
It may seem peculiar to spend the first two paragraphs of a relatively short book review on a preface to a collection of essays that was added quite some time after the essays themselves had been published. But in the case of Heinz Ickstadt’s Aesthetic Innovation and the Democratic Principle, a collection of his essays on literary aesthetics and aesthetic experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is necessary to do so because the preface sets up these essays as an intervention in current Americanist debates. In this preface, Ickstadt, a masterful, philosophically thoughtful reader of American literature, states that he “did not follow the discipline’s unmistakable tendency to shift its attention from literature to culture or from the study of literary texts to the study of theory” (9). While Ickstadt explicitly advocates interdisciplinary dialogue, he is wary of current attempts to read literary texts exclusively for their relevance for other fields, without considering how these texts are first of all literary texts and not simple representations of research in other academic fields.

According to Ickstadt, then, current forms of interdisciplinarity occur too readily with readers disregarding the literariness of the text. For him, this shift away from literature is symptomatic of a general crisis of the Humanities:

Since the status of literary studies (and the study of literature within American Studies in particular) is apparently endangered by the general shift in our contemporary academic landscape away from the Humanities, it is of course greatly tempting to secure its relevance by subsuming the specific questions literature generates into those of adjacent or seemingly more relevant fields (be they philosophy, sociology or the history of science). (10)

Accordingly, the text too often becomes “an illustration of the theory applied.” Both in his preface and the essays themselves, Ickstadt does not reject such “interdisciplinary dialogue” (10). But he makes sure that he participates in this dialogue from a literary perspective, insisting that the question of the aesthetic remain at the heart of literary studies. In this light, Ickstadt’s collection of essays must be conceived as the scholarly legacy of a towering figure of American Studies as well as a challenge to the field as it stands today.

Ickstadt’s series of essays ultimately amounts to a treatise on the aesthetic. His aesthetic theory is rooted in a commitment to modernism—from John Dewey’s philosophy to the poetry and fiction of American modernism. Throughout his essays, Ickstadt dwells on the aesthetic as a form of “resistance” against “individual self-expression and imaginary self-empowerment” in an attempt to “redirect the energies of the creative self into more social channels” (28). Some essays stand out here. “Making It New” is a concise introduction to American modernism which every student of American literature should have read. In line with recent reassessments of modernist literature such as Peter Nicholls’s Modernisms and George Hutchinson’s The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White, Ickstadt paints a picture of American Modernism as a debated, conflicted, but mostly inclusive and diverse response to the challenges of modernity that was united in its experimentalism. Pound’s dictum to “make it new” was shared by all modernists, but adjusted to the various cultural and social contexts of writers such as Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Langston Hughes. Although Ickstadt emphasizes the diversity of American modernism, he also resists a tendency to do away with the period label in the name of smaller literary movements. As he shows, “the ethnic differences and antagonistic interactions of American cultural history add to the innovative potential of an American modernism that in its various manifestations conceives of the new in the name of buried origins and, as part of a tradition of the new, understands even its linguistic revolutions as re-discoveries of its diverse cultural heritage” (86).

This synchronic dimension is combined with a diachronic dimension in Ickstadt’s discussion of the enduring legacy of the American Renaissance. Ickstadt shows how American modernism, in spite of all its attempts to make things new, did not so much break with the past, but rather “reached back to what were considered the beginnings of a national cultural tradition originating with Emerson and Whitman” (88) in an attempt to actualize this potential for its own historical moment. As such, American modernism must be placed within a specific American literary and
cultural tradition as much as it must be understood as “the result of a continuous dialogue across national and cultural borders” (92). As Ickstadt has it in an essay on painters and poets of the Stieglitz circle: “The awareness of early American modernists of the artistic revolutions that were going on in Paris, Berlin, Milan, or St. Petersburg went hand in hand with their discovery of American ancestries and continuities” (105).

