

Marginalia and Marginal Figures in the Romantic Age

Alex Watson, *Romantic Marginality: Nation and Empire on the Borders of the Page* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012)

Simon P. Hull, *Charles Lamb, Elia and the London Magazine: Metropolitan Muse* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010)

The two books under review are in many ways comparable. The authors of both represent a younger generation among the students of the romantic era. Both of them practice a scholarship that is historically grounded and is interested in the material aspects of literary production. Hence, both studies have been published in Pickering & Chatto's *The History of the Book* series (where "the book" metonymically stands for all tangible conveyors of culture, including journalism). Both of them are interested in the rethinking of the canon, and neither of them sees the "greater romantic lyric" as the only possible candidate for its single centre. Both are interested in romantic prose writing. However, while Watson investigates how marginalia reflect or reject contemporary thinking about the margins of the British Empire,

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Hull looks at its very centre, albeit from the perspective of a self-consciously marginal figure, Charles Lamb's *Elia*.

Alex Watson's *Romantic Marginality: Nation and Empire on the Borders of the Page* is an important book, because it is the first book-length attempt at investigating romantic authors' practices of annotation. As the title indicates, the innovative approach is connected to post-colonial studies. Watson argues that the way marginal texts (footnotes and endnotes mostly) are used reveals a lot about attitudes concerning centre and margin in the growing empire.

The first chapter gives a short but very fascinating overview of the development of what Watson calls the "subtle cultural anxiety about the potentially encroaching effects of paratexts" (13), which he sees as a neglected factor in the emergence of the Romantic concept of the work of art as an organic whole (poems, according to John Keats, "should do without any comment," 29). The eighteenth century saw many objections to annotation. From theology ("the word of God," said Berkeley "should not need a comment," 16) to the debate between Ancients and Moderns, in which Pope compared the presence of commentaries in texts by Shakespeare or Milton to "'Hairs, or straws, or dirt, or grubs, or worms' preserved in amber" (17). Thus, a distinction came to be made between the "pedant," who simply collects information (and transforms it into footnotes), and the critic of sensibility, who directs the readers' attention to "beau-

ties and blemishes” in a given text. At the same time, the eighteenth century sees a rising interest in the potentials in annotation, on the one hand for purposes of Scriblerian parody and satire, as in “A Tale of a Tub” or the *Dunciad Variorum*, and on the other, for using real footnotes in experimental ways (Watson quotes a few of what Winston Churchill referred to as “Gibbon’s naughty footnotes,” 24).

The second chapter deals with “struggles for authorial ownership and interpretative hegemony” (32) as witnessed by marginalia. An extreme example of this is provided by William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), a novel originally written in French, and then translated into English and provided with a commentary by clergyman and schoolmaster Samuel Henley. Henley took his task so seriously that he not only provided many more footnotes than was thought necessary by Beckford, but actually published the English edition without any mention of the fact that he was not the author. A more subtle, and better known, example is the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, where the notes not only conduct a dialogue with the readers, but also a more private conversation and contest between the contributors over the meaning of the texts. Watson chooses the example of Thomas James Mathias’s notes for *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794–7) as an example of a romantic poet using his comments to ensure that his poem takes part in rich public interactions with the wider world.

The very informative discussion, however, made me feel – not for the last time – that the line of argument could have taken exactly the opposite direction as well. The fact that direct political attack can (only) take the form of a footnote might also reveal anxiety about romantic poetry’s ability to enter the public arena.

It is in chapter 3 that Watson finally finds his true subject: the similarities and differences between political and textual marginalisation. The chapter includes analyses of Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), with special attention to the footnotes, of course, which “manifest their authors’ dual marginality as Irish women writers” (49). Indeed, Watson posits a recognisable late eighteenth century feminine tradition of marginalia, exemplified by works such as Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* or “Beachy Head,” Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Charlotte Brooke’s *Reliques of Irish Poetry*. The similarities are not immediately noticeable. While, according to Watson, the significance of Smith’s notes is that she “demonstrated her mastery” of “hitherto male-dominated discourses” (51), Wollstonecraft’s are seen as “provocatively unscholarly,” the first demonstrating anxiety about women’s place in public discourse, the second its opposite. What makes them all feminine, though, is that they use the margins to “put forward emotional pleas” (57). *Castle Rackrent*

