



Book Review

Darkening Scandinavia: Four Postmodern Pagan Essays

Francisc-Norbert Örmény (2013). *Darkening Scandinavia: Four Postmodern Pagan Essays*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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by **Bruce Bradfield**

Writing a review of this recently published book by the thirty-year-old Dr Francisc-Norbert Örmény has, as intuited at the outset, proven to be as difficult as was reading it. Extraordinary in its display of the author's erudition and linguistic dexterity, the book demonstrates an uncannily broad and thoroughgoing understanding of a complex variety of intellectual and creative landscapes. It extends far beyond the breadth and depth of the reviewer's theoretical knowledge and understandings, and was read with constant fascination and surprise. I found myself struggling to grasp much of the work on the first reading, and had to work hard to capture the expressive and conceptual complexities which the work offers.

With this in mind, let me begin this review by acknowledging my own discomfort with the experience of reading, thinking about, and responding to the author's offering. This discomfort stems primarily from my engagement with the aesthetic of terror and disruption that seems to colour the subjects explored in the book. The author, in a manner that is as abstruse as it is skilful, elaborates the innards of works of art – musical, cinematic and literary – considering these in the light of a conflation of philosophies, ranging from the metaphysical universe most centrally, through the phenomenological, and into the psychoanalytic most peripherally. The obscure profundity of the work is fitting, however, as it seems to enact through the text a worldview that is important to the author, in which truth is seen as

indecipherable, recondite and asyntactic.

Writing this review as a psychoanalytically informed psychotherapist with a history that is richly informed by phenomenological thinkers, I found my attentions turning to the referencing of psychoanalytic fabric, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, listening to the author's voice as a potential reflection of his internal world. At this level I am fascinated by what the book has to offer in terms of the almost brazen freedom with which it has been written. I couldn't help but think of Freud's method of free association, in which psychic integration is facilitated through a movement towards liberation of the mind from an internal censor. In his seminal text *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud examines the tensions inherent in psychic life. The self, for Freud, is divided along the lines of instinctual life, and the demands placed on the socialized individual by the imperative to conform, leading to the repression of sexual and aggressive drives. The repression of instinctual life is linked in Freud's mind with the notion that unrestrained libidinal impulse, driven purely towards the satisfaction of basic desires, can be fundamentally damaging to others in the world. Freud's secular humanism is seen in relation to this in his consideration of culture, tradition and the social fabric as a regulation of human behaviour that is necessary for the development of a climate of safety in the individual's experience of being in the world. It is in the light of this basic Freudian thinking that I felt

surprised and fascinated by Örmény's thesis. In this book, in a manner that is cloaked in a beautifully crafted veil of academic discourse, there is an apparent encouragement to abandon socio-culturally elaborated forms of self-regulation in favour of the chthonic, visceral impulses of the embodied self.

Having gone all awry in this review by opening with an expression of my own response, rather than reflecting first on the author's actual contribution, let me return to what is important. *Darkening Scandinavia* is framed as an inter-disciplinary (or, as the blurb would have it, "trans-disciplinary") gesture which explores the music of Norwegian black metal band *Burzum*, the cinematic offering of Danish film director Nicolas Refn, *Valhalla Rising*, and the "charmingly evasive" book written by Per Petterson, *Out Stealing Horses*. These creative gestures are used to elaborate an ethos of darkness, in which there is an invitation to consider the life-giving potential of a return to a primordial and visceral way of being. As such, the book is written so as to inspire a new way, in which being can be felt to emerge from chthonic and inchoate bodily and darkly spiritual impulse. Although in constant danger of proselytism, this book, through locating itself with utter intellectual sophistication in a vast range of ideologies, manages to give the reader almost enough room to hold on to his own mind whilst engaging with the ideas being presented. At the level of my own being I found the ideas expressed here un stomachable, and felt a constant desire to turn away. As a gay man, relatively firmly located in secular humanist thinking, committed to sexual, racial and sociocultural equality, and heavily influenced by the psychoanalytic imperative to facilitate the movement of the human mind towards its own chosen freedoms, I wrangled with the author's emphasis on the value of masculinity, finding this to be alienating and isolating, and reading into the book a disturbing irreverence in its framing of women. That masculinity is the domain of men and femininity the domain of women is not a proposition that I can identify with. As such, the author's apparent idealization of masculinity and manhood evoked in me a defensive disconnection which rose and fell as I moved through his book's meanders.

