BOOK REVIEWS

Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 2013). 224pp. ISBN: 9780199861125.

Both within and outside modernist studies, the notion of literary autonomy is an outmoded one. The ineradicable social embeddedness of all literature is now a guiding assumption from which critics begin their inquiries into texts – so much so that political and historical content can be wrung from even the most defiantly aestheticist and obtuse works as a matter of course. Beginning from this premise, Andrew Goldstone's book *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* insists that autonomy is still worth discussing – not in its traditional guise (as an argument for art's freedom from history), but with a view to the historical and biographical tensions that press up against and influence its formulation in the writings of various authors during the modernist era. 'To think about autonomy', Goldstone argues, '*is* to think about literature's social embeddedness in the distinctive way the modernist period permits' (5).

The tension inherent in relative autonomy is apparent in Goldstone's strong first chapter, which examines the role of labour and servanthood in the work of *fin-de-siècle* writers Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Marcel Proust. Wilde's famous valuation of aesthetic form is apotheosized in his depictions of the serving class, who themselves represent 'the dominance of form' but whose labour cannot ultimately be occluded by a literary devotion to aestheticism. Indeed, Wilde's butlers function as reminders of the reality of the working world, of the wages that must be paid in the pursuit of aesthetic autonomy. The figure of the servant visible in the background of these novels evinces their writers' recognition of the hidden labour that makes aestheticism possible at all. In this way, the servant comes to stand in for the author himself, who must likewise work, however unobtrusively, to produce a text that aspires to ahistorical canonicity.

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In his second chapter Goldstone takes the unconventional step of setting the poetry of T. S. Eliot alongside the criticism of Theodor Adorno in order to consider another form of literary autonomy: the artist's escape from the biographical self. Of interest here is how the concept of 'late style', as it appears in both Eliot and Adorno, thematizes a desire for the extinction of personality even while it remains proper only to a fully realized personal aesthetic. This paradox – that a mature, impersonal late style is the function of a singular type of individual creative personality – highlights, again, the extent to which modernist autonomy remains a contextual construct despite Eliot's and Adorno's assertions to the contrary.

The third chapter of *Fictions of Autonomy* focuses on Djuna Barnes and James Joyce, arguing that their social cosmopolitanism is one method through which they seek to achieve relative aesthetic autonomy for their work. Here Goldstone's focus arguably shifts slightly – and perhaps problematically – from the autonomy of the artwork to the autonomy of the artist (specifically, from his or her national background). Putatively, Joyce and Barnes are both invested in the autonomy of what they write, but Goldstone's attention to their *performance* of that investment – which requires disidentification with any one nationality – only emphasizes the artificiality of whatever aesthetic freedom their work might aspire to. As Goldstone observes, 'the appearance of autonomous aesthetic form actually depends on a social performance by the artist' (131). But neither Barnes nor Joyce could have been unaware of how their cosmopolitanism only provided their work with a unique socio-historical context and did not displace it entirely.

The book's final chapter is arguably its most fascinating, if only because of the juxtaposition of two writers rarely discussed alongside one another: Wallace Stevens and Paul de Man. The shared trope that connects Stevens and de Man, Goldstone argues, is the tautology, a feature of many a Stevens poem and of de Man's critical axiom that language can only ever refer to itself. In the closed circle of tautology we can intuit the purest version of literature's purported autonomy: the unassailable gap between the text and the world. Nonetheless, Goldstone argues, here too autonomy remains a careful fiction – for Stevens because poetry's autonomy 'depends on the consent of the poet's partners in dialogue, his audience' (153), and for de Man because 'the failure of literary language to refer beyond itself nonetheless brings about the recovery of an extraliterary reality' (175). That is – in an ingenuous reading to which de Man himself would surely object – the text mirrors the world by its very self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, the visions of literature and its task offered by Stevens and de Man are inextricably linked to the academy, to which and within which they intend their work to resonate. As Goldstone concludes (with a neatly tautological flourish), word always inheres in world: 'the poem is what it is because we are what we are' (185).

Fictions of Autonomy is well worth reading, especially for Goldstone's consistently perceptive and rewarding analyses of the texts he marshals in support of his argument. The overall conceit of the book, however, remains somewhat problematic. It is difficult to shake the feeling that to call autonomy 'relative' or label it a 'fiction', as Goldstone regularly does, is to deprive it of the very quality that makes it what it is. Goldstone wants, it seems, to 'rescue' autonomy and restore it to the critical lexicon – but he does so only by granting from the outset that literary autonomy as he defines it is never entirely autonomous. However, once one grants the plausibility of partial or 'relative autonomy' as a theoretical concept, *Fictions of Autonomy* offers the reader a compelling take on the self-awareness of modernist writers, and, most usefully, provides a cogent index of modernism's anxious attentiveness to its own favoured idiosyncrasies.

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Carrie Preston, *Modernism's Mythic Pose: Gender, Genre, Solo Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). xiv+357pp. ISBN: 9780199766260.

The received history of modernism, following the injunction of Ezra Pound to 'Make It New', has tended to see the arts of the early twentieth century as marking a complete break from the precedents of Romanticism and Victorianism. According to this history, modernism favoured disjunction and crisis over amelioration, shock and experimentation over continuity with received genres and modes of expression. In literature it valorized impersonality, in visual arts it favoured hard edges, praising abstraction in language and the mechanized object over nostalgia for the human form. This history is only partially accurate. In recent years, criticism has begun to consider how modernist art is not identical with avant-garde art, but bears continuities with, as well as ruptures from, tradition. Criticism has also begun to register that some modes of art often excluded from such historiographies, theatre and early cinema important among them,