is unique because it breaks with this tradition, which also puts Edgeworth on the imperial side of the question: her notes associate native Irish customs with backwardness and barbarity. Owenson, however, uses the antiquarian learning gathered in the notes to *The Wild Irish Girl* “as evidence of a distinctive Irish national identity” (65), and thus as possible “foundation for the nation’s future” (64); in effect, she constructs “an anti-colonial archive” (68). By focusing on what the English reader is ignorant of, the notes to both novels, although to differing degrees, undermine the coloniser’s sense of superiority.

Watson interprets Robert Southey’s commentary accompanying *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) as the opposite of an “anti-colonial archive”; he calls it “an imperial collection,” which is based on “the practice of extracting objects from their original context, and resituating them in the hermetic – ‘useless’ – world of the collection” (73). That this text should receive such a detailed interpretation is perhaps going to be surprising to some people; some of us might even snigger that it is no wonder that Watson does not focus on the centred text, but he still establishes certain interesting parallels between the frenzied collecting zeal of the Empire and Southey’s “miser-like love of accumulation” (73, the poet’s own words). The British attempt was to establish London as the centre not just of finance and power, but also of knowledge, thus marginalising the colonised lands in a cultural sense as well.

Southey is also a good example of how notes begin to live a life of their own. He insisted that his “notes will be too numerous and too entertaining to print at the bottom of the page,” which enables us to imagine a type of reader (maybe not even too rare a species) who actually is more interested in the notes than in the poem itself. Watson relies on Edward Said’s insight that Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt (1798), a military campaign where the army was accompanied by 165 scientists, artists and other intellectuals, created a very strong precedent for an association between imperial expansion and intellectual progress. Watson argues that while Southey very much shares and even propagates this “progressive” view of imperialism, his fascination for the supernatural in *Thalaba* makes it difficult to assimilate him to the “Enlightened” view. Moreover, not even in the notes, where one would normally expect it, does the rationalisation of the superstitious elements take place. Room is left for the possibility, in other words, that Southey is more open to non-Western ways of thinking than he is usually given credit for, maybe in this poem “truth is dependent on social circumstances” (95). Watson makes a similar statement about *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), where India appears as a “disturbing and fascinating alterity” (98). It remains a question, however, whether delight in the wildly exotic really amounts to openness towards “alterity.” In certain parts the mixture of eastern and western

in the poem struck me as simply silly (“Allah, thy will be done” (I.7) and the rest of it). Nevertheless, Watson is surely right to stress the importance of Southey’s poems in founding a recognisable tradition of narrative poetry in the romantic period, which includes works by Thomas More, Felicia Hemans, Lord Byron, and P.B. Shelley, many of which share the fascination with the eastern and the exotic.

Chapter 5 turns to Scotland, and its two best-known authors: Robert Burns and Walter Scott, who both “translate Scots and Gaelic dialect terms, collect, display and remake materials from Celtic and Pictish folk traditions, and gather and interpret anthropological information about Highland and Lowland communities” (101), and thus “in their annotation, Burns and Scott created archives of history, culture and tradition from which a Scottish identity could be formed” (103). Watson emphasises that “to be a Scots poet” for Burns, as much as for previous authors like Robert Ferguson or Allan Ramsay, was “to live a bilingual existence, on the margins between Scotland and England” (105). But exactly because of the complexity of the cultural interchange that their work achieves, it is far from obvious whether the archival work embodied in the annotation actually “decentres the English metropolitan reader, confronting them with their lack of cultural competence in an alien environment” (106), or rather decreases and domesticates the otherness of that environment. Nevertheless,

Watson is surely right to elaborate on the importance of Burns’s writing in the Scottish dialect as opposed to the distinguished tradition of scholars (such as Adam Smith, David Hume or Hugh Blair), who simply eliminated Scots (Although here as well some reflection on differences of genre and the possibilities of linguistic experimentation would have been beneficial to the argument). Ultimately, Burns’ annotations are seen as deconstructing the English-Scottish dichotomy on which the negative discrimination of the latter could otherwise rest.

