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Book Review: *A Critical Work II. Ways of Art: Literature. Music, Painting in France*

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Robert Greer Cohn. *A Critical Work II. Ways of Art: Literature, Music, Painting in France*. Stanford: Stanford French and Italian Studies, Anma Libri 40, 1985.

Robert Greer Cohn, the leading Mallarmé scholar internationally (*L'Oeuvre de Mallarmé: Un Coup de Des*, 1951; *Toward the Poems of Mallarmé*, 1965; *Mallarmé's Masterwork: New Findings*, 1966; *Mallarmé's "Igitur"*, 1981; *Mallarmé's Prose Poems*, forthcoming), launched his three-volume study of French Arts and Letters in 1975 with *A Critical Work I: Modes of Art*, setting forth his epistemology and the general aesthetics emerging from it. The present volume represents a diachronic exploration of French art, with emphasis on the literary, grounded in that theoretical base. It is the transitional work to the third volume, *Particular Studies*, eagerly awaited by Cohn's readers both here and abroad.

Those not familiar with the author's epistemology should begin with Appendix A of *Ways of Art*, a schematic demonstration of his tetrapolar-polypolar-dialectic, especially as it concerns the development of the French novel within the European tradition. But this dialectic, which has antecedents in Kierkegaard, Mallarmé and Joyce, underlies all art, because: "this dimensional pulsation, or tetrapolar (and polypolar) *higher vibrancy* is, in short, the stuff of life: life is vibrant in this more complex way as well as in the more bipolar sense" (7). Cohn shows that "far out enough" the male or linear and the female or circular, the male vertical and the female horizontal dimensions "tend to merge as in relativity theory" (19). *Ways of Art* shows us the way through a historical becoming of art in its complex dialectic in which the metonymic (horizontal) axis constantly interrelates with the metaphoric (vertical). "Life is the mother, art the father" (vii); hence Cohn's quarrel with most contemporary Feminism, which is pronounced throughout the volume. Firmly grounded in its author's tetra-polypolar epistemology, this beautiful book becomes, however, at no point dryly abstract; it is the mature work of a true humanist who stands in clear and open opposition to the dehumanizing trend of "the quasi-scientific reductionism and abstract gimmickry of a great deal of current academic literary study, bellwethered by the structuralists, post-structuralists, and deconstructionists" (vi). Abundant footnotes constitute a substantial part of *Ways of Art*, on occasion developing insights almost into essays demonstrating crucial points along the general flow of the tradition from "Obscure Beginnings," the opening chapter, to our "Contemporaries," the last.

Cohn reminds us that "In the Beginning was the Word," for the Judaeo-Christian tradition at least, which his study fervently embraces; thus, for example, in Appendix D on "The Dance of the Sexes," he censures "those who live by slogans, camps,

and peer-opinion, the countless little bastard cults which characterize an era which has massively veered away from our free and beautiful Greco-Judaeo-Christian tradition" (332). Cohn traces man's way and that of his myths and rituals culminating in his art from that beginning along the lines of Freud, Neumann and Cassirer, and many others, always demonstrating the underlying polypolar dialectical rhythm. Thus in "From Barbarism to Young Culture," we follow the Celts to Druidic ritual, Hebrew beginnings to the Psalms, Dionysian ritual to Greek tragedy, and thence to the beginnings of French dramatic literature originating in the *Quem quaeritis* sequence of the medieval Mass. Along the way arises artistic symbolism, for Cohn synonymous with "effective poetry," to finally "ripen in France as never before" (99). Table I (134) graphs this development from the twelfth to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The author traces the rise of the artistic vocation from its antecedents in the double function of bard and priest, with the figure of Ronsard at the crossroads of that dying institution and the nascent concept of personal glory. "The Enlightenment Vocation" is exemplified in Montaigne, who humanizes the French cultural elite and points the way to French classicism and, farther down the road, after the moral collapse with the outgoing reign of Louis XIV, toward the Age of Reason. Clearly the most significant figure of the French Enlightenment for all of Western civilization is Rousseau, and Cohn beautifully shows us why this is so. Subsequently, "the nineteenth-century stage of the writer's journey will lead, starting from the crossroads of Rousseau, primarily in these two directions: the imperialistic and visionary prose of Balzac, the equally ambitious poetry of Mallarmé, brothers under the skin" (199). And these two paths will then be reconciled in Proust's monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

Along the final segment of the journey, "From Rousseau to Proust," Cohn points to the importance of the opening of horizons beyond the borders of France—after the Revolution—to younger and more primitive cultures like Germany with its "somewhat barbaric" Romanticism and the early *Sturm und Drang* of Schiller and Goethe. Thus also Spain, the Orient, and North Africa, whose traditions exerted their fascination on some of the major poets and painters of nineteenth-century France (for example Baudelaire, Delacroix, Gautier, Hugo, Manet). Most significant for the development of Symbolism, however, is the contact with music, and especially the German, culminating in Wagner and his notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and synthesis of the arts. Mallarmé, Cohn recalls, was the only major Symbolist who voiced reservations. In another area of cross-fertilization, between literature and philosophy, Germany, again, contributed richly with thinkers from Kant to Hegel and his avow-

ed enemy Schopenhauer, and finally the latter's one-time disciple Nietzsche — who later had to kill his spiritual Fathers, God, Schopenhauer and Wagner. And this influence has continued in French letters to our own day, *viz* the phenomenologist Husserl and his student Heidegger, who fathered French, and ultimately, Western Existentialism. In "Contemporaries," Cohn brilliantly discusses some of its artistic representatives, like Camus and the early Sartre, with a marked preference for the former over the latter.

Appendix B, on the "Poetry-Prose Cross," familiar to Cohn's readers from the volume *The Prose Poem in France* (Columbia, 1983), traces the prose poem from its originator, Aloysius Bertrand, to Mallarmé, its uncontested master. Appendix E, "Shekhina," deals with this rich concept of Hebrew tradition, "the pervasive feminine atmosphere of life, presence. . . [a]nd memory: 'If I forget thee Zion. . .'" (336). Here the author shows how the predominantly vertical Christian and male dimension and the predominantly horizontal Hebrew and female one, constitute such a limited perspective, and that "both dimensions and their ultimate meeting are more to the point of totality" (339). This is, of course, the truth underlying his entire philosophico-epistemological stance.

Ways of Art, both an artistic work itself as well as a major critical text, is a treasure house constructed on that firm foundation.

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