Andrew Gibson. *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. ISBN: 9781474293150. £21.58.

It is perhaps all too easy to be dismissive of a notion like misanthropy. Like nihilism, which enjoys roughly the same philosophical standing as teenage angst, and solipsism, which has little or no currency outside a clinical setting, misanthropy seems to be a catch-all term of abuse for anyone who dares entertain anti-social ideas, regardless of their intellectual merits. Its scandalous premise invites a facile opprobrium that can easily find supporters hailing from opposite ends of the political spectrum. And yet misanthropy should not be dismissed offhand, given that it often represents the forceful expression of an uncompromising sentiment that is neither provable nor refutable, neither entirely rational nor liable to be completely rationalised away.

The starting point of Andrew Gibson’s *Misanthropy: The Critique of Humanity*, to the great credit of its author, is precisely the refreshing acknowledgement that misanthropy, for all its inconsistent, incomplete, and flawed character, deserves to be taken seriously, at least in part “because it thrives on its very contradictions” (p. 5). This book constitutes a most laudable and – somewhat surprisingly, given the long and far from ignoble history of misanthropy – original attempt to proffer a brief survey of misanthropy in its myriad philosophical and artistic manifestations in the West. The ambitious scope is made manageable by the provision of plenty of historical, political, religious, philosophical, and biographical context for each of the case studies, resulting in a portrayal of misanthropy that splendidly reveals its enduring, manifold, at times complex, and unexpectedly pervasive nature.

*Misanthropy* follows a roughly chronological order, to which Gibson adds thematic thrust. Thus, for the sake of cohesion – or at least convenience – near-contemporary luminaries are grouped together and whole eras are categorised under the banner of a given focal point. The Ancien Régime of late-seventeenth-century France is considered the spawning ground of an elitist, even state-sponsored brand of misanthropy. The eighteenth-century English and Anglo-Irish misanthropic traditions are studied through the lens of misanthropy’s often vexed attitude towards the body. The misanthropic philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Arthur Schopenhauer is deemed representative of the allegedly circumstantial (because rooted in historical and biographical factors) nature of misanthropy. The case for the idea of colonial misanthropy is illustrated by the Irish experience of merciless British rule for well over three centuries. The misanthropic writings of modern women highlight the fact that feminism can be misanthropic and that anti-progressivism need not be conservative. Finally, the American variety of misanthropy, in its relentless assault on boosterism, shows the validity, usefulness, almost righteousness of a sceptic stance that serves “as a corrective to the facile modern optimisms” (p. 178).

The remarkable wealth of examples effortlessly brought up by Gibson, his thorough understanding of the different variants of misanthropy and the contexts that gave rise to them, and the judicious way in which he handles his subject matter when discussing its merits and failings are some of the decisive strengths of this book. The author’s confident mastery of his material is patent in his tone, which is clear and authoritative throughout – and often witty, with a sporadic recourse to colourful language that sits well with the provocative disposition of many of his misanthropes. Neither is quality compromised by the gargantuan temporal scope – indeed, the six chapters listed above are flanked by two high-grade overviews of misanthropy: the introduction, in which the Ancient Greek Cynics, the Roman satirists, and St Augustine are credited as key influences of Western misanthropy; and the conclusion, which takes stock of the sundry nuggets of misanthropy in contemporary philosophy, politics, and pop culture.

However, those peripheral and more far-ranging chapters also bear witness to an aspect of *Misanthropy* that is not beyond reproach: its structure. The book begins with Timon of Athens, and this is fitting. Yet it is not entirely obvious, for instance, why, immediately after discussing Timon, Shakespeare’s eponymous play, and Molière’s *Le misanthrope* (itself a perplexing leap),a detailed account of misanthropy in Elizabethan revenge drama should be given pride of place; one almost feels like this is a way of mentioning a misanthropic tradition that is perhaps neither sufficiently significant to deserve a full chapter nor sufficiently insignificant to be omitted altogether.

Indeed, the introduction (as well as the book in general) would greatly benefit from a clearer structure: the more categorical systematization of stated aims we find pertains to the introduction itself (p. 14); the synopsis of the chapters that follow the introduction (p. 13) is more akin to a discreet lifting of the veil. Signposting is admittedly much less of an issue in the transition between the chapters of the main text. Also, in the conclusion (pp. 232-234) we find a rather tentative summary of the whole, and the fact that it is not a satisfyingly neat synthesis in the manner of a “grand narrative” is not at all reprehensible but indeed quite sensible, given the subject matter’s intrinsic elusiveness.

Another, more serious formal foible is Gibson’s intention to divide *Misanthropy* between the first three chapters and the last three (pp. 119-120), which seems either somewhat arbitrary or, what is hardly better, deliberate but unwarranted: the author’s logic seems to entail a distinction between circumstantial and therefore unconvincing misanthropy on the one hand, and equally circumstantial but more legitimate misanthropy – simply because it emanates from more marginal members of society (pp. 13, 121) – on the other.

