

REVIEWS

EDITOR: MELISSA MCMAHON

Sonia Servomaa, *A Lacquered Box*, Paris: Éditions des Écrivains, 2002.

A Lacquered Box is a richly lyrical, insightful and deeply poetic journey into one woman's life, world and consciousness. It follows the story of Sophienne Dantela, a French scholar of oriental philosophy, art and aesthetics, as she embarks on the transient, illuminating yet sometimes lonely life of a visiting scholar in Kyoto, Japan. It is a position which bestows on her the luxury of time to pursue poetry, aesthetic appreciation of beauty and contemplative attention to the life of the mind. Through Sophienne's eyes we enter into an Other's world, which transcends an ordinary sense of life, purpose, and even time. In *A Lacquered Box* we encounter a world vibrant with awareness, rich with perception, and with the intense lyricism of a life lived gratefully in accordance with imagination.

The style of *A Lacquered Box* has a strange, otherworldly quality. It is not written in a formal, grammatically perfect style, but reads like a translation; an echo, shadow or interpretation which comes from somewhere foreign. The effect of this is curious and interesting for the reader. Servomaa's technique foregrounds the text as a contrived, deliberate *language*, so one is particularly aware that there is something peculiar about it. The unexpectedness of the language highlights one of the main themes of the book, as it explores the impossibility of language replacing the senses, or even adequately describing events and feelings. This point is asserted as only a *writer* can assert it. For naturally it is a writer who would struggle, more than anyone else with the difficulty of capturing the world through written language, a world which eludes capture, which remains *outside* us as it were, as it is.

Thematically, *A Lacquered Box* is about love, respect and faith. Love: between lovers, love of beauty, of harmony and of nature. Respect: for the past, for sacred spaces, for art, for other cultures, of the need for respect between lovers and how this can be transgressed. And of faith: faith in poetry, in energy, in the restorative, redemptive powers of nature and silence.

In order to comprehend more deeply where and how *A Lacquered Box* is stylistically and thematically situated, one must look to texts of the Zen Buddhist tradition. The character of Sophienne is inspired by Zen philosophy, and the book itself, as a creative entity, is moved and created with attention to tenets and conundrums similar to those with which the Zen Buddhist tradition is occupied.

A book of Zen sayings, *A Zen Forest: Sayings of the Masters* (trans. Soiku Shigematsu, Trumbull, CT.: Weatherhill/Inklings, 1992), encapsulates the endeavour of Zen philosophy with respect to writing:

A word is a finger that points at the moon.
The goal of Zen students is the moon itself,
not the pointing finger. (p. 27)

Teaching
beyond teaching;
No leaning
on words and letters. (p. 28)

The man who's
drunk water
Knows if it's
cool or warm. (p. 28)

And the pithy, cautionary cogitation:

Words
fail. (p. 29)

The questions, preoccupations, and philosophical meditations of *A Lacquered Box* are informed and inspired by this tradition. In this way, the book must be seen to be more than a narrative or story about one woman's life, or a representational description of events and emotions. Servomaa is deliberately invoking the Zen Buddhist tradition when Sophienne muses:

How can one describe the colours of autumn leaves, the yellows of ginkgos and the reds of maples, mixing with all the shades in between of other deciduous trees, then mingled with the deep greens of pines and sakaki and the light greens of bamboos. No, they cannot be described with words, you have to sense them directly, you have to become those colours yourself, you let them in in your breathing, they enter your cells and soul without words, without borders of thoughts, in their natural, immanent and immaculate manner. (p. 63)

Another theme which permeates Zen Buddhism and informs *A Lacquered Box* is that of *contradiction*. Sophienne summarises the 'goal' of Zen to a Zen priest in Kyoto as "to live with an open mind and above dualities, above contradictions, to understand the nature of things" (p. 37) and describes 'Zen freedom' as "freedom in spirit, nonattachment to anything, state of mind above emotional or material dependencies, above right and wrong, above just and false, detachment from words" (p. 37).

