

The return of what has been forgotten
Ian Hamilton Finlay: Revolution and Poetry (a reply to Drew Milne)

By Wayne Clements

'Hope is not memory held fast but the return of what has been forgotten' (Adorno)

This paper differs from its published Abstract in that it questions one of the main claims made in that Abstract. This hesitation, over the precise relation of Finlay to Adorno, is more fundamental than the caveats I now mention. I will explain my more fundamental disavowal later in the paper that follows.

But first, the trivial. Despite the title of this conference ('Poetry and Revolution'), this paper is not, to begin with, either about an unequivocal revolutionary or about a poem. 'Adorno's Hut' (1986-7), is an artwork by Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006). Finlay, first and foremost a writer and visual poet, is best known perhaps for his sculptural installations. Many of these artworks are placed within the garden he created at Stonypath, or 'Little Sparta', in Lanarkshire. But others, such as 'Adorno's Hut', are works exhibited in art galleries. 'Adorno's Hut' is a large construction; it is formed of the frame of a neo-classical temple made of wood and steel. On one side there are columns of simply-dressed logs. One half of the roof is carpentered timber. This gives way to steel joist construction, and steel beams comprise the second of its two rows of columns.

Finlay was preoccupied by the French Revolution. But it is not my claim that Finlay was in any meaningful sense a revolutionary. He had differences with, for example Hugh MacDiarmid, over the issue of the latter's Marxist politics¹. Whilst Finlay may have been a Jacobin sympathiser (as at least one French critic claimed with hostility), it is not really possible to be a French revolutionary of the 18th Century variety, now, nor in 1980s Britain. However, my claim is that Finlay's work is not merely an ironic toying with revolutionary themes and tropes. Rather, there are elements of social criticism in his work that tend to be overlooked in a discourse formerly dominated by discussion of irony and post-modernity. My wish is to liberate the socially critical aspect of Finlay's work. But I wish to do so without proposing an equally one-dimensional Finlay as straight-forwardly an artist of social engagement, in the place of one of scepticism and ironic distance. Rather, Finlay is a complex artist whose work is irreducible to simple formulations. Nevertheless, within this complexity there is critique.

In the words of the Poetry and Revolution call for papers: 'The current crisis makes it possible to think what couldn't be thought before'. Therefore, the context of the upsurge in social protest, which includes the Occupy movement (although not in my

¹See *The Piety of Terror: Ian Hamilton Finlay, the Modernist Fragment, and the Neo-classical Sublime*, Scroggins M, <http://www.flashpointmag.com/ihfinlay.htm>.

opinion the Occupy movement alone), allows us to see Finlay in terms different to before.

(That is not to say Finlay did not deploy irony. It is arguable, he made a practice of playing with fire in his references to Nazism, for instance. Plainly, to refer to Nazism in itself is not to embrace the ideology. This would be absurd. However, his references to Nazism and his refusal to editorialise his work so as to clarify its political stance meant that he remained vulnerable to claims he shared ideas that in fact he merely deployed in his artworks to poetic effect. With his call to execute the Arts Council² it may be possible for most to see the joke. But, with his reference to the lightning strikes of the SS in 'OSSO', the ambiguity was enough to lose him his commission for the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution.)

Finlay's 'Adorno's Hut' is not primarily an ironic reference to neo-classicism, technology in modern society, or Adorno's philosophy, although it may have elements of these things. It is rather, I wish to argue, an un-ironic statement of Finlay's then current preoccupation with the threat to his home and work posed by the power of the state in his confrontation with the local council.

I wish, therefore, to place 'Adorno's Hut' in the context of protest and resistance, rather than the context of ironic meditation, where it has often been situated until now. The difficulty in the symbolism of 'Adorno's Hut' has been misunderstood as ambiguity. But although arguably obscure, it is susceptible to interpretation. It deploys wit, but rather than situated in the well-worn discourse of irony, 'Adorno's Hut' should better be understood as engaged with its social context. This reinterpretation shifts the debate about Finlay away from the familiar theoretical preoccupations of post-modernity to one that is more contemporary. However, it is true, the work has challenged interpretation.

Peter Hill (1995) places 'Adorno's Hut' within a general understanding of Adorno's philosophical preoccupations. An associate of Finlay, he states that for a group of baffled students he encountered: 'What *Adorno's Hut* needed was a critical exegesis: an explanation of its content and symbolism" (p.14).

