

2017

The Crisis of Aestheticism

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Recommended Citation

Weisman, Karen (2017) "The Crisis of Aestheticism," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss4/10>

THE CRISIS OF AESTHETICISM Karen Weisman

Art's Undoing: In the Wake of a Radical Aestheticism by Forest Pyle. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. Pp. 322, 11 ill.

This is a passionate book about a passionate subject; in fact, the experience of reading this text comes close to replicating one aspect of the central dynamic it describes: “how the literary representations of aestheticization can in certain circumstances result in an aestheticism powerful and extreme enough to deliver us to the roots of the aesthetic” (xi–xii). Forest Pyle reads Romantic and post-Romantic texts in a white heat of critical engagement, an appropriate stance for a critic who sets himself the task of staring into the heart of a radical aestheticism, one that he defines as art reaching its own fever pitch, by which the putative claims of the aesthetic are undone: “At certain moments in certain texts by each of these writers we encounter a radical aestheticism, one that undoes the claims made in the name of the aesthetic—as redemptive, restorative, liberating, compensatory, humanizing, healing—claims that are not only an irreducible aspect of the legacy of Romanticism, but are often spelled out in their most compelling forms by the writers themselves” (5). The radical of the aesthetic in Pyle’s hands becomes a vacant luminosity, one that we occupy with a silent, wild surmise.

Pyle’s Romanticism, then, is highly self-reflexive and postdeconstructionist, with some cultural materialism serving as warm side notes. Radical aestheticism is an experience of an interference

that negates, or rather undoes, the claims of knowledge that are putatively related to art. At the same time, the experience of such radicalization is emphatically not a tacit claim for art's autonomy. This is no valorization of art for art's sake. Precisely because what Pyle terms *radical aestheticism* offers no redemptive claims for art in the arena of ethics, politics, or aesthetics, the encounter with it is often registered as an unmaking or as combustion or as flaring. Pyle observes several criteria to meet the designation of radical aestheticism. The first will be most familiar to students of close reading: the text "must reflect on art and its effects" (3). The text must "pose or present questions about art's relationship to history or to knowledge, and on the relationship between art's sensuous aspects and its ethical, political, or theological responsibilities" (3); "and finally, a text can be understood as *succumbing* to a *radical* aestheticism the moment it finds itself and its representations of the aesthetic at its vacating radical" (4, emphasis in the original). What we have, then, is a view of a highly self-reflexive literature that owes a great deal to Walter Benjamin's theory of the "aura" but also to Paul de Man's textual disarticulations. Pyle indeed cites several canonical twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists throughout his chapters, and he reads them as a sort of parallel text to the

Romantics. Read alongside Shelley, Keats, Dickinson, Hopkins, and Wilde are Benjamin, de Man, Barthes, Derrida, Agamben, Lacan, Bataille, and others. Pyle is not claiming that we need one to understand the other, and he is certainly not reducing such parallel reading to the domain of "influence"; rather, he seems to be modeling different approaches to critical distance even as he draws ever nearer to the heart of the texts' catastrophes. In this, he is trying to clarify a dynamic of reading and of writing that calls out for rigorous conceptualizing. There must be several access points into this complicated and complicating process of understanding a text's negation of its own project. One of the delights of this text is the scrutiny of authors' manipulations of their formalist and generic inheritance. Pyle performs close readings of his authors' formalist power, readings that are themselves theorized.

Pyle is insistent that he is not positing a totalizing theory of Romanticism. He repeats over and over again that the dynamic he studies is something that occurs only "at certain moments in certain texts." This is a phrase very self-consciously reiterated throughout all of the chapters, not as a textual tic but as a textual cue to the very self-conscious care taken by the author of this critical text. Pyle describes the reader's reflexive need to "turn away" from the consuming

effects of radical aestheticism; it is, as he describes it, a crisis, one from which Anglo-American criticism has conventionally turned. In this, the work of the critic is perilous. If we may get “too close to the text . . . and stuck in a kind of auratic fascination” (21), then Pyle is taking, on our behalf, what he describes as “the risk of proximity” to these radicalizations, “to understand who or what might ‘perish’ in the process” (26). This is a tall order; or at least, it is announced as if it were a tall order. And Pyle’s reading often calls attention to its own emotional and ethical investments. I take this critical self-reflexivity to be consonant with the book’s project, which is after all to study the effects of coming into possession of the intensity of a work of art that is all but entirely consuming. It is to encounter, as he reads it in Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life,” the poet’s “light’s severe excess,” which for Pyle is the “aestheticism that burns a hole in the heart of this poem” (63). There may be, at times, a little bit too much preciousness in such a tone; all the same, what is at stake for the literature under discussion is its own self-understanding. Perhaps we *ought* to feel it on the pulses, our own and the critic’s who delivers it to us.

Reading Shelley, Pyle reads several lyrics with a view to understanding Shelley’s twinned commitments to aesthetics and politics. His strongest readings are of “On

the Medusa of Leonardo” and “The Triumph of Life,” which he pinpoints as poems that especially undo the compensations of the aesthetic. Reading Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion*, Pyle identifies a “glorious burn-out” (101) that affects our understanding of the relationship of ethics and aesthetics in Keats’s poetry. Dickinson is studied as a poet whose “poems themselves often produce this eradication of context, scene, or setting” (108). We would not naturally expect to find Gerard Manley Hopkins in a book featuring such a definition of aestheticism, but Pyle argues that whatever Hopkins’s resistance to mere aestheticism, its radical is to be found in the poet’s presentation of “the breath, the aspiration, the sigh” (149), in which Pyle sees evidence “of a poetics, already radicalized, that exerts such a pressure on his theological aesthetics that we encounter something that risks, in Hopkins’s words, a ‘flame out’ to the everything and the nothing of a breath” (149). The pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti presents a critical challenge in this overarching thesis because he is already viewed as the poet-painter of the superficial. Despite the obviousness of this aestheticism, it is the very insistence of Rossetti’s superficiality that prepares the ground for radical aestheticism: “Thus a radical aestheticism in Rossetti is not so much an event, a singular and crisis-ridden occurrence, as

it is the manifest pressure of the surface . . . upon everything that is painted or written” (202). And finally we have Oscar Wilde, who is already explicitly dedicated to aestheticism as his project, who boldly announces, “Love art and all the things will be given to you” (210). The climax of Pyle’s reading of Wilde is in his examination of *Salomé*, in which he observes in the titular character’s monstrosity—the violence, the kissing of Jokanaan’s decapitated head in the moonlight—“a love carried out in the vertiginous language of an aestheticism that has exceeded the claims of beauty and pleasure with which it is most identified and *tasted* its radical” (240).

Pyle resists the temptation to turn away from such radicalization. His criticism is an impassioned engagement with the ethics of reading no less than it is a celebration of its very perils. If we can virtually hear him taking deep breaths to sustain his reading, that is because he lovingly recognizes the demands of the literature he unveils.

Karen Weisman is an associate professor of English at the University of Toronto. She is the author of the forthcoming book Singing in a Foreign Land: Anglo-Jewish Poetry, 1812–1847 (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018) and of Imageless Truths: Shelley’s Poetic Fictions (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) and is the editor of The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy (Oxford University Press, 2010). She is also the author of many articles and chapters on Romantic, post-Romantic, and Anglo-Jewish poetry and culture in such journals as European Romantic Review, Philological Quarterly, The Wordsworth Circle, Criticism, Salmagundi, The Yale Review, Modern Language Quarterly, and others.