

Allan Janik

Interviews Himself about Egon Schiele

Allan: There isn't very much about Egon Schiele in your Wittgenstein's Vienna. Why are you so interested in him now?

Prof. J: When we wrote our book there simply wasn't much written about him – or for that matter painting in Austria – available to me and my own knowledge of art history was scant. In those days painting in fin de siècle Vienna was simply “Klimt and Schiele”. I first became aware that there might be more to say about Schiele from an early review of our book in the fall of 1973 in which the reviewer complained that there was much to little about Schiele in it. I had no idea what he might have meant and found the remark so strange that I never forgot it. First with the publication of the Stanford Symposium on Schiele in 1994, more than two decades later, did I become aware that there was something very special about Schiele. Albert Elsen's essay on Rodin and Schiele in that volume was an eye-opener. Elsen explained how Schiele was one of the first to cultivate Rodin's newly developed technique for “continuous drawing”, i.e., drawing without looking away from the subject. The enormous concentration that this technique demands created a new intimacy between artist and subject that issued in turn in the incredible intensity characteristic of his drawings after 1909. In short, it conferred an identity upon him as a artist that we are really only beginning to explore. “Continuous drawing” took him beyond Klimt, “Jugendstil” and Viennese Modernism: he became a critical modernist. More recently, the new picture of Schiele that emerged when I reviewed the proceedings of the Stanford Schiele Symposium in 1995 were confirmed and deepened in the course of advising Carla Carmona Escalera on her dissertation on Schiele, which argues explicitly how he should fit into “Wittgenstein's Vienna” by virtue of the fact that Wittgenstein's dictum “aesthetics and ethics are one” forms the basis of his mature art. Moreover, her claims about the relationship between painterly structures and the ethical dimension of his painting made

a strong case for including him in the category “critical modernist”. The work of Helena Pereña on problems of the self and identity in Schiele's work presented me with yet further evidence for that thesis.

Allan: Wait a minute, what is “critical modernism”? I never heard of that before!

Prof. J: Critical modernism is a term that I coined over twenty years ago in the wake of the fad for everything “post-modern” in order to disentangle classical modernism, Viennese modernism and the critical movement in Vienna that reacted against the superficialities of the latter. From the impending fall of the Iron Curtain in the mid-1980s disillusioned ex-Marxists (most of whom were also ex-structuralists) began to talk about the failure of the Project of Modernity, which was identified as the Enlightenment project to reform society on the basis of scientific knowledge – *savoir pour prévoir pour pouvoir* as Auguste Comte put it. “Modernity” was transformed into a caricature of itself by being identified exclusively with all monumental accounts of rationality such as Marxism that laid claim to being emancipatory. “Anything goes” became the catchword for a new form of intellectual anarchism that set out to destroy idols in politics, science, art, linguistics etc. Now, there was a lot to the negative critique of logical positivism, Chomskyan linguistics, the idea of aesthetic canons in literature, architecture or painting and totalitarian politics that had been under criticism for nearly 50 years at that time to justify the negative side of that critique. For example, the positivist idea that there was one and only one set of criteria for determining what is meaningful language of the sort that the infamous Verification Principle incorporated was certainly opened to criticism. The later Wittgenstein for one was entirely critical of that narrow view. However, post-modernists in philosophy wanted to go farther than that and to allege that it was not only that there were no fixed

and anything but certain about who they are. In a word, they are disturbing and intended to be so. They are in a word sceptical (something wholly foreign to Klimt) and contemplating their scepticism *we* must be too. They challenge us precisely on the basis of the “unresolved” character of their presentation (which Prof. Botstein seems to consider a weakness) to question our comfortable certainties. That is no small achievement. There is a parallel to Georg Trakl here that should not go unnoticed.

Allan: Can you spell that out?

Prof. J. Hardly, that is also the subject for further detailed interdisciplinary research and not something that you can sum up in a few sentences (tho’ I have discussed Trakl in the context in my book *Wittgenstein’s Vienna Revisited*). What I can do here is cite an aphorism which Trakl wrote just before going off to war and which I take to sum up his relation to his art:

Feeling in moments of death-like being:
All human beings are worthy of love. Awakening
You feel the bitterness of the world, In it is all your
Unforgiven guilt; your poem an imperfect atonement.

Schiele’s art seems to be moving increasingly in the direction that Trakl indicates with his reference to human beings as worthy of love and his art as a form of atonement. As in Trakl, traditional religious themes appear in Schiele’s art in secular guise, which ironically turns out to be an index of a “religious” dimension in that art. The case of Trakl is relatively clear, but a peculiar religiosity in Schiele’s works is being increasingly acknowledged by scholars. His early death makes it difficult to make any final pronouncements on the subject. However, it is something certainly worth investigating. In short, I think that we are just beginning to discover what we can learn from Schiele.

Allan: That is an appropriate note to end upon. Thank you!

Prof. J: End? I would rather conclude these remarks – and they are nothing more than that – by paraphrasing what Winston Churchill said after the Allied victory at El Alemein which de facto put an end to the war in Africa: this is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end; it is the end of the beginning for Schiele scholarship. Thank you very much.

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