As far as *Misanthropy*’s actual insights are concerned, there is much to praise and little to find fault with. Gibson sets out to treat his subject fairly in an attempt “to think with, about, for and against misanthropy” (p. 13), and he keeps his word by examining its many strands from different viewpoints and striving to formulate his assessments of them informed by a solid theoretical basis and a representative assortment of instances. Several snippets of novels, treatises, poems, *bon mots*, diary entries, and song lyrics illustrate the points he painstakingly introduces and explains, and his scholarly use of bibliographical references is both meticulous and non-intrusive.

There is always room for quibbling, of course – especially when dealing with a book that cover a rich and wide-ranging topic across many centuries. Notable absences are simply inevitable, and Gibson is well aware of this (p. 30). But it is still rather perplexing that there are only the briefest and more or less incidental references to clearly kindred concepts such as nihilism (p. 81) and anti-natalism (p. 212), and no mention at all to some of the most famous apologists of misanthropy, such as the philosopher Emil Cioran.

In addition, it might be argued that more could be made of the connection between misanthropy and socio-economic inequality – the constant and intractable nature of inequality, evident in humankind’s bleak record as far as distributing resources equally or even equitably is concerned, makes it a formidable recruiter of misanthropes. But perhaps there are not enough instances recorded in great works that deal specifically with this strain of misanthropy, and anyway the misanthropy nurtured by outcasts is already quite well represented in the book. A more glaring omission, however, particularly when we bear in mind the author’s historicist bent, is the Holocaust, a genocide which surely contributed much to bolster the ranks of misanthropy and which is referred to only once and that in passing (p. 172).

Incidentally, the abovementioned emphasis on historicism – which in the bookis repeatedly given “the edge on misanthropy […], casting doubt on its plausibility if not its power” (p. 110) – is itself a major bone of contention. An overreliance on what Gibson calls “the historicist stricture” (p. 177) yields historical and biographical readings that surreptitiously or explicitly undermine the theoretical foundations of misanthropy, which are not infrequently carefully thought through by its proponents.

For example, it is perhaps questionable to give an accomplished account of Schopenhauer’s misanthropic philosophy at some length (pp. 99-107) only to rationalise it in the light of his historical context (p. 107), thus essentially sapping the vitality out of the philosopher’s worldview without really addressing the soundness of his arguments. Indeed, if anything, Schopenhauer, whose wholesome daily regimen regularly elicits derision from critics who note the discrepancy between his pessimistic views and his own contented and comfortable lifestyle, was arguably a living testament to the human being’s possibility of abstraction from the here-and-now – in that sense his biography, far from explaining his philosophy, actually belies it.

It is a tribute to Gibson, however, that he himself readily concedes that historicism has its limitations (p. 177). It may be that “the occasions of misanthropy repeatedly turn out to be determined by circumstance” (p. 119) – but then again, what is not thus determined? Historical and biographical context is undoubtedly useful, but too much emphasis on it runs counter to Gibson’s own goal of taking misanthropy seriously and assess its theoretical worth or lack thereof in a dispassionate way.

There are a few other claims that, while following a plausible line of reasoning and indeed backed by a plenty of corroborating examples, are at least disputable or problematic, such as the statement that “hatred of, or at least disaffection from, the body” is “crucial” for the “misanthropic vision” (p. 207) and the decision to equate colonial resentment with misanthropy. Does criticising a ruthless colonial power and one’s meek countrymen really amount to misanthropy? In yet another demonstration of his perspicacious reasoning, Gibson is alive to that criticism (p. 145), but his reply – that “misanthropic discourse need not of itself make universalizing claims” (p. 145) – is not wholly convincing, as it would not be unreasonable to claim, on the strength of the vast evidence provided by Gibson himself, that misanthropy is more or less by definition a generalisation, and to see it otherwise risks to stretch the theoretical elasticity of even such a diffuse concept as misanthropy to breaking point.

As for political musings, to which misanthropy lends itself so well, Gibson prudently abstains from any sustained commentary, with the exception of the occasional waggish dig at contemporary identity politics (p. 61) and especially academics (pp. 30, 230, 237). His keen sensitivity to and comprehensive knowledge of contemporary society and all its quirks and workings is particularly apparent in his outstanding digest of contemporary instances of misanthropy, which ranges from object-oriented philosophy to queer misanthropy, post-humanism, eco-misanthropy, and the popular misanthropy found in writers like John Gray and Michel Houellebecq as well as in cinema, television, punk rock, and gangsta rap.

Minor structural shortcomings and slightly contentious claims notwithstanding (which anyway are natural to occur in a work of such daunting breadth), *Misanthropy* is a vibrant, well-researched, and enlightening scholarly work on a subject that has always flown under the radar but is fully deserving of all the studious attention that Gibson so generously bestows upon it.

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