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WALTER BENJAMIN, RELIGION AND AESTHETICS

A review of S. Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts*. New York: Routledge, 2005. xiii + 165 pp. \$85.00 (cloth); \$22.95 (paper). ISBN: 0415969921.

AESTHETICS AS A SPECIALIZED FIELD of philosophy can often seem to be a curiously bloodless affair. Although ostensibly dealing with that which is *aisthetikos*, or perceptible to the senses, the philosophical study of aesthetics seems to have come adrift from its sensual roots. This curious splitting apart of aesthetics from its avowed subject matter is, in large part, due to Kant's move in his third critique of 1790 from a consideration of aesthetics itself to a consideration of the power of aesthetic *judgement* and its role in legislating between understanding and reason. As S. Brent Plate writes in his *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics*, in the pursuit of philosophical aesthetics "the perceptual is again and again swallowed up by the conceptual" (21). Plate's book is an attempt to return the senses to the heart of aesthetic theory, chiefly through the work of Walter Benjamin, and then to apply what might be called a "re-embodied aesthetics" to the study of religion.

Brent begins this wide-ranging study by considering the work of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), the father of modern aesthetics. It was Baumgarten who gave the name "aesthetics" to the field of that which can be known through the bodily senses, contrasting this with logic, the realm of that which can be known by means of the mind. This return to the origins of modern aesthetics is important because it clears away many of the Kantian preoccupations—with the role of aesthetic judgement, with matters of taste, with the beautiful and the sublime—and it rescues something of the original sense of aesthetics as the science of sense perception. Baumgarten, however, was in many respects a Platonist, which is to say that he considered aesthetics to be concerned with the inferior faculty of perception, as opposed to the superior faculty of logic; nevertheless, in granting sense perception an autonomous sphere, he started to open up the realm of the senses to the kind of careful phenomenology that was alien to Plato's thinking.

In the realm of sense perception, Baumgarten divided his aesthetics into two: *aesthetica artificialis*, the study of art, and *aesthetica naturalis*, the study of the

natural scope of the sense faculties (20). Plate maintains this double view, a duality that Benjamin himself recognizes in his materialist approach to aesthetics in which art, community, sensory embodiment and everyday life are brought together. *Aesthetica naturalis* and *aesthetica artificialis*, after all, can be mutually illuminating: “Even neurobiologists and physiologists return to the importance of art when examining the senses” (25), Plate reminds us.

Having set out the field of his inquiry, Plate explores how a view of aesthetics drawn from Benjamin, in which *aesthetica naturalis* and *aesthetica artificialis* are reconnected, can challenge our view of the act of creation, understood both artistically and religiously. Beginning with the assertion that creation is never *ex nihilo*, Plate considers the God of the Old Testament, not as some kind of Aristotelian first cause, but rather as the one who organizes the chaos of existence. The world is not created from nothingness, but God gives form to the undifferentiated matter and void, the *tohu wabohu* – the hubbub, chaos or, in the language of Michel Serres, the *noise* that precedes creation. God creates not by conjuring into existence, but by acts of separation: land from sea, heaven from earth (27). This is directly paralleled, for Benjamin, in the human process of creation, which itself does not arise out of nothingness. Instead, creation is a process of clearing away, of taking apart, and of rebuilding: and in this process, meanings are both created and destroyed (29). As a model for this creative process, Plate explores the Kabbalistic dimension of Benjamin’s thought, looking at this process of creation in the light of Rabbi Isaac Luria’s three-act cosmogony. The first act is that of God’s withdrawal; the second is in the breaking of the ten *sephirot* – the “vessels” or emanations of God, leading to the dispersal of divine light; and the third act is the human work of mending the world. We live, that is to say, amid ruins and fragments. There is a wind blowing from Paradise. The angel of history gazes at the wreckage before him as he is blown backwards into the future. Here, amid the rubble, within history, in acts of recomposition and *bricolage*: this is where and how creation takes place. For Plate, this twofold process of structuring (or, more properly, restructuring) and destructuring presents a much ‘grander’ view of the processes of creativity (33). It is grand, perhaps, because it refuses to accept the lie that the world is whole, and the complacency that goes along with this lie. No single myth is ever complete. We live always amongst fragments and the work of religion, of art and of community is both that of building and of taking apart.

