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Book Review: The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, Nancy. By Joseph Acquisto. Pp. 218, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, \$110.00

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Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, Nancy*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, ISBN 978-1-6289-2652-1, 218pp.

Joseph Acquisto's *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, Nancy* addresses itself directly to those immersed in recent continental philosophical turns to the theological, here taken up as a general 'structure of thought' itself (p. 2). By isolating this strain, Acquisto certainly intends to further question the arbitrary split between the sacred and the secular, but also to challenge the nature of the philosophical in the first place, something he achieves through an exploration of the poetic. In Charles Baudelaire's 'amodern' poetry, as it faced and tried to reject the 'impossibility of redemption' (p. 3), Acquisto finds a suitable foundation for this theological turn that has been described as a 'religion without religion' (a phrase very familiar to the work of John Caputo, but which goes unmentioned by Acquisto). Though Caputo might be missed here, Acquisto does not miss the opportunity to parallel Baudelaire's initiative with the deconstruction of Christianity put forth more recently by Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben. Acquisto will develop through such thinkers a specifically modern 'asoteriology', or a movement away from the typical doctrines of salvation (soteriology) and toward an exploration of this particular metaphysical and aesthetic atheism that arises out of the Christian tradition.

What we witness throughout this remarkable study is a veritable literary playground of experimentation with the consequences of such asoteriological gestures, such as we find in the work of Baudelaire, but also Emil Cioran, whose aphorisms challenged the descendants of modernity to contemplate redemption anew. The focus on literary forms that Acquisto gives his book is a search not for systematic rigor, but for that which opens us up toward the eternal or unending, hence the preference for maxims, aphorisms, poetry and other such forms. Much as the poet Wallace Stevens had once pointed out, with the loss of redemption, poetic endeavors take on a new resonance and significance; they offer us something that religion once did, but which now has lost its power.

The first chapter links together Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, Giorgio Agamben and, briefly, Slavoj Žižek. We are greeted by a rich tapestry of figures, poems and commentary that interweave to give us a fascinating portrait of an atheological worldview that at once takes seriously the state of fallenness or original sin that humanity finds itself mired in, but also how our modern context can no longer find a way forward within such a situation. Reconceiving the category of redemption from this place means, for the most part, and to the authors assembled here, to see it as cancelled out by itself—that is, in effect, a cancelling out of the duality of sin/redemption that has haunted the West for centuries (p. 24). The suspension of action and the preference for simultaneity over eternity, thus realigning our conceptualization of time, is paramount for Baudelaire and sets a course that will guide, in some ways, the rest of the study. Žižek is brought in, quite appropriately, to demonstrate how such a reading is not necessary opposed to the Christian story, but rather its own 'perverse core' (p. 48) that has too often been silenced. In the end, and through the interactions of these varied authors, Acquisto explores how the loss of redemption in the modern period opens thought up to viewing the redemptive qualities of art or of political revolution as forms of 'alinear critical dialogue' (p. 55).

The second chapter continues Acquisto's somewhat critical stance toward Benjamin, which was taken up in the first chapter as an attempt to read Baudelaire *with* Agamben and as against Benjamin. Here, he takes up a variety of related themes in pursuit of this line of inquiry, from Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire (as well as a 'Baudelairean reading of Benjamin') to, more significantly, the Romanian-born French poet Benjamin Fondane's writings on Baudelaire. Benjamin, in Acquisto's estimation, retains too much of the theological in his reading of Baudelaire, allowing a messianic sense of hope to permeate a world that is truly void of such things. The full metaphysical weight of sin that is not beholden to an explicitly theological point of view is only given its due, not by Benjamin, but by Fondane—an interpretive move that mobilizes against so much of Benjamin's current popularity (and also Jean-Paul Sartre's contemporaneous study of Baudelaire that had overshadowed Fondane's work), but which offers us a refreshing, alternative perspective on the false dichotomy between metaphysics and experience. Fondane, for his part, illuminates the Catholic, mystical side of the darkness that the modern poet has fallen into, but in a reversed sense, one that highlights the human side of things: 'Transcendence is the temptation here, the impossible attempt to go beyond the human' (p. 92). What salvation is left to humanity? In Fondane's eyes, poetry's ability to

partake in the suffering of humanity—the ‘grace of poetry’ (p. 96), which sustains us through its creative, albeit pessimistic, linguistic capabilities.

