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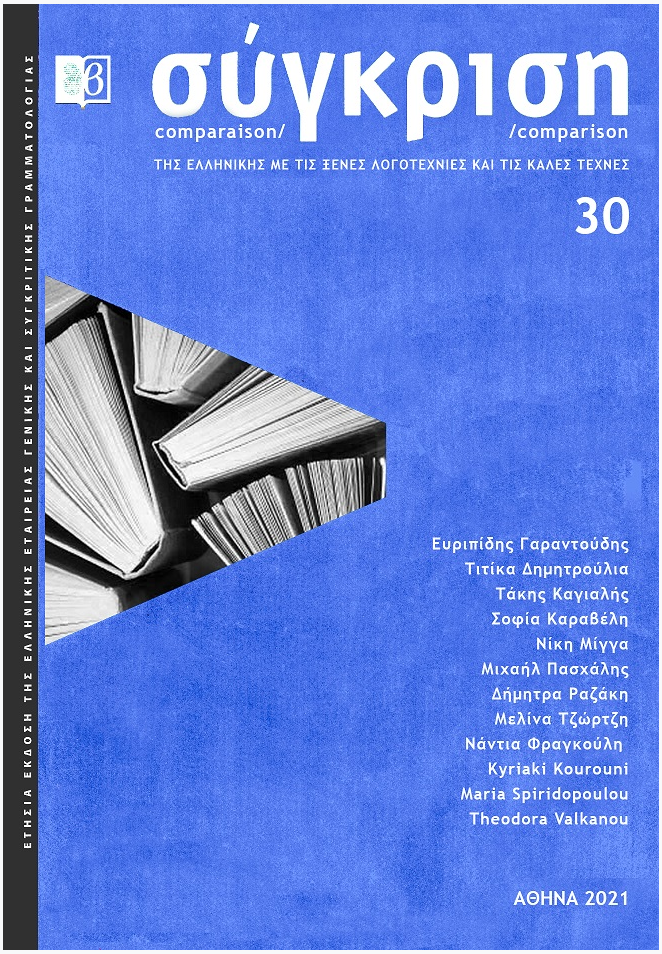

Sarah Ekdawi, "Eleni Philippou, Speaking Politically. Adorno and Postcolonial Fiction. New York and London: Routledge 2021"

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Eleni Philippou, *Speaking Politically. Adorno and Postcolonial Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge 2021. Pp. 142.

This slim but significant contribution to Adorno studies, comparative literature and postcolonial scholarship packs a considerable punch. Clearly written, with precise use of current critical terminology (interrogate, problematise) and concepts (precarity, gender fluidity), it offers Adornian readings of two Anglophone writers and two writers whose works are read/(re)presented in English translation. Of the four novelists under examination, three are acclaimed male literary figures and one is a rank (female) outsider.

Philippou sets the terms in her Introduction. She defines 'political literature'; 'political' writers' and 'politicised readings'. At the heart of her project is a re-evaluation of the complex (and, Philippou persuasively argues, much misunderstood) 'aesthetically-minded critical theorist' (3), Theodor Adorno. Philippou describes her book as 'an act of rethinking the literary in Adornian terms, and rethinking Adorno through the literary (17).

Adorno is perhaps best-known for his *dicta*, 'It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz' and 'How can you write music after Auschwitz? (often conflated and misquoted). The latter question is echoed in the book's concluding reflections on the poem (published in 2019), 'How Can Black People Write About Flowers at a Time Like This?' by Hanif Aburraqib (121). The 'time like this' in question was the Trump presidency.

Following Adorno's assertion that social/political commentary can be present in a text without being overt or 'manifest' (p. 4), Philippou selects texts that do not conform to traditional definitions of political novels, whilst arising from situations of extreme political and social crisis: Apartheid South Africa, Chile and Greece under dictatorships, and war-torn Sri Lanka. The authors selected for discussion are: J. M. Coetzee, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Margarita Karapanou and Michael Ondaatje.

Philippou aims to use Adorno's conceptual vocabulary to reframe post-colonial literature. She does not attempt to use Adorno as a methodology but follows a clear and careful procedure that entails looking at the historical context and reception of each novel, and exploring the work under discussion through the prism of one or more of Adorno's key concepts, including 'commitment' (Coetzee); 'configurative language' (Marquez); truth content (Karapanou), and identity as a 'universal coercive mechanism' (104: Ondaatje).

Adorno argued that the imposition of a social or political message onto an artwork undermined its (aesthetic) autonomy. This was not to deny the historicity of texts but to take issue with programmatically political authors such as Sartre, to whom Adorno (not unreasonably) preferred Beckett *qua* literary artist.

Each chapter begins with clear, succinct and sometimes poignant historical contextualisation, an exposition of the relevant Adornian concepts and a useful account of and commentary on the critical reception of the work under discussion, before proceeding to a more detailed 'Adornian' analysis.

Chapter 1 is devoted to J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*. In this chapter, Philippou explores Adorno's defence of lyric poetry's power as implicit social/political criticism and his notion of 'immanent criticism', whereby a work of art is critiqued on its own terms rather than via a 'potentially distorting external framework' (36). The kind of art that interests Adorno is not overtly political,

but operates on a universal level through subtlety and enigma.

The Life and Times of Michael K drew negative criticism, most notably from the prominent anti-Apartheid writer Nadine Gordimer, for its lack of a clear political message. In fact, in her efforts to restore some semblance of political meaning to the text, Gordimer speculates that the letter 'K' represents a racially-marked surname, thereby undermining the author's deliberate refusal to assign a racial identity to his character. Gordimer's reductive reading serves as a counter-example to Adorno's espousal of the interpretation-beating 'enigmaticalness' of universal art (49). It also appears to have considerably annoyed Coetzee himself (40). The hallmark of Coetzee's literary output is 'enigmaticalness', a quality that lends itself to Adornian analysis. It also conforms to a well-attested artistic strategy for avoiding the censorship of a repressive regime (further discussed by Philippou in her chapter on Karapanou). In this case, the South African censors appear to have regarded Coetzee's work as too 'intellectual' (or obscure) to require proscription (49).

