

Exemplarity and Mediocrity – Conjunction and Disjunction

A Review of Paul Fleming, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity. The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 240 pp. \$57.50. ISBN 978-0-8047-5890-1 (cloth: alk. paper). E-book, \$57.50. ISBN: 9780804769983

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We owe *Exemplarity and Mediocrity. The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* to Paul Fleming, Associate Professor of German at New York University, who also published *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* in 2006. The book is the result, as its author confesses at the very beginning, of a thought-provoking course entitled *Introduction to Mediocrity*, delivered by Professor Fleming to his undergraduate students, and was announced by a number of conferences on the same topic held at various universities. The research in the US and Germany which directly contributed to the writing of the book was supported by *New York University's Research Challenge Fund* and the *Alexander von Humboldt Foundation*.

In an age where reflections on mediocrity are dominated by popular advice literature that trains readers either to embrace their inner mediocrity, accept and come to terms with it for a better self-image, or to overcome it, break free and wage war against it, in an age where self-sufficiency is encouraged through and subsidised by certain educational systems, Paul Fleming's book should be welcomed in contemporary literary and art criticism as one of a kind: a truly insightful excursion into the lineage of aesthetic thought and of German literature. Indeed, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity. The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* deserves credit for boldly and inspiringly tackling a hot and convulsive dichotomy and elaborating upon its intricacies in German-language literature between the 1750s and the 1850s.

One of Hegel's main arguments (expressed in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*) represents the launch pad of the central polemic of the book under discussion: in the post-heroic age of bourgeois society and culture, art is torn between addressing the prose of the real world and surviving as Art, firmly preserving its essential role to expunge the common, the ordinary, the prosaic, the quotidian, the non-heroic and the non-poetic from its territory. This inner necessity is what underlies Hegel's legendary pronouncement of the end of art, a thesis whose contentiousness and "admittedly complicated" character (201) Fleming discusses in detail and does not rule as unmotivated. Moreover, the 'death of art' thesis is identifiable, as it is revealed further on, in Heine's ambivalent attitude to Goethe's legacy, oscillating between profound

admiration for the *Meister* and criticism against the tyrant who promoted mediocrity and a false concept of art, “art as an independent second world”.¹

Upon contemplating the historical evolution of European literatures, Fleming deems the situation of German literary writings as “unique” (9) and radically different from England’s or France’s cultural and social status in the middle of the eighteenth century. He relies on a claim put forth by Helmuth Plessner, a German philosopher and sociologist, with regard to Germany’s belatedness at that time (9), manifested both in political life and in literary tradition, where no classical trend had been shaped yet. This is precisely the reason why, Fleming claims, German literature rather than any other artistic domain proved particularly susceptible to encompassing the tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between mediocrity and exemplarity:

One of the premises of this study is that the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity is a particular problem of literature (as opposed to, say, sculpture or music) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, moreover, that Germany and German letters occupy a special position within this dynamic. (7-8)

Furthermore, other essential factors are related to societal and civilisation advancements – more notably, the rise of the educated middle class as an ever-increasing mass of consumers and producers of literature as well as the explosion of printed literary output. This explosion of literature supply and demand on the public market was unprecedented and

[o]nly in the twentieth century did the visual arts, followed by the mass media of radio, film, television, and the Internet, overtake literature as the embodiment of the dilemma of mediocrity, both as a question of quality and as the main vehicle for representing ordinary life. (9)

The German paragons of culture whose biographical, aesthetic and artistic trajectories and philosophical stances are elaborated upon are Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Grillparzer and Stifter. Their aesthetic and literary contributions are predicated on the lines of critical inquiry that dominate the three pivotal chapters of the book: ‘The Average Audience’, ‘The Average Artist’ and ‘Average Life’. Each of these three axes emblematises a crucial component of the exemplarity-mediocrity opposition (or continuum): the public and the readers (‘The Average Audience’), the writer (‘The Average Artist’), and the topic or subject matter of the work of art (‘Average Life’). It is to Fleming’s credit that he chooses this clarifying division and yet coherently integrates the aesthetic with the non-aesthetic viewpoints.

What the author of *Exemplarity and Mediocrity* deciphers in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) is a plethora of antinomies that correspond to the manifold signification of ‘the Werther complex’. Thus, the Werther complex is decoded as a tension between the “unequivocal demand for artistic genius” and “a decided affection for everyday life” (3), a paradoxical dissociation between the genius and the artist who, by not being a genius, fails to be an artist (8), and the clash between genuine art and the proliferated sub-standard replicas, literary imitations and parodies (10). Overall, this reading of the Werther complex allows Fleming to hypostatise the central

¹ Heinrich Heine, *The Romantic School and Other Essays*, ed. Jost Hermand and Robert C. Holub, trans. Helen Mustard, Frederic Ewen, Robert C. Holub, Gilbert Cannan (New York: Continuum Press, 1985), 34.

