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Zakir Paul, *Disarming Intelligence: Proust, Valéry, and Modern French Criticism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Viii + 278 pp. Bibliography and index. $99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691257976; $39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-0691257983; $39.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0691261539.

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Zakir Paul's insightful and wide-ranging study traces the transformation of the meaning and application of the notion of intelligence chiefly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. The book delivers far more than its subtitle implies, as there are chapters not only on Marcel Proust and Paul Valéry but also Hippolyte Taine, Henri Bergson, the circle of writers and critics aligned with the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, and Walter Benjamin. Taken together, the chapters illustrate that the notion of intelligence is marked by its "analytic excess and cultural overdetermination" (p. 2). They demonstrate that early twentieth-century literature "appropriated the category of 'intelligence' from psychological and philosophical attempts to redefine an otherwise vague notion of understanding" (p. 3). The title of the book refers to Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's comparison of thought's two functions of reflection and action to a mirror and a sword, and Paul traces the shifting relation of intelligence as a faculty to ideologically committed action. One element that unites the writers in this study is that, for all of them, "the relation between knowing and thinking is not simply a cognitive one, but rather a vacillation within and between judgments understood as a critical activity, and flair, an intuitive capacity to distinguish and discern" (p. 14).

Chapter one, "Gathering Intelligence: From Taine to Bergson," traces a shift in meanings of the term intelligence in philosophy and psychology with particular reference to Hippolyte Taine and Henri Bergson. It begins with a consideration of late nineteenth-century efforts to quantify and test intelligence, with reference to Théodule-Armand Ribot and Alfred Binet, as well as earlier history of the concept of intelligence in René Descartes as a manifestation of the "common and universal," and Etienne Bonot de Condillac, who emphasized the "complex and the particular" (p. 37). Taine's view of mental operations as "akin to nascent hallucination" (p. 39) are contrasted with Bergson's anti-quantitative approach; Paul challenges the common interpretation of the latter that sees him rejecting a focus on intelligence in favor of the intuition. Rather, Bergson, on Paul's account, merely "displaces and nuances" the notion of intelligence (p. 45).

In chapter two, "Abdicating Intelligence: Proust and Narrative Form," Paul shifts to a focus on literature as he argues that Proust, like Bergson, does not abandon or demean intelligence as a

category so much as he shifts its primacy, allowing it to "com[e] into play as the work of analytic mind in the aftermath of the encounter with occulted signs of experience" (p. 52). Proust's "ambivalence toward intelligence" (p. 54) is made manifest via an analysis of *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust widens the semantic scope of intelligence, suggesting a range that includes "consciousness itself; the will, to a lesser degree; common sense or ordinary sanity; a concept-hungry analytic drive; the opposite of instinct; and received ideas" (p. 59). While artist figures in the *Recherche* may "abdicate intelligence in order to perceive nature, discover laws, and create percepts and affects" (p. 68), neither these figures nor Proust himself can abdicate it entirely "since there would be no way of doing so, once and for all" (p. 73). So, while the action of broadening our perceptive and expressive powers may require rethinking its primacy, intelligence continues to play a vital role in allowing Proustian characters, including the narrator, to identify erroneous perception.

Chapter three, "Testing Intelligence: Valéry Reconfigured," reads Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, his *Cahiers*, and the *Histoires brisées* to show that Valéry conceives of intelligence as "the power of substitution or translation in language, situating its interest in potentiality rather than actuality" (p. 90). In Valéry's later years, the "difficulty of defining intelligence…was recast as a political problem capturing a range of social and historical changes" (p. 90). The analysis passes through Theodor Adorno's essay, "Valéry-Proust Museum," which highlights "the exchange Proust and Valéry have concerning the nature of the artistic gesture: to what extent is art an offshoot of vitality, an abridged version of nature?" (p. 95). Paul demonstrates that in the *Cahiers*, "the task of thinking…becomes to limit the number of illegitimate questions that have their origin in a misuse of language" (p. 104). Such a view leads to a characterization of intelligence which "solicits incessant redefinition" (p. 111), which Paul links to the "crisis in intelligence" that Valéry identifies in "Propos sur l'intelligence" (p. 122). An important consequence of this multifaceted crisis is that inheriting such a self-undermining notion of intelligence means "inheriting a series of variables and tests for intelligence, as well as the task of deciding which sense of intelligence one is leaving behind" (p. 128).

