

Minima Moralia is, primarily and finally and incipiently once again, a catalogue of the multitudinous wrongs that modern life has coerced its clients, universally, to endure. If its strictures add up to a sociocultural physiognomy of a nation poised on the brink of global pre-eminence – the tough guys in their Cadillacs, the dinner-jacketed gent spurting a little soda into his post-prandial whiskey, the radio stations playing swing, the cinema audiences staring rapt at the monochromatically glowing face of Lana Turner – its reflections are more than mere period-pieces. They sounded the theme on which postwar societies have played tireless variations ever since.

STUART WALTON
Torquay, UK

THEODOR W. ADORNO: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION. By Andrew Bowie. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 127 pp.

If those of us who have written introductory guides to the substantial corpus of Theodor Adorno's thought have felt it necessary to acknowledge, at least partly out of intellectual guilt, that the Frankfurt theoretician would utterly have repudiated such an approach, the task Andrew Bowie has taken on would appear to mandate nothing less than the penitence of the medieval flagellant. Oxford's Very Short Introductions series, inaugurated in 1995, now runs to more than 700 diminutive volumes on everything and everybody from Abolitionism to Zola.

Adorno is the first luminary of the Frankfurt School's inaugural generation to be included, having been inducted into the pocket-sized pantheon ahead of either Walter Benjamin or Herbert Marcuse. Bowie, whose previous works include an authoritative study, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy* (2013), dispenses with the *mea culpa* and plunges straight in with a reference to the interview Adorno gave to *Der Spiegel* in the year that he died. 'Herr Professor,' the interviewer begins, intending to refer to a recent explosion of student unrest, 'two weeks ago, everything seemed all right with the world,' only to be preemptorily cut off by the Professor: 'Not to me it didn't'.

In an age when, to recast the dictum of Friedrich Schlegel on the philosophy of art, what passes for critical theory usually lacks either the critique or the theory, it is more than ever essential to recall that the work of the Frankfurt School and its disciplinary foundation, the Institute for Social Research, was nothing if not a thoroughgoing assault on contemporary society and its shabbily culpable cultural forms. It is worth remembering this above all because, although the Frankfurt School has an unassailable place on the historical syllabus of politics, philosophy, sociology and cultural studies, and Adorno in particular is held to be one of the twentieth century's most versatile, original and provocative theorists, very little work being produced in these disciplines now actually bears much relation to the thinking of Frankfurt's first generation. Where it does surface, it is either too shallow or one-dimensional, lacking in dialectical proficiency, or else refused as hopelessly elitist or unrelentingly cheerless.

Andrew Bowie is a responsive and clear-sighted interpreter of Adorno's thought, by no means a blinkered acolyte but encouragingly resistant, except in one or two perennial instances, to the tendency to line up the familiar row of fairground ducks, against which traditional and analytic social theory has felt itself obliged to take aim. It is true, nonetheless, that Bowie is sensitive to a certain excess in Adorno's rhetorical idiom and, by extension, the substance of his arguments. On the opening page, a warning is sounded about the 'sometimes unnecessary obscurity of his prose style', a caution that is repeated a little further on, where we are told that his writing 'sometimes ... tips over into unnecessary opacity'. In a subsequent chapter on Adorno's philosophy of history, it is stated that he entertains a 'sometimes hyperbolic view of the "totality" of modern society'. These caveats are intended less in the spirit of *lasciate ogne speranza* than in the manner of the calorie counts on a

restaurant menu. There will be some propositions that are not only difficult to digest, but that are probably not very good for you.

As Bowie makes abundantly clear, these moments where Adorno's discourse appears to exceed reasonable bounds are deliberate strategic moves, equivalent to the startling *sforzando* in music. Terry Eagleton once expressed this as Adorno's being 'more concerned to rub the ridiculousness of his doctrines in our face than to defend them'. If this makes him sound like a zany irrationalist or, even worse, somebody who had up his sleeve a set of impartible doctrines, the true emphasis of these observations is that he believed that postwar social conditions in the capitalist Western hemisphere amounted to a 'context of delusion', with which contentedly rubbing along was a dereliction of the critical faculty that might begin to dispel it, while raising considered objections in the mild-mannered Social Democratic tradition amounted to already playing its lethal game. In the 1960 essay, 'Opinion Delusion Society', Adorno states that deviant, lunatic opinion is not a fringe manifestation of false consciousness, as traditional Marxism was inclined to see it, but arises from within the circuit of normal opinion as such. Because the world is a heteronomous network, idiotic opinion feels like self-assertion, so that pointing out patiently how ill-informed it is does nothing to detoxify the underlying structural-psychological soil from which it springs. Among the non-fascist recourses people of the day resorted to were the conservative superstitions of astrology, a topic on which Adorno wrote an exhaustive work of content analysis, 'The Stars Down to Earth'.

