

# BOOK REVIEWS

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*Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed.* By Alex Thomson. London and New York: Continuum, 2006. viii, 175 pages. \$24.95.

Critical thought alone, not thought's complacent agreement with itself, may help bring about change. —Theodor Adorno

For the last several decades the critical writings and reputation of Theodor Adorno (1903–69), one of the key members of the Frankfurt School and one of the leading contributors to the development of Western Marxism, have been continually battered from virtually all political perspectives, but perhaps, nowhere more so than from within the left itself.

Whether it is from the postmodern left and cultural studies (Jim Collins, for example) or from within the second generation of the Frankfurt School itself (in the form of Jürgen Habermas), left-wing critics from Marxist to social democratic tendencies have seized upon Adorno's work as symptomatic of a cultural elitism and political impotence that highlights, by way of contrast, the political efficacy and democratic roots of their own projects. While several important works on Adorno have been published in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, which reaffirm Adorno's relevancy for this current moment, I was, at first, skeptical about whether Alex Thomson's new book *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed* would add anything new to the mix. There are already two significant introductions to Adorno available in English: Martin Jay's classic *Adorno* (published by Fontana Press in 1984) and Simon Jarvis' excellent *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (published by Polity Press in 1998). My initial thought was that this was merely going to be another introductory text, rehashing many of the well-trodden paths of Adorno scholarship: in other words, a very pedestrian read. I was relieved that my initial apprehension was entirely unfounded and that Thomson's book is a significant new contribution to the recent literature that revives and reframes Adorno's critical legacy as perhaps more relevant for the twenty-first century than at any other time since its origins.

Thomson sets the tone for his book in the introduction where he tackles one of the thorniest issues that face his readers and that invariably draw the scorn of critics like Lezek Kolakowski: the question of the relation of form to content in writing. Thomson alerts the reader to the fact that his book "cannot be a simple instruction book" taken up "as an off-the-shelf solution" (7) to reading a complex set of ideas that are "playful" in the way they blend form and style. Thus, argues Thomson, "it cannot be intended to replace a reading of Adorno's work, but to precede and accompany it" (7). Most importantly Thomson emphasizes, ironically, the need for the reader to remain perplexed by the work of Adorno as it is in that perplexed state that a critical thought process is engaged. To produce a text that panders to the reader would betray Adorno's critical principles and undermine the critical intentions of Thomson's text.

Thomson uses his first chapter to provide an historical and political context for the subsequent three chapters which focus on three key aspects of Adorno's thought: his work on art and culture, the relationship between his social and moral thought, and the interaction between philosophy and history. In each of the chapters, Thomson explores a very nuanced and dialectical analysis of each particular facet of Adorno's work. In the chapter on "Art and Culture," for example, he elaborates on the difficulty of branding Adorno as either a modernist or an avant-gardist when the essential question is Adorno's fundamental ambivalence to either category, especially to the aesthetic tradition. From Thomson's perspective Adorno is interested in the art that would be the hardest to integrate into the commodity fetish of contemporary capitalism but that this does not correspond to a blind faith in the autonomy of art nor an adherence to the historical avant-garde's objective of overcoming the separation of art and life. Thus the illusion of art's autonomy must be revealed which, paradoxically, affirms "the possibility of autonomy" (81).

Through all three of the later chapters, the same difficulties and ambivalences within Adorno's thought are explored, demonstrating both why so many critics are impatient with such displays of dialectical pyrotechnics yet, at the same time, why his thought resonates so much with the contemporary world. Adorno's attacks on 'progress' and 'modernity' in the section on "Philosophy and History," echoing his colleague Walter Benjamin, offer little solace to traditional radical or democratic socialist political movements. As Adorno himself anticipated in his essay 'On the Actuality of Philosophy,' he "is not afraid of the reproach of unfruitful negativity" which will be made at a philosophy of 'radical criticism' (152). "Only by overcoming its own affirmative impulses can metaphysics press beyond itself; only 'philosophy which no longer makes the assumption of autonomy, which no longer believes reality itself to be grounded in the *ratio* ... will stop there where irreducible reality breaks in upon it" (152). Yet, given that, there are still gains to be made through the application of critical reason, as Thomson writes, "But the fact of bearing witness and the process of critical thinking both still attest to the promise that there might be more reason and more justice in the world, however attenuated such a prospect might seem under present conditions" (147).

