vrata* that he describes are quite helpful for understanding their occurrences in the later Brahmanic texts such as Patañjali's yoga aphorisms and the *Bhagavadgîtâ*. Samuel has been truly a historian of religion in this regard, although he uses the secondary sources rather too often. What is most interesting in his searches is the growth of Indian religion amidst a very healthy blending and intertwining of the Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic, particularly Buddhist, traditions frequently one complementing the other.

But the author comes to the core of his topics of discussion only after traveling more than half of his journey- i.e. to the concept of *dhyâna* and *samâdhi* on pages 218 ff. His observation that the Brahmanic concept of *samâdhi* in Patañjali draws upon the

Buddhist notion preached by Buddhagho¾a (5th c.) is controversial – why should it not be the reverse? Patañjali's yoga aphorisms cannot be stretched to such a later period of history. If there is a question of "may or may not" in identifying the grammarian and the yogacæ¢strî, I have always regarded them the same person belonging to the 2nd c. B.C. I say, Buddhagho¾a draws upon the Brahmanic texts. Apart from the historical considerations, what is most disappointing is the author's dealing with the central issues of the yoga and tantra systems of the Indian religion: his differentiating meditation from yoga is unsound and his failure in understanding the interrelationship of yoga and tantra is also only too obvious to point out. *Samâdhi* or focus on the body-mind unity and beyond is undoubtedly the ultimate aim of meditation that forms the major part of yoga *sâdhana.* Had he been a real practitioner of yoga, he should have mentioned the importance of *prânâyâma* with *khecarî* posture and should have explored the significance of such practice in going beyond the experience of our psychic existence. Breathing exercise and breath watching exercises are the most essential techniques of yoga which are followed by both the Brahminic and Buddhist schools, and their origins can be traced beyond the Vedic period – to even their Indo-Aryan origin. *Samâdhi* in its two levels –determinate (*vikalpaka*) and indeterminate (*nirvikalpaka*) - refers to a gradual progress from the semi-concentrative status to the absolute merger in the *vijñâna* level of experience that completely lacks any mind-body awareness. This might be explained in terms of the Buddhist notion of the experience of emptiness (*úûnyatâ*).

One can fairly assume that the tantric practices of both the Brahmanic and Buddhist traditions draw profoundly on the Vedic scriptures, particularly from the *Atharvaveda* and grow up complementing each other in their rivalry to each other, both supported and opposed by the prevalent administrative systems. Obviously, Buddhist systems of yoga and tantra were under great constraint since the fall of the Mauryan empire that was taken over by the Brahmanic rulers of the Sunga and Ka´va rulers, and for several centuries later Buddhism failed to rival Bahmanism, the latter continuing to supersede and assimilate most of the Buddhist methods of worship, meditation and philosophisation till the 8th c. A.D. when the former was finally expelled to Tibet and other places of Indian subcontinent – the south-east and Eastern Asia. Harsavardhana (7th c. AD) being the last patron of Buddhism (on par with Brahminism) and Islamic invasions frequently destroying the Buddhist shrines in the North-Western Himalayan valleys, Brahminic practices remain constant in converting almost all the Buddhist tantric deities into their Brahmanic counterparts as also converting their techniques of *sâdhana* including *mantras* and *man²alas* into the Brahmanic systems.

Geoffrey Samuel is mostly successful in surveying a vast source of secondary materials without any original insight in synthesizing them to impress and encourage his readers for a useful reading.

Rita Felski (Ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy,* Baltimore County: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, pp.368.

In recent days "tragedy" is being rightly rethought. A form of drama that

evolved out of the Hellenic experience of life and its manifestation in rituals that provided the Greeks with an understanding of the major crisis of life – suffering and the possible way for its redemption either by ethical practices or by unconditional surrender to the invisible and unsurpassable destiny – is now re-examined in social and aesthetic perspectives. It has been a serious critical question whether tragedy should be understood and explained in its classical social perspectives only, and therefore the aesthetic genre be confined to its historical origin and development, or be interpreted in an extended conceptual dimension so that its universality can be theoretically justified in each and every phase of human existence. Tragedy is thus, now being taken out of an arena of specific world view that considers man as a puppet in the hands of destiny and, as such, he should, surrender himself to it unconditionally. The more he tries to escape it (*hubris*), the worse he suffers. The new move favours a total rejection of destiny. All suffering is man- made, a social factor due to a type of political economy that controls the destiny of the majority of people by way of exploitation, and, therefore, tragedy is a historical art form that changes its pattern from time to time. No metaphysical world view is necessary for its understanding, and, therefore, no religious method is granted for its relief. The grandeur of tragic hero (*hamartia*) is reduced to a common man's struggle for existence against all odds of the capitalist economy. Aristotelian tragic emotions of pity and fear have lost their religious dimensions in the socialist perspectives of the British Marxist Raymond Williams where they are simply political and historical originations that deny the very idea of humanity. Following him, Terry Eagleton, his distinguished disciple, comments that "One of the most poignant tragedies of our time is the fact that socialism has proved least possible when it is most necessary" (2003:59). Whereas Georg Steiner announced long back that "tragedy as a form of drama is not universal… And nearly till the moment of their decline, the tragic forms are Hellenic" (1961:3), recent thinkers insist on the continuity of this literary genre through the course of history with new definitions and perspectives of the sense of tragic in life and its representation in art forms that can be validly called tragedy in ever-changing aesthetic norms and criteria. Substantial contributions have been made by the philosophers of modernist and postmodernist traditions such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus and Girard to the Platonic and Aristotelian perspectives along with the (French) classical tragedies and their successors in the European, American and colonial cultures.

The origin of tragedy in the sixth-century(B.C.) Athens was of ethical and philosophical concern dramatizing the persistence of human blindness, vulnerability and error; but, simultaneously, the fear and the need for their catharsis as a religious purification has recently been justly acknowledged. The present book evolves out of a special issue of *New Literary History* (XXXV.1. 2004) guest-edited by Rita Felski adding seven fresh essays and restructuring the volume with four systematic sections: Defining Tragedy, Rethinking the History of Tragedy, Tragedy and Modernity and Tragedy, Film, Popular Culture that follow an introduction by herself and followed by a commentary by Terry Eagleton.

Aristotle's consideration of the *King Oedipus* as the model of tragedy presupposed a speicific world view that disentangled human life from its political context and focused the meaninglessness of human life left to the determination of invisible extrahuman principles, may they be environmental or divine. "Tragedy was perceived as the enemy of politics in promoting a sense of hopelessness, fatalism and resignation." (P.4) But against the individualist/existentialist confinement of the idea of tragedy, Raymond Williams announced, for the first time, that tragedy is not a single and permanent phenomenon, "but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions." (p.5) Next turn of the feminist critics was to dismiss tragedy "as a genre preoccupied with the heroics of masculine overreaching." Aristotelian focus on *Oedipus* as the model tragedy was further elevated to an archetypal structure in the psychology of Freudian cultural studies. But alternative proposals might be made by citing examples of other Greek tragedies such as *Antigone* and *Bacchae* where male domination is not the central issue. Besides, the second point in rethinking tragedy is the Nietzschean approach that considers tragedy not as a specific genre, but as a form of human sensibility that can be manifested in several other genres such as opera, novel and poetry or film.

Joshua Dienstag, following Paul Gordon (2001) liberates tragedy from a pessimistic world view commonly associated with Nietzsche whereas, in reality, Nietzsche opposes vehemently Schopenhauer's pessimism. Eagleton and Gordon, therefore, suggest that "if tragedy is pessimistic, it must lead nowhere, or nowhere good from political perspective." Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism or courageous pessimism is characteristically different from the depressive pessimism of Schopenhauer associated with his view of life as meaningless. Nietzsche's pessimism might be compared with Camus's notion of absurdity.

Adrian Poole has already discussed several notions associated with tragedy and the tragic (2005). Simon Goldhill highlights, in the present volume, how tragedy differs from tragic: further, tragedy as a literary genre does not advocate the pessimistic idea that human life is tragic in character, because, as Socrates has said, "pleasure and pain are mixed not just in drama but also in the whole tragedy and comedy of life." Similarly Aristotle offers a theory of tragedy, not of tragic. As tragedy does not reflect the pessimistic view of life, Aristotle justly opposes the Platonic project for banishing it from the city. Martha Nussbaum takes up the moral aspects of the emotion of pity as a basic element in tragedy and offers an erudite and insightful analysis with particular reference to Sophocles' *Philoctetes* that is rather rarely studied and appreciated since Aristotle with few exceptions like Lessing and Goethe. Nussbaum points out that it is this *Philoctetes* that illustrates Eagleton's thesis that the confrontation with human pain in tragedy is both immediate and universal: the sympathy for Philoctetes is due to "a pseudo problem bred by a bogus historicism… he is in agonizing pain from his pus-swollen foot. There is no use in pretending that his foot is a realm of impenetrable otherness which our modern-day notions can grasp only at the cost of brutality colonizing the past." For Eagleton, there is nothing 'ennobling' or 'uplifting' of suffering

in tragedy, this suffering being simply a universal "fragility and vulnerability" of the human body coming to terms with our finite and fragility that projects a political ideology. While agreeing with Eagleton that tragedy, in the context of *Philoctetes*, is a materialist phenomenon, she is rightly unwilling to support Eagleton's sweeping generalization, and investigates thoroughly the moral aspects of 'pity' in the Greek context and its cultural value in both its original context as well as in the subsequent Western cultural traditions with due emphasis on the conventional world views that legitimize aesthetic taste, which, contra Eagleton, is not merely an ideological phenomenon.

Michel Maffesoli links tragedy with the issue of world view, and observes that in the postmodern societies there is a shift from "ego-centred" to a "place-centred" world-view. Whereas there is an optimistic claim to the totality of the self, the world and the state in the tragedy of post-modernity, there is a loss of the individual ego in a greater self of natural or social otherness. The Greek tragedy stresses the role of Fortune and Fate in human life – the variety of human actions, the sense of their precariousness and the brevity of human life, simultaneously linking tragic with hedonism, with a conviction that life is not simply lived but must be avidly lived: what is intended is not simply a consumption but an intense consummation. This culture of pleasure –the passions, ideals and enthusiasms – shapes the mode of confrontation with fate and thus structures the tragedy of the tradition. But in the modernity/ post modernity opposition thoughts and lifestyles change – "in the frame work of the former history unfolds whereas in the latter the event arrives. It intrudes, it compels, it wreaks violence. Hence its brutal, unexpected, always startling quality."

Although it is not possible to highlight all the sixteen essays placed in the volume, one can assure that all of them are highly original and perceptive. It is quite natural to expect from Eagleton (Commentary) a statement that terror springs straight from the bourgeois social order, the absolute freedom of that society being a freedom in void. Tragedy reveals the limits of human endeavor that yearns for the carnal world, stuffing more and more colonies, conquests, commodities into its insatiable maw…" Whatever may be the intensity and rigor of Eagleton's arguments for reducing tragic sensibility to a political phenomenon of bourgeois democracy, a sociological perspective of human experience bereaved of any deceptive aesthetic value of ennobling feelings of pity and fear, the age-old Aristotelian cathartic perspectives of tragedy continues to contribute to human *erlebnis* beyond the confinements of any political ideology.

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