At this stage in the writing of the review I feel that I must remind myself that this is not about me; it is about the book. I find, however, that I can't commit to writing a review of this book that is academic in the usual sense. Firstly, I don't feel equipped to do so, having experienced a constant sense of being out of my intellectual depths when reading the book.

Secondly, I believe that an academic review would exclude an essential aspect of the experience of reading the book: the reader's relationship with the work and with him or herself, as this relationship shifts during the course of reading. Thirdly, my relationship with this book changed considerably after reading it, when I began to engage with the art that it examines. As such, I feel that a review of this book would be incomplete without some reflection on the art that it explores.

At the level of my own self, I found that I was happily drawn into the author's exuberance and vigour, as he extends to the reader an invitation to experience life in a manner that is located in a bodily, primitive and, ironically, wordless space. I found, in response to this, that I was sickened by what I perceived to be the ideological underpinnings of the work. It was in response to this that I experienced the call to darkness as a sophisticated proselytizing. At the level of my internal world, I found that a final assault came through my engagement with the cinematic and musical offerings. The veritable rabbit hole that is YouTube shows black metal band *Burzum's* location inside a wild, violent and irreconcilable socio-political battle. The movie *Valhalla Rising*, much like Örmény's text, interacts with the watcher in a manner that enacts its communications. It is a gore into the self, a piercing into the gut, that may or may not leave an impression, depending on the person of the reader.

It is no fault of Örmény's that his book is being reviewed by a "wuss". But, unfortunately, this is the case. I could not, and would not, take the art in, neither the musical nor the cinematic. I reacted with disgust, horror, and defensive resistance to the darkneses on display, and found that I could not reflect on my feelings enough to maintain an attentive connection to the book. The destabilizing impact which the music and movie had on me formed an important part of how my relationship with the book developed. Taking the reading experience as a personal one in which I was engaged as an emotional being, I found this book unendurable, for all its intellectual allure. In taking the book as an invitation to enter a new kind of bodily and psychic life, I felt relieved in being able to decline. I felt challenged, exhilarated, repulsed, confused, deeply stimulated, and, ultimately, disinterested.

I gauge from the intensity and variety of my responses that this book lives and breathes in the precise manner as I imagine does its author. It is dark, vehement, rage-fuelled and adventurous.

Referencing Format

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About the Author



Dr Bruce Bradfield holds both a research Master's degree in Psychology and a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology (Cum Laude) from Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, and a PhD in Psychology from the University of Cape Town. He is registered as a Clinical Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Before commencing clinical training in 2006, he worked for two years in the field of psychiatric rehabilitation in the United Kingdom (Oxford), with his internship served at the Fort England Psychiatric Hospital in Grahamstown. Dr Bradfield is currently practising as a clinical psychologist in Cape Town, and also lectures part-time at the University of Cape Town.

While the focus of his research for his Master's degree was on the impact of psychiatric labelling on an individual's intersubjective experience, his doctoral dissertation explored the intergenerational transmission of trauma from mothers to their adult children from a relational psychoanalytic perspective. Currently Dr Bradfield is conducting post-doctoral research through the University of Cape Town on the intergenerational transmission of trauma as it pertains to the children of victims of apartheid. The research involves a reappraisal of Holocaust literature, considering this material within the South African context, through the lens of contemporary Freudian theory.

Dr Bradfield's published research includes work on the interpersonal or relational implications of living with mental illness, with specific focus on schizophrenia and childhood bipolarity, as well as in the field of his trauma-related studies.

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