

1 HEINZ ICKSTADT, *Aesthetic Innovation and the*
 2 *Democratic Principle: Essays on Twentieth-*
 3 *Century American Poetry and Fiction*. Eds.
 Susanne Rohr, Peter Schneck, Sabine Sielke.
 Heidelberg: Winter, 2016. 402 pp.

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 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 weary 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.

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 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:

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 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)

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 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

1 cultural tradition as much as it must be under-
 2 stood as “the result of a continuous dialogue
 3 across national and cultural borders” (92).
 5 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, Ber-
 lin, Milan or St. Petersburg went hand in hand
 with their discovery of American ancestries
 and continuities” (105).

10 It is of little surprise that for Ickstadt, Hart
 Crane is one of the central figures of Ameri-
 can modernism. Crane has been a reference
 point of Ickstadt’s writings throughout his
 career. Appropriately, Crane makes appear-
 15 ances 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 con-
 20 quest 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.

25 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 nov-
 els of Richard Powers and Thomas Pynchon’s
 epic *Against the Day*. The collection concludes
 with three programmatic essays in which Ick-
 30 stadt 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 commu-
 nity. Although he draws on Jan Mukařovský’s
 concept of literature’s aesthetic function,
 Ickstadt somewhat surprisingly asserts that
 35 the “value” and “social function” of the aes-
 thetic 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
 40 who kept the aesthetic alive and made some
 of the most important twentieth-century con-
 tributions to a non-reductionist theory of the
 aesthetic. In the tradition of American prag-
 matism, Ickstadt understands the aesthetic as
 “a realm of creative self-assertion but also as
 44 a laboratory of thought and action,” insisting
 45 that “the aesthetic and the social [are] inter-
 46 connected” (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, imagi-
 5 natively taking the place of the Other or ex-
 ploring 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
 10 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 read-
 15 ing. 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 pub-
 20 lished. But as the preface makes clear, the
 republication of his essays illustrate how Ick-
 stadt still insists on “the symbolic and social
 practice of art” (15). For him, any form of lit-
 erary 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 illu-
 25 stration 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 in-
 30 dex 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 irritat-
 35 ingly subtitled “Essays on Twentieth-Cen-
 tury American Poetry and Fiction,” and while
 Ickstadt’s main interest is certainly the twen-
 tieth century, with modernism in particu-
 lar, both his essays on Richard Powers and
 Thomas Pynchon are on twenty-first century
 fiction, just as Ickstadt’s two theoretical es-
 40 says are comments on the state of American

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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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