The hyperbolic expressions that Adorno himself risks in his work, particularly in the short essays and radio lectures he wrote throughout the 1950s and 1960s, are intended to blast apart the consensus in which dynamic critical thinking becomes ossified. Criticism of this approach is less effective when it simply takes Adorno's assertions literally, as his successor Jürgen Habermas would do, pointing out what we have already intuited in letting an outrageous declaration pass. In *Negative Dialectics*, he claims that '[p]eople are spellbound without exception, and none of them is capable of love, which is why everyone feels loved too little'. The suggestion that everybody is deluded has Habermas out of his seat with a point of order, on the grounds that if everybody was deluded, the author of this statement would have to be too. Is nobody in the world capable of love? Do our own disappointed lives not furnish the odd warm-hearted exception? Is there nobody who feels loved enough, even momentarily, even if they have to rake through the vanished past to recall such a time? And yet, as a critique of damaged emotional life in a society that, having put the old sentimental affects to the torch of the capitalist exchange principle, while simultaneously taunting them with their tearjerking simulations in the productions of the culture industry, the damning, sweeping verdict exposes a moment of truth.

If there is a problem with this mode of thinking in the present generation, half a century after Adorno's death, it is that rhetorical exaggeration has been co-opted by the worst elements in international politics, and turned instead into a version of truth as poisoned facticity. There is hardly any need to list the political leaders who have found this style suits their nefarious purposes precisely. That doesn't, in itself, render such a cathexis of critical thinking invalid, only impose on its practitioner the duty to make it quite clear that a general and genuine liberation of fettered social subjects, not their immurement in infantile delusion, is the goal.

Bowie shines a brilliant hermeneutic light on Adorno's theory of the historicity of nature, both the second nature people have inherited from the socialisation of preceding generations and that of the now widely despoiled and imperilled natural world. The twin currents of nature and history are mutually determining, meaning that human history itself is not a process that arose purely from natural impulses, but nor is the natural world, to the defence of which Green politics has rallied, simply a changeless essential principle underneath the injuries it has sustained since the industrialisation of the developed world. Although he disappointingly reiterates in passing the fashionable libel that Adorno's theoretical work bears some 'philosophical proximity' to that of the Nazi magus Heidegger, Bowie does at least also concede that the present-day trend to cultural nationalism, in whose service

the rector of Freiburg preached the pre-eminence of the Classical Greeks and the Germans, represents the corrosive depletion of the human spirit's chances of self-determination.

When he turns to Adorno's aesthetic theory, Bowie finds the going considerably rougher. A charge he curiously brings against it is that it is too wedded to philosophical structures of thinking, which seems a surprising way to miss the point. The case that Adorno makes for the liberating social potential of avant-garde music at the last mid-century, that by refusing the language of tradition it retained the possibility of inducing audiences to perceive the truth of alienation, may not have survived the subsequent sterility of twelve-tone technique, as Adorno would acknowledge, but its problem as a case is hardly that its philosophical dimension overburdens it. 'His dialectical reversal is too dependent on a philosophical idea,' Bowie thinks. In any case, he suggests, the theory was wrong because tonality, once convicted of desuetude, lives on. Perhaps it does – rock and roll will never die – but that scarcely in itself equips it for taking on a critical role.

There are very few critics alive who are prepared to defend Adorno's animadversions on jazz, a form to which he was constitutionally allergic. At the risk of a *reductio ad hominem*, it is worth pointing out that Professor Bowie's case for the defence rests on the witness of his own alter ego as Andy Bowie, jazz saxophonist. This case relies on the notion of 'participation', suggesting that, as Adorno and I suspected, jazz is considerably more entertaining to those who play it than to those who listen to it. The theory that it represents a form of resistance to the musical establishment, of 'opposing convention', was exploded generations ago by practitioners like Guy Lombardo and Cleo Laine, but in any case, some acknowledgement that, as a musical form, it has long been assimilated by the culture industry would have had the astringent merit of candour.

It is true that a musical effect with which Adorno is prepared to credit the work of Gustav Mahler, that its recourse to worn-out conventions throws a glaring historical light on the social suffering represented by those very conventions themselves, is not one that he is inclined to extend to the formulaic productions of the popular recording industry. There are layers of dialectical complexity in the process by which an electronically generated composition in ruthless 4/4 can provoke, especially when accompanied by ebullient joy or inflamed complaint in the lyric, an emotional catch that feels like insight. Bowie thinks Adorno takes too little account of such sustaining emotional effects, instead relating music to its socio-historical roots, as though it could ever be divorced from them. The claim, however, that 'art as a social practice produces real change in people's lives' returns us to the performance imperative, at the expense of a theory of reception. No concrete examples are given, but the suspicion must linger that what it produces at its most ameliorative is psychological adjustment, not 'real change', which awaits as ever the universally enlightening flash of insight that the Emperor is naked.