The third chapter isolates Agamben’s notion of the ‘end of the poem’ in relation to his conception of messianic time, alongside closer readings of the already developed poetic legacy of Baudelaire. In particular the chapter focuses upon poetry’s ability to refuse the linear progression of time, something that Baudelaire demonstrates time and again in his play of poetic forms, and which Agamben has taken up in studies of both poetry and (Pauline) theology. In Acquisto’s words, ‘[...] it is precisely the poetry’s refusal of linear progression, its infinite doubling back, that subtracts it from the linear logic of the modern while making the problem of endings central to its esthetic and metaphysical concerns’ (p. 117). We can see in this description of form and its dissolution too why the structure of Acquisto’s book, which involves a ceaseless circling around Baudelaire’s poetry from a variety of angles, is more than just haphazardly conceived—it is rather emblematic of the nature of the amodern quest that he wishes to further identify.

The fourth chapter finds an immediate example for the kind of alinear (or even ‘anti-linear’) writing that Acquisto suggests permeates Baudelaire’s poetry: the aphorisms of Cioran. To situate things properly, Acquisto guides the reader first through Nietzsche’s views on art and redemption, followed by a brief analysis of this Nietzschean influence upon Cioran and, finally, upon Cioran’s echoes of Baudelaire in his own work. What we are shown is that, rather than adopt Nietzsche’s preference for the aesthetic as the last work of salvation in the modern period—a position that, like Benjamin, overcommits itself to a theological worldview—Cioran’s fragmentary style of thought does not make such a religious commitment, but rather recognizes the impossibility of redemption as perhaps another form of redemption, a liberation from the confinement to seek knowledge (the result of our fallen state of existence). What we are given by Cioran then is not simply a nihilistic stance, but one that recognizes the paradoxical tension that exists for the poet who is always suspended between abandoning poetry in favor of redemption and ‘remaining incapable of ending a poem and thus fulfilling the creative act’ (p. 136). This irresolution within Cioran’s work is what leads directly to the next chapter.

The fifth chapter further pursues the resonances between Cioran and Baudelaire more carefully, specifically examining the necessary role that fiction, which can be both ‘poisonous’ or ‘nourishing’, must play within our existence (p. 148). By recognizing how we are, at best, only able to abide liminally within such a fictional way of living, the ‘lucid delusion’ we clamor for, Cioran paints a landscape wherein sin takes us both in and out of time, the ‘eternal fall’ from which the chapter draws its title. Where this eternal fall takes us, interestingly, is to the threshold of our ability to create a world through language, through poetry as through all acts of writing. In Acquisto’s rendering, ‘Writing thereby becomes a means of confronting, even if not vanquishing, the illusions inherent in human life, and therefore requires courage temporarily to enter those illusions so as better to illuminate and give voice to them’ (p. 165). Though Cioran remains a pessimist (and not a nihilist) in the end, his work gestures towards the almost therapeutic value of clinging to our fictional worlds found within writing rather than by clamoring for a salvation that is never to come.

The sixth and final chapter, which serves too as the conclusion of the entire study, returns to Baudelaire and Cioran concerning their notions of sin and the fallen nature of humanity, not in order to issue a total condemnation or state of despair over existence (any alleged nihilism), but rather to foster a sense of aesthetic creation that jolts humanity out of its theological slumber. Acquisto subsequently guides us through a reading of both Nancy and Agamben on community, salvation and the attempt to reject transcendence and lift up a form of immanence from within, rather than external to, a Christian-theological point of view. His efforts are centered on showing how such a reading that seeks to recover something of a theologically-inflected notion of community after a significant loss of meaning within modernity cannot simply be achieved. What Cioran and Baudelaire present, rather, is a cancellation of redemption that ‘[...] facilitates the esthetic *and* ethical relation while rejecting, it is true, any notion of community, whether actual or, like Nancy’s and Agamben’s, always “to come”’ (p. 201).

In the end, Acquisto’s view of a sort of aesthetic redemption is prominently on display, causing him to diverge even from those philosophical responses—Benjamin, Agamben, Nancy—that would try to make something from the theological fragments that still occupy a good deal of the modern landscape. I wonder how viable such a rejection of community is from a theological standpoint (probably not very much),

though this does not detract from the insights of either Cioran or, more centrally to this work, Baudelaire, whose rich poetic universe still resonates deeply with the fragmented masses of the modern world. Though I am not as convinced as Acquisto seems to be that Baudelaire is as opposed to Benjamin, Agamben and Nancy as he portrays matters, I still find myself deeply enriched and grateful for the study that he has presented us with, one that will, undoubtedly, guide a good deal of my own thought over the years yet to come.

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