

Philip Pothen, *Nietzsche and the Fate of Art*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.

Philip Pothen's new book looks at Nietzsche's views on art in a way vitally important to contemporary discussion about that much-debated term 'the aesthetic'. The category of the aesthetic has recently been refurbished to serve as the rallying-cry for those determined to resist an overly social perspective. Pothen makes clear, however, that though Nietzsche would have also rejected any vision of art subjugated to social control or to external social criteria, the category of the aesthetic in his work is neither positive nor self-sufficient. As Pothen says early on in his treatment of *The Birth of Tragedy*, discussion of art must criticize art, not celebrate it, if it wishes to be truly artistic. It must lay the entire idea of art open to scrutiny, expose it, highlight its fissures, rather than offer it up as a perfected, lacquered artifact to be imposed on the human mind as its inevitable crowning product.

Pothen recognizes that a discussion of art does not just mean discussion of the artwork, and that regarding the philosophy of art as the philosophy of how best to explain or exalt the artwork is misleading. Nietzsche, as the source of much of 'contemporary theory', helps show us why discussion of individual works of art are not necessarily crucial to theory. Of course, discussion of individual works can be important. But the constraint of being bound by particular artworks, and by a kind of reverent connoisseurship that may be appropriate to discussing works of art as such, is hardly supple in diagnosing the essential presuppositions of the possibility of art. The art work, conventionally the *fons et origo* of the aesthetic, in Nietzschean terms points to 'the failure of human creativity' (38) and precludes an alternate existence where we would 'view existence as aesthetic and ourselves as works of art' (38).

Why did Nietzsche dislike aesthetic idealism so much? Why did he find it so repellent? Pothen finds a hint in Nietzsche's characterization of the aesthetic spectator as permitting an 'overwhelming' (106) by the art-object, which prompts him to make an abdication into 'trusting, awe-struck, loving reception'. (106) In an aesthetic response to the art-object, there is the danger of excessive veneration. Without accusing aestheticism of being per se a displacement of Christianity, Nietzsche feels that the veneration of art involved an overly transcendental mode of worship, as evinced by the admirers of

Nietzsche's own toppled idol, Wagner. Pothén cites a very interesting passage in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here, Nietzsche denounces the notion of 'books for all'. "Books for all the world are foul-smelling books; the smell of small people clings to them" (qtd. 76). Nietzsche means by this to incorporate both canonical Scriptures, holy books as denoted by the Islamic appellation of peoples of the Books to describe Islam and the other faiths it recognized as lesser versions of itself, and non-scriptural books popular with a general audience: bestsellers and books with what would come to be called middlebrow currency. Nietzsche endorses esoteric books designed to be read by an elite, but the always astute and moderate Pothén comments that here, Nietzsche, perhaps, ignores the fact that Christianity too, like Platonism, Islam, and most other faiths, also operates within, at least to an extent, something of an "esoteric framework" (76). In other words, there are esoteric and exoteric readings of, say, the Bible, and perhaps through the most dedicated reading of scripture or even a bestseller books for all the world can be reclaimed through a different mode of reading. To make his wording a bit less elitist (Nietzsche's championship of tribal, esoteric warrior aristocracies must be regarded as rhetorical), one needs only to recall Flaubert's observation that it is enough to have read five or six books well. The Dionysian is both anti-art and anti-Christianity. But the fact that the Dionysiac serves as a weapon against both does not mean that aestheticism is Christianity in another coin, or that Christianity is a sacralized aestheticism. It means that, in Nietzsche's view, the aesthetic and the Christian both need to be rescued from lapsing into propaganda, into what Nietzsche might call an illusion.

Nietzsche is not just debunking here, but undermining, in a very root sense of that word. By going under rather than over the work of art, by excavating its rationale and not elevating its appearance, Nietzsche actually provides a space for philosophy to become distant enough from art so it can meaningfully discuss it in a way emancipated from immediate enthusiasm. Veneration, far from being understanding's friend, can be its most inveterate enemy. I would perhaps not hire Nietzsche as a museum curator, but to have him be professor of art history at a university nearby the museum might well end up bringing more, rather than fewer, people within the museum's confines. One would grant, though, that Nietzsche might well gnash his teeth at this.

Nietzsche's rhetoric sometimes becomes, to most viewpoints, overheated. No one who upholds any one of several mainstream doctrinal allegiances can avoid finding a

good deal of what Nietzsche seems to say preposterous. Pothen is very sensible in not trying to explain this away or see it as only metaphorical. But Pothen also sees that sometimes it is wise not to take the implications of what Nietzsche says so literally. It is very easy for people who are writing within an Anglo-American tradition to simply see Nietzsche as somewhat of a wild man filled with Continental abstractions, uninformed of the subtler and more gentlemanly distinctions at play in the Anglophone academy. This can be observed in William Gass's review of Curtis Cate's Nietzsche biography in the August 2005 *Harper's*, where even a writer of the philosophical acumen and aesthetic brio of Gass seems to be puzzled that Nietzsche writes in aphorisms and seems frenzied and indecorous. Gass acts as if it would have been preferable if Nietzsche were an ironic comedian in the style of Henry James or even George Meredith.