What makes Servomaa's treatment of these philosophical concepts and attainments rise above a strictly aspirational yearning or naively didactic treatment of the striving toward 'enlightenment' is the sensitivity she shows to the difficulty of attaining this reported state of pure 'non-attachment'. Servomaa elegantly shows how, even in the desire for 'satori' (enlightenment), one is confronted with the contradiction that to yearn for non-attachment from all things, is, in the Zen way, still to be enslaved by want and desire. And, as the priest tells Sophienne, sometimes one's most earnest spiritual desires can be at odds with one's own emotional longings, as he perceptively warns her, "... your dreams and freedom do not fit" (p. 38).

In addition to being inspired by Zen koans and philosophy, the book uses Japanese haiku, for example:

Fragile blue flowers
Burst at dawn, gone before night
Shining when in bloom! (p. 39)

We are also introduced to the artistry of Japanese ikebana (flower arrangement) and calligraphy. In addition, each chapter is exquisitely illustrated by the author's own paintings, which beautifully show the tender Japanese aesthetic, whereby the empty space, or what lies *between* the flower, leaf, twig, branch or word, is as illuminating and necessary to the meaning, composition, and balance of the work as the mark, flower, word, or story itself. Sophienne's description of the action of a water basin can be taken as a thematic extension of the Zen aesthetic itself: "It is the sound that makes the silence to be perceived" (p. 54).

This conceit works well for conceptualising the book as a whole, for *A Lacquered Box* is far more than a linear narrative of conventional storytelling containing "a beginning, a middle, and an end". *A Lacquered Box* is intended to provoke questioning, wondering, musing, just as a Zen koan is intended to provide a platform for a Zen student's meditation. Servomaa's book is intended to function as a

trigger for meditation, for thoughtfulness, for imagination. It is a journey designed with many pauses—aesthetic, poetic, philosophical—where one can, visually, mentally and poetically savour the impressions made along the Way. We may have never physically been to the places in the book, but by Servomaa's artistry, words and pictures, we may feel transported.

Servomaa wants to show us *through her writing* that even though language may never be able to capture enough for us, it can transport us, just as it transports the poet Sophienne beyond the linear, the concrete, and into the space beyond. As Sophienne herself says, "Zen and the way of poetry are inseparable ... both search for truth by means of grasping the spirit" (p. 50). Later she adds, "You need to be a poet in order to comprehend the other world, you need to be sensitive to invisible energy" (p. 64).

Sonja Servomaa has given us a courageous, insightful, profoundly thoughtful and resonant combination of writing, poetry, philosophy and painting. She deserves to be proud of a fine achievement in creating an original, intriguing, and poetic work of art.

Jean Marie Barrett

José Luis Bermudez and Sebastian Gardner (eds): *Art and Morality*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Art and Morality is a noteworthy addition to the Routledge International Library of Philosophy editions. It presents a collection of contemporary articles by some of the world's leading figures in aesthetics, including John Armstrong (who presented a wonderful paper to the SSLA in 2002), José Luis Bermudez, Sebastian Gardner, Christopher Hamilton, Christopher Janaway, Matthew Kieran, Colin Lyas, Mary Mothersill, Alex Neill, Aaron Ridley, Anthony Savile, Roger Scruton and Michael Tanner. The volume contains a very useful introduction from the editors, which not only describes the articles, but sets them in perspective, both with the other contributions and with questions about art and morality in general. The volume is not explicitly divided thematically into sections, so the reader may have a little trouble identifying the relations between chapters. This seems to have resulted from a conscious choice by the editors, who

take the view that thematic differences between the entries is a matter of emphasis. In spite of that, two main groups emerge: there are articles that mainly discuss the theoretical issues of art and morality independently of particular forms of art (Tanner, Hamilton, Kieran, Mothersill, Bermudez, Ridley) and those that take a more concrete approach, focussing on particular historical figures and particular forms of art (Scruton, Armstrong, Savile, Neill, Gardner, Janaway, Lyas). This second group might have been subdivided or arranged differently to reflect the difference between the consideration of a historical figure from the point of view of their contribution to more theoretical discussion and consideration of a historical figure from the point of view of their role in a particular form of art. There is a helpful index, but there is not a general bibliography at the end of the volume.

