



Red Sea – Red Square – Red Thread: A Philosophical Detective Story by Lydia Goehr

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A book review of Lydia Goehr, *Red Sea – Red Square – Red Thread: A Philosophical Detective Story*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, xlii + 677 pp. ISBN 9780197572443.

Red Sea – Red Square – Red Thread is a large, original, and extraordinarily ambitious book. It undertakes nothing less than to alter radically what we think philosophy is, how it is to be done, and how we think about culture in general and the place of philosophy in it. To mention only two out of many summary formulations: ‘a book is a device to ignite the imagination’ (p. 4, citing Alan Bennett), and what we are offered is ‘a micrology of telling details’ that focuses on ‘all the finger- and footprints in images and texts’ (p. xli) rather than offering general arguments for general conclusions.

One way into the book’s radical ambition is to note its unusual structure. Its 674 pages of text and images are divided into a preface and four parts, with each part containing three to five chapters. The chapters in turn, each between 19 and 45 pages, are divided into titled subsections, usually one to three pages long. The section titles are frequently imagistic, abstract, and somewhat oblique to the narrative: ‘Hitch Hike’, ‘Stubborn Pigeon’, ‘Philosophical Furniture’, ‘Buffoons by Paper and Toast’, and ‘Irregular Dance’, to choose just a few at random. The sections mostly discuss particular artistic and cultural phenomena and their surrounding contexts. An astonishing range of artists, writers, philosophers, and other cultural agents come into view, from Locke, Burton, Hogarth, and Fielding to Lichtenberg, Goethe, Hegel, and Puccini, to Danto, Motherwell, Wittgenstein, and Beckett, and many, many more. There is often quotation, indicated by italics rather than quotation marks, and frequently given in French, German, or Latin, with occasional Greek and Hebrew, as well as English translations. Though

BOOK REVIEW

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there is a 39-page 'Bibliography (Non-Fiction since 1900)', there are no footnotes or specific text references. There is frequent use of italics for *emphasis on concepts*, or to mark *authorial voice*, or to indicate puns or etymological affinities; no single general *conception* or *conceit* governing this *considered practice* is evident. Here are two sentences that illustrate the style:

When Shakespeare let Hamlet ask: *Has this fellow no feeling at his business, that he sings at grave-making*, he warned of the gravedigger whose spade digs his own grave when beating around bushes of blind revenge. The grave wit that came to fall under the rubric of gravity allowed many a song of praise to be laid to rest with a certain *gravitas* in the Red Sea. (p. 254)

The overall feel of this style and structure is a combination of closeness of attention to particulars with a paratactic-oracular stance that aims at *highlighting connections*. The closest textual model for the structure and style of the individual sections is Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, and both Adorno and Walter Benjamin, especially Benjamin's notion of *Denkbilder* or thought-images, hover continuously in the background. The text as a whole is an extended exercise in what Goehr in an earlier book characterized as *Doppelbewegung* – according to which 'philosophy and music [and here visual art, literature, politics, and criticism] [are, in Adorno's phrase] *Verhaltensweisen*, [...] dynamic modes of conduct' that are essentially interrelated, rather than being isolated practices, let alone practices of detached theorizing.¹

Unlike Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, however, there is a more or less continuous narrative that ties the sections, chapters, and parts together: the philosophical detective story of the book's subtitle. This is the hunt for the first appearance of the *Red Sea Anecdote*, told by Arthur Danto in Chapter 1 of *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, according to which a painted *red square* represents, according to its maker, the Egyptians crossing the *Red Sea*: the Israelites have already crossed over, and all the Egyptians have drowned. Danto picked up this anecdote from Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, but it was already well known in Kierkegaard's 1840s Copenhagen. When, then, did it first appear? And why is it picked up, varied, and repurposed in so many cases from (it turns out) Christopher Smart in London in 1751 onwards? (p. 587) – though Goehr also traces affinities with stories about all-over white (or green) paintings in seventeenth-century Till Eulenspiegel stories in Germany and in older Yiddish legends. Answering these questions, or tracing multiple answers to them and conjectures about them, is the *red thread* that binds together the whole. (There is a substantial parallel investigation of the history of the image of the red thread, used by the British Royal Navy throughout the length of a piece of rope in order to indicate its royal ownership, and made prominent by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in *Elective Affinities* as an image of an underlying thread of argument, narrative, or history.)

