

Ross Posnock, *Renunciation: Acts of Abandonment by Writers, Philosophers, and Artists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2016), 415 pp.

Ross Posnock's *Renunciation*, the 2016 winner of the Times Literary Supplement Award, is a genuinely extraordinary book—it is extraordinary in form and style, in intellectual depth, and subject matter. It might seem counterintuitive at first to make a phenomenon that is essentially tied to matters of rejection and frustration, of resignation, and of an utter lack of artistic and intellectual productivity the focal point of an analysis of creative expressivity and aesthetic empowerment. However, Posnock confronts his topic affirmatively and almost emphatically, exchanging the “terminal” meaning of renunciation with the “existential or generative” (41).

Renunciation is clearly a subject close to Posnock's heart. Based on his decades-long studies of Emerson, Nietzsche, William James, and Wittgenstein, Posnock turns *Renunciation* into a *tour de force* of nineteenth and twentieth-century U.S. American and European histories of art, literature, and philosophy. He combines the teachings of premodern mysticism and Eastern and ancient philosophy with the experience of modern popular culture. For him, “[r]enunciation is as American as apple pie, and as old as the Greek cynics” (28). Accordingly, Posnock opens a spectrum that ranges from professional and institutional renunciation (as in the cases of Emerson or Salinger) through intellectual and structural renunciation (as in the works and lives of William James or Wittgenstein) to creative renunciation (as in the poetry of Celan).

The most impressive feature of this book, aside from its intellectual depth and rigor, is Posnock's power of association. By sketching original sets of elective affinities, *Renunciation*, for example, shows how Pollock uses his drip paintings to renounce painting; that Celan renounces “any distinction between art and life” (334) and “poetry as an art form of lyrical beauty” (54); that Philipp Rieff renounces scholarly writing for more than three decades in an “art of silence” (220); and that Salinger renounces his writing of fiction, as he “seems to associate publication with violation of the lyrical current that lets be the mastery of being” (153). In addition, the book discusses the renunciations of Arthur Rimbaud, Bob Dylan and Kierkegaard, of Kafka, Susan Sontag and Glenn Gould, of Thomas Bernhard, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, and others. But in view of current debates, it decidedly surpasses the limits of biographical and historical accounts.

In the past few years, scholars in literary and cultural studies have come across a number of daring and thought-provoking publications, central to already heated debates. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015),¹ Rita Felski advocates “postcritical reading” against an “hermeneutics of suspicion”; in *Forms* (2015), Caroline Levine states her case for a timely updated formalism; and Sianne Ngai, in her book *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), provides her readers with a theory of aesthetic categorization that highlights the role of the affective.² With the publication of *Renunciation*, Ross Posnock adds another important contribution to these debates: He rejects a postmodern criticism of immediacy and instead affirms presence and spiritual investment in philosophical thinking and artistic creation. At which point we arrive at the core of Posnock's book: its apology of the aesthetic.

In literary and cultural studies, the aesthetic has been under attack for quite some time, be it in the context-driven approaches of New Historicism, in the fear of hegemonic cooptation in the various forms of ideology critique, or in younger attempts to overthrow theories of literary aesthetics with the implementation of distanced reading techniques. Posnock's book steps forth as a welcome collaborator for those scholars who deal with the phenomenon of the

1 See the review by Len Gutkin in: *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 61.4 (2016): N. p. <https://dgfa.de/rita-felski-the-limits-of-critique-chicago-u-of-chicago-p-2015-232-pp-und-lee-konstantinou-cool-characters-cambridge-harvard-up-2016-384-pp/>.

2 Cf. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015); Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2015); Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015).

aesthetic and who cherish it as a central point of reference in their studies of literature and art.

To that effect, Posnock's "acts of abandonment," as the book's subtitle suggests, must not come across as a sheer rejection or self-abandonment of aesthetic practice, but as an aesthetic practice that gives presence to a particular form of openness that can "generate a lot of creative energy" (25). Drawing on this energy, *Renunciation* is a powerful book on what it means to give up something—or even oneself—and to consent to "the power of generative renunciation to serve as a compositional resource" (284). And Posnock's "figures" (40), as he refers to them, have all given up a particular social or institutional role, a distinctive mode of pursuing their profession—or they have given up their profession altogether. But Posnock understands these choices as chances and openings; as hermeneutic play-spaces that enable these thinkers and artists to establish new ways of thinking, writing, and art making; and as a fresh critical access to their works. Relying on the power of an existential openness, Posnock makes the aesthetic the essence of the good life (in many ways similar to Foucault's notion of an "aesthetics of existence"³), emphasizing "the existential *uses* in life and art of renunciation, how it or its threat orients a life and functions as a compositional resource in writing and art making" (55; emphasis in original).

