

**Not Your Ordinary Ghosts
Retrieving the Art of the Retrogarde**

Giuliano D'Amico, *Tilbake til fremtiden. Håkan Sandell og den nordiske retrogardismen*, Scandinavian Academic Press/Spartacus, Oslo 2020, 331 pp.

In *Tilbake til fremtiden. Håkan Sandell og den nordiske retrogardismen* (*Back to the future. Håkan Sandell and the Nordic Retrogardism*) Giuliano D'Amico, associate professor at the Centre for Ibsen Studies in Oslo, is dealing not with his ordinary ghosts but with a different kind of *gengangere*, namely the ones haunting the art of the late 20th century Scandinavian retrogardists. D'Amico's intention is to address the critical and artistic potential of this revivalist movement and to offer a hitherto unseen book-length and scholarly perspective on a discussion so far conducted mainly by the practitioners themselves.

The Retrogarde appeared as a response to the modernist mantra of originality at all costs and as a reaction to the "language poetry" of Post-modernism. As a consequence, its literary representatives turned to the "old masters" in search of innovation through tradition, by recovering poetic craftsmanship and with the ultimate aim of re-establishing a contact with the readership by also redefining the role of the contemporary poet as bard or visionary. The Scandinavian section of a movement with international roots in the Slovenian *Neue Slovenische Kunst* and in the New Formalism of the American 1970s and 80s declared its intentions in the pamphlet *Om retrogardism* (*On Retrogardism*), published by the Swedish poets Håkan Sandell and Clemens Altgård in 1995. After having established its headquarters in Oslo, the group tightened around a review, *Aorta*, and an

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art gallery, *Frie Kunster*, and came to include painters declaring war on abstract Modernism (Odd Nerdrum, Christopher Rådlund) and poets such as Ronny Spaans, Eirik Lodén, and Annika B. Myhr to name just a few of the writers who came together in anthologies such as *Från ormbädden/Fra ormleiet* (2000; *From the snake bed*), *Metro nord* (2002) and *Urblå natt* (2005; *Ur-blue night*). As a collective unit, the Scandinavian Retrogarde waned in 2011. *Tilbake til fremtiden* scrutinizes the history of the group through a discussion of its activities and views on art, and by masterly investigating the single acts of creation by some of its members, chiefly Håkan Sandell.

With D'Amico's outsider perspective come expectations on clarity, fulfilled from the start in the orderly structure of the discourse. After an introductory chapter aiming to dispel the conceptual fog surrounding the term "Retrogarde", the discussion is channelled into six chapters tackling the Retrogarde's relationship with Tradition, Technique, the Figurative Arts, Ideology, Spatiality, and Esoterism. In addition, the volume is carefully edited and contains visual material in full colour to illustrate not only cross-contaminations between art and literature within the group, but also the iconographic sources that informed the creative acts of the Retrogarde. Ultimately, the book displays a writing that is well-turned and emphatic.

From the point of view of the literary scholar, the introductory chapter grappling with the conceptual confusion regarding the definition of the term 'Retrogard' is particularly interesting. As a label, it has been used by its detractors to stigmatize retrograding anti-modernists, by eulogists to denounce the aesthetics and ideology of late Modernism and, self-referentially, by *agents provocateurs* to «épater les modernistes». In an act of sophist wordsmithery quoted in the book (48), William Marx and André Compagnon have claimed that nothing is more avant-garde than the Retrogarde, a paradox that risks sounding dangerously mainstream in an era of

retromania like ours, where retrospection and recycling are no longer connected with opposition and protest but rather trends in a wide range of cultural fields and artistic expressions favouring the past over both the present and the future.

By departing from the term as used in a military context, where the Avantgarde and the Retrogarde are said to proceed in the same direction but with different tasks and strategies, D'Amico carefully avoids establishing a flat opposition between the two "gardes". He also stresses that the Retrogarde is raging not so much against "high Modernism" as against the empty machinery of Postmodernism spitting out "language for language's sake" and detects in the retrogardist aversion to Modernism a wish to adopt a hard-line stance rather than denying its importance. However, the Retrogarde's intricate relationship with Modernism is a hard nut to crack and the issue is addressed and readdressed in the course of the discussion. Since the complexity of Modernism as a multifaceted phenomenon combining old and new, tradition and innovation is acknowledged in *Tilbake til fremtiden* and because Modernism is used as a touchstone throughout the discussion, a mention of those literary modernists who, in one way or the other, established a dialogue with the Classics would have been welcome. Admittedly, this might not be the place to spotlight the art of Rabbe Enckell, Gunnar Ekelöf, or Bo Carpelan, but it must be recognized that their examples demonstrate that to be of the Avantgarde (Enckell) or of the Modernism of a later era (Ekelöf, Carpelan) is not so much a question of rejecting tradition as of experimenting with it, which really ties in with the work of the Retrogarde itself and, above and beyond, resonates with the challenging of ideas and the pushing of boundaries which is the essence of art. When Modernism, from a retrogardist point of view, is described as a «deluge» (260) and the art of the Retrogarde explained as an attempt to recover antediluvian models, the question is whether the poetry

created anew after the great deluge really has leapfrogged beyond modernist lessons such as the idea of estrangement and decontextualization as eye-openers. Isn't this exactly what is going on as Sandell re-enacts the crucifixions and depositions in the paintings of the old masters when describing a crowd in a shopping mall or when a car-bound Orpheus reappears in «a road poem» (75; *eit road-diket*) by Spaans?

In general, *Tilbake til fremtiden* is relevant as an academic contribution to the retro debate taking place in a range of fields at present. It informs us of a “garde” that was “retro” in a time of spatial turns, animal turns, material turns, and ecocritical encounters with plants by bringing the experience of mankind back to centre stage. Just like Neoclassicism, the Gothic revival, the Arts and Crafts movement or the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to which D'Amico establishes a parallel in the epilogue, the Retrogarde speaks about our contemporary age as much as it restores the past. The reflection on how tradition can hold an interpretive key to the present is one of the pleasures of this book. The essence of this reflection is mirrored in the title and translates as a U-turn performed by an excellent driver.

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