The overall development of the text in its tracing of the *red thread* of the *Red Sea* anecdote about a *red square* painting of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea is driven by a combination of anger and hope. The anger is directed largely at institutionalized philosophy, especially analytic philosophy and its argumentative protocols, and, more broadly, at Platonism, understood as the effort by experts to claim knowledge of some foundational, abstract entity (forms, the form of the Good) that would entitle them to judge and prescribe the development of artistic and cultural (moral and political) practices. Danto took a first step in overcoming cultural prescriptivism in rejecting all

1 Lydia Goehr, *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 3.

normative definitions of art in favour of his avowedly value-neutral conception of art as embodied meaning. But Danto, placing too much hope in liberal-plural America, failed to reflect on the historical entanglements of artistic and political practices and on how his own definition given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions itself could be used to prop up the authority of philosophy as a (pseudo-)detached discipline with central roles for experts and for logical arguments modelled on mathematics, as opposed to shifting micrological attention to modulating and varying artistic-cultural-political particulars. 'Thinking,' Goehr argues, 'cannot be reduced to its abstract scaffolding without concrete or experiential loss' (p. 4). In place of abstract argument, we should embrace 'keeping [...] in play [...] the agonistic tug and pull between history, ideology, and essence' (p. 520). Micrological attention that is sensitive to politics is the only way, Goehr suggests, really to confront (though not plausibly to conclude) 'the terrible history of prejudice and persecution that has worked its way through lives lived for the sake of art, truth, reason, and divinity' (p. 611). Abstraction and the pursuit of generality are *per se* bad. Indulging in them amounts metaphorically to drowning the Egyptians, or painting them out via abstraction, together with all the other gypsies, bohemians, Jews, and other non-Platonists, non-Christians with whom the Egyptians have been historically affiliated in the cultural imaginary as objects of persecution. 'I remain haunted,' Goehr tells us,

by a safe house erected for a reason placed on a pure island and by a reason ideologically and theologically bolstered by origination theories of birthright and inheritance. I remain extremely wary of a [misguided] wit that is out to expose others assuming others to be exposed by those claiming an upper moral hand over conscience and self-knowing. (p. 612)

The hope that Goehr poses against aesthetic-cultural-political authoritarianism reposes not only in the aesthetic-cultural-political micrology that she practises but more broadly in wit, modelled on the conception of wit as eternal agility and openness to the incursions of primary process that was articulated and defended by Friedrich Schlegel. 'The transport across water and language of an inverted wit is a running theme in [...] my book' (p. 434). 'Geniuses' – those in German Romanticism who are masters of wit and those who come before or follow after them – 'leave something wanting – not from a failure to finish but from respect for other minds to engage the artwork with a liberty of mind and imagination' (p. 503).

By the end of the book, the focus of Goehr's hopes emerges as, above all, William Hogarth, and more broadly, the witty, cosmopolitan, artistic life of eighteenth-century London. There is also extended attention early on to Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* and its images of Bohemian life, including a Red Sea painting that is turned into a shop signboard, but the wit and practice of free-thinking are ultimately traced back to a more intense moment in 1750s London. Hogarth in his engravings and paintings practised 'a wit of incongruity, ambiguity, and inversion' (p. 485) – terms of high praise for Goehr. Hogarth's 'wit supports a satire that, drawn loosely from virtue theory, addresses liberty and justice in a society of professions feared for their foreign taste and imposture' (p. 485). Up, then, with English liberty and with witty cosmopolitanism, also practised by others in London salon life, including Fielding, Sterne, and Burton; down with foreign impositions, pretensions, and professional protocols. Down with cultural-political authority and up with the fugitive experiences and perceptions of the marginalized and oppressed. As thinkers, we would do better by 'finding and breathing life into things to release their inner threads, fabric, or fibers' (p. 13) and by 'avoiding the path toward a complete explanation' (p. 421) than by indulging in theory-building and definition-mongering.