Not least against the backdrop of his critique of Felski's (allegedly) insufficient resolution of the status of the aesthetic, Posnock uses *Renunciation* to not give in to the "reflex pacifying move to the 'political' or 'social' that tends to occur whenever the aesthetic is invoked."⁴ Posnock rejects both the current romance with "distant reading" and the desultoriness of a number of "surface readings" concerning matters of aesthetic experience, and he underlines that his investment in the aesthetic is marked by his deep-seated fascination with the sensual.⁵ Moreover, Posnock dismisses the dominance of "historical context" as "the anchor of our work," and he urges literary scholars to give up "unfortunate anxieties about aesthetic experience."⁶

Posnock rejects dualisms and dichotomies, and he instead rehabilitates the sacred dimensions of the aesthetic by way of tying "the religious experience of mystery" (as drawn from Kierkegaard; 208) to the "play of antithetical thinking" and "the means of creative turning" (as taken from Emerson; 297). "Renunciation, as conceived here," he writes, "is not itself a Kantian aesthetic idea but rather works like one." Since "aesthetic judgment is not immediately subject to the control of understanding," renunciation is mystic and "skeptical of definition or explanation" (36).

Accordingly, *Renunciation* includes insightful references to Eastern philosophy ("The aesthetic is where Zen and Western thought meet" [151]) and Meister Eckhart's philosophy of the reciprocal relationship between "existence and thought," against which Posnock sketches his own, I dare say, pragmatist philosophy of "aesthetic living":

Many of the renunciations I discuss insist in various ways on this reciprocity, on *living* one's convictions rather confining them to the page, the canvas, the pulpit, the classroom, the concert stage. They often pivot around versions, more or less secular, of 'released existence'—what I will call aesthetic living. (20; emphasis in original)

Posnock argues that "aesthetic living's openness involves acceptance, tacit or explicit, of art's sacral quality" (65), and he thereby bases his readings on a theory of aesthetic judgement that is both post-metaphysical and ethically sound.

And as can be seen in his discussions of Susan Sontag (131–35), of George Oppen and Paul Celan (330–64), and of J. D. Salinger (135–88), the political, social,

³ Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence." *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (London: Routledge, 1988) 47–53.

⁴ Ross Posnock, "Review: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*." *ALH Online Review, Series VI* (2016): 1–4. Oxford Academic Journals. Web. 3 December 2019.

⁵ Cf. Jessa Crispin, "An Interview with Ross Posnock." *Bookslut* (May 2016). Web. 3 December 2019.

⁶ James Livingston, "Interview with Ross Posnock on his new book, *Renunciation*." *Politics/Letters* (June 2016). Web. 3 December 2019.

and aesthetic are intricately intertwined in Posnock's philosophy of "aesthetic living" (an idea comparable to Richard Shusterman's idea of the "art of living"). Aesthetic living marks a state of immediacy and a challenge to "minutely observe our everyday life" (64), and it is thus "one answer to how might one live" (63). Readers of Emerson and Nietzsche will be reminded of Emerson's aesthetics of "the near, the low, the common"⁸ and of Nietzsche's admonition that "we, however, want to be poets of our lives, starting with the smallest and most commonplace details."⁹

In his apology of the aesthetic, Posnock is essentially concerned with the possibilities of aesthetic freedom. And much like the German philosophers Christoph Menke and Georg W. Bertram who, on the one hand, understand aesthetic experience as "freedom from practical freedom"¹⁰ and, on the other, recognize the "unsecuredness [*Unabgesichertheit*] of art" as its "contribution to human freedom,"¹¹ Posnock convincingly locates a desire for freedom in the aesthetic essence of renunciation: "I redescribe renunciation by tracking its other life: instead of its familiar identity as the condition of the immiserated self in modernity [...], here renunciation is an act of freedom" (43).

At this point, the author could have offered an even more extensive and forthright analysis of how aesthetic freedom that is acquired in acts of renunciation supports, reflects, or challenges notions of individual and social freedom. Are we to understand renunciation—in an Emersonian manner—as the precondition of all social interaction and self-liberation? Is renunciation as "an act of freedom" an individual endeavor that is always already tied to a larger scope of human practices and intentionality? And if "generative renunciation" undoes the "boundaries between art and life" (41), is there a difference between human self-determination through art and the dynamic negotiation of our social engagement?