Peter Timms (2004), referring to Hill's account, says of Finlay's artwork, 'I read it at the time as a rumination on barbarism and civilisation, the primitive and the refined, or perhaps the pre- and post-industrial' (p.31). Broadly, this may be so. It is similar to the interpretation advanced by Susan Stewart (1998, p. 112) who says:

'We find here, of course, a continuation of the simultaneous promotion and critique of Enlightenment undertaken by the Frankfurt School. In Finlay's 1989³ work with Keith Brookwell and Andrew Townsend, *Adorno's Hut*, a direct allusion is made to this philosophy regarding the terrible consequences of technological thought.'

But it may be Drew Milne who has explored this artwork at greatest length. 'Adorno's Hut' is the subject of his (1996) paper 'Adorno's Hut: Ian Hamilton Finlay's

² 'Death to the Arts Council' (1982) <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-finlay-death-to-the-arts-council-p07928>.

³ This is later than the date usually given of 1986-7.

neoclassical rearmament programme'. He repeats similar arguments in his (1997) 'The Performance of Scepticism', particularly in the section significantly entitled 'Adorno's Hut: quotation and the perils of irony'. In these texts Milne attempts to pin down the relation between Finlay and Adorno's thought.

Milne argues for a connection with one or other of Adorno's philosophical works. Thus he claims that 'this temple offers itself as a dialectical image or emblem of Adorno's aesthetic theory' (2001), and adds a footnote to the text of Adorno's 'Aesthetic Theory'. Or, he hazards, 'Adorno's Hut' implies 'an aesthetic complement to the stark conception of history suggested by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*'. This cannot really be disputed. It is similar to Harry Gilonis's (1994) invocation of 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment' whilst voicing the observation that this artwork is 'the product of a long march to a functionalist future' (p.146). Such formulations are not wholly incorrect. But they may be incomplete.

However, Milne's failure to fully situate the work leads him to misconceive its import. His placement of Finlay's oeuvre largely in a context of a discourse about irony leads him to omit the critical aspects of Finlay's work in general and this work in particular. Thus he claims of Finlay that he 'shows little interest in the associated political problems of contemporary revolutionaries.' This was probably so with Finlay, as stated. But the next remark is misplaced in that it is incomplete: 'Indeed, his approach to Strathclyde Regional Council in the 'Little Spartan War' deliberately aestheticises politics'. I will now proceed to outline why this is not wholly true, at least of 'Adorno's Hut'.

Milne (1997) states, 'Adorno's Hut offers both an occasion for reflection, and a sceptical provocation which ironically undermines its condition as a simple proposal, statement or affirmation' (p.52). He continues, 'This work performs its questions within ironic frames, offering a scepticism without positive terms, a scepticism neither explicitly affirmative or critical'. If I am correct, scepticism, irony, and lack of critique do not characterise the artwork in question. Rather, this artwork is a salvo in Finlay's battle with Strathclyde Council in the Battle of Little Sparta.

Finlay's well-visited confrontation with Strathclyde Council extended over some years, but reached a significant early peak on February 4th 1983, known as the First Battle of Little Sparta, when the sheriff's officer of Strathclyde region attempted to seize works of art from Finlay's property, in lieu of rates. But the conflict continued until 1988. 'Adorno's Hut' is dated, as mentioned, 1986-7; therefore, it is plausible that the work may relate to these events.

The claim I am *unable* to substantiate is that 'Adorno's Hut' makes direct reference to a little known 1942 essay by Adorno (1991), 'On the Final Scene of Faust'. In this essay, in the course of discussion of Goethe, Adorno evokes the theme of a 'hut' as refuge and site of memory. It might seem reasonable to infer that it is this text to which Finlay is alluding. However, it has proven impossible to demonstrate that Finlay read this essay. It was not published in English until 1991. Finlay had no

German. It would also seem that Finlay's collaborators and assistants had no knowledge of this essay by Adorno⁴.

Therefore, I must abandon any claim of direct inspiration. Instead, I will use this essay to inform my discussion in the remaining part of this paper.

Commentators have puzzled over the significance of Finlay's strange creation and its meaning in the context of Adorno's philosophy and Finlay's own artistic production, as we have seen. But Gilonis (1994) has identified one of the main sources of Finlay's sculpture in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'. This is the passage that Gilonis cites:

'...that old cottage home,
Small even for two owners, is transformed
Into a temple, columns stand beneath
The rafters, and the thatch, turned yellow, gleams
A roof of gold...'⁵

In so doing, Gilonis accounts convincingly for the puzzle of why Finlay may have chosen to construct a neo-classical temple rather than anything that resembles the 'hut' of its title. Finlay's construction is caught half way in its process of transformation. For Gilonis, its mixed media represent the 'movement from the rural/primitive to the machined and modern'.

