

Peter Murphy and David Roberts. *Dialectic of Romanticism*.

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In 1942, two exiled German intellectuals held a series of meetings in Los Angeles. The topic of their discussions was the convolution of enlightenment and myth, the origin of the one in the other and the accelerating assimilation of the Other to the One. In the background, all but ignored by the interlocutors, sat a woman taking notes in shorthand. Later, her notes were typed up, revised, elaborated, and sent forth into the world under the title *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the foreword they added to the 1969 edition, the authors downplayed the significance of her contribution: "We jointly dictated lengthy sections; and the vital principle of the *Dialectic* is the tension between the two intellectual temperaments conjoined in it." No place remains in this marriage of minds for the woman who acted as surrogate for their creation, the empty vessel through which their words flowed and intermingled to the point where they could no longer be traced back to one or the other parent. Of the final product, it is said that "no outsider will find it easy to discern how far we are both responsible for every sentence." As the only reader of the book in a position to know exactly who said what before the contours of the conversation were erased, the woman must be considered an insider to the discussion (in fact, she is Adorno's wife). Her unsung service guarantees the unity of style which marks the difference between scholarly collaboration and utopian anticipation, between a partnership of specialised workers and a working partnership that, however briefly, transcends specialisation. At the same time, she is an outsider to the extent that she does not belong to that community – on the contrary, it is constituted through her exclusion – and hence has no legitimate claim upon the work that emerges from it. Her role is exhausted in enabling the authors of

the *Dialectic* to adopt a position of enunciation which their own theory of modernity would lead them to disavow, one which first allows them to articulate that theory by granting them immunity from its most deleterious systemic effects. In this sense, she is emblematic of what Murphy and Roberts call “the hidden romantic roots of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of enlightenment” (ix).

If the continuity of tone maintained throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment* betrays its authors’ romantic longing for “good” totality, the book’s formal disintegration into oversized excursions and paralipomena suggests the frustration of that longing in the face of a “bad” totality deemed to be inescapable, terminally riven, and unsusceptible to reform. Once enlightenment is conflated with myth as the eternal return of the ever-same, the utopian impulse kept alive by Horkheimer and Adorno is forced to take refuge in style rather than form, expression rather than rational construction. Henceforth, utopia will be confined to the moment of aesthetic irruption which impotently configures the indefinitely postponed advent of the entirely other. *Dialectic of Romanticism* offers itself as a rejoinder and corrective to that celebrated critique, and its organisational principle differs accordingly. Murphy and Roberts display none of their predecessors’ discomfort with the functional differentiation that is part and parcel of modern society. On the one hand, their book spurns the illusion of univocity embraced by Horkheimer and Adorno as their compositional ideal. Even an outsider will usually find it easy to discern who was responsible for a given sentence (or indeed chapter). But the sudden shifts in register with which the authors demarcate their respective areas of expertise are offset, on the other hand, by the book’s well-proportioned, lucid tripartite structure, which serves as a bulwark against the dynamic of fragmentation to which *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ultimately succumbs.

Such divergences in presentation are not without relevance for the broader argument put forward by Murphy and Roberts. They reflect a fundamental break with the historical-philosophical conception that informs not just the “blackest book” of Critical Theory, as Habermas dubbed *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but the entire German romantic tradition from which it secretly draws. That tradition was defined from the outset by “the paradox of future past origin” (7), expertly reconstructed in the first part of the present work. The dialectics of enlightenment and romanticism were both triggered by the historicist self-understanding of modernity, with its chronic awareness of man’s pre- or deformation through cultural factors over which he has no immediate control. Together, enlightenment and romanticism make up the “divided unity of [European] modernism” (a modernism which, in this account, extends to its various postmodern recensions). Whereas enlight-

enlightenment rationalism has as its goal the liberation of man from the contingencies of birth and custom, romanticism responds by calling for a return to nature. Regardless of how such a return may be construed in individual cases – as the descent to the chthonian realm of the Earth Mother (Bachofen, Baeumler), as the remembrance of nature in the subject (Horkheimer/Adorno), as the repetitive recuperation of the original event of Being (Heidegger) – the split between nature and spirit is in each case to be overcome through their reunion in a “new mythology” founded upon the free interplay of the rational and creative faculties.

Murphy and Roberts maintain that this project leads to consequences as invidious as those it was intended to counteract: “Enlightenment autonomy is always threatened by the immanent contradiction of denaturalization: the reversal of freedom into unfreedom (the perpetuation of the blindness of nature); romantic incarnation is always threatened by the immanent contradiction of renaturalization: the reversal of the spiritualization of nature into the naturalization of spirit, of creative into destructive nature. Each bears witness to the failed internal dialogue of modernity” (75-6). Murphy and Roberts find an alternative to this breakdown of communication in a “third stream” of modernism, which they propose to call the “civilizational.” This looks to classical models for inspiration and has its locus in the city, more specifically in the cosmopolitan milieu in which some of its greatest exponents – Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, Mies van der Rohe – made themselves at home. Its representative art form is architecture, which “exemplifies most clearly the bridging power of the city – its superlative capacity to conjugate modern and ancient, present and past, utilitarian and ideal” (81). Consequently, a discussion of architecture provides the occasion for the “external critique” of modernism launched in the second part of the book.

The final section of the triptych contrasts the architectonic utopia envisaged by many of the intellectuals who resettled in America with the progressive-futurist and aesthetic-archaic utopias they had left behind them (and one can see here, at the very latest, how the formal syntax of *Dialectic of Romanticism* dovetails with its argument). Their vision of a society shaped by the civilizing forces of pattern and order was sustained by the idea of a perennial present which spans the ages, linking the *civitas* of classical antiquity with its modern revivals. This vision entails “neither self-destructive unanimity nor the reductive equation of technique and spirit” (150), *both* of which inform the bleak diagnosis of modernity offered by Horkheimer and Adorno. Whereas the dialectics of romanticism and enlightenment culminate in the internecine bloodbaths of the early twentieth century, (Old) European modernism generates a new dialectic following its

translation to the New World. On the West Coast, romantic historicism enters into an alliance with communications technology, neutralising the agon between nature mysticism and enlightenment innovation characteristic of an earlier period. The “dream factory” in which their partnership is consummated goes on to become the major player in the global entertainment industry. In Chicago, meanwhile, the “trans-historical” ideal of the *res publica* finds expression in “the anonymous ‘collective work’ of city-making in contrast to the ‘total work of art’ of the Californian ideology” (187). *Dialectic of Romanticism* is unabashed in its advocacy of the Chicago model.

I have touched on some of the points which separate Murphy and Roberts’s project from that of Horkheimer and Adorno; these may be summarised in terms of their useful distinction between civilizational and romantic modernisms. It remains to be noted that, while the ongoing conversation in which both projects participate is an overwhelmingly German affair, it will prove of interest to all students of modernism and modernity. *Dialectic of Romanticism* is a genuinely interdisciplinary work whose analytic rigour, vast learning, and argumentative sweep make it a worthy successor to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It deserves a wide readership.

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