

chapter contains a most interesting section on ‘reconciliation: from autonomy to love’ (pp. 194–200), where Brittain suggests that the ‘scattered fragments in his writings . . . offer illuminating commentary on relationships of love which enhance the power of his conception of an inverse theology’ (p. 195). Brittain gets matters right when he suggests that Adorno’s ‘inverse theology acts as a “force-field” against a collapse into pessimism’ (p. 198). Instead of being treated as a site of illusions, theology emerges as a source of sanity, one to be used to make sense of an insane world. To that degree, theology becomes a projection, not cast in illusions but by reference to the requisites for survival.

Overall, this study is a brave venture providing much to reflect on. On balance, it copes well with a thinker whose work is as fragmentary as the insights it yields. What emerges is an ‘inverse’ line of thought which ‘new atheists’ are likely to find negative, but which those dwelling in the homelands of theology will regard as oddly positive. Going against the vulgar assumption of the mass media in the United Kingdom that intellectuals exit from theology, this study suggests that they make reluctant entries into its ambit even if these do not yield stated affiliations. As was the case with Benjamin, an oddly rich and unexpected amount of theology can be found in Adorno if one looks as, in this study, Brittain profitably did.

KIERAN FLANAGAN

NOMADIC NARRATIVES, VISUAL FORCES: GWEN JOHN’S LETTERS AND PAINTINGS by Maria Tamboukou, *Peter Lang*, New York, 2010, pp. 209, £45

In 2008 the Barber Institute gallery at Birmingham University held an exhibition of paintings of nuns by Gwen John (1876–1939). There were three versions of her portrait of Mère Poussepin, the founder of an order of Dominican Sisters of Charity with a convent in Meudon, the French town in which John had settled in 1910 after the breakdown of her affair with Rodin. The portraits were based on an old prayer card the nuns gave to John, and this commission led to other paintings of nuns and worshippers in the local church. Evidently Gwen John often sat sketching in the rear pews. But she was also in the church because of her own commitment. Gwen John had been received into the Catholic Church in around 1913.

Gwen John is now the subject of a number of books, but most of them have troubles with her conversion to Catholicism. It is often explained away as a rebound from Rodin, when it is not just passed over as an oddity, worth less narrative attention than her fondness for cats. This new volume on John, by the feminist sociologist Maria Tamboukou, continues the trend of passing over the conversion in near silence. This is shown by Tamboukou’s reading of a poignant passage in Gwen John’s notebooks. Writing after her conversion, Gwen John called herself ‘God’s little artist: a seer of strange beauties, a teller of harmonies, a diligent worker’ (quoted on pp. 56–57). For Tamboukou this passage reveals nothing less than John placing herself in the tradition of the Christ-like artist, a tradition initiated in Dürer’s self-portraits as Christ. Tamboukou is confident of the link to this tradition: ‘it is this trail in the history of art that John was following in trying to make sense of herself as an artist and this was independent of the fact that she had become a Catholic’ (p. 57).

Tamboukou has to make this claim because her analysis is driven by Deleuze and Foucault, two writers who feature so often in cultural analysis nowadays that they have become an obstacle to independent thought. This book is led by its theoretical attempt to establish Gwen John as a ‘nomadic subject’ who through her writings and art becomes ‘difficult and impossible to pin down as a

coherent and fixed identity' (p. 57). By this argument to call John a 'Catholic artist' – and therefore to take the notebook entry at face value and as a statement of an intention to put the work at the service of God – is indeed to fix identity and thus situate Gwen John within structures of meanings which are fundamentally patriarchal.

Tamboukou offers one reading of Gwen John which is based on a deep and sensitive encounter with the archive of letters at the Rodin Museum in Paris and the National Library of Wales in Cardiff. The art is given less attention. Tamboukou is aware of the status of her narrative as one amongst many. She admits to 'different approaches in how John's life has been represented and her work has been appreciated' (p. 2). The multiple approaches all move in the space created by Gwen John's personal style, which was reticent, small-scale, and quiet, although Tamboukou rightly draws attention to John's participation in the life of Paris in the 1900s. Before the move to Meudon at least Gwen John was no recluse. By her own concession then – a concession which is inherent to the theoretical and methodological principles she seeks to employ – Tamboukou's book is itself partial. Like all other books about Gwen John, Tamboukou's is exploiting the enigma of John for its own theoretical-methodological purposes. It is a shame that this happens. The theoretical baggage often gets in the way of the analysis which Tamboukou is more than capable of providing for herself. It is this theoretical baggage which causes Tamboukou to read John's identification of herself as 'God's little artist' with a theoretical insight it simply cannot carry. Taken in the round of everything else Gwen John painted and wrote it is hard to justify any contention about 'Christomorphic' tendencies.

Gwen John is an enigmatic artist but certainly one of the two or three most intriguing British painters of the twentieth century. Her life can be positioned in many ways, so perhaps it is best to turn to the art rather than the artist if we want to develop our appreciation of her status and significance. For Tamboukou, John might not be a 'Catholic artist', but when we confront the paintings of nuns and of the nameless girl in the blue dress sitting in the wicker chair whom John painted around twenty times after her conversion, she certainly produced wonderful art possessed of a Catholic religiosity.

KEITH TESTER