

## The House that Kant Built

Diane Morgan, *Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened* (London: Routledge, 2000)

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I've occasionally tried to argue that the best available introduction to Kant's critical philosophy is Thomas Gainsborough's 1748 painting "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews". In this best-known of Gainsborough's paintings (according to the Phaidon gloss on it), "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are resting after an afternoon of shooting. To the right, their estate extends far into the distance."<sup>1</sup> Traditionally interpreted as a Rousseauist depiction of the subjects' philosophic enjoyment of nature, I believe the painting actually shows their extreme discomfort in it. Mr. Andrews leans awkwardly against the cast-iron bench his wife sits upon, his unnaturally long body seemingly propped up by his hound and rifle. Mrs. Andrews sits with restraint, her form both controlled and embellished by her vast satin gown. They gaze at the viewer with a sort of insipid pride about the extensive property behind them: a natural expanse from which the painter has compositionally separated them. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are properly situated on their own land, but are strictly separated from nature by the props of civilization - the bench, the gun, the dress - which support, protect, and envelop them.

The means by which they connect with nature is not "philosophic enjoyment" but control: hunting, cultivation, landscaping, and simple assertion of property ownership. The subject is not unified with nature but remains alien within it, relating to it through these structures of control which make nature appropriate to human ends. The impossibility of feeling entirely at home in nature is expressed not only by the composition of the painting but by the painting's very existence: Mr. and

Mrs. Andrews, sundered from nature, are yet aware of the importance of asserting their connection with it, and the work of art is used to mediate and promote that connection.

Gainsborough's painting can be used to illustrate one of the problems most basic to Kant's critical system: the problem of the suitability of nature to human thought and action. The painting is effective because, like Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, it problematizes the relation of the subject to nature, revealing the illegitimate ways in which reason makes nature appropriate to human ends. Property ownership for Gainsborough, like teleology for Kant, has nothing to do with nature itself but is a condition presupposed by reason which first makes nature comprehensible as a system; and it is only within such a system that human thought and action can comfortably proceed. But the problem then becomes the validity of the system. If reason can only justify its connection to nature by presupposing such subjective principles, then the idea of a unified system of nature and thought is undermined, as it is based solely on humanity's need for this system. Kant allows for a connection between subject and nature but never an identity; the unreliability of that connection, the impossibility of unity between subject and nature, is what makes the *Critique of Judgment* and "Mr. and Mrs. Andrews" so comparatively interesting in the context of eighteenth-century thought and painting.

Though what is "comparatively interesting" often lacks philosophical rigour, its potential as a method of textual interpretation should not be denied. Such comparisons allow previously unconsidered questions to be asked from striking philosophical perspectives. One could, for instance, ask questions about property and landscape gardening in Kant because there is a clear connection between property ownership and the subject-nature relation in Gainsborough's painting, and indeed, the question of this connection has proved to be most intriguing for eighteenth-century studies. Searching out references to landscape gardening and determining their significance for the subject-nature relation would be to take Kant in radical new directions while not deviating from his texts. It might be interesting to think about Kant in terms of the architectural metaphors he famously uses, and to determine what these metaphors mean both for Kant's "philosophical edifice" and for the fortress of Enlightenment thought in general. It might be interesting to think about how certain themes within Enlightenment texts both support and undermine that fortress, how they both contribute to its unassailability and initiate its dismantling. An investigation of such connections, metaphors and themes would point to what is problematic, unreliable, and troubling at the centre

<sup>1</sup> *The Art Book* (London: Phaidon, 1994), p. 171.

of Enlightenment philosophy, though without purporting to solve such problems.

This opening of the problematic is the direction Diane Morgan takes, and that she explores with great dexterity in *Kant Trouble: The obscurities of the enlightened*. Her avowed aim is to rescue Kant from a modernist interpretation of Enlightenment thought as hegemonic, oppressive of difference, and promoting an unquestioned authority of reason. "For far too long Kant ... has been nailed to the stake of such dry and unsatisfactory readings"<sup>2</sup>. Morgan wants instead to rediscover what is troubling in Kant, to show how elements of Kant's philosophy undermine a hegemonic interpretation of the Enlightenment project, and to prove that this undermining is a necessary and unavoidable component of Enlightenment thought. Her project is to discover the instabilities at the foundation of Enlightenment system-building, which make the system both possible and impossible: "Systems systematically include within them the principle of their own crumbling and this irremediable spot of obscurity ... is (at) their very foundation."<sup>3</sup> Although Morgan does not mention her indebtedness to Friedrich Schlegel, her approach is in the spirit of German Romanticism, pointing to the ironic moment which both ruins and completes the systematicity of the work of art.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, it appears that Morgan wants to attribute to the Enlightenment text a "workliness" by restoring its essential moment of unworking, what Blanchot called *désouvement*.<sup>5</sup> She makes no claims to philosophical analysis, adopting instead a literary-cultural studies approach, which allows for greater freedom of interpretation of a broader range of texts. Morgan gives Kant's so-called pre-Critical and non-Critical works equal weight to the three *Critiques*, focusing particularly on less studied texts such as *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and *The Theory of Heavens*. While Morgan is occasionally guilty of reducing Kant's philosophical texts to literary artifacts, this approach does reveal the fascinating details of Kant's thought which would often be left out of a philosophical analysis.