antagonism between mediocrity and exemplarity as multiple antitheses between the artist and the genius, aspiration and execution, the wider public and the select audience, falseness and truthfulness. The problematic character of exemplarity is simultaneously contained and revealed by Werther's ambivalent positioning towards it, since Goethe's character both abhors the self-sufficiency of the prosaic bourgeoisie and longs to be integrated into it. Exemplarity is a matter of profound desire, of aspiration, of self-assessment: "Werther, it seems, loves like an artist, but produces art like a bourgeois" (6). What complicates matters more is that exemplarity is defined, for Werther, by the spark of genius, that singular talent which defies any template, and the Goethean hero ultimately contemplates himself not being exemplary in this sense. On that account, the stamp of genius and the spark of genius epitomise mediocrity and exemplarity on a personal level and end up being diagnostic for the German letters of the time, when mass production and proliferation of literary imitations started to be ushered in.

Even if the study concentrates on the landscape of German literature, it launches its main argument from the normative aesthetic thought of classical antiquity, which is seen to have set the philosophical pace for centuries on end, up to the eighteenth-century transmutation of the paradigm. Horace is mentioned for his aversion to mediocrity, perceived as an excessive deviation from exemplary models. Fleming is not deterred from relating *auream mediocritatem* (*golden mediocrity*) to Kant's perspective on original exemplarity through the obvious contrast between Horace's grounds for refuting imitation and the ones adopted in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Fleming's analytical thoroughness directed to Horace's key phrase unveils two consanguine apprehensions of *auream mediocritatem*: beyond the first one, which posits the normative aesthetics view of mediocrity stemming from a sterile application of external norms, there looms a perception of the *golden mean* as an ideal middle "that does not proceed from a rule and, in fact, rejects the very notion of a universal standard but nevertheless offers a measure without a guiding norm" (18). The latter apprehension is thus comfortably latched onto Kant's exigency that genius and original exemplarity be inextricably linked and emerge naturally, in the absence of any imitation or standard whatsoever.

Pursuing his interest in the progression and digressions of the pattern of normative aesthetics, Fleming notices that, with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *golden mean* becomes more flexible, being practically submitted to recalibration according to idiosyncratic variables, and that it turns into a self-standing, non-comparative concept, in harsh contrast to Horace's *mediocris*, an essentially relational category. With Aristotle, the *golden mean* is customisable according to the situation, the context or the individual, but it remains forever singular, decoupled from any comparison, whereas for Horace *mediocris* is always judged by comparison and betokens middle ability. In other words, Aristotle's *golden mean* rejects Horace's belief in its equidistance to extremes and is an extreme itself: this is a feature which explains why it can be decoded as a stepping stone to Kant's "exemplary originality", which does not owe its essence to any norm. Furthermore, Fleming sees in Aristotle's text the first doubts as to whether the middle way, the way to *arête*, virtue, might be of only middling merit.

This insight into how aesthetic norms have shaped the valences of mediocrity simultaneously highlight, particularly in Horace's *Ars Poetica* and Cicero's *Brutus*, some of the earliest observations, concerning the contrast and tension between art and other areas of human activity, such as politics. Fundamentally, in Horace's view, fine art is unthinkable if it embraces mediocrity, but averageness is unhesitatingly deemed as

perfectly natural and likely to be valued, and therefore allowable, in domains where mere effectiveness is at stake. As Brink² remarked, Horace, *contra* Cicero, wants to maintain a strict difference between the practical arts, including rhetoric and jurisprudence, “in which mediocrity has a place,” and poetry, which is not a practical art. (179)

A further disparity is borne out on the very territory of fine arts: exemplarity in literature is claimed by Horace to be an all or nothing enterprise, based on no more than the simplest writing and reading skills; by contrast, training marks the progress from amateurship to professionalism in other art forms. It is Cicero who further connected art and oratory to the quality and number of the audience and who suggested that winning over the masses was a clear sign of mediocrity.

Exemplarity and Mediocrity demonstrates how eighteenth-century literary and non-literary forces act upon and displace normative aesthetics, with its insistence on restricted innovation, and instead effect “a paradigm shift from aesthetic judgment to hermeneutical understanding” (135) through a double reversal bearing upon the content and form of art. Kant’s concept of genius is marked, in Fleming’s view, by a series of prerequisites which include exemplary originality. Later on, a dilution of criteria for exemplarity in art is brought about by Schiller’s *sensus communis* (i.e. communal, shared taste) and his ground-breaking claim that the common may be artistically metamorphosed into the exemplary. It follows naturally that the next stepping stone is Hegel’s entreaty for art to face prosaic reality “without remaining stalled in the prosaic”.³

From Fleming’s viewpoint, the beginning of the eighteenth century marks a turning point in the axiology in question, because it commends mediocre art or, at least, the oddly benchmarking qualities of the mediocre. It was Kleist who, in 1811, argued that “mediocre art is the measuring rod of excellence” (40), implying that it is precisely through the lens of average art that excellence can be fully grasped and the operations of *sensus communis* can work at their best.

