which one may find traces, or “glimmers,” of an alternative to this story of violent exclusion (273). By patiently deferring the resolution of a historical narrative that would sooner have him forget the moments to which he attends, Perl-Rosenthal has offered a substantial testament to the importance of buoying seemingly marginal pasts, of keeping them afloat long enough to preserve their vital energies.

University of Pennsylvania

AJAY KUMAR BATRA


Marxist critics and theoreticians from Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton have argued that “aesthetic formalism” – the idea that art has a special kind of existence and should be judged by criteria unique to itself – came into being because of capitalism. No longer protected by aristocratic patronage, their prestige and income now determined by the vulgar market, artists withdrew into their own world, where only other artists and critics could determine artistic value.

Capitalism, though, always finds a way in. In The Capitalist and the Critic: J. P. Morgan, Roger Fry, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the eminent poet, literary critic, and biographer Charles Molesworth recounts a telling episode in the long history of capitalism’s encounter with art: how, in the early 1900s, J. P. Morgan recruited the promising young English art critic Roger Fry to the young Metropolitan Museum, and why Fry’s stay at the museum was so short.

Morgan was the president of the board of trustees of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and its guiding spirit. The Met needed someone highly skilled in the evaluation and acquisition of Old Masters to help yank the new museum into global prominence, even if the sometimes provincial trustees at times preferred the museum to highlight American art. The best-known figure in the field, Bernard Berenson, was too close to the commerce side of the equation (he specialized in attributions and pricing), and so Morgan turned to Roger Fry, a younger critic who had been part of the Cambridge Apostles group of aesthetes.

For Fry, experiencing art should be both spiritual and educational, and in his writing he focussed on the formal qualities of a painting – attributes of an artwork that anyone could appreciate, given some rudimentary guidance. A museum, he felt, should epitomize that: it should present art to educate and uplift. Not all of the Met’s trustees loved that idea, for it implied that the institution should reach out to the broad, uncultured public. Some trustees even opposed the museum being open on Sunday – the one day off in the standard six-day working week – because of the clientele that might attract.

Morgan didn’t object to the museum’s educational mission, but as a major collector himself, he was also one of its primary competitors. In 1909, he and Fry clashed over the acquisition of a Fra Angelico Madonna, which Fry felt that Morgan had snatched up for himself after Fry had done his best to obtain it for the Met. After receiving a letter from Fry that he considered insufficiently deferential, Morgan had the museum board terminate Fry’s contract.
Fry and Morgan’s contentious relationship is only the top layer of a rich story here, and Molesworth frequently dips into the larger cultural context of the time. Some of it is familiar—Morgan’s nearly unfathomable power in the American economy, for instance—but Molesworth briefly but vividly describes the personalities and relationships between some of the largely forgotten figures who dominated the art-criticism and collecting world in the early 1900s: Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, “Goldie” Lowes Dickinson, Herbert Horne, John G. Johnson. The portrait of the fraught relationship between Fry and Berenson is particularly good, as is Molesworth’s account of Fry’s evolving aesthetic and critical philosophy in the 1920s—his championing of Cézanne, his reflections on the relationship between art and commerce.

The book has a chiasmic structure, tracing two lives that began far away from each other, intersected briefly but consequentially, and then diverged again. The central core of the book, the chapters dealing with the two men’s direct interactions, moves quickly and offers a vivid portrait not just of these two notable figures but also of the collision of Anglo-European aestheticism and American robber barony.

Unfortunately, too often in the first third and the final third of the book, the stories are simply too divergent, and Molesworth’s somewhat diffuse argument fails to hold them together. Capsule sketches of the founding directors of the Metropolitan’s several divisions are interesting, but what do they have to do with Fry or the collision of aestheticism and capitalism? Nor do we need such detail of the Pujo Committee hearings, especially in such a short study. Finally, a few unfelicitous redundancies mar the otherwise well-written and fast-moving book. The chapters seem to have been written separately, and so personages are introduced in one and reintroduced in another as if we hadn’t met them before, and minor episodes and details are presented for the first time twice. But these are ultimately minor objections to what is on the whole an engrossing book with as much appeal to a general audience as to scholars.

GREG BARNHISEL

Duquesne University


During the last twenty-odd years, Robert Frost has enjoyed a well-deserved critical renaissance, with volumes that have enlarged how we view the writer’s life and achievement. These works include Robert Faggen’s Robert Frost and the Challenge of Darwin (1997), Mark Richardson’s The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics (1997), Karen L. Kilcup’s Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition (1998), Jay Parini’s Robert Frost: A Life (2000), and Tyler Hoffman’s Robert Frost and the Politics of Poetry (2001), as well as collections of essays such as Mark Richardson’s edited volume Robert Frost in Context (2014). Equally important, Harvard University Press has begun publishing its essential collection of Frost’s work, beginning with The Notebooks of Robert Frost (2006), The Collected Prose of...