



Daniel Cottom, International Bohemia: Scenes of Nineteenth-Century Life
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Review by: Jerrold Seigel
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BOOK REVIEW

International Bohemia: Scenes of Nineteenth-Century Life. *Daniel Cottom*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. x+355.

“Their everyday life,” Henri Murger said, “is a work of genius.”¹ These were *bohemians*, young (or mostly young) people identified with some creative calling and unburdened by ordinary work, with its responsibilities and its income, living irregular, unpredictable, imaginative—and, in the eyes of some, deluded and suspect—lives in the name of art. Murger did not invent the term, which arose as a play on the common French word for a gypsy (and long applied to other people in Paris who seemed to have no fixed abode or regular source of income), but his *Scenes of Bohemian Life* (1851), a collection of tales and sketches based on himself and his friends, originally published in an obscure Left Bank paper during the 1840s (and made into a highly successful stage play in 1849), provided the paradigmatic account of what it meant. From the start bohemia was at once real and fictional, a mode of life that both those who identified with it and those who looked on it from outside understood by way of its imagined representations, first and most often Murger’s. His book was rapidly translated and published in other languages and countries, making bohemia an international phenomenon of remarkable reach and scope.

It is bohemia in this global guise, both as life and image, and its larger cultural and historical meaning that is the subject of Daniel Cottom’s book. The volume exhibits some remarkable virtues. Cottom has read more widely and deeply in writings associated with bohemia than any other writer on the subject (me among them)—including novels, poetry, and journalism—and in addition brings to bear an extensive knowledge of literature in a variety of

1. “Leur existence de chaque jour est une oeuvre de génie” (Henri Murger, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, ed. Françoise Geisenberger [1851; repr., Paris: Julliard, 1964], 33).

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languages, allowing him to seek out bohemia's relevance to writers not ordinarily associated with it. Some mostly unknown or obscure figures emerge here as far more interesting than one might expect, among them the American novelist Francis Christine Fisher, who wrote under the pseudonym Christian Reid and whose sharp-witted and forthright novel *A Daughter of Bohemia* (New York, 1874) reinterprets the world Murger made famous as "a romantic, principled, feminist alternative to genteel respectability" (69). Cottom's sustained readings of other writers are sometimes arresting and challenging too, including notably the "arch-bohemian" of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, Alexandre Privat d'Anglemont, and the Italian *scapigliato* Iginio Ugo Tarchetti. So is his ferreting out of the wide range of bohemian elements that Conan Doyle attributes to Sherlock Holmes.

On other levels, however, the book is more problematic. Cottom's attempt to say what the whole phenomenon of bohemia means in and for the larger history of modern life and culture is bold and determined, and it may well appeal to readers of a certain stripe. But I confess that I find it one-sided and unconvincing, leading him onto some very swampy interpretive ground. The passion and tenacity with which he pursues his thesis, and the quality of some of his readings, gives the text a kind of underlying electric hum that often draws the reader along. But because the full import of what he wants to claim about bohemia only appears relatively late in the book, a reader has to endure moments of confusion and puzzlement along the way. And once the argument becomes clear, it appears as tortuous and bleakly paradoxical.

In Cottom's view bohemia is important because it provides at once the best hope for an alternative to the oppressive and deadening way of life modernity imposes on its denizens and the demonstration that no such alternative is possible. Bohemia points the way to a different way of being—freer, more companionable, more humane, independent of the economic injustice and social oppression that pervade society still—but in the end the inequity and subjugation penetrate so deeply that they colonize and foredoom every attempt to escape them. Thus the bohemian is "a scapegoat for the disavowed utopian desires of an entire civilization" (35). Because these two aspects of bohemia are two faces of a single mode of existence, Cottom shifts back and forth between presenting it in very bright and very dark colors; bohemians are "those whose cultural ideals shine through the poverty-stricken conditions in which they must often pursue their unconventional lives" (75), but they are also and necessarily "poseurs," false idealists, and false friends, and devoid of sympathy for others who, like them, occupy a marginal position in society, notably women and Jews (it is easy to make a case for this if one does not compare them to others). In a way, Murger and his band already perform this role, but it is only in the life and writings of Iginio Ugo Tarchetti that we learn to see the two facets of bohemia in their

organic connection and thus “how to reconceive our entire perception of bohemia” (205). The Italian’s novels teach us such things as that “every human being, merely by living—apart from any questions of intentionality, morality, ethics, or rationality—conscripts others to suffer for him,” that “modern love is a sickness precisely because it establishes a creditor-debtor relationship that can be neither rationalized nor escaped . . . it is this economy’s triumph,” and that ours is a society in which “mutuality figures as enslavement, reciprocity as assault . . . and identity as the weaponry of self-deception by which we strive to subject others to a will that we must be deluded even to claim as our own” (212, 220, 215). Thus “it seems that the best for which one can hope is to lead an out-of-the-way bohemian life, avoiding responsibilities and piling up debts, on the off chance that for no good reason one might eventually be offered a way out” (213).