The group of articles that explore the theoretical issues take up such matters as aesthetic and moral judgment, art and moral formation, ethicism (the view that art is to be judged by a moral standard), imaginative resistance to morally repugnant ideas, sentimentality, decadence and the conversion experience. The links between the articles in this group are tenuous, but nevertheless interesting. Tanner's article on aesthetic and moral judgment suggests that aesthetic and ethical judgment are similar in cases where the work/action has an element of extreme originality. Hamilton suggests art might play a more effective role in moral education if, instead of relying on didactic works to familiarise us with accepted standards, we explore the way that extreme, original and morally questionable creations force us to explore our moral beliefs. Kieran and Mothersill examine the difficulty of entertaining the morally questionable. Thus, the first four articles all undermine ethicism in one way or another. The other three articles in this group have a different focus. They concern concepts that have applications in both moral and aesthetic contexts. Tanner's "Sentimentality" and Bermudez' "Decadence" fit more closely together here, but Ridley's article, which shows how the experience of art *and* of morality can both lead to appreciative transformation, also deals with moral/aesthetic parallels. All of the articles in this group resist the desire to trump aesthetics with ethics.

The articles of the second group explore music, pictorial art and tragedy, and consider such historical figures as Wagner, Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. This part of the book is perhaps not as

well unified as the first part, but the editors' choice of arrangement helps here to break the temptation to see the book in an overly schematic way. For example, Armstrong's article on pictorial art, which argues that pictorial art contributes to moral understanding, works as well if paired with Hamilton's discussion of moral education, as it does when paired with Scruton's article on Wagner (where we can see both Scruton and Armstrong concerned with the way that primarily non-verbal arts are concerned with morality). Or again, Savile's article on Kant's ideal of beauty works just as well when paired with Tanner's article on moral and aesthetic judgment (chapter 1) as when paired with those articles by Scruton, Neill, Gardner, Janaway and Lyas that develop responses to the Kantian tradition in aesthetics.

The editors claim that the contributions to this collection, "do full justice to the richness of the subject matter" (p. 1). To their credit, there is a very wide range of discussion in the book; moreover, the way the articles have been arranged helps to reveal connections between all sorts of issues that might at first appear unrelated. There are, however, two significant points of view that have not been given enough prominence, one as a result of general opposition, the other through sheer omission or an undetected prejudice.

The first neglected view is the one which holds that aesthetic judgment must be kept free of moralising. While several of the articles in this volume criticise ethicism, all of the contributors agree that "the realm of the aesthetic cannot, and should not, be divorced from the realm of the moral" (p. 1). The most astonishing example of this attitude appears in Anthony Savile's argument that for Kant the normative role of an ideal shows that morality plays a fundamental role in aesthetic judgment. Savile presents a very tempting argument, but the point here is just that the contributors should take care to see whether, in their wedding of aesthetics with morals, a more subtle and insinuating ethicism takes root in place of the original. *Art and Morality* cannot do *full* justice to its theme without consideration of the view that "ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style" (Oscar Wilde, "The Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

The second neglected view, which a reflective person will find related to the first, is the view that there is a fundamental aesthetic dimension to moral life and moral behaviour. This view passes without mention in nearly all modern discussions of art and morality

in the West. When one examines them, it appears as if the relation between art and morality had only one direction: we are welcome to consider the view that art has a fundamental moral condition, but we are not even permitted to consider things the other way around. Style of life and manner of performance are treated by Western philosophers as incidental to moral content. This prejudice of investigation automatically gives priority to morality, and I doubt there can ever be a fully just treatment of the relation between art and morals until that prejudice is overthrown.