Walter Scott’s historical novels, however, effect a union (almost *the* Union) by “distancing the reader from . . . diversity, presenting cultural differences as evidence of past conflicts that have been superseded by the civilising effect of national centralization and modern manners” (108). It is only on the margins that Scott gives voice to the trauma that accompanies the history of integration. From the first, Scott’s strategy is to record (already in his ballad collection and early poetry) the brutality of the past, and to enable the reader to sense the advance that has been made since then. As most of the violent acts are connected to the fight against English supremacy, however, the very bases of British rule are represented as blood-stained. Scott appears as an ethnographer in the footnotes, elaborating on the wider cultural significance of what might otherwise be seen as mere *couleur locale*.

Having examined the contradictory strategies of the two most famous Scottish writers of Romanticism, Watson turns to Lord Byron, whom he calls, with dazzling overstatement, “their fellow Scotsman” (116). In this last chapter the analysis centres on Byron’s and John Cam Hobhouse’s imperfectly collaborative annotations to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1811–16). Although the post-colonial perspective does not at first seem to be as clearly relevant as in the case of the Scottish writers, general problems related to imperialism are at stake here as well; most famously in the case of Byron’s objection to the transfer of the Parthenon sculptures to London. Byron’s footnotes contain much information about the places Childe Harold visits, and by insisting on the immediacy and authenticity of his first-hand experience, he allows his readers to see through the widespread ideological accounts of these colonised cultures, and thus “to comprehend the world from the perspective of the margins” (124). Hobhouse wrote the notes to Canto IV, and Watson offers a very interesting reading of the text as a result of a complex, uneasy cooperation between the two friends, in which the footnotes provide the crucial context for placing the Byron of this Canto in the line of republican Italian poet-heroes. He does not, however, make a very strong case for either of the two actually thinking of this as creative cooperation, or for the work ever having been read in that way in its history of reception, or indeed

examine how many people actually worked their way through the ocean of Hobhouse’s annotation. Watson uses this final example as a summary of many of the themes of his book, and indeed Watson’s reader will by this point be ready to share in the pleasures of the de-centred text that delights in heterogeneity and non-hierarchical variety.

I have found the Conclusion (“Romantic Marginality and Beyond”) to be the least satisfying part of the book. Most of the short chapter is taken up by a seemingly ad-hoc list of works from J. F. Cooper to David Foster Wallace, in which notes are also used in creative ways, and to which some of the insights of the book seem to be applicable. I would, however, have wished for a chapter that meditates on how far we can generalise from the case studies in the volume. By this point, we have seen that annotations can complicate the meaning of a text in innumerable ways, we have seen them caught up in widely different ideologies, we have seen them as sociable and as satirical, playful and (pseudo-)scholarly. Is there a way in which a taxonomy can be drawn up? Are there any deductions to be made as to the conditions of possibility in which a set of marginalia assumes significance in one way or another? What factors influence the process? Watson mostly examines the annotations in the works of more-or-less solitary authors (or in some cases of duos), but surely facts of publishing and formatting, as well as of recep-

tion, are also significant. “I have opted to focus on how authors use annotation, rather than what these practices reveal about the nature of reading in the period” (2) Watson claims in “his Introduction,” but it is debatable how far the two can be separated. He, for instance, regularly makes assumptions about how the dialogue between centred text and marginalia influences the reader, typically without offering empirical evidence of this actually manifesting itself in reception history. Contemporary reviews are regularly cited at the beginnings of analyses, but not much is made of them to this effect.

Another problem with the “Conclusion” is that reading through the list of texts from different periods, we become uncertain how far this project is historically specific at all. Surely, if the context in which the texts are examined is the troubled relationships between colonial centre and the peripheries, then it has to preserve a high level of historic specificity (since those relationships were themselves unstable). Nevertheless, given that Watson’s interpretations are relatively easily divested from the contexts of the histories of reading, cultures of publication, reviewing, one gets the sense that what we are faced with are deconstructions of the centre-margin dichotomy, and rather brilliant ones at that.