Morgan reads Kant in terms of the "blind spots" within his system; "zones of darkness" which are "structurally necessary for insight and vision".<sup>6</sup> For Morgan, such blind spots are not signs of Kant's failure but

<sup>2</sup> *Kant Trouble*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the Athenaeum Fragments in Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955) p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> *Kant Trouble*, p. 3.

rather of Kant's complexity, the "residual mystery" of his texts attesting to "every philosopher's inability to ever give a complete and adequate account of the world".<sup>7</sup> Kant poses a challenge not to Enlightenment thought, then, but to interpretive strategies which would ignore or remove these blind spots. If Morgan wants to deconstruct Kant, she wants thereby to deconstruct modernist deconstructions of Kant, to show the extent to which they constrain Kant to a single, ungenerous reading. Though deconstructing Kant is now fashionable to the point of tedium, it is refreshing to read an author who, in so doing, wants so determinedly to come out on Kant's side. Morgan is therefore to be forgiven for jargonistically describing her project as "a hypo-critical deconstruction of structural blind spots".<sup>8</sup> She has written a book which delves into a number of unexplored pockets of Kant's thought and makes remarkable connections between the bits and pieces it pulls out.

The specific bits and pieces Morgan addresses all relate broadly to Kant's architectonic metaphor: his stated intention to build a metaphysical edifice upon firm foundations, "a secure home for ourselves, ... in conformity with the material which is given to us, and which is also at the same time appropriate to our needs."<sup>9</sup> Morgan's question, then, is how this metaphor sustains itself within Kant's texts, and what metaphoric problems it engenders. Related directly to the architectonic metaphor are her explorations of landscape gardening, freemasonry, and Egyptian pyramids, phenomena which function surprisingly frequently as metaphors or examples in Kant's texts.

Landscape gardening, for instance, is described as a form of painting in the third *Critique*, as a way of arranging nature's products to be suitable for the free play of the mind's faculties.<sup>10</sup> As a bridge between nature and thought, the landscape garden exemplifies Kant's project to build a bridge between theoretical and practical philosophy, and represents the Enlightenment project to build an ideal community of rational beings in tune with nature. Such projects are problematized, Morgan argues, by the artificiality of these gardens and the inclusion of landscape follies within them: buildings constructed as ready-made ruins which suggest the "necessary striving for founding an ideal community"

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1929) B735.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) Ak. 323.

as well as the impossibility of its realization.<sup>11</sup> Landscape gardens thus also exemplify Morgan's point about instability at the foundation of the philosophical system. For if Kant has built two edifices of theoretical and practical philosophy, he has placed between them the landscape garden of reflective judgment, which connects them but also attests to the impossibility of their unity.

Morgan has a tendency to invest more in metaphor than the reader is entirely comfortable with, sometimes building up elaborate claims on the basis of slim metaphoric evidence when a closer look at Kant's philosophy might have been more helpful. She manages to avoid an excess of metaphoric thread-following by referring liberally to other thinkers, Enlightenment and otherwise. However, in favour of seeking extra-textual support, she often leaves her most interesting points about Kant undeveloped: how, for instance, does the landscape garden, which Kant aligns with art and which Morgan aligns with community, relate to the *sensus communis* with which Kant himself explains the association of aesthetic judgment with community-building? This seems only the most obvious of the questions Morgan could have pursued in a detailed chapter about the art-community-judgment nexus in Kant. Morgan is too hasty to extend her analysis to Goethe, Benjamin, Addison and others, leaving her ideas about Kant sketchy and insufficiently explained; she chases up textual references from all over the map where a sustained analysis of Kant's texts would have been far more satisfying. Landscape gardening and its relation to architecture, literature, and philosophy is an enormous topic that merits a book of its own, and Morgan's attempt to distill such a book into a thirty-page chapter detracts from what could have been a fascinating analysis of Kant and the relation of art, nature and community, if developed more slowly and carefully.

This is a characteristic of the book in general, that Morgan's most interesting ideas are obscured by the surfeit of texts she enlists to embellish them. It is both Morgan's strength and her weakness that she is able to apply her vast textual knowledge to any question at hand; she is extremely well-read and has a remarkable facility in interpreting and comparing texts between disciplines and historical periods. However, her enthusiasm for intertextual rambling distracts the reader both from the text in question and from the point that Morgan wants to make. The litter of texts with which she presents us can be baffling, their connections often tenuous, and their relevance to her ideas not always clear. There are far, far too many endnotes, many of them irrelevant, rather making one

<sup>11</sup> *Kant Trouble*, p. 155.

suspect that their inclusion was designed to extend the length of the book beyond 200 pages. Kant makes a peripheral remark somewhere about married couples growing to look like one another, and Morgan adds an endnote about just such a married couple in Henry James' novel *The Sacred Fount*.<sup>12</sup> Knowing that Diane Morgan noticed this unremarkable similarity enhances neither an appreciation of Kant, nor an understanding of her argument, but only adds to the enormous number of unnecessary references the reader is expected to sift through.