To this end one of the important ideas in Thomson's book are the new efforts to recognize Adorno as a public intellectual. Using public appearances, lectures, radio programs, in other words, a broad spectrum of media to communicate with a larger public, Adorno himself was not resigned to addressing only a small intellectual elite. Thomson writes that certain recurring themes present themselves throughout Adorno's career: "the need to ensure events never repeat themselves; the need to develop a deep-rooted democratic culture; the need to avoid positivist or technicist thinking; the importance of culture but the impoverishment of what passes for it; administration and systemization which passes from top to bottom of society, in which the thinker is entwined" (36). The overall image of Adorno that emerges is of a highly critical, engaged, public intellectual who exemplifies the most rigorous adherence to self-reflexive critique.

Thomson has accomplished a very difficult task in *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed*, making Adorno's work more readable and more accessible to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students without overly trivializing or simplifying the

complexity of Adorno's thought. Having said that, I would still recommend that undergraduate students and general readers approach the Thomson Guide after having digested introductory works such as the aforementioned works by Martin Jay and Simon Jarvis. Fortunately, the writings of Theodor Adorno, thanks to writers like Thomson, have been rescued from the intellectual margins to which they were relegated by the last three decades of oversimplification, and sometimes outright vilification, by many postmodernist and cultural studies scholars.

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*Unstoppable Brilliance: Irish Geniuses and Asperger's Syndrome.* By Antoinette Walker and Michael Fitzgerald. Liberties Press: Dublin, 2006. ix, 332 pages. \$32.

In Walker and Fitzgerald's book, *Unstoppable Brilliance: Irish Geniuses and Asperger Syndrome* (2006), a compelling argument is made for a unique kind of mind common to a group of nine Irish geniuses: Robert Emmet, Padraig Pearce and Eamon de Valera, all distinguished politicians, Robert Boyle, William Rowan Hamilton and Daisy Bates W., from the sciences and mathematics, and the literary giants W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. At the heart of this mind, whether manifested in politics, science/mathematics or the arts, is an "unstoppable brilliance" marked by an insatiable curiosity, boundless energy, a singleness of purpose and a drive for precision and truth. By way of a thoughtful analysis of the lives and contradictions of these extraordinary human beings, the authors show that these particular qualities of mind co-exist with liabilities: a diffuse sense of self, social awkwardness and a naiveté about, even a disregard for, others and the dictates of social convention, the constellation of which is known as Asperger syndrome (a variant of autism). And, while Asperger's is typically associated with a heightened sensitivity to criticism, a sense of moral authority and an inflexibility of conviction, there is also a "Peter Pan"-like charm and innocence, and a purity of mind and creativity unhindered by convention. As Walker and Fitzgerald argue, this constellation of features "brings both blessings and burdens," the blessings of which in extreme cases can constitute brilliance.

Clearly, the intent in this scholarly analysis of Irish icons is not to pathologize but rather to provide a context for understanding the minds of these and other similar geniuses. It also would be unfortunate to get caught up with the issue of whether each or indeed any of the individuals in question is truly afflicted by Asperger's disorder. Walker and Fitzgerald are well informed of that about which they speak, whether it is referred to as a disorder or an extreme form of a particular (largely innately-determined) temperament. The main point is that the constellation of features so well captured and articulated by the authors represents, in varying degrees, co-existing abilities and disabilities. In other words, there are costs associated with certain strengths, if not brilliance. The really important contribution here is the 'humanization' of these particular qualities of mind, the recognition of their potential for genius, and the critical insight that their expression is not restricted to the sciences and mathematics but rather is found in the arts as well. The book also contributes to our current understanding of individuals with

Asperger's and related autistic spectrum disorders by emphasizing the largely neglected issue of self-identity, exemplified by their poor autobiographical memories (vs. memories for facts and events) and tendency to live in the here and now. And finally, the book is a fine read, full of fascinating information about the lives and achievements of a diverse group of exceptionally gifted and complex individuals. As noted by Kathy Sinnott in the foreword to *Unstoppable Brilliance*, it is to be hoped that a greater awareness and understanding of people who share this ability/disability is achieved, and that we are inspired to appreciate "both the potential and the plight" of all such individuals.

Susan Bryson

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*Crises of Memory and the Second World War.* By Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 2006. x, 286 pages. US \$29.95.

This study—or, rather, collection of essays (at least seven out of nine of which have previously appeared as book contributions or journal articles, albeit "often [in] quite different versions")—examines the elusive phenomenon of historical memory in relation to World War II as it involved mainly France and above all the Shoah.

