

Bjarnadóttir, Birna. 2012. *Recesses of the Mind: Aesthetics in the Work of Guðbergur Bergsson*. Translated by Kristjana Gunnars. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press. xv+298 pages. ISBN: 9780773539105 (hdbk).

The subtitle of this book (*Aesthetics in the Work of Guðbergur Bergsson*) is a curious one. I say this because I think that Barnett Newman was right when he observed that, “Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds.” I take it that Newman meant that, just as the studies of ornithologists have no effect on how birds go about their lives, so the cogitations of aestheticians have no effect on how artists practice their craft. Artists are in the business of creating works with aesthetic value. Their works do not present an account of aesthetic value. Such accounts come later and are the work of aestheticians. Works of art can, however, address moral and existential questions on which philosophers have reflected. Artworks can also be shaped by the social context in which they originate. Attitudes and mores of a society can be manifested in a work of art. This is the view (despite the subtitle of her book) that Bjarnadóttir defends. References to aesthetics are mainly superfluous.

Bjarnadóttir holds that Bergsson’s “dialogue with poets, novelists, and philosophers who are prominent within the history of ideas and world literature” have shaped Bergsson’s work (154). She discusses, in particular, the significance of Augustine, Blanchot, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Plotinus. While various poets, novelists and philosophers have undoubtedly affected Bergsson’s writing, Bjarnadóttir does not provide a convincing account of how the philosophers she discusses illuminate Bergsson’s work. At the same time, Bjarnadóttir holds that, “in Bergsson’s writings, the reality of Icelandic culture and society is interwoven with elements of the literature and history of ideas of the West” (182). Her discussion of Bergsson’s relationship to Icelandic culture is more successful than her discussion of philosophical influences.

One might wonder how Bjarnadóttir selected the figures she chooses to discuss in relation to Bergsson. Augustine, Blanchot, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Plotinus are a pretty heterogeneous collection of philosophers and one might expect to find that what they have in common is their importance for Bergsson. The Preface to Bjarnadóttir’s book reveals otherwise. What they have in common is that Bjarnadóttir read them in the course of her graduate studies. While in graduate school she took courses on Blanchot, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. At about the same time she read Hannah Arendt’s book on St. Augustine. I am not quite sure how Plotinus ended up in the book. His connection to Bergsson is tenuous.

Bjarnadóttir is aware that the connection between Bergsson and Plotinus seems sketchy. She writes that, “one might suppose that the ideas of Plotinus

concerning beauty and existence are altogether irrelevant to contemporary discussions on the subject” (92). One might indeed. Even if Plotinus exercises a residual influence on contemporary thought about beauty, Bjarnadóttir does little to convince the reader that the neo-Platonist has particular significance for Bergsson’s thought about beauty. Bergsson wrote an essay (helpfully included as an appendix in this volume) entitled “Ideas of Beauty” and Bjarnadóttir holds that the search for beauty is a theme running through his work. She does not, however, provide a convincing case for thinking that Bergsson’s conception of beauty in any way resembles or is influenced by that of Plotinus. She advances two reasons for thinking that Bergsson and Plotinus have something in common: it “seems that the aesthetics of Bergsson’s works emerges from concerns that relate to both life and art. It is also a response to how the relationship between humanity and beauty have been considered in the past” (103). This could be said about pretty much everyone who has written about beauty and this does not establish that reflection on Plotinus casts light on Bergsson.

The relevance of Augustine to Bergsson is only marginally greater than the relevance of Plotinus. Perhaps the closest connection that Bjarnadóttir can find is that, in *The Mouse that Skulks*, “Bergsson attempts to describe the human condition from a Christian perspective” (86–87). Suppose that this is true. It would still be unclear why Augustine, as opposed to any other Christian thinker, is relevant to Bergsson’s writings. Other similarities between Bergsson and Augustine seem comparably slight. Augustine wrote an autobiography. Bergsson’s novels sometimes take the form of fictional autobiographies. Even if this similarity were striking, many people besides Augustine have written autobiographies. In the absence of any evidence that Augustine exerted some influence on Bergsson (and Bjarnadóttir provides little) it is hard to see how the author of the *Confessions* helps us understand the author of *The Mouse that Skulks*.

While there are some superficial parallels between Bergsson and Augustine, there are conspicuous dissimilarities. One obvious difference between Augustine and Bergsson is that, “while Augustine turns to God, the narrator of *The Mouse that Skulks* turns to the world and all its material things” (87). In general, Bergsson seems to be a post-Christian writer. The differences between Bergsson and Augustine are, it seems, more salient than any similarities. I was left unconvinced that Bergsson’s writing displays the influence of any of Augustine’s thought, aesthetic or otherwise.