In the second chapter, Plate considers the role of allegory in this process of structuring and destructuring. Here Plate draws upon Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book which explored German baroque drama as a anti-transcendental and wholly mundane literary form, a form that resisted the claims to unity that are found in tragedy. Departing from tradition, Plate translates *Trauerspiel* as “lament-play”: not a tragedy in which a unified meaning may be summoned from the wreckage, but a lament that takes place in a ruined world, amid the

debris. If the lament-play is a literature of survival, it is a survival that does not overcome ruin. It is, perhaps, the survival of the final passages of Beckett's *The Unnameable*: "... you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." As Plate writes, "God is conspicuously absent from the biblical book of Lamentations" (45).

In this materialist context where there is no transcendent unity to which we can return, allegory distinguishes itself from symbol. If a symbol deals with the unifying connection between a thing and a metaphysical idea (46), and if in the understanding of the symbol we somehow pass over from the thing to the idea that lies beyond the thing, allegory resists this transcendence, opening not to a single transcendental meaning, but to a multiplicity of meanings that do not manage to rise beyond the materiality of the allegory itself: a distinction thus opens up between the verticality of metaphor and the horizontality of metonym: "Metonymy [...] deals with the small stuff, the details, situated in a material setting of atmosphere, space, and time. As metonymy is taken up and used in the allegorical mode, allegory pays attention to the material details even to the point of the fragmentation of the whole. The unified picture is sacrificed to its features..." (54).

When applied to religion, the horizontality of allegory becomes a means of creatively deconstructing the bases of our religious thinking. So, for example, it is not so much a matter of replacing one metaphor ("God the father," for example) with another ("God the mother"), as this would leave the basic structure of hierarchical metaphysics in place; instead it is a question of contesting this tendency towards metaphorical and hence univocal readings. Resisting metaphorical readings, we recognize that our texts, too, are ruins and fragments. Rather than soaring beyond them to ultimately transcendent meanings, we find ourselves asking a different question: what *work* can this text do as we destructure and restructure it? This is, Plate tells us, not so much Nietzsche's philosophy with a hammer, but more akin to "philosophy with a screwdriver" (77), the taking apart and the creatively rearranging of fragments in "regenerative ways" (80), leading to a kind of defiled religious aesthetics that doesn't seek a God, Beauty, or even Truth, but which, in paying attention to the materiality of our lives, of our texts, of our communities, and of our artworks, permits a genuine ethical engagement.

The work of art becomes the focus of the third chapter: not the artwork, so much as the work that art *does*. Although he is aware of the distinction between the German noun form *das Werk*, employed by Benjamin in the title of his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," and the verbal form *arbeiten*, Plate deliberately distorts the translation, "in order to rethink what Benjamin might have meant..." (86). Technological reproduction, in repeating the work many times over "substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence"; but on the other hand,

in bringing the work into proximity with many more people, it “actualizes that which is reproduced” (93). The argument from Benjamin is well known: that this process of substitution and actualization leads to decay in the artwork’s aura. Plate, however, reminds us that this destruction of aura is “not as simple as it seems” (101). In the endless repetition of images to the human subject, the aura remains: to see the persistence of the aura, we need only try the experiment suggested by art historian E. H. Gombrich, in which he suggests we take a pin and use it to poke out the eyes on a photo of a loved one or a relative. Through considering the human face—in photography, in cinema, in the mirror—Plate takes his Benjaminian screwdriver to the human subject, considering how the various reflections of our bodily image in the artwork put us in a “continual fluctuation between collection and dispersal” (104). This leads to a move beyond what Plate calls “the myth of interiority” (106), and the Romanticism that goes along with such a myth. In collection and dispersal, we find that our relationship with the world is reanimated. Reproducible technologies, that is to say, undercut our confidence in the world as a self-evident whole, they demonstrate that this wholeness is imposed (111), and that, being both composed and imposed, this view of the whole is open to aesthetic recomposition. Yet what does this have to do with religion? Although the decay of aura may seem to be kind of secularizing process, it is not necessarily so. If in technological reproduction we see the shattering of aura, and the dispersal of the pieces, the idea of religious “reformation” (114) can take on a new significance. When the aura renders the objects of religion—books, rituals, practices—inaccessible, then through the processes of both deconsecration and reconsecration it is possible to salvage from the ruins a new kind of proximity with the sacred. Plate takes as his examples the *bhakti* movement in South Asia and the Protestant Reformation, identifying in both the dynamic drawn from Benjamin’s study of art: a concern with proximity, the decay of aura, concrete material conditions, new forms of technological reproduction (the printing press, in the Protestant case, and the singing of religious texts in the vernacular in the case of the *bhakti* saints), shattering and recomposition. Yet Benjamin’s exclusive focus upon proximity and reform misses, Plate reminds us, the opposing desire for auratic distance, sacredness and mystery. “Certainly we want it both ways: to touch it all, and to be restricted from touching” (119). In not fully acknowledging both aspects of desire—the desire for proximity with the sacred, and the desire for sacred distance—Benjamin “temporarily [...] forsakes one pole of the sacred dialectic between mystery and fascination, repulsion and attraction” (120). In doing so, he surrenders to a kind of utopianism that perhaps betrays the movement of breaking and recomposing, of screwdriver-philosophy and *bricolage* that he has so carefully advanced.