Such a topical focus, complemented by a methodology which analyzes for the most part French literary texts and films, corresponds to both the author's professional qualifications and personal background: Susan Rubin Suleiman, Professor of the Civilization of France and of Comparative Literature at Harvard, describes herself as a Jewish-American born in Hungary. Accordingly, the sole non-French subject she treats is the 1999 movie *Sunshine* by Hungarian director István Szabó (its producer, Robert Lantos, is Hungarian-Canadian), which tells the story of the rise to wealth and then near obliteration of a family of Budapest Jews. Suleiman's emphasis in this chapter is upon the question of Jewish identity when facing pressure to assimilate—here "Magyarization"—and how this screen epic depicts a fictional family's memories of its history over several generations.

The remainder of the book deals with the varied ways French writers (in a few cases authors with some connection to France) and one filmmaker have tried either to recollect or to repress their country's terrible experience under Nazi occupation. Beginning with Jean-Paul Sartre, who between the liberation of Paris and the end of the war published three essays that consciously sought to obfuscate the role of French men and women in overwhelmingly collaborating with or at least not opposing the Germans, especially in the persecution of Jewish fellow citizens, Suleiman proceeds through the deconstruction of different types of testimony to expose conflicting remembrances of France's so-called "dark years." These genres include the supposedly factual memoirs of former members of the Résistance, which she demonstrates, however, to be more or less seriously deficient in their accuracy even in recalling crucial events such as the betrayal and arrest of national hero Jean Moulin, as well as the sometimes dubious techniques employed by Marcel Ophuls in making his celebrated documentary film "Hotel Terminus" on the career of Lyon's notorious Gestapo chief, Klaus Barbie. The deliberate instrumentalization of truth might be expected in the commemoration address by

politician and writer André Malraux on the occasion of the solemn 1964 entombment of Moulin in the Panthéon. But what should an uninitiated reader make of the startling revelations by this accomplished scholar about the admittedly fictionalized accounts of two Holocaust survivors, the Spaniard Jorge Semprun and Hungarian-born Elie Wiesel, whose autobiographical novels *Le grand voyage* (1963) and *Nuit* (1958) were originally composed in French? By carefully comparing incidents in each of these famous works with subsequent treatments by their respective authors, Suleiman illustrates the absolute contingency of remembering. Her thoughts on the experimental writing of Georges Perec and Raymond Federman, both children in wartime France traumatized by the murder of their parents, and on the problematical nature of forgetting and forgiving as responses to such personal crises, conclude this provocative volume. Nor ought its value be diminished if an historian takes issue with the premise that the central importance of the Second World War is “in large part” owing to the Shoah (3). That perception, too, rests upon individual memory.

Lawrence D. Stokes

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*Law and Empire in English Renaissance Literature.* By Brian C. Lockey. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006, 236 pp. \$99.95.

This intriguing and accomplished exercise in interdisciplinary scholarship examines British, and more particularly English, attitudes to the ethics of conquest in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Lockey's focus is the transformation in the mindset of English subjects and elites from an inward-looking, defensive view of England's place in the wider world to a more ambitious and aggressive vision of empire and 'just' warfare that could accommodate expansion. In order to understand how English thinkers justified bloody incursions into Ireland and then the new world, Lockey looks to an unlikely source; the genre of romance, a form condemned throughout history as frivolous and distracting. As Blair Worden has shown for England, and David Quint for Europe, while epics deal with valour and military victories, it is romances and romantic interludes in epics that pay attention to the plight of the defeated, providing ample scope for discussions of justice, good government and the ethics of war.

Part One examines 'romance and law,' and Lockey's central contention is that “while one might expect religious or legal authorities to have formulated legal rationales for English expansionism, it was actually writers of romance fiction who employed juridical standards in order to evaluate acts of foreign intervention or conquest” (4). He argues that common lawyers ignored this question because the common law was based on custom and was unashamedly domestic in its focus. Meanwhile, Sir Philip Sidney, inspired by his frustrations at royal policy in Ireland, used the conventions of romance “in order to define a concept of natural law that could be used to justify charitable conquest” (7).

In Part Two Lockey examines “the prerogative courts and the conquest within,” examining common lawyers' fears of Roman law, natural law and other legal regimes that smacked of European and possibly papist influence. According to Lockey these

concerns led judges in common law courts openly to attack rival jurisdictions that did not operate according to common law principles. To justify their opposition, common law thinkers emphasized the longevity of the immemorial common law, and stressed its imperviousness to all outside influences including conquest by the Romans and then the Normans. On the opposing side, civilians trained in civil law argued the virtues of universal natural law and presented a different view of history, one in which Rome and its laws had civilised England's barbaric original inhabitants. It took writers of romances to find ways either to reconcile domestic common law with a more international natural law or else to champion natural law alone as ideally suited to empire.

