

Book Reviews

ADORNO'S AESTHETICS AS A LITERARY THEORY OF ART. By Mario Farina. London and Switzerland: Springer Nature/Palgrave Macmillan. 237 pp.

The copious literature that has accrued on aspects of Adorno's philosophy of art continues to spring forth. Its principal source lies in the pellucid waters of the *Aesthetic Theory*, tantalisingly incomplete at the author's death in 1969, but there are many tributary currents reaching back to his earliest reflections on music, his visceral recoil at the protocols of the popular song of the 1930s, his readings of the shifting ideologies of modernism. There are false trails here and there. Theodor Wiesengrund, the seventeen-year-old author of a journal article on expressionist theatre, who damns the naturalistic drama of the 1890s as outmoded 'trash', will receive short shrift forty years later from the more reflective Adorno, who unmasks those inclined to condemn the great works of naturalism as outmoded for the ahistorical philistines they are. Mario Farina, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Florence, argues in the present work that, of all these currents, the one that most surely provides the key to unlocking the complex mechanism of the Frankfurt thinker's aesthetics is his theory of literature. If all art, construed as an autonomous category in the form of the aesthetic, exists at a remove from society, it finds its function thereby in the critique of the very social existence that produces it. The explicit discursivity of literature aids it in this task, so that while the visual depiction of natural beauty in oil on canvas, for example, cannot escape the commodification to which all aesthetic objects, as objects, are susceptible, the literary representation of it – even the literary representation of paintings themselves, as in the ekphrastic passages in Proust – occupies a zone beyond the reach of reification.

It is for this reason that Adorno argues in the *Aesthetic Theory* that works of art all harbour something like a linguistic quality, even where their techniques bear no relation to the semantic structuring of language, as in music. Farina highlights a moment in Adorno's ruminations on the new music of the atonal and twelve-tone schools, in which he states that serial compositions are prepared to incur the risk of being magnificent failures, a judgment, Farina observes, less obviously applicable to the literary representation of the twelve-tone violin concerto in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), for which Adorno stood service as musicological consultant. The more artworks approach the condition of a literal address to reality, even where explicitly critical of it, as with the politically engaged works of novelists and dramatists such as Sartre and Brecht, the more they traduce the authenticity of art's challenge to a faulty reality. 'Art does not come to know reality by depicting it photographically...' he writes in the essay, 'Extorted Reconciliation', 'but by expressing, through its autonomous constitution, what is concealed by the empirical form reality takes.'

Late capitalist society, Adorno argued in the postwar period, needs a form of artistic expression that 'leaves no material untransformed', a task for which literature is uniquely equipped. The great amnesia that set in during the post-1945 reconstruction in Germany, which produced humanist verse that celebrated life's enduring loveliness, less than a decade after the same culture was conducting mass burials of the asphyxiated and the half-dead in the killing camps, was self-evidently corrupt, but a new generation of writers that was prepared to look alienated experience in the eye, and faithfully record it through blasting apart the formal conventions of the arts, offered hope. 'Extorted Reconciliation' represented Adorno's dismissal of the claim of Georg

Lukács that modernist art was a diseased subjectivist tendency to which the socialist realism of the Eastern bloc, in which he served the role of cultural functionary, when not being punished for occasional deviations that only the state authorities could see, was the healthy antidote. If art was to do nothing more than reflect a reconciled reality, it would be no more needful to human amenity than candy-apples.

Not merely literature itself, though, but the means of addressing it was of crucial significance, as Adorno suggested in a short radio address of 1952, 'On the Crisis of Literary Criticism'. The critique of literature must turn on social critique, not evaluations of its literariness. What was the skill of a well-turned metaphor, compared to the need for it to tell the truth about the forces of history? 'Criticism has power only to the extent to which every successful or unsuccessful sentence has something to do with the fate of humankind,' Adorno states. The interiority in those literary works that first took up the technique of the interior monologue, those of Proust, Joyce, Woolf and others, is not the solitary solipsism that Lukács claims to detect, but is itself, as Adorno puts it, 'socially mediated and essentially historical in substance'.

Farina is an attentive exponent of Adorno's literary aesthetics, delineating its principal reflections with capable succinctness. A philosophy of literature in the Frankfurt manner, he shows, involves elucidating the nature of literary works in the framework of a historical understanding of reality, literature being itself a product of social labour. In a skilful section on the work of Franz Kafka, he expounds Adorno's notion, gleaned from the 'Notes on Kafka' in *Prisms*, that there is a need in Kafka's writing first of all to take everything literally. What happens to Joseph K. in *The Trial* is in itself of primary importance, before one considers what it might symbolise or represent about the human condition. Too much existentialist reading of Kafka – and also, notoriously, of Beckett – brushes past the explicit content in search of those all-important metaphors that express, in liberal humanism's favourite cliché, 'what it means to be human'. A man is arrested for something he hasn't done. When he is killed like a feral dog at the end of the story, he sees a window opening in the distance, from which a figure throws forth its arms in apparent sympathy. These matters are hideous enough, and expressive enough, in themselves to be worth dwelling on them in themselves, before we hurry past them in quest of the elusive hidden meaning that emerges like the bit of comfortless wisdom from the fortune-cookie.