The Life and Times of Michael K and the text selected for discussion in Chapter 3, *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje, are works that resist interpretation in general and have particularly frustrated critics who search for overt political meanings and decry their absence. Chapter 2 focuses on a very different text (if equally resistant to unsubtle political readings), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. This novella has a more conventionally-constructed plot, but is still open to multiple readings.

Although Philippou supplies the Spanish title, 'Cronica de una muerte anunciada', no comment is made on its English translation or on the lost connection between the 'annunciation' of the murder around which the plot revolves and the Annunciation (of the birth of Christ, in which his eventual murder is implicit). This could perhaps have been added to the discussion on Adorno's citation of Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of history' (60). The propensity of 'Christian' right-wing dictatorships to weaponize religion, especially but not exclusively against women, discussed with reference to Karapanou (and the Greek junta's infamous slogan: 'Greece is the country of the Greek Christians') is surely also relevant to *Chronicle*.

These trivial objections notwithstanding, Chapter 2 is a *tour de force*. Beginning with a discussion of a controversy that arose over the award of the Adorno Prize to Judith Butler (who was accused of saying the wrong thing about the rights of Palestinians), Philippou goes on to explore the layers of silence in *Chronicle* through the prism of Adorno's work on silence and its meanings. In a section entitled 'Three Silences', Philippou explains how Garcia Marquez broke his own self-imposed literary silence (he had stated he would not write literary works again until Pinochet had left the scene), going on to explore the significant silences woven into the plot of the novella (the non-annunciations to the victim of his impending murder by those who could have forewarned him and, in so doing, saved him). Choosing silence is explored as the weapon of female victims of the patriarchy (rape, enforced marriage and strict gender roles are referenced). The 'silenced' victims of the Pinochet regime, the 'disappeared' are absent (silenced) here; the book does not refer to them directly, but the structures of Chilean society under dictatorship are ruthlessly exposed and the role of the church in endorsing societal violence is noted.

Silence, in this analysis, can be disruptive and unsettling as well as complicit. Although Adorno advocated for the moral imperative of speech, Philippou

persuasively argues that silence itself can be a form of speaking, echoing or permitting us to hear the silence of the oppressed (72).

To this reader, the chapter dealing with Margarita Karapanou's novel, *Kassandra and the Wolf* is the most problematic. It relies for its inclusion (as an instance of postcolonial literature) on Michael Herzfeld's definition of Greece as a 'crypto-colony' (10), but the main problem is the novel itself, which simply does not stand up to scrutiny. The 'periphery' to which Karapanou belongs is neither Greek nor female; it is the no[wo]man's land of the poorly realized literary artefact. Not even poetic truth (cf Adorno's 'philosophical truth' and 'truth content', 82 ff) can mask the perversity of Karapanou's account of childhood – the crude attempts to shock; the disturbing projection of male fantasy onto the child, such that she becomes the perpetrator's *agent provocateur* and his apologist - and it therefore comes as no surprise that Karapanou's reception has been largely psychoanalytical (79) and (by definition) content-focused. And yet Adorno's aesthetic theory surely implies an object worthy of consideration in aesthetic (and stylistic) terms. From the reviews cited, it would appear that Karapanou's 'naïve' (some might say slapdash) Greek prose style is adequately represented in the English translation (which I have not seen). If Karapanou sits somewhat uneasily in the company of Coetzee, Garcia Marquez and Ondaatje, the intention behind her inclusion is laudable and Philippou's analysis is lucid and penetrating.

Michael Ondaatje's earlier work, *The English Patient*, explores the erasure of identity and what it means (in this case, death or rescue) to have the 'wrong' name. Perhaps this is more Gordimer's kind of book than *Michael K.*, though Ondaatje, like Coetzee, has also publicly failed the 'political engagement' test and even stands accused of taking sides implicitly (Sinhala/Buddhist over Tamil). It seems the critics have force-fed him his cake, making him eat it (take sides) and have it (remain politically aloof). Adorno's measured tone, so well reflected in Philippou's, moves the reader on from such value judgements and implied demands for virtue-signalling, into more abstract, open and engaging realms.

The chapter on Ondaatje focuses on *Anil's Ghost*. 'Prismatic' rather than explicit reflections on the meaning of a name are central to this text, in ways Philippou teases out with reference to Adorno's views on identity and its dangers. Anil is a girl who has literally bought her brother's name, using as currency sex, cigarettes and cash (the control of these is, in itself, an appropriation of masculinity). She resists attempts to 'normalise'/ re-feminise her. The little girl in Karapanou's novel is taken by her father to a psychotherapist, who ends up treating him instead. Anil is taken to an astrologer, who suggests adding an 'e' to her name to remedy its/her gender transgression. Once again, Philippou's analysis is exemplary.

Philippou is a scholar who engages with complex ideas, making them salient to her readers and persuasively arguing for their usefulness in critical discussions around (and beyond) post-colonial literature. This book makes an important contribution to rethinking ways of reading and discussing seemingly apolitical or non-politically-engaged literature; treading new pathways through textual obscurity to shed light on obscurity itself as a political and artistic strategy. It allows the reader space to explore: Adorno's concepts are carefully presented, with illustrations of the ways in which they might be useful/enlightening, without recourse to a narrow or prescriptive methodology. The book also benefits from a refreshingly unfussy prose style and meticulous notes. It is warmly

recommended to all scholars and students of comparative literature and postcolonial studies.

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