

David Antin, the Critic



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Gathering some of the most provocative essays David Antin published over the course of four decades—between 1966 and 2005, to be more exact—*Radical Coherency* draws the portrait of one of the most perceptive, well-informed, and historically minded North American observers of art and literature in the postmodern era.¹ The portrait I am talking about is, to be sure, a fairly reluctant one. As Antin explains in the introduction, it took some serious prompting and encouragement by friends both to consider getting into criticism “proper” back in the 1960s and to put this volume together. The obtaining picture is also one *en miettes* to boot, fragmented, and yet only superficially incoherent and by the same token structurally attuned to one of the book’s pivotal problems, collage. For *Radical Coherency* tackles, aptly to my mind, collage as a cardinal feature of modernism, but the collection too is a collage of sorts, featuring as it does texts rather heteroclitite in form as well as in subject matter.

True, the pieces anthologized here come only under two headings, “art essays” and “literary essays,” with each category covering roughly

¹ David Antin. *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, ix + 369 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02097-6; ISBN-10: 0-226-02097-5.

half of the book. But these classes are illustrated by reviews, review-essays, essays in a more “academic” sense (some of them include endnotes), an interview-essay (“Some Questions about Modernism,” pp. 197-226), and poems or, the author would probably insist, “talk” pieces. By incorporating the context of their delivery, these compositions set out to do away with the distinctions between pre-existing script and delivery, constituted text and improvisation, already-made and making (or in the making), stasis and process, writing and reading/dissemination of the written, poetry and narrative, past and present, authorial self and literary representation thereof, text-writing and self-writing, fiction and (auto)biography, textuality and metatextuality, and so forth.

The main casualty here is, as Antin and his critics have pointed out, genre traditionally understood. Where most people may still think of his *oeuvre* primarily as poetry, possibly the kind of Gertrude Stein-inflected “oral” postmodernism coming on the heels of the San Francisco poets of the Beat epoch, Antin is a strikingly original, quintessentially cross- or supra-generic performer to whom literary genre is a secondary matter insofar as it has been historically fashioned by extraneous constraints such as notation or typographic presentation (line justification, for example). But his anti-taxonomical campaign, so to speak, reaches far beyond literature, for he mixes up expression forms, techniques, media, and recording/delivery instruments associated with a range of art fields. He is really “talking at the boundaries” (this is the title of one of his works) or, better still, across them, in a number of discipline languages and crossing a whole aesthetic and philosophical spectrum from structuralist poetics and metaphysics to recent developments in drama, painting, music, video, and so on.

Few people command such a superbly extensive and, I should add, *effective* knowledge, for even fewer have had for decades an original artist’s consistently affirmed “angle” on it. As the pieces in *Radical Coherency* show, Antin is equally at home in linguistics, philosophy (he would be probably called a Wittgensteinian, although he is also keen on a “novelist” like Descartes), arts, literature, *and* their modern histories. But he also writes/talks/composes as an artist, an artist who has his own creative—and, it becomes clear once again, *critical*—agenda. To the extent most of us still go by genre in a classical sense, this platform may not be immediately visible. But again, Antin’s “talk” productions are not “only” poetry (post-improv, tape-recorded and

spoken performances, etc.). They are more than that, for they assume the *functions*—if not also the form—of what we normally mean by criticism.

These functions are in effect throughout the book, but at the end of these very succinct considerations I would like to single out two works. One of them consists actually of two essays: “Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry” (161–196) and its companion piece, “Some Questions about Modernism” (it is noteworthy, I think, that both have been triggered by requests from friends and editors); the other is the following text, a typical Antin talk composition, which lends the book its title. To my mind, the former (the two-text unit) should be widely anthologized as one of the best discussion of the U. S. transition from modernism to postmodernism, more specifically, from the poetics of collage and the kind of modernist dead end of arguably stale recyclings typical of the 1950s to the new, fresh, performance-oriented rediscovery of the quotidian through which postmodernism moves past collage or takes it another level, if you will. Interestingly, what that collage or intertextuality—textual (literary) as well as cultural—designates becomes apparent in “radical coherency” (the talk poem), which concurrently discusses and enacts (in order to step beyond) collage, one more time defining (as it practices) the distinction between modernism and postmodernism. A sense of “direction,” and with it a certain moralism, informed the piecemeal poetics of Eliot and his followers; no such guidance is foregrounded by the poet in the juxtapositional domain of places like Sears (a liminal universe in its own right). What can be found here and elsewhere, though, is an “incoherent” or subterranean coherency, and it is the reader’s job to find it by engaging with the text in the absence of a friendly user’s guide. A coherency, I might add, or “narrative” redolent of Antin’s idiosyncratic employment of the term—narrative as form capturing change and thus the formation of self. “Conventional coherency” on the one hand—which Eliot and his school admittedly ended up fostering—and on the other hand a less orthodox one, which the human mind articulates as it wrestles with today’s mazelike socioscapes. One of the most insightful art and literature commentators around, Antin, the critic, speaks to us in many voices, some of them unexpected, some utterly intriguing. We would be well advised to listen carefully.