Lockey succeeds admirably in demonstrating the aesthetic, social and political importance of the romance form, and in providing imaginative new readings of works ranging from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* to Mary Wroth's *Urania*. Two of his larger arguments, however, are more contentious. His claim that debates about natural law and the ethics of warfare only appeared in romances ignores comparable discussions found in sermons, promotional literature and humanist-inspired texts. Furthermore, his depiction of narrow-minded, nationalistic common lawyers overseeing an inward-looking and largely corrupt common law is two-dimensional almost to the point of caricature. Readers seeking alternative views would do well to consult recent works by Christopher Brooks, Andrew Fitzmaurice and Ken Macmillan. However, these small criticisms merely underline the difficulties that come with crossing disciplinary boundaries. Lockey's book remains a rich and emphatic advertisement for the accompanying benefits of taking an expansive view of romance that looks beyond purely literary questions to consider national politics and attitudes to laws and legal regimes.

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*Waterlight: Selected Poems.* By Kathleen Jamie. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007. viii, 112 pages. \$17.50 paper.

Over twenty years after her first works were published in her native Scotland, the poems of Kathleen Jamie finally see print this side of the pond. With the sole exception of "Julian of Norwich," all of the pieces found in *Waterlight* are taken from Jamie's three most recent collections, and while this approach may give short shrift to the young, globetrotting voice found in *New British Poetry*—the one who would "bash out praises" (103)—the end result is a truly select collection highlighting the wonderful aspects of this poet's recent work.

I write *wonderful* because these poems, more often than not, take their impetus from an inquisitive awe of one's time and place in the world. Jamie responds wistfully to both the trappings of modern life and (an old fixation of lyric poets) the natural world, whether that be in the form of "skeins o geese" (108) or "purple baubles / reflected below the water's surface." In the contemplative "Rhododendrons," we find the poet taking pause to reflect upon just such a scene: "What was it," she asks, "to exist / so bright and fateless / while time coursed / through our every atom / over its bed of stones—?" Inspired, solemn even, such inquiries are often interrupted in Jamie's work

with a self-aware admission of the realities of daily events. Having paused and pondered the meaning of this glint in the natural scheme of things, she reins in her heady, philosophical concerns, and the more common responsibilities of human relationships and clock watching take their place with the lines: "But darkness was weighing / the flowers and birds' backs, / and already my friends had moved on" (25).

Conversely, the poem "Fountain" begins very much outside the realms of the natural environment, focusing in on a family excursion and modern-day consumerism as "we glide from mezzanine to ground, / laden with prams, and bags printed / Athena, Argos, Olympus." Here the fountain of the poem's title is not the pure inspirational waters of classical antiquity or Romantic chasms of Wordsworth and Coleridge but, instead, "reflections of perspex foliage / and a neon sign—FOUNTAIN," a wishing well in the midst of a shopping mall. Still, Jamie's awestruck perceptions do not reject the scene outright, but manage to silt the marvelous from the mundane. How then does the speaker of this poem see the act of a coin toss?: "a wee stroke of luck? A something else, a nod / toward a goddess we almost sense / in the verdant plastic? Who says / we can't respond; don't still feel, / as it were, the dowser's twitch / up through the twin handles of the buggy" (91).

Conveying an abundance of such inquisitive, social and personal bearings-keeping, these poems resist sentimentality by never figuring one perspective as the more weighty. With each questioning glance, each startling epiphany, the voice in these poems responds to its own almost spiritual yearnings with a corrective statement of worldly pragmatism. In "Arraheids" the speaker of the poem hears the colloquial Scots of "the hard tongues o grannies" chastising the practice of daydreaming up history. They berate brusquely "*ye arenae here tae wonder, / whae dae ye think ye ur?*" Yet, for all this cognitive to-ing and fro-ing between exulted perception and the sudden sound of a voice calling 'come back to earth,' the best of these poems don't make a distinction between the elevated and the profane; in *Waterlight*, both are equally capable of creating a heightened sense of connection with the immediate, often intimate world that surrounds. The "grannies'" incredulous "*whae dae ye think ye ur?*" (98), as well as being a corrective scolding of some young thing without any common sense, also starts one attempting, once again, to answer the question in earnest. The result is a poem that, even as it seems to disavow the potency of the imagination, tosses the reader back toward a path of wonder and yet more questioning. Ultimately, what Jamie seems to ask over and over in these works is where to place oneself within this ambiguous boundary between inspirational awakening and urban banality, or, put simply: what's more pertinent, the waterlight or that which pulls us from it?

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