In his closing reflections, Bowie turns to the perduring problem of metaphysics. Is there a form of perception, a conscious experience, beyond the enveloping concretion of the everyday world? He would appear to be too ready to attribute to Adorno the conviction *tout court* that the traditional metaphysical life is over. 'That metaphysics is no longer possible becomes the last metaphysics,' he writes in the book on Mahler. 'Announcing the end of metaphysics,' Bowie glosses this, 'is itself metaphysical, because it makes a universal claim.' It isn't the universality, though, that makes it metaphysical, otherwise it would be an ethereal abstraction to assert that all human beings need food. Those moments of Mahler that penetrate the hardened integument of social delusion with recollections of true experience, including experience of the transcendent, in fact belie the standard narrative of progressive material disenchantment. This is why *Negative Dialectics* ends with the postulate that there is a 'solidarity' between non-identitarian thought and metaphysics, at the precise moment that Auschwitz confirms the verdict of the Enlightenment that humanity will need to live without the redemptive mirage that things could be, let alone ought to be, better.

For a Very Short Introduction, Andrew Bowie's text probes impressively into some of the deeper strata of Adorno's philosophy. One might regret the house style of attributing all in-text citations

solely to the edition of the German *Gesammelte Schriften*, rather than more assiduously to the individual texts from which they arise, an omission not really made good in any sound bibliographic fashion by the meagre References section. The newcomer to Adorno, though, will come away with a reasonable conviction of the multivalent complexity of his thinking, and not just the obligatory caution about its intemperance.

STUART WALTON
Torquay, UK

PLATO'S EXCEPTIONAL CITY, LOVE, AND PHILOSOPHER. By Nickolas Pappas. London & NY: Routledge, 2020. 302 pp.

As timely as it is intellectually earnest, the complex of ideas that occupies Nickolas Pappas' recent monograph *Plato's Exceptional City, Love, and Philosopher* elucidates the relationship between several distinct appearances of what he calls the "exceptional items" in the dialogues of Plato. Though this nuanced project is fundamentally intended for specialists, Pappas offers the general reader a handful of industriously woven guiding threads in his introductory chapter, situating his notion of the exceptional within the philosophical and historical contexts of its appearance and relating these components back to Plato's reception by later figures of the Western philosophical tradition. With Kant, for instance, Pappas recalls the metaphorical summary of the former's criticisms of Plato through the image of the ever-rising bird. What makes the example useful to the reader is his subsequent justification for the reference, adding to this that in spite of the temptation to view his own project on comparably lofty terms, there lies a marked difference between his itinerary and Plato's: "Because they are found among ordinary samples of their kind, exceptional phenomena can engage with the objects of experience, not just through empty metaphors. The philosopher spoken of in the *Phaedo* who manifests courage unmixed with fear appears among other people and their adulterated courage, often facing the same dangers they do" (10). Far beyond this dialogue, in which the exceptional presents itself as courage, Pappas' comprehensive approach is fittingly broad in scope, explicating the instantiations of the exceptional in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* as erotic desire, in the *Republic* as the good city and as the person of the philosopher in the *Ion*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*.

Though depicting his accounts of each appearance, and doing so with fidelity, would require much more detail than what has thus far been offered, what lies in common to the approach of each chapter can be briefly clarified by outlining his discussion of tyranny in the book's third chapter. The chapter, "Speaking of tyrants: Gyges and the *Republic's* city," further triangulates the ties between eros, incest and wisdom — a triad that proves highly significant in previous chapters concerning the exceptional form of eros tacit in the speeches given by Diotima and Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. While much of the chapter takes its direction from an analysis of the difference between the accounts of Gyges given by Glaucon in Book I of the *Republic* and in Herodotus's *Histories*, Pappas carefully situates his reading of the former's speech downstream from his interpretation of Cephalus's opening remarks. Pappas' claim here is not simply that "old age brings calm and freedom," but by extension, "that a life governed by sexual desire is a mad one; more broadly that sexual desire resembles political despotism" (120). Though the commendable development of Pappas' argument certainly owes to his scholarly rigor, it is additionally the product of his ability to continually write in the shadow of his initial premises at later points in the chapter. Novel as the reading might be, its conclusions are not drawn from his intentions but rather from employing the historical conventions of his source material as the parameters of his approach. As Pappas reminds his readers,