

Larson Powell. *The Technological Unconscious in German Modernist Literature: Nature in Rilke, Benn, Brecht, and Döblin*. Rochester: Camden House, 2008. 256 pp.

In this work, Larson Powell challenges the “blindness of modernity” with respect to its treatment of nature representations and thereby hopes to renew philosophical and critical investigation on the topic, “for nature in the wake of technocracy is anything but a self-evident matter” (3). His wide-ranging theoretical analyses revisit the representation of nature in German prose and poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke, Gottfried Benn, Alfred Döblin, and Bertolt Brecht from 1900 to 1945. This interdisciplinary study references major literary theories of modernism and postmodernism, including psychoanalysis, gender theory, and postcolonial theory, as well as the sociological systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, who, aside from his debate with Jürgen Habermas in the early 1970s, remains relatively unknown to American academic audiences. Powell also considers philosophical mediations between history and nature from Kant to Adorno as he examines how modernist literature tends to sever the human from its natural environs, what he sees as an admission of the human failure of sovereignty over nature. By utilizing such usually mutually exclusive paradigms as psychoanalysis and sociology, Powell seeks to “contribute to keeping open that necessary mobility” that one finds, for example, in Kant’s “more fluid and mobile relation” to nature and its dependence “upon the human constitution for its ultimate self-realization” (56). Powell views his analysis of the “technological unconscious” in the context of two preceding works: Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and Rosalind Krauss’s *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), both of which adapt psychoanalytical terminology in order to contest the self-fulfilling truths of modern culture and modern art, respectively.

In the first chapter, he writes of the “complete theoretical elision of nature” in cultural theories of modernism, which continued into the works of the “new subjectivity” of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Peter Handke, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Ulrich Plenzdorf, and others). Instead of rethinking the idea of *Naturlyrik* ‘nature poetry,’ a weakness of the movement was that it “preferred most often to recur to older traditional patterns of nature as backdrop or projection screen for a subjectivizing depth psychology” (22). This is a productive segue for chapters two through five, where Powell then revisits conceptions of subject and system as they relate to nature in the works of arguably the most important writers of German modernist literature. In these chapters he uses various philosophical, hermeneutic, and anti-hermeneutic methods to problematize modernity’s

generally-held views regarding its conceptions of nature and, thereby, its relation to reality.

Although Powell deals with arguably the most important writers of German modernist literature, he is not aiming to produce a new narrative about modernist literature, but rather, takes a case study approach and generally focuses on the authors' lesser known works. With respect to Rilke, he looks at the beginnings of modernism via his monograph *Worpswede* (1903), regarding Rilke's stay at the artists' colony on the Luneberg Heath, his development as a poet, and the relation of nature to the aesthetic artifice of modernism. He then turns to the demands placed on the reader regarding the fetishizing of language and the distortions of the subject of *Buch der Bilder* (*Book of Images* 1902, 1906). With respect to Benn, Powell focuses on a revaluation of Benn's earlier poetry, such as "Ikarus" and the canonical work "Pappel" (*Poplar*), to highlight Benn's unresolved ambivalence to the *Naturlyrik* tradition. Likewise, in his chapter on Döblin, he looks to earlier novels such as *Drei Sprünge des Wang-lun* (*The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* 1913) and (to a lesser extent) the sci-fi fantasy *Berge Meere Giganten* (*Mountains Seas and Giants* 1924) rather than *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) to show that "the moments of traumatic shock and discontinuity in Döblin have the function of breaking apart the traditional collective subject of anthropological history, thus of the philosophy of history" (169). Throughout these chapters Powell for the most part succeeds in maintaining a productive tension among the many, many competing theories he references, yet at times he seems to over-valorize the psychoanalytic. For example, Powell sees nature "massively overdetermined in psychoanalytic terms" in the above works "to the point where it is almost too easy to see the gendering and mother-father instances" (7). In the final chapter, Powell switches lenses to focus on Brecht's turn to *Naturlyrik* after his political works of the 1930s. Using the system-theoretical terminology of Luhmann, Powell demonstrates that it is fruitful to consider these works and Brecht's experience of political powerlessness within the context of art and legal systems theories.

Powell makes an innovative and intriguing case that the chapter is not yet closed on what some might consider the old hat of modernism. However, given the incredibly broad range of scholars, critics and theorists he engages (and the ensuing demands placed upon the reader), the book would have benefited from a more extensive introduction and explanatory notes, as well as a concluding chapter. As one example, he cross-references Friedrich Nietzsche, Benn, Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Kittler, Benjamin Marius, Oliver Jahraus, and George Spencer-Brown in just two sentences (106). His references to Luhmann's sociological theories, which are considered complex and notoriously difficult even for

sociologists, would benefit from more expansive explanation than his brief appendix of Luhmann's works. Yet the connections he makes are fascinating and demand more in-depth study.

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