Let us turn now to a consideration of how the aesthetics of Blanchot are present in Bergsson’s writings. Blanchot is best known for anticipating postmodern or poststructuralist literary theory. One way to characterize his view is to say that (like subsequent French theorists) Blanchot is a sceptic about meaning: works of literature do not have a determinate or determinable meaning. (One might wonder why Blanchot is considered rather than other postmodernists. That question is answered in the Preface.) Bjarnadóttir also regards Blanchot as an

existentialist. So the question is whether postmodern and existentialist themes, of the sort found in Blanchot, are echoed in Bergsson.

Bjarnadóttir does not provide a compelling case for answering this question in the affirmative. She interprets Blanchot as saying that, “the ‘impossibility of literature’ ... makes for its very possibility.” She then holds that this “idea is not foreign to Guðbergur Bergsson” since he repeatedly “expresses the idea of the *unfinished* nature of art and the *potentialities* that reside in a work that is not ‘complete’” (30). Bergsson might, in expressing this idea, express something like Blanchot’s view of literature, but it is not obvious that he does. (The suggestion Bergsson’s writings express anything at all is at odds with scepticism about meaning. But this paradox haunts all postmodernism.) Other attempts to find parallels between Blanchot and Bergsson are equally speculative. Bjarnadóttir finds evidence of Blanchot’s existentialism in these lines: “I have lost life / the night has come and offered me wakefulness” (30). Well, maybe, but for a start, Blanchot is not a paradigmatic existentialist. Why not choose another existentialist? (For what it is worth, Blanchot is not on Wikipedia’s list of prominent existentialists.) Secondly, not every gloomy poem is a manifestation of existentialism.

Bjarnadóttir is no more successful in showing that Kierkegaard’s existentialism is manifested in Bergsson’s writings. As Bjarnadóttir notes, Kierkegaard maintained “that he never wrote about anything other than the difficulty of being a Christian in dialogue with the terrible deception: Christendom” (120). A similar claim cannot plausibly be made (Bjarnadóttir does not make it) about Bergsson. Some superficial similarities between Bergsson and Kierkegaard can be found, and Bjarnadóttir finds them. For example, like Kierkegaard, Bergsson is concerned with faith. But even Bjarnadóttir has to admit that it is faith of a different sort (151).

Nietzsche is the final philosopher whose relationship to Bergsson is considered in some detail. Unlike the other philosophers Bjarnadóttir discusses, Nietzsche is known to have been read by and to have influenced Bergsson. Whether we find an important influence of Nietzsche’s thought on Bergsson’s writing is another matter. *The Birth of Tragedy* is the principal source of Nietzsche’s aesthetics considered here, but the single most important idea in this book receives very little attention. This is Nietzsche’s belief that the most valuable sort of art combines elements of Apollonian and Dionysian art. This art most effectively shields us from the horror of reality. I do not see much evidence that Bergsson conceived of his art as intended to shield us from reality by blending the Apollonian and the Dionysian. On the contrary, Bjarnadóttir’s book gives the overall impression of an author who gazes unblinkingly at modern life. It is not even clear that Bergsson’s writing could be a candidate for tragic art, in Nietzsche’s sense of the term. The full title of Nietzsche’s book provides a clue to the sort of art that concerned him: *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. Nietzsche

believed that such art is found in Attic tragedy. For a time he believed that it is also found in Wagner's operas. That is, he believed that music drama combines Apollonian and Dionysian elements.

The remainder of Bjarnadóttir's book is devoted to an examination of the Icelandic background to Bergsson's writing. One chapter provides a survey of Icelandic writing on aesthetics since the nineteenth century. The views canvassed seem mainly to contrast with views expressed by Bergsson. Another chapter is devoted to the contemporary Icelandic context of Bergsson's writings. This chapter includes a review of some of the early reception of Bergsson's work. This chapter does not have much to do with the role of aesthetic or philosophical thought in Bergsson's writings.

Augustine, Plotinus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Blanchot are a diverse set of philosophers with inconsistent views. This alone makes it unlikely that the thought of these writers would be simultaneously manifested in the fiction of a single writer. In any case, Bjarnadóttir does not succeed in showing that the aesthetic or other philosophical thought of these thinkers is present in a significant way in the work of Guðbergur Bergsson.

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