



A Flight from Reality: Chris Arthur's *Hidden Cargoes*

ARTHUR, Chris. *Hidden Cargoes*. Rochester: EastOver Press, 2022, p.230. ISBN 978-1-958094-03-7.

One of the most important references for literature researchers today is Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), a collection of essays on works whose aesthetics are, for him, somehow representative of crucial moments in the formation of western literature. These essays are admirable for a number of reasons, but one of them deserves special attention: they are all written following an analytical method known as *Ansatzpunkt*—a German word that can be roughly translated as “starting point.” Simply put, this method consists in providing a thorough analysis of a given artwork based on a very specific point of its development—normally a peculiar scene from which the critic can formulate a complex hypothesis about the artwork as a whole. The best-known case in *Mimesis* is “Odysseus’ Scar”, an essay in which Auerbach examines the constancy of the present tense of the *Odyssey*'s narration based on a recognition scene towards the end of the story: the moment when Euryclea, Odysseus' old maid, recognises on his leg the scar from a hunting accident when he was a young boy. This is a truly peculiar scene, not only because at this point Odysseus' past conflates with the present tense of his homecoming narrative—a structural peculiarity masterfully noticed by Auerbach—, but also because it triggers in the maid a chain of memories long forgotten that enliven in her a new sense of hope about the future.

I revisit Auerbach's analytical method because it helps us understand the logic of Chris Arthur's reflections in *Hidden Cargoes* (2022), his latest collection of essays. Right in the beginning of his book, Arthur illustrates this logic through the fragment of a poem by William Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour. (11)

What Blake's verses do is invite us to think about our process of coming into existence through a reconsideration of the very existence of mundane elements of our material reality—a grain of sand, a wild flower—, a method of thinking afresh about life that ultimately leads to a stasis and to a new and more sublime perception of time. In our ordinary days, overwhelmed by the frenzy of our routines, we ignore the weight of the existence of trivial things such as a grain of sand or a wild flower. These mundane elements, however, are themselves products of long and complex processes of coming into existence, processes which the more we try to comprehend, the more they push us towards a sublime feeling of incomprehension of the passing of time.

Arthur's essays deal precisely with this tension between the apparent banality of elements of our ordinary reality and the imponderability of all the revolutions in time that eventually culminated in their existence: an owl's skull, a piece of furniture, a tulip's leaf, a vulture's egg—these and many other equally unlikely objects of reflection become for Arthur *Ansatzpunkte* from which all the process of coming into existence and all the configuration of material reality can be rearranged. It is not always to be better understood, for it is not always possible to fully understand them, but to be better misunderstood, for, as Arthur makes clear in his texts, it is precisely our eagerness to understand, our anxiety to decipher the world, what systematically makes us blind to all the beauty in it.

The title *Hidden Cargoes* refers to these unlikely objects of our existence—to this “baggage” that the world carries with it in its material manifestation as well as to the weight of coming into existence that these objects carry with them in their overlooked presence in material reality. This title, however, carries in turn something else with it: these neglected objects are themselves capable of turning *us* into *Ansatzpunkte*. In his reflections on the owl's skull (*Asio otus*) or the tulip's leaf (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)—the terms in Latin root the objects in our material reality—, Arthur often finds himself carried back to moments of his past in Ireland and Northern Ireland, moments that, he finally concludes, first contributed to his realisation that these objects hide and carry complex beauties within them:

The way I've come to think of these periodic floodings of the mind—how it can be filled in an instant with a burgeoning network of connections—is to see the dam walls of consciousness as only *just* managing to contain what lies behind them. Reservoired in the invisible honeycomb that walls the psyche are huge volumes of life-water, categorized, corralled, confined, but always ready to escape. (67-68)

Now, Arthur's use of the essayistic structure in his collection is crucial to the consistency and the refinement of this reflections.

In *The Essay as Form* (1954-58), Theodor Adorno explains that one great importance of the essay is that it challenges the hegemonic form of the scientific article—objectifying, structuralising, universalising, and therefore normally consistent with Capitalism's intentions—by exploring a creative freedom to think about the world—which makes it subjective, spontaneous, ephemeral, and therefore resistant to Capitalism itself. The purpose of a scientific article, in fact, especially in the hard and natural sciences, is to be informative and instructive, so that its content can be replicated and reproduced. The purpose of an essay, conversely, is to be reflective and intuitive, so that its content actually proves to be irreproducible: the essay is not teleological, as most scientific articles are, because the essayist does not write it aiming at a practical horizon beyond her own interests; the essay is autotelic, as most artworks are, because the essayist writes it as a singular object to be enjoyed for its own form and sake. In practical terms, the purpose of the essay is not to retell events, it is not to provide a structural investigation of facts to establish their universal principles; its purpose, rather, is to reflect on certain events of interest to reveal how peculiar they truly are—to reveal characteristics that we normally overlook, so immerse that we are in the materialism, utilitarianism, and consumerism that govern the order of our days.

What Arthur's *Hidden Cargoes* does, therefore, is surprise us with hitherto inconspicuous beauties from our own realities, beauties that we instinctively overlook because we are completely mechanised in the productivist redundancy of our lives. Arthur's essays interrupt for a moment the passing of time so that we can grasp the cruel artificiality of these realities. He chooses fragments of our existence that we educated ourselves to assume as insignificant and invite us to analyse them with due calmness so that we can realise how unique and complex we all actually are.

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Notes

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