So while I agree with Tom Williams, who in a *TLS* review celebrates the book as groundbreaking,¹ I believe that if the study of romantic marginality wishes to

become a well-established field in present day romantic scholarship, it needs to reflect more on its methodologies, and needs to engage more with studies of readers’ marginalia (especially those of H. J. Jackson),² and, in general, move away from the examination of the solitary author to the social scene of writing. In this Watson’s work, which certainly succeeds in directing attention to the margins, will be fundamental. It makes us understand that there is more to the footnote than what Anthony Graft called the Cartesian tradition of clarity and distinctness.³

Simon P. Hull’s *Charles Lamb, Elia and the London Magazine* argues for a reconsideration of the *Elia*-essays that takes into consideration their specifically metropolitan character, and their position in what Hull calls “periodical text,” two subjects against which traditional romantic scholarship tended to be biased.⁴ Although Hull often refers, in a very broad sense, to the “periodical text,” it is the work of Lamb’s great prose-writing colleagues (William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, Thomas de Quincey and to a lesser extent Pierce Egan) that provides the backdrop for the analysis. By this, Hull also counters the commonplace objection that *Elia* writing equals escapism. As Felicity James argues in her review of the book, Hull goes beyond existing scholarship on Romantic magazine culture, by focusing on the development and the complexity of the *Elia* character.⁵ He also places the traditionally marginal genre of the essay at

the very heart of the literary scene. The complex argument is that while Elia is part and parcel of the commercial world of the *London Magazine*, the essays also cunningly educate the middle-class reader “to see beyond the material and the empirical” (15).

The first chapter argues that “an Elian mode of metropolitanism emerges in response to the ‘anxious’ image dramatised by the Cockney dispute” (20). In Hull’s usage, the very word “Cockneyism” refers to the “professional anxiety” (22) caused by the (not complete) anonymity and the commercial and collaborative nature of writing for magazines. Hull quotes a variety of contemporary periodical writers (but especially Hazlitt) who display this anxiety by self-criticism, saying that “the only way for the genre” of the embattled periodical essay “to redeem any literary credibility is for it to attack itself” (26). Another option, I think is to tap into the perfectly respectable eighteenth century traditions of essay writing. In a book that claims, in the very first sentence, to be “about the essay” (1) I would have expected more about this. Hull could, I think, have made more of Hazlitt’s lecture “On the Periodical Essayists” (from a course delivered in the winter of 1818/1819) and his *Edinburg Review* essay, “The Periodical Press” (1823) with the rather well-known rhapsody, “let Reviews flourish – let Magazines increase and multiply – let the Daily and Weekly Newspapers live for ever!”;⁶ in neither case are the signs of anxiety

immediately visible. Hull’s point about Elia is a very important one, however. Lamb becomes a successful writer partly by his ability to turn weakness into strength: to create a character that is forever elusive, layered and detached, even from himself. Elia is also distanced from the intense critical debates of the time, and achieves a certain amount of ideological neutrality.

The re-education of the readers, moving them away from the rigid, insensitive criticism exemplified by the Cockney controversy takes the form of “manoeuvring” their “judgmental tendencies into corrective self-reflection” (40), often by exposing himself to such criticism (“Poor Relations,” or “The Convalescent” could, Hull suggests, be read along these lines). The harsh opinions expressed in “Imperfect Sympathies” are defended as expositions of the inevitable bias and partiality of any act of critical judgement. Through their very arbitrariness, they stand as a plea for toning down such attacks, typical amongst other things of the name-calling that resulted in the labels by which we still identify different versions of romanticism (Jacobin, Lake, Cockney). Against such finger pointing, “Elia adopts a playful, suggestive, never-naming style” (50).

The second chapter examines the Elia essays in the context of that most talked-about figure of metropolitanism, the flâneur. Coleridge’s “This Lime Tree Bower my Prison,” a poem that builds upon the contrast between enclosure and

free movement (and to which Lamb objected), and also the beggar poems of Wordsworth are read as articulating a “liberalist association of vagrancy with freedom” (58). Beggars are also present in the essays, in fact, Elia at one point claims that the beggar is “the only free man in the universe” (58). Nevertheless, this freedom is tied to being