Even though it is improbable that Finlay knew the text, Adorno's essay adds several layers of complexity to Finlay's 'Adorno's Hut'. A reading of the Adorno essay illuminates a different reading of the story of Baucis and Philemon based on the version that appears in Goethe. It is more probable that Finlay knew this account in Goethe⁶ (quite separate to the question of his knowledge of Adorno's meditation on Goethe).

Adorno's essay identifies a hut in two passages in the last section of his short meditation on Goethe's 'Faust'. Referring to Faust's famous pact Adorno writes:

'Perhaps the wager is forgotten in Faust's "extreme old age", along with all the crimes that Faust in his entanglement perpetrated or permitted, even the last, monstrous crime against Philemon and Baucis, whose hut the master of the piece of ground newly subjected to human domination can no more tolerate than a reason that dominates nature can tolerate anything unlike itself' (p.119).

⁴ Cunningham and Mapp (2006) give this as the essay's date of first publication in German (p. 143). It was published again in 1959. It was not published in English until 1991. This is after the date of 'Adorno's Hut'. Harry Gilonis states (private communication) that Finlay had no German. Also, according to Gilonis, none of Finlay's assistants or collaborators were likely to have known this essay or brought it to his attention. We are therefore left with what seems to be an astonishing coincidence.

⁵ This is Melville's (1986) translation rather than that Gilonis cites.

⁶ 'His work, ARCADIA n. A KINGDOM IN SPARTA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD draws on a scene in Goethe's "Faust" linking the equally "spartan" Arcadia with Sparta, its near neighbour to the south'. Peter Manson, <http://www.petermanson.com/Littlesparta2005.htm>.

Adorno then goes on to evoke the aged Goethe who, ‘in boundless joy...reread on the boards of a chicken coop the poem, “Wanderers Nachtleid” [“Wanderer’s Nightsong”], he had inscribed on it a lifetime before. That hut too has burned down⁷. Hope is not memory held fast but the return of what has been forgotten.’ Goethe therefore in this meditation represents the figure of the poet as the bearer of hope through restitution, albeit one that is also threatened.

But Baucis and Philemon, just as Adorno says, perish when they refuse to give up their land to Faust:

And the little hut that stood
Damp and moss-grown in the wood,
Is in flames; will no one heed
The call for those in direst need?
If not, that old and kindly pair
Who used to tend their hearth with care
Must soon be overwhelmed and choke.
Now the mossy timber frame
Is all ablaze...⁸

It is not a casual decision that Goethe has chosen Ovid’s characters to illustrate the extent of Faust’s rapacity. If Finlay consulted the Goethe text, he would have found words that would have confirmed his worst fears about the possible outcome of a confrontation with power:

An ancient proverb we’ve heard tell:
Give way to force, for if you choose
To stand and fight, then you could lose
Your house and home – your life as well.

My thesis is that Finlay knew this version of Philemon and Baucis. But he came to it independently of Adorno (who still serves to identify the significance of the later account of their story).

The contemporary economic and social situation, characterised by crisis and protest, possibly may provide a more conducive context for a revised understanding of Finlay’s ‘Adorno’s Hut’. If hope is not memory but return, what is to be returned? This can only be what has been expropriated, or stolen, as was the home of Baucis and Philemon. For Finlay, this can only mean the removal of the threat to his home and artworks symbolised in the enduring steelwork of his temple/hut. For us, such restitution must, however, go beyond individual wrongs.

⁷ Cunningham and Mapp (2006) state it burned down in 1870 (p.140).

⁸ Translated by Williams (2007).

At the time of writing, the Occupy movement's dispute with power over the ownership of public space encourages a reinterpretation of this 1980s artwork. Here too we find a confrontation between the state, not least in the form of local councils⁹, and the populace. In this conflict too, we find the juxtaposition of 'official' architecture side by side with the perilous structures of hut and tent. Many of these have proved to be as little tolerated by Adorno's masters of the ground as Baucis and Philemon's own hut was. The implication of Finlay's version of the hut is that we need to build a durable architecture of resistance.

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⁹ At the time of writing the last remaining Occupy site in London, in Finsbury Square, has recently been removed.

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