Delving into the history of tragedy and referring particularly to the advent of bourgeois tragedy, Fleming devotes a lengthy and somewhat involved discussion to the implications of Lessing’s notion of tragedy. Both Nietzsche and Heine have firmly concluded that when the average man in the audience finds a counterpart on stage, tragedy has reached the end of the road. This is not what Lessing claims in the face of the rise of the bourgeois tragedy, and Fleming retrieves a similar outlook in Euripides’ *avant la lettre* heroes. Following one of Nietzsche’s⁴ early comments, Fleming reminds us that, from among the Greek tragedians, it was Euripides who turned the quotidian man into a character and invited the average spectators to recognise themselves on the tragic stage. Accordingly, in clarifying the reasons why Lessing dismantles admiration towards art and praises compassion as the best means of human improvement, Fleming opens up the topic of the tortuous itinerary of the ethical *telos* of art. The ideational conflict between Lessing and Kant, Hobbes or Nietzsche springs into view and is

² C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: The Ars Poetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 372-373

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55-56.

analysed in detail. It is then revealed how the former falls prey to two centrifugal theories of compassion (on the one hand the excellent that promoted the unusually good, anything that surpassed ordinary standards and, on the other hand, the egalitarian, a trend of thought in political philosophy which suggested that people should be treated as equals, in any respect) and how Lessing gets mixed up in discussing teary compassion outside and inside the theatre. These theories of compassion are derived from Lessing's strong conviction that compassion overrides admiration due to its pedagogical pre-eminence: the former is egalitarian, since it addresses every member of the audience without exception, and it is excellent by being maximally efficient. Fleming succeeds in emphasising the weak points in Lessing's ethical-political value of art, signalling how this particular perspective leads art, through the arousal of compassion, to ethical and political destinations, i.e. the betterment of the public and a democratic society with a deep internalisation of *sensus communis*. It is then adequately noted that a non-aesthetic frame such as Lessing's may leave room for mediocrity.

In Chapter 3, Fleming takes over Goethe's phrase "the stamp of genius" and redirects attention towards its rampant counterpart, "the stamp of the dilettante". He eruditely records the genealogy of the word *dilettante* ever since its Italian roots, through Hans Vaget's acceptance of the term and the 1790s double-meaning *Liebhaber*. Fleming acknowledges among the factors that determined the span of dilettantism the social milieu – the cultivated middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*), the mediocritisation of art through marketisation, and the impetuosity with which fragmentation, compartmentalisation and specialisation invade modernity. Goethe appears as a problematic and paradoxical figure, "a model for dilettantism and – more importantly, for overcoming it" (94), who laments lack of genius yet tries, equally, to rehabilitate the dilettante through his depiction of Wilhelm Meister.

As to the post-Goethean artistic period, Fleming chooses to illustrate the way out of the straits between mediocrity and genius in the realism-oriented standpoints of Franz Grillparzer and his Austrian fellow writer Adalbert Stifter. The artist, in Grillparzer's work, is the pseudoscientific investigator of the common lives of the non-famous, who can achieve exemplarity for the narrator. Similarly, according to Fleming's minute analysis, Stifter discovers sublimity in regularity and affirms a poetics of the normal, the ordinary, the insignificant.

In the concluding remarks, Fleming manages to bridge the gap between nineteenth-century aesthetic thought and the twentieth-century dissolution of art's boundaries and aesthetic categories. It is briefly asserted that art history and new educational canons have broadened the scope of inquiry and have been enriched (if that is, indeed, the term) with new opportunities for the investigation of the mediocre.

Turning away from art, Fleming only touches upon mediocrity as "a force to be reckoned with" (166), a force which intrudes upon society in a despotic democratic form (citing John Stuart Mill⁵) and which homogenises and effaces individuality.⁶ Fleming closes the circle with Nietzsche's warning about the peril of mediocrity ("the

⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

chattering of the dwarfs”⁷) and his hope that the mask of mediocrity will be saved if infused by the spirit.

The style of *Exemplarity and Mediocrity* is engaging, deeply scholarly and not without ironical reach (“How many tears should the ‘Best Human’ shed?”, 62); it is also surprisingly rhetorical at times (“Tragedy is an affective fitness studio”, 63). Professor Fleming’s ample, comprehensive and profound study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the heredity of aesthetic categories and will be of interest to diverse researchers in philosophy, literary studies and the History of Ideas.

Fleming opens his study quoting one of Flaubert’s epistolary musings (his letter to Louise Colet from September 1853) on his mission “to write the mediocre well”, a mission perceived by the French writer as an infernal challenge.⁸ One could, indeed, say in conclusion that in *Exemplarity and Mediocrity*, just as in Flaubert’s work, the “diabolical task” of “writing the mediocre” is exemplarily carried out, even if we need to ask the question why such an insightful essay on mediocrity stops at the beginning of the twentieth century, even if Fleming is our contemporary and must have observed more post-Nietzschean mediocrity.

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⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München et al.: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag et al., 1999), 317.

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