Does this book successfully breathe life into things? I am in considerable sympathy with many of its stances. I, too, am a child of existentialism, deconstruction (especially its Adornoesque variant), Ludwig Wittgenstein, and left Hegelianism (and the social conditions to which they respond), and as such I am quite ready to embrace the entanglements of philosophy with literature, visual art, music, history, politics, and theology, thence to practise (quasi-)philosophy as a relatively undisciplined and creative form of cultural critique (albeit with its own vocabularies). Looking into unexpected and neglected crannies of history is a good idea, and I found myself moved and instructed by Goehr's treatment of Hogarth and eighteenth-century London wit. Her exegeses of passages from the Bible (mostly from *Genesis*) and of associated theological ideas are likewise illuminating. The book overall is a difficult read, however, and I might have preferred a sustained, footnoted, close analysis of the full range of Hogarth's work in its London contexts to the exceptionally broad range of topics that Goehr offers.

Normatively, I am somewhat troubled by the strain of aesthetic-cultural-political libertarianism that runs throughout the book. To be sure, this is to be a libertarianism that gives no privilege whatsoever to the powerful, credentialed, or moneyed. The oppressed and marginalized are to be liberated and heard; no one is to be drowned in the Red Sea. Goehr's positive image of cultural life struck me as in the region of Karl Marx's image of communist life, where, having overthrown the exploiters, we will no longer have any need for government or other forms of normative authority; where the state will wither away, leaving each of us to 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic'.² Despite its attractions against regnant normalizations, marginalizations, and exploitations, this image, I fear, is all too readily appropriable by the right, leaving an economic free-for-all of all against all. It also threatens to leave us collectively not as fellow citizens or fellow cosmopolitans in relations of mutual respect but rather as a mere heap or heap of heaps of competitive individuals. Can there be forms of normative authority (artistic, cultural, and political) that reasonably win the trust of all, especially including those currently neglected or oppressed? This is a difficult question, and Goehr is right to suggest that history does not encourage a favourable answer. But is the dichotomy that Goehr suggests – no normative authority at all versus sectarian, oppressive, unjustified normative authority – itself necessary and absolute? Here it strikes me that we need the cultivation of disciplined forms of attention and authority, not simply habits of unthinking consumption, and that at least sometimes those practised in such cultivation have succeeded and might still succeed in winning wide audiences and speaking 'with a universal voice'. (Kant is an obvious resource here, and I also have in mind the forms of democratic, perfectionist liberalism and cultural criticism urged and practised by Joseph Raz and Stanley Cavell.) The boundaries between high and low art and between serious and trivial art (different boundaries) are and of right ought to be vague and permeable. Artworks only for particular audiences ought not to be denigrated. But we still also need some high art, some cultural authority, and some (democratic) compositions of a 'we'. As Ted Cohen once poignantly wrote,

[h]owever we choose to explain and understand wide and narrow connections [among us, and between us and works of art], I think we should assume, at least at the start, that width is neither better or worse

2 Karl Marx, 'The German Ideology', in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. and trans. Eugene Kamenka (New York: Viking Penguin, 1983), 177.

than narrowness. I need both. Urgently. *Hamlet* and *The Marriage of Figaro* connect me with most of you, I would guess, perhaps all of you. Elaine May's movie *Ishtar*, which I am very fond of, leaves me virtually alone. That's all fine: I need to be with you, and I need to be alone. I need to be like you, and I need to be unlike you. A world in which you and I never connected would be a horror. And so would a world in which we were exactly the same, and therefore connected unfailingly, with every object on every occasion. *The Marriage of Figaro* helps us be us. *Ishtar* helps me be me. Thank God for them both.³

Goehr, I fear, leaves us only with a motley of individuals and groups, each with their own incommensurable *Ishtars* as a result of their historical experiences. But then perhaps by Goehr's lights I cast myself, in saying this, into the ranks of the philosophical oppressors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

3 Ted Cohen, 'High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 156.

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