Yet Nietzsche, wild man though he was, was a complex wild man, not a simple one. It is hard to be both a wild man and a Kantian, for instance, but Pothen points at Kantian analogues, or even sources, for several of Nietzsche's ideas of aesthetics. The Third Critique shares Nietzsche's perspective that art 'posits something that is, simply, not there' (31) and that the analysis of art must grapple with how art, and its purpose, hover between the natural and the metaphysical, rather than simply hailing art as itself able to solve, or salve, the gap between nature and metaphysics. Just because Nietzsche replaces the Kantian idea of disinterestedness with his own of rapture does not mean, according to Pothen, that Nietzsche does not derive a pleasurable understanding from rapture not dissimilar to that which Kant describes as derived from disinterestedness. Nietzsche emerges from Pothen's presentation as, counterintuitively, closer to Kant than Schopenhauer or Hegel, in that both Nietzsche and Kant are stringent and demanding, and both will not settle for the panacea of the concrete universal, and of the art-object as embodying or sublimating this concrete universality, so often championed by the 'German aesthetic tradition' (63) that came between them. Although Pothen does not mention Kierkegaard, he brings Nietzsche around to a position on aestheticism that, though diverging from the Danish thinker in destination, is rather similar in procedure. Indeed, although Nietzsche was neither, his instincts with regard to the aesthetic, and in many ways his general sense of style, are more 'Protestant' than 'Catholic'

Pothen's own style involves negotiating between rapture and disinterestedness. He often discusses Nietzsche's Dionysiac concepts in a highly Apollonian way, in this

fashion actually paying tribute to Nietzsche's balancing of the two states in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Pothen's cerebral calm really comes to the fore in his final chapter, where he concludes that even the visions of madness in Nietzsche's philosophy were so laced with rationality as to be insulated from the biographical destiny (219) of Nietzsche's own madness. But Pothen does not make the mistake of seeing Nietzsche as an analytic philosopher to be evacuated in analytical terms. Though Pothen writes clearly and lucidly, and is not a hard-carrying post-structuralist (if there is such a thing any more) he is aware of the comments on Nietzsche by Blanchot, de Man, and Derrida, who, in their own way, tried to do what Pothen does more systematically: to start a dialogue between Nietzsche statements about art and a standpoint that, however critical, is not prepared to jettison art entirely. Pothen, though, warns against backing off Nietzsche's own affirmations. Heidegger, for instance, wanted to reinterpret rapture -*Rausch* as a more dignified, refined state of reverie, as opposed to what Heidegger denounced as chaos that churns and foams, the drunken bravado of sheer riotousness and tumult (148). But Pothen shows that what Nietzsche meant was just the conventional definition of Rausch rapture without the Heideggerean refinements--though maybe not in the let-it-all-hang-out, bang-on-a-drum-all-day sense from which Heidegger so shrinks.

Even so, Nietzsche might also find Blanchot, Derrida, de Man, and Pothen too tame for his blood. Yet all four thinkers lead their reader to ask the crucial question about Nietzsche's aesthetics: could not Nietzsche not have been denouncing the idea of individual artworks, but merely the particular artworks used as hypostases of this idea? (One certainly feels this is true of Plato, that there are some poets who are not liars, just as, at the other end of philosophical time, there are clearly some writers, for Derrida, that are not logocentric). Is there a ground-level Nietzschean aesthetics that might challenge our settled ideas of what is and is not beautiful? Duncan Large has recently shown how, despite Nietzsche's seeming Anglophobia, he was in fact very responsive to Shakespeare, and that, despite their irremediable separation from the Dionysiac, several of Shakespeare's tragedies were important to him. Nietzsche is not really on record as responding to the late romances, but surely Nietzsche's denunciation of Euripides, with his masking of myth with ceremony and his willingness to regard happy endings as, also, cathartic, might also extend to Shakespeare's late miracles, such as the return to life of Hermione the statue. *The Winter Tale* is one of my favorite plays. Yet reading Pothen makes me wonder if we might not need a Nietzschean interrogation of the 'spectacle'

(201) of Shakespeare's drama, without puncturing the solace the play provides or reducing its artistic integrity, what Pothén would call giving it 'over to genealogy'(197). Pothén's assured, confident, admirably reserved exposition gives us a Nietzsche whose denunciation of aesthetic complacency only fortifies his usefulness in understanding the artistic.

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