It is of little surprise that for Ickstadt, Hart Crane is one of the central figures of American modernism. Crane has been a reference point of Ickstadt’s writings throughout his career. Appropriately, Crane makes appearances in a number of essays and is discussed at length in “Hart Crane’s Columbus: The Poet’s Voyage of the Incarnate Word.” As a poet “who attempted to mediate between Whitman’s expansive gestures of spatial conquest and Dickinson’s metaphoric densities of inward exploration” (124), Crane emerges as the quintessential American modernist. His aesthetics, which is rooted “in the belief that it connected world, Word and self” (136), is a perfect illustration of the title of Ickstadt’s book.

Subsequently Ickstadt takes his reader on a tour through mid- and late twentieth-century poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Susan Howe, but also discusses the novels of Richard Powers and Thomas Pynchon’s epic Against the Day. The collection concludes with three programmatic essays in which Ickstadt theorizes his version of the aesthetic in more detail. The volume’s final essay can be regarded as his definite statement on the relationship between aesthetics and community. Although he draws on Jan Mukařovský’s concept of literature’s aesthetic function, Ickstadt somewhat surprisingly asserts that the “value” and “social function” of the aesthetic had been “a thriving topic even during the Marxists revival of the late 1960s and the decade after” (361; emphasis added), when in fact Marxists such as Bloch and Adorno (and Western Marxists generally) were the ones who kept the aesthetic alive and made some of the most important twentieth-century contributions to a non-reductionist theory of the aesthetic. In the tradition of American pragmatism, Ickstadt understands the aesthetic as “a realm of creative self-assertion but also as a laboratory of thought and action,” insisting that “the aesthetic and the social [are] interconnected” (364). He cautions that “the value of a literary text can never be determined by its politics alone” (368), but always follows a universal impulse to go “off limits, imaginatively taking the place of the Other or exploring oneself in the Other” (372). Ickstadt seeks to avoid false dichotomies (politics vs. form etc.), instead emphasizing how literary texts can do cultural and political work only through their “aesthetic function”: the literary text “is not theoretical, political, documentary etc. but able, through the specific organization of its functions, to open up and test theoretical or political or historical discourse by pushing it to its limits, by staging it in terms of lived life, i.e., in terms of practice and experience, of concrete and the particular” (367). For this reason, the literary text is to be understood both in its concrete situatedness and in its appeal to a universalist experience of reading. Ickstadt’s is an aesthetics which “accepts difference without discarding the notion of a universal” (372).

Of course, as Ickstadt himself acknowledges, the universalist dimension of the aesthetic experience has come under assault, and some important work has been done on questions of aesthetic experience, the idea of beauty, and literary aesthetics in the sixteen years since Ickstadt’s programmatic essay has been published. But as the preface makes clear, the republication of his essays illustrate how Ickstadt still insists on “the symbolic and social practice of art” (15). For him, any form of literary theory must engage the tension between universalism and particularity as well as the social dimension of the aesthetic experience. In this sense, the book itself stands as an illustration of Ickstadt’s claim that “theory should serve textual analysis and not make the text an illustration of the theory applied” (10).

Given the wealth of literary figures and movements Ickstadt analyzes and which often combine into fascinating arguments across individual essays, the lack of an index is an unfortunate editorial decision, as it would have helped the reader to identify these connections more immediately. The collection of essays is also somewhat irritatingly subtitled “Essays on Twentieth-Century American Poetry and Fiction,” and while Ickstadt’s main interest is certainly the twentieth century, with modernism in particular, both his essays on Richard Powers and Thomas Pynchon are on twenty-first century fiction, just as Ickstadt’s two theoretical essays are comments on the state of American
Studies in the twenty-first century. This may seem a minor detail. But, when the short editorial preface proclaims the essays’ “conceptual interrelatedness” (5), it would have been helpful to briefly explain what precisely this conceptual interrelatedness consists of, as the claim pertains to the question of periodization both in and of Ickstadt’s essays. Still, these minor issues, none of which are a result of the essays themselves, will certainly not be an obstacle for this volume to be used as an accessible, comprehensive, and encompassing guide to aesthetic theory, modernist literature, and ultimately as an introduction to one of the most important Americanists of the last decades.

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