The fourth chapter, "Mobilizing Intelligence: Critical Neutrality at the *Nouvelle Française*," engages the journal's editorial policy and critical agenda to examine the ways in which intelligence was "recuperated" from psychology, science, and philosophy by "aesthetic, literary, and political discourse" after World War I (p. 129). It begins with a consideration of Charles Maurras's *L'avenir de l'intelligence* (1905) which "sets the intellectual, political, and affective stages that critics of the *NRF* would stumble upon" (p. 135). When publication resumed in 1919, figures such as Jacques Rivière focused on a "critical intelligence" which would be "capable of cataloguing the richness of romanticism and the refinement of symbolism into an archive of clear ideas" (p. 146), resisting Maurras's nationalism and defining intelligence as "the capacity of recognizing difference as difference, lending it a crucial role in the act of critical discernment" (p. 152).

Chapter five, "Situating Intelligence: Benjamin and Political Technique," swerves from consideration of French writers to a consideration of the modern German tradition of engagement with *Intelligenz*, first with reference to Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, and then via a reading of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Present Social Situation of the French Writer" that argues that, for Benjamin, "the political potential of interwar French literature

resides precisely in its ability to escape the economizing effects of capitalism" (p. 162). Paul's focus on intelligence becomes more diffuse in this chapter than it has been, as he retraces criticism of the essay by Adorno, along with Benjamin's debates with Albert Thibaudet, Julien Benda, and Emmanuel Berl.

Rather than a conclusion that summarizes the ground covered in the chapters, the book surprisingly offers an epilogue, "Crises of Intelligence," on artificial intelligence in our own time, when "intelligence ceases to be intellectual" (p. 186). Paul offers a brief consideration of Catherine Malabou's work before tracing the history of artificial intelligence since the mid-twentieth century. Valéry and Heidegger are also briefly evoked, the latter in light of the "prescient insights and strategic blindness" (p. 194) on display in his 1967 lecture, "On the Provenance of Art and the Destiny of Thinking." Paul acknowledges that his epilogue "may seem to bring us far from the concerns of modern writers and critics studies in this book" but claims that "any contemporary discussion of intelligence cannot afford to ignore the way in which the notion is being transformed by its artificial afterlives" (p. 195).

Paul offers a very clear presentation of the arguments in each chapter and provides compelling readings of the texts with ample citation, intriguingly tracing the ever-shifting meanings of intelligence, as well as the cultural contexts in which those changes occurred. In the first four chapters especially, the book deftly crafts a multifaceted account of intelligence that draws convincingly on the often-intertwined fields of psychology, philosophy, literature, and criticism in the time period under investigation, with helpful accounts of lesser known figures and fresh readings of highly canonical writers such as Proust and Valéry. The attention to the German tradition in chapter five seems a bit out of place, even if the subject of Benjamin's essay is some of the French writers that have been considered in the other chapters. Paul provides intriguing glimpses of that tradition, where the French word *intelligence* covers semantic ground that is shared in German among "*Klugheit, Verstand, Einsicht,* or *Intelligenz*" (author's italics, p. 154), but the scope of the book is not able to do full justice to the nuances of a comparative approach to the two traditions. The same could be said about the epilogue's excursus on artificial intelligence: while it does extend some of the considerations raised in the book, there is not enough space in the short epilogue to do more than raise the question at a rather general level. Primary sources are cited in English translation in the main text, with the original text provided in the endnotes. Also sometimes revealed in endnotes rather than in the body of work are the names of authors of secondary sources who are quoted in the main text, which requires fairly frequent recourse to the endnotes in order to determine who is being cited.

Paul's analyses are at their most compelling when they are tightly connected to the book's main line of argument about the semantic and conceptual shifts in understanding and application of the notion of intelligence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All in all, this intelligent book provides incisive and original readings, sometimes against the grain of received critical ideas about the authors, and encourages reflection on how the esthetic, psychological, esthetic, and political vagaries of the notion of intelligence color our own understandings, interrogations, and critiques of that concept today.

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