The two articles in *Art and Morality* that draw near to addressing these views are both by Michael Tanner. In "Sentimentality" (reprinted for this volume), Tanner famously refers to "the pointless inner proliferation of feeling which is sentimentality", but argues that the alternative to this is "at least as frightful" (p. 109). In "Ethics and Aesthetics are —?", Tanner's consideration of the similarity between aesthetic and ethical judgments, when the latter concern extreme cases, suggests a view of ethics where the aspects of style make all the difference to the evaluation of action. Tanner's work was the inspiration for the editors of *Art and Morality*. When one considers the depth and richness of his contributions, it is easy to see why.

Eugenio Benitez

Routledge Critical Thinkers: Essential Guides for
Literary Studies, London: Routledge, 2003: Karl Simms,
Paul Ricoeur

A helpful survey of Ricoeur's leading ideas and methodological insights. Ricoeur's interests have been very wide ranging, but Simms artfully spindles the major strands of his thought into seven chapters, each corresponding to Ricoeur's best known monographs (more or less in the chronological order of their appearances). Thus under the chapter-heading 'Good and Evil', Simms basically deals with *The Symbolism of Evil* (Eng. Trans. 1967 = Part 2 of *Philosophie de la volonté*, 1960); under 'Hermeneutics' with *History and Truth* (1965); under 'Psychoanalysis' with *Freud and Philosophy* (1970); under 'Metaphor' with *The Rule of Metaphor* (1977); under 'Narrative' with *Time and Narrative* (1984); and under 'Ethics', 'Politics and Justice' with *The Just* (1995).

Listing the English titles of his major works in French allows us to intuit the solid written output of Ricoeur's mind and the remarkable scope of his attentions. Indeed, Simms' overview might well leave many readers persuaded that Ricoeur is the greatest Francophone philosopher of the last half-century. His strong rootedness in the religious tradition of Christianity already lends durability to his work, because he combines a command of tradition with intellectual innovation, thereby escaping the pitfalls of post-modernist faddism. Ricoeur's approach to language and literature is more 'constructive' than 'deconstructive'; all along he shows a concern for an ultimate Referent beyond the sea of human words, and he stresses the need to look at acts of literary creation as 'wholes', not just as a series of component parts. Derrida's highly analytical 'grammatological' agenda to discern whether terms and sentences do (or do not) refer to being is thus too limiting for him. Ricoeur's opus almost always contains a theological dimension, as Simms quickly tells from the start, and so, unlike Derrida, he did not come late in his writings to religious issues.

Simms, Director of the English-Philosophy joint programme at the University of Liverpool (as well as Lecturer in English Language and Literature there), is an authority on hermeneutics and the 'translating [of] sensitive texts', and the ideal scholar to expound Ricoeur for the general reader. Students of both literature and aesthetics will appreciate that matters of technical interest in literary theory—tropylogy, the imaginal, language as metaphor, language as 'master' or as 'mastered', the created text as sufficient unto itself without reference to authorial intent, etc—do not receive priority of place in this introduction. One cannot grasp the full significance of Ricoeur's approaches to any of these matters without understanding him on much bigger questions—to do with the fallibility of the human, the human struggle to come to terms with evil, the propensity of humans to give an account of themselves (or to narrate), the tension between the naivety of our beginnings (which can possess such freshness and primal strength) and the withering effects of criticism or 'suspicion' (that may leave many powerless, cynical, and resentful). At the last, Ricoeur is very much an ethical thinker, and in Simms (who is editor of *Ethics and the Subject*, 1997) we possess a most suitable guide.

The book contains a useful bibliography (though be prepared, there are no matches to the 'Ricoeur 1988' found in the text). Shaded, blocked expositions are occasionally inserted to elucidate key

concepts and personages for readers less familiar with philosophical debates. If the book is to be used as commentary on Ricoeur, I suggest it could be read in conjunction with Mario J. Valdés (ed.), *A Ricoeur Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

Garry Trompf