

the moment. However, any philosopher who builds on this foundation may well be building his house on sand, because the history of science teaches us that no theory ever loses its hypothetical character. Science progresses, forever criticizing and completing and correcting itself, and today's fresh fact often becomes tomorrow's stale fiction. (4) Parascientific discourse has the deck stacked against religion from the very beginning. How? Through epistemological legerdemain. Once we have granted that nothing counts as evidence except what is accessible to scientific observation – in other words, once the voice of subjectivity has been silenced and excluded – it is not terribly difficult to depict “religion” as a vestige of a pre-scientific worldview, akin to magic and superstition.

Despite a certain amount of repetition (excusable, perhaps, in a lecture series) and occasional longueurs, *Absence of Mind* is an admirable work: lucid, forceful, and refreshingly impatient with fashionable cant. Like Robinson's novel *Gilead* (2004) and her nonfiction work *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), this slender volume – a thoughtful critique of ‘thought that has not been thought out’ – is simultaneously a celebration of the mysterious gift of mind and a demonstration of that gift's nuanced powers.

DOUGLAS McDERMID

**ADORNO AND THEOLOGY** by Christopher Craig Brittain, *Philosophy and Theology Series*, T. & T. Clark, London, 2010, pp. x + 238, £16.99 pbk

The forms of Marxism which so dominated sociology, politics, and philosophy in the United Kingdom during the late 1970s and mid-1980s were marked by scholastic skirmishes around theories of the state as derived from the imported texts of Althusser and Poulantzas. In these forms, religion was subsumed under ideology and stamped as irrelevant in a secular ethos that brooked no self-criticism on that matter. With the translations into English of the works of Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer, who dominated the Frankfurt School, considerable surprise was generated in the mid-1980s at the theological baggage attached to these thinkers, all the more so as it was decidedly Jewish in shape and origin. Benjamin occasioned deeper bafflement with his interest in the writings of the kabbalah, his fascination with the painting of *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, his fixations on allegory and the baroque, and his frets over naming that had unexpected roots in Genesis.

Cast as idiosyncratic in the United Kingdom during the 1990s, this form of Marxism was never really assimilated into sociology and theology but was deposited in the left luggage section of the history of ideas and was marked as ‘unclaimed’. But as Brittain indicates, with the ‘return’ of religion, again, the shrill cries of the ‘new’ atheists, and the angst of post-secularity, times are ripe for a re-appraisal of that unspent Marxist legacy, which he supplies well in relation to Adorno.

Usually treated as a self-declared atheist, with whom Christian theologians did (p. 189) or did not (p. 171) engage, some might be puzzled that Adorno exhibited any interest in theology. Brittain gets around this difficulty by concentrating on what he terms an ‘inverse’ theology in his writings, which extend over the culture industry, politics, and music. Adorno's route into theology is confused and divided in origin. Rightly, Brittain stresses the influences of Jewish theology in shaping his orientation, but also notes that Adorno's doctoral thesis was on Kierkegaard and that his supervisor was Paul Tillich. From this study, Adorno emerges more as an agnostic than as an atheist.

The study, divided into seven chapters is well sectioned and sub-headed and traverses a lot of ground with considerable economy. There are three prime

concerns in the study. First is an exploration of the implications of Adorno's famous comment that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' which Brittain notes is 'a damning condemnation of modernity' (p. 5). Second is Adorno's stress on *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition on the making of images, which links to his notion of 'inverse' theology. Thirdly, the political and cultural implications of Adorno's writings are explored to assess their contemporary impact. Like Bauman, Adorno is all the time seeking openings and resisting forms of closure effected by method or ideology. This follows a contemporary path in sociological and philosophical thought where reference to the beyond is the price of the preservation of indeterminacy, the antidote to the hegemony of reason.

'Inverse' theology arises deductively (virtually as an imperative necessity) from the culture of modernity and is a response to the suffering it generates. Given the deceiving basis of culture and its proneness to commodification, theology emerges as a resource of resistance to these trends, unexpectedly occupying a default position. Its 'inverse' form bears a sort of resemblance to negative theology. Brittain treats this 'inverse' form as being 'at the very core of the moral impulse that motivates his work' (p. 170). He encapsulates Adorno's plight well when he observes that 'an inverse theology has no revelatory scripture; it is merely aware of its need for one, and feels the pain of its absence' (p. 101). In another passage, Brittain suggests that Adorno's 'inverse' theology 'involves the "spiritual experience" of thinking the "last extreme of horror" and being prepared to confront it' (p. 174). The difficulty, as Brittain admits is that the term 'theology' is not really defined by Adorno (p. 11), who nevertheless seeks from it a theodicy and the motifs of redemption (p. 96), expectations generated by his ruthless appraisals of the distortions of the social. Adorno needs a theology; he does not inhabit one.