These notions are reiterated in the conclusion. Radical as the bohemian “assault on the notions of utility, productivity, morality, and value” might appear, the notion of art as “a quasi-sacred realm” prepared objects to enter “the temple of culture,” so that in the end bohemia worked “to make the arts safe for capitalism” (279–80). All the same, “If bohemia could not survive the realities of social life, then so much the worse for that life. If a fearless happiness was to be available only to men and women in the brief time of their youth,” we should view this outcome not as amounting to “a disconfirmation of bohemian desire but rather to an urgently compelling motive for seeking to persist in one’s bohemianism against all reason” (269).

There is a kind of bravery to these words, to which some of us who would not utter them, but who have felt the pull of bohemia (and written books about it), will respond with respect and sympathy. But Daniel Cottom’s way of preserving his loyalty to the bohemian dream stands on weak, even hollow ground. The first problem is that he never speaks about the modern world he finds so repressive, save in abstract and one-dimensional terms. There is no social history in this book, not of bourgeois or workers, of women or Jews, so that their stories are told only in clichés. Why should we take Tarchetti’s dark melancholy as generating a credible account of modern existence? Was life in the nineteenth century really less humane than in the Middle Ages or the Old Regime? Second, the quotations from Tarchetti’s writings Cottom provides make clear that the Italian viewed some deep flaw in human nature as at least as responsible for the mutual exploitation, suffering, and self-delusion love brings as is any specifically modern quality of contemporary social relations; when the protagonist of one novel declares about love that “the more profound it is, the more monstrously egoistic it is” (223), he has biology and psychology at least as much in mind as modernity. (Cottom makes the same one-sided interpretive gesture when he reads a comment of Ada Clare as pointing to “the irreducible foundations in social and cultural structures of the very possibility of such a thing as

a woman's true passion" [184].) With Tarchetti we are, after all, in the age of Schopenhauer, although the great pessimist never appears in Cottom's book.

The reason it is wrong to take Tarchetti as emblematic of either modernity or bohemia is that he was one of those people so alienated from ordinary life that for them the most unbearable form of social existence is bound to be the one into which they happen to be born. The imaginings of a different kind of life such people generate are likely to be no less abstract and one-dimensional than their perceptions of the present. This is one chief reason why Marx and Engels thought it so important to distinguish between merely imagined forms of a better future world and one that sought to build on materials empirically present in society as it exists. Wrong as their understanding may have been, it provides a far more concrete way of getting our social bearings than the one Cottom takes over from Tarchetti. Marx and Engels are relevant here also because unlike Tarchetti or Cottom they recognized that the same modern society whose oppressive and unjust social relations they decried freed human beings from the narrow confines of past forms of life and the more categorical forms of inequality they instituted. The authors of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) believed that the more just and humane form of life they envisaged as emerging in the future would have to build on the broader and more expansive social relations, and the deeper understanding of human potentialities, that bourgeois society introduced.

Bohemia (as I have argued in a book that Daniel Cottom cites with civil respect but shunts aside in order to pursue his more exclusive thesis) developed also in relation to these positive potentials in its bourgeois counterpart, even as many of its denizens acted out their alienation from its negative ones.² One of the chief features of modern life that made the bohemia Murger mapped relevant beyond the circles of poor artists he put at its center was the greater mobility many people experienced as cities ballooned, drawing large numbers of immigrants from rural areas into an urban life they little understood. A second was the decline of traditional "estates" and corporate groups and the predefined identities they provided. Together these changes left many young men—not yet so many women—with the need but also the scope to participate far more in constructing their selves and their place in the life they entered. The people for whom bohemia became a point of reference because of these new freedoms and necessities were far more numerous and important in giving it such widespread appeal—and, as Cottom rightly notes, such susceptibility to being defined in myriad and uncontrollable ways—than were the Tarchettis of the world.

2. Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (1986; repr., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

To be sure, bohemia served the latter as an idiom in which to express their extreme alienation from modern life, and some, like Daniel Cottom, will cherish it for just this. But for the former it provided help in confronting the diverse and often troubling but by no means always negative challenges modernity still presents.

Jerrold Seigel
New York University (Emeritus)

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