Even so, *Renunciation* is an invitation to rekindle the much-needed debate about the power of aesthetic freedom in an age after critique and an age of creative ubiquity. In fact, *Renunciation* marks an incisive contribution to the debates about the phenomena of creativity and aestheticization, as in the works of Angela McRobbie, Juliane Rebentisch, or Andreas Reckwitz.¹² Much in line with these scholars' works, *Renunciation* sets out to be a dissenting voice against those who either cater to a naïve enthusiasm for creativity and aesthetic practices as enablers of social equality and cultural diversification, or to an uncompromising critique of creative expressivity and the aestheticization of life-worlds as hegemonic forces in the game of ideological interpellation.

So yes, as a critical reflection of the status of the aesthetic in literary and cultural studies, and as a discussion of renunciation as a powerful generator of creative practices, *Renunciation* is not only lively and surprising in form, structure, and content, but also inspiring and enjoyable as a reading experience. And yet, the book is almost impossible to recount or summarize. *Renunciation* uses "parts" and not chapters, lists of protagonists' names rather than part titles, insertions rather than footnotes. Rather than following a given argument, the reader is being led from one idea to the next, from one reference to a related side note, from one thinker's renunciation-based perspective to another artist's claim for abandonment.

Herein, Posnock presents himself as mediator, moderator, and commentator, as critic and enthusiast, at times ironically intervening and at others emphatically affirming. He challenges the common norms of scholarly writing and he demands of his readers to do the same. When reading *Renunciation*, one must get *involved* in Posnock's kaleidoscopic unfolding of different voices. One must

7 Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992) 194.

8 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," *Essays & Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983) 68.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008) 170.

10 Christoph Menke, *Kraft: Ein Grundbegriff ästhetischer Anthropologie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017) 127 (my trans.).

11 Georg W. Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis: Eine Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014) 154 (my trans.).

12 See, for example, Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015); Juliane Rebentisch, *The Art of Freedom: On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2016); Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New*, trans. Steven Black (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

cherish these moments of taking part in an open-ended dialogue with a book that urges its readers “to add examples of their own” (9). *Renunciation* allows for the infinite interposition of renouncing and abandoning figures left out by the author. I, for one, could think of Langston Hughes’s renunciation of classical lyrical forms, or, as an example from the sphere of popular culture, of basketball superstar Michael Jordan’s early retirements in 1993 and 1998.

Admittedly, one can hardly accuse Posnock, the author of *Color and Culture* (1998) and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* (2005), of not being aware of the privilege that is at the bottom of acts of “elected renunciation” (22). But with regards to the cultural history of white male privilege and to other (often related) forms of social, economic, and cultural privileging, the following questions could have been unfolded more substantially: Who can elect and afford to renounce? Who can allow him or herself to leave behind a world of prestige and public recognition? Who is even in a position to take the step of stepping away? Are we to understand renunciation as an economic, social, or cultural, and not least a gender and race-based privilege? As a privilege, that is, that figures such as Emily Dickinson or Ralph Ellison (both of whom Posnock briefly mentions in the opening of his book) could not have enjoyed?

Posnock, in fact, opens his “Overview” with the renunciation of Dave Chappelle, one of the leading black artists and entertainers, who stepped away from a \$50-million TV contract and experienced “the transformation from the familiar to the enigmatic” (16), and he hints at the dynamics of capitalism that led to the public bewilderment of Chappelle’s decision. And yet, Posnock could have elucidated more thoroughly the socio-cultural preconditions of his aesthetics of renunciation. I am not arguing for an addition of context at the expense of philosophical depth, but as Posnock’s discussions of fragile and marginalized figures such as Celan and Sontag show, an aesthetic theory of renunciation is in and of itself a debate about renunciation’s form-giving disposition. The act of renunciation is itself the reflection of its (im)possibilities, and *Renunciation* may be even richer in scope and even more powerful in essence with the addition of more liminal renouncing figures.

Notwithstanding, *Renunciation* undoubtedly emphasizes Posnock’s exceptional qualities as a reader and an authority in intellectual history. Without falling into the traps of a mere history of influence and biographical idealization, Posnock delicately and thereby masterfully combines the biographical with the artistic, the history of ideas with the ideas themselves, the particularities of a given cultural climate with the aesthetic sensibilities of its main figures. It is a lively and thought-provoking reflection of the field-immanent short-sightedness to renounce prematurely in-depth hermeneutic practices for the sake of “distant readings” and its inclination to disengage with inquiries into the meaningfulness of art and literature. *Renunciation* is the result of essayistic excellence, rhetorical playfulness, and intellectual poignancy, and it is, as such, an extraordinary theoretical and methodological asset for scholars in literary studies, American studies, philosophical aesthetics, and the history of ideas.

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