Plate’s final chapter returns once again to aesthetics, but this time concerns itself with the question of community, and it is in the art of architecture that

the themes of religion, aesthetics, and community converge. Benjamin's final work, the *Arcades Project*, with its allegorizing moves through a vast range of fragmentary materials, retains a necessary incompleteness: it is a *work* in Blanchot's sense, rather than a *book* (130). In its incompleteness, the *Arcades Project* itself allegorizes the city as the "discovery site of the personal." And if the desire of the personal is always to retreat into some kind of imagined interiority, Benjamin works hard to "explode the buildings, to reveal the interiors" (131). The city, one might say, is the dramatisation of the fact that we are always within history, that interiority is a temporary and contingent state. Benjamin's interest in the city is almost diametrically opposed to the closed and intimate interiors of, for example, Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space*. He wishes to explore those places which are "open to interaction" (135): not solitude, but community. Here the senses are shifting thresholds, passages between insides and outsides, both of which are in continual flux (137), and although this is not to dismiss interiority altogether, it is to recognize that what is important are the passages between subject and object, passages that are "constructions that are in historical space and time, and are subject to alteration" (141).

It is here, finally, that Plate offers us the possibility of a religious aesthetics that is no longer a matter of purely inner experience "a disembodied mind in communion with symbols, disappearing into an otherworldly wooded interior" (140). Beyond this Romanticism, and without any transcendence, the religious aesthetics he proposes becomes something that is played out in a particular community, at a particular time, within a particular set of material conditions, that takes its many meanings from these conditions and from the particularities of this history and this community, something the work of which is a continual destructuring and restructuring through the processes of allegorization.

Plate's book ends with the shadow of death, against which all such temporary structuring and restructuring must take place. "Today," Benjamin writes, "people live in rooms that have never been touched by death—dry dwellers of eternity" (141). Enclosed in the shells of our interiority, without community or a past: this is the predicament from which Benjamin seeks—through his own recomposition of the fragments and without desiring to return to any nostalgic past before the breaking of the vessels—to rescue us. "Recollecting death," Plate tells us, "through storytelling and memorializing—gathers others together in response" (142). And, one might add, not only through storytelling and memorializing, but also through the work of art and the work of religion.

The range of material that Plate covers in this book is impressively broad and whilst he confesses that he is not sure "that this book is *about* Benjamin" (vii), it has the invigorating effect of making me want to return to read Benjamin

with new eyes. There are, however, a few lapses along the way. For example, the claim early on in the book that for Levinas “We see and touch the other” (25) is wide of the mark. For Levinas, we can neither see nor touch the other who, Levinas tells us (in strikingly un-Benjaminian fashion!), is “the very locus of metaphysical truth” and as such “disincarnate.” And perhaps a more serious issue is the way in which the book tends to pull away from the very bodily sense of aesthetics that it proposes. Although concerned above all with restoring the role of the senses to aesthetics, Plate’s text in its tendency to ignore *aesthetica naturalis* in favor of *aesthetica artificialis* seems to still be curiously in the grip of Baumgarten’s view of the senses as an inferior faculty. I would have liked to have seen Plate pay more attention to the bodily experience of *aesthetica naturalis* itself: this itch upon my arm, this pang of hunger in my belly, this ache behind my eyes, these sensations of restlessness or of ease. And I wondered whether a materialist aesthetics rooted in bodily sensation that aimed to take *aesthetica naturalis* seriously should really give the neurobiologists and physiologists such a brief walk-on role.

At the end of Plate’s book, as at the end of any book, it is hard not to ask, “What does this all add up to?” But perhaps in this case the question itself is mistaken. It may be that the question is too nostalgic for a kind of transcendent unity, that it is too much in the grip of metaphor, that it is not sufficiently alive to metonymy. Plate is certainly both zealous and skilful with his Benjaminian screwdriver; but it may be that it is up to the readers of his text to recompose these fragments into something capable of providing multiple illuminations, fragments of light. And perhaps that is how it should be.

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