The Aesthetic Character of Form


Bernard Freydberg’s book *Provocative Form in Plato, Kant, Nietzsche (and Others)* is an engagement with the provocation and wonder in which philosophy is said to begin. At the same time, this is a book about the mortifications of soul that smother provocation and do away with wonder. As Freydberg suggests, wonder provokes the different kinds of experience we find preserved in art, literature, and philosophy, but this very experience has a way of distorting its own origins and concealing its source. Philosophy in particular has distorted its provocations into dual categories of intelligible form, e.g., shape and structure, and sensible content. Thinking along with one of the guiding insights of twentieth-century Continental philosophy, Freydberg draws the sensible/intelligible distinction back to its origin in situated human experience. But also challenging some of the most noteworthy figures in the tradition of Continental philosophy, such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida, Freydberg argues that the
importance of form has been overlooked in the effort to free philosophy from its reliance on formal truth. *Provocative Form* is at once a retrieval of the provocations that challenge the sensible/intelligible distinction, but it is also a rehabilitation of the role that form plays in the experience of provocation. Freydberg’s book is an important contribution to our understanding of the history of philosophy and also twentieth-century Continental thought, and it is a book written from a perspective of expansive and expert knowledge of the Western philosophical tradition.

In the course of his analysis, Freydberg examines particular texts in which the intelligibility of the world is directly engaged, such as Plato’s *Republic* and *Timaeus*, Kant’s three *Critiques*, Schelling’s essay on human freedom, and Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*. These texts present themselves as a locus of interest precisely because they are most rigorously respectful of form, intelligibility, and the intelligible form that seems to manifest itself in the world. Freydberg argues that the stable truth of intelligibility is not self-sufficient, as it claims to be, but is only adequately grasped against the background of a darker, more unsettling experience of gap, disruption, and provocation. In the moment of creative uncertainty average experience opens onto the spheres of art and myth, and it is only because the world manifests itself as intelligible in the disruption of intelligibility that our creative response becomes possible.

*Provocative Form* breaks down into three main parts. Each part presents certain representative “standard” works from the philosophical tradition. These are works in which the basic characteristic of Western philosophy presents itself most clearly as the effort to give a stable analysis of the intelligible structures of sense experience. Each part then turns toward specific texts within the tradition that risk a more eccentric approach to the question of form. Freydberg calls these texts the “by-ways” in the history of philosophy, that is, the texts that veered off the standard path. The first part of Freydberg’s book deals with selected dialogues of Plato and elements of Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. The by-way comes from the middle sections of Plato’s *Timaeus*. In the second part of the book, the standard texts are Immanuel Kant’s three *Critiques*, and the by-way is provided by F. W. J. Schelling’s *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom and the Objects Connected Together with It*. In the third part of the book, Freydberg primarily addresses the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, whose work fundamentally challenges the sensible/intelligible distinction first established by Plato and later characterized Western