I believe this book would have been stronger had Morgan limited her project to the careful analysis of one or two metaphorical clusters in Kant's texts. The concept of *Verwandtschaften* or "affinities," which Morgan discusses with great intelligence in chapters 2 and 3, would have provided a tighter organizing principle (and enough material) for the entire book. The metaphor of affinity, taken from chemistry, asserts neither absolute identity nor absolute difference between beings, but rather their ongoing and changing relations. Given the importance in Kant's texts of connections which can never be identities - particularly that of subject and nature - there is much to be said for an analysis of *Verwandtschaften* in Kant.

Morgan handles this analysis expertly, investigating each of the metaphorical directions which *Verwandtschaften* takes. She discusses the significance of affinity for chemistry and Kant's chemical metaphors, affinity as sympathy between people, forces, or cosmic bodies, and affinity as association of images with ideas in the mind. She explores the importance of *Verwandtschaften* for Kant's theoretical, practical, political, scientific and aesthetic philosophy, making particularly interesting links between Kant's theories of natural science, physics, cosmology, teleology and beauty and his socio-political "community-building" project, ultimately weaving all these threads into the "unstable architectonic" theme. But again, there is a hastiness to Morgan's analysis which prevents her points from effectively sinking in. Morgan misses a crucial point, for instance, about the sacrifice of sensibility in the third Critique - the impossibility of the aesthetic which makes "aesthetics" possible - which would have proven her central point beautifully had she looked at the sublime in more detail. In short, *Kant Trouble* would have been a stronger book had it attempted a concentrated analysis of a narrower band of ideas. Those about *Verwandtschaften* are by far the most interesting and best developed.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111 & n.12.

This is not to say that Morgan's explorations of radical evil, Egyptian pyramids, regicide, talion law and so on are not interesting, nor that they are unconnected to the architectonic metaphor she wants to deconstruct. Her exploration of these "very heterogeneous themes" (as Morgan herself describes them<sup>13</sup>) is in fact fascinating for anyone interested in Kant, and the way she draws them together is generally convincing. Her prose is readable and engaging, both for the philosophical and the literary audience. It's just that there are too many heterogeneous themes, and too many textual references, to analyze adequately in one fairly short book without the analysis seeming scattered and incomplete. If the reader is left with a sense of frustration at the end of *Kant Trouble*, it is not because Morgan has revealed the principle of crumbling at the foundation of Kant's system, but because she has failed to give her most interesting points the attention they deserve.

One wants both more and less of Morgan: more analysis of Kant's texts within the limitations of a single thematic cluster, and less wandering through her extensive library. This is my one reservation about this otherwise enticing, original, and interesting book. The obvious question, the one about the philosophical validity of asserting the instability of the Kantian edifice on the basis of the metaphors he uses, seems to be precluded by the genre of cultural studies, under which even a comparative analysis of Kant and Gainsborough might be applauded. While the more scholastic Kantian might be hard pressed to find philosophical value in Morgan's hypo-critical deconstruction, students of philosophy, literature, and cultural studies will happily be led along the garden paths that Kant unknowingly plotted, and that Morgan, as textual archaeologist, unearths.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

## The Problem of Socrates

Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher*, Translated by Catherine Porter (London: Athlone, 1998)

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*They say that Socrates,  
having heard Plato reading from his Lysis, said,  
"By Heracles, how many lies this young man says about me".<sup>1</sup>*

For many people Socrates is the archetypal philosopher, the patron saint of philosophers. He is also a notoriously slippery fellow, a philosopher who wrote nothing, a philosopher who claimed to know nothing yet one who gained an unsurpassed reputation for wisdom. Moreover, he is the inspiration for a number of quite diverse philosophical traditions, from Cynic practical training in self-sufficiency to the Platonic search for unchanging essences.<sup>2</sup> For a later ancient philosopher such as the Stoic Epictetus, Socrates is *the* philosopher, the ultimate role-model: "even if you are not yet Socrates, you ought to live as someone wanting to be Socrates".<sup>3</sup>

Modern European philosophy has continued this fascination with Socrates, most recently in works by Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault,

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\*Abbreviation: SSR = *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, ed. G. Giannantoni, 4 vols (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990).

<sup>1</sup> Diogenes Laertius 3.35 (= SSR I C 90). I would like to express my thanks to Mr. F. Beetham for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> See the survey of the various philosophical traditions deriving from Socrates in Cicero *De Oratore* 3.61-62 (= SSR I H 4).

<sup>3</sup> Epictetus *Enchiridion* 51.