A missing ingredient in the study and one almost impossible to supply is a notion of a 'normal' theology against which to compare Adorno's 'inverse' version. Eluding the study is whether Adorno's theology is one at all. Somehow, he fumbles about with concerns about 'reasoning about God, or at least the ontological structures which give shape to existence' (p. 11). The latter might not require belief in a God, but at least it permits recognition of the ingredients to think about one, and perhaps this is the unexpected witness to wrest from the study. The tenor of the study seems to suggest social suffering finds secularity wanting in supplying healing, hence issues of theology return, so that in this sense post-secularity is the unfinished business of the maturation of modernity.

Chapter 2, on 'actuality and potentiality: on Kant and metaphysics' and containing a detour into Milbank, is not very profitable. Oddly, when Brittain tries to situate Adorno's insights in contemporary debates on religion, the complexity of his 'inverse' theology that so attracts manages to unravel. Chapter 5 on 'politics, liberation and the Messianic' is bitty. It involves a peculiar digression into liberation theology and has not enough on the Messianic, especially in relation to Adorno. The effort in chapter 6 to link religion and the culture industry produces a mixed bag. The critiques of rational choice theory and religion are decidedly unpersuasive, though better material appears on 'spirituality' and on religion as a form of compensation.

The best chapters emerge when Brittain is dealing with the perplexities surrounding Adorno's own approach to theology. Chapter 3 on social science, negative dialectics as 'crypto-theology', centring much on the debate about positivism between Adorno and Popper, is excellent, as is chapter 4 (which Brittain treats as the heart of the study) on 'inverse' theology itself. In that chapter, the material on Benjamin and Kafka is invaluable. The study finishes with chapter 7, aptly entitled 'hymns to the silence'. The definite article attached to silence is notable. The title marks a return to the issue of Auschwitz where Brittain tellingly notes the way Adorno reversed his position, not only on poetry, but also on belief. The

chapter contains a most interesting section on ‘reconciliation: from autonomy to love’ (pp. 194–200), where Brittain suggests that the ‘scattered fragments in his writings . . . offer illuminating commentary on relationships of love which enhance the power of his conception of an inverse theology’ (p. 195). Brittain gets matters right when he suggests that Adorno’s ‘inverse theology acts as a “force-field” against a collapse into pessimism’ (p. 198). Instead of being treated as a site of illusions, theology emerges as a source of sanity, one to be used to make sense of an insane world. To that degree, theology becomes a projection, not cast in illusions but by reference to the requisites for survival.

Overall, this study is a brave venture providing much to reflect on. On balance, it copes well with a thinker whose work is as fragmentary as the insights it yields. What emerges is an ‘inverse’ line of thought which ‘new atheists’ are likely to find negative, but which those dwelling in the homelands of theology will regard as oddly positive. Going against the vulgar assumption of the mass media in the United Kingdom that intellectuals exit from theology, this study suggests that they make reluctant entries into its ambit even if these do not yield stated affiliations. As was the case with Benjamin, an oddly rich and unexpected amount of theology can be found in Adorno if one looks as, in this study, Brittain profitably did.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

**NOMADIC NARRATIVES, VISUAL FORCES: GWEN JOHN’S LETTERS AND PAINTINGS** by Maria Tamboukou, *Peter Lang*, New York, 2010, pp. 209, £45

In 2008 the Barber Institute gallery at Birmingham University held an exhibition of paintings of nuns by Gwen John (1876–1939). There were three versions of her portrait of Mère Poussepin, the founder of an order of Dominican Sisters of Charity with a convent in Meudon, the French town in which John had settled in 1910 after the breakdown of her affair with Rodin. The portraits were based on an old prayer card the nuns gave to John, and this commission led to other paintings of nuns and worshippers in the local church. Evidently Gwen John often sat sketching in the rear pews. But she was also in the church because of her own commitment. Gwen John had been received into the Catholic Church in around 1913.

Gwen John is now the subject of a number of books, but most of them have troubles with her conversion to Catholicism. It is often explained away as a rebound from Rodin, when it is not just passed over as an oddity, worth less narrative attention than her fondness for cats. This new volume on John, by the feminist sociologist Maria Tamboukou, continues the trend of passing over the conversion in near silence. This is shown by Tamboukou’s reading of a poignant passage in Gwen John’s notebooks. Writing after her conversion, Gwen John called herself ‘God’s little artist: a seer of strange beauties, a teller of harmonies, a diligent worker’ (quoted on pp. 56–57). For Tamboukou this passage reveals nothing less than John placing herself in the tradition of the Christ-like artist, a tradition initiated in Dürer’s self-portraits as Christ. Tamboukou is confident of the link to this tradition: ‘it is this trail in the history of art that John was following in trying to make sense of herself as an artist and this was independent of the fact that she had become a Catholic’ (p. 57).

Tamboukou has to make this claim because her analysis is driven by Deleuze and Foucault, two writers who feature so often in cultural analysis nowadays that they have become an obstacle to independent thought. This book is led by its theoretical attempt to establish Gwen John as a ‘nomadic subject’ who through her writings and art becomes ‘difficult and impossible to pin down as a