1-1-1987


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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-opposition” (32). But as in his art from the beginning (and in many others), in “From Beginnings to Beginnings: the Beginnings of French Medieval and Post-Medieval Art,” this development has massive, effective power, “effective potential” (32).
in France.

Deuvre de France.

A Critical Masterwork.

Appendix.

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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.

Ursula Franklin