There are inevitable parallels here with the hermeneutic approach of psychoanalysis, as Farina goes on to elaborate, but what the exegetical attitude often misses is precisely that it is what strikes the dreamer about the dream in the course of relating it afterwards, the emphases and articulations that he gives it, that constitute its true meaning, not the arcane occultism that fixes an objective symbolic meaning on every concrete object and action. In this way, too, fragmentary details speak the truth more tellingly than the whole. When Gregor Samsa reawakens after his family's first horrified discovery that he has become a giant bug, he finds something has been left for him, 'a basin filled with fresh milk in which floated little sops of white bread'. The prospect fills him with hungry glee until he discovers, not only that the injury the family has inflicted on him prevents him from feeding in comfort, but that, in his new insectile condition, he no longer likes milk. Dehumanisation starts at these mundane, and darkly surprising, levels.

In the final chapter of this book, Farina tries out an Adornian literary analysis on three canonical beacons of American postmodern fiction: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), three texts published in the years since Adorno's death, each of which, in its singular technical fashion, is about the fate of mass psychology in modern experience. These gigantic novels are collections of fragmentary diegetic phenomena, representing a disintegrative world in face of which the narrator himself retreats into an unstable orbital state, split like the atoms whose splitting determined the course of the twentieth century. In the Pynchon, particularly, the chaotic experience of warfare, and the multiple conspiracy theories it generates, stand for a contemporary condition in which, within

an overarching administered structure as implacable as total war, nothing is fixed. Paranoia generates its own scientific principles, themselves as vaporous as the smoke that rises from the bomb-craters: 'Paranooids are not paranoids (Proverb 5) because they're paranoid, but because they keep putting themselves, fucking idiots, deliberately into paranoid situations.' It might be true once, and then never again, or not at all. Who knows?

Mario Farina's study is substantially compromised, sad to relate, by the frankly ghastly English in which the Italian author has boldly tried to write it. Many sentences regularly need reading two or three times before their strangulated meaning emerges from the verbal contortions, and the regular recourse to superfluous parentheses – 'in fact' is a regular favourite of the author's – hardly helps. The blame for this state of affairs lies less with an academic chancing his arm in a second language than with an academic publisher that, while reserving the right to charge the earth for an intellectual work, sees no need for a qualified proofreader to make it sound coherent.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO RABINDRANATH TAGORE. By Sukanta Chaudhuri (Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 515 pp.

W. B. Yeats in his introduction to 'Gitanjali' noted that Tagore, "like the Indian civilization itself, has been content to discover the soul and surrender himself to its spontaneity" (Tagore xx). The book being reviewed here is a comprehensive collection of articles and essays by leading Tagore experts from India and Abroad. The book is classified into two parts: Part I Overviews and Part II Studies. The articles present both a diachronic and synchronic study of the life and works of Tagore. In the introductory chapter 'A Garland of Many Tagores' reflects the visionary poet's pluralistic attitude and belief in diversity through the words of Anisuzzaman, "We must look at the garland of many Tagores not as a string of disjunct elements but as an organic, integral whole" (Chaudhuri 22). 'Rabindranath and His Times' by Biswajit Ray provides the background to Tagore's personal life, his education and love for literature, his vision and creation in the changing world.

As a person who believed in modernity as "both contemporary and beyond time" (Chaudhuri 35) Tagore epitomizes the Indian philosophy of the changing times. 'Tagore's Poetry' by Sukanta Chaudhuri underscores Tagore's preoccupation with the themes of Divine-devotee relationship, love and nature. Banabini 'The Voice of the Forest' under the title 'The Life of Plants' represented through the lines, "Earth and Sky are sunk in deep sorrow...Mother Earth clasps the smallest blade of grass to her bosom and cries, 'I won't let you go.'" (Chaudhuri 65) and the respect for women's lives and women's being through the analysis of the text 'Manasi' (Woman of the Mind) may interest eco-critics and ecofeminist thinkers. Tagore's interest in music and songs is studied by Ashish Lahiri in his essay 'Something of a Musician -Tagore's Songs'. The author provides a comprehensive view of the musical tools used by Tagore that includes: *dhrupad*, the Hindustani classical music, the *kirtan*, inspired by his devotion to Radha and Krishna, the Bangla *Tappa*, the modern Bangla songs, the Baul folksongs of East Bengal, western music of Beethoven and Bach as mentioned to Romain Rolland and the South Indian Carnatic music. Tagore's belief in 'Unity in Diversity' is reiterated by his ideas in his essay 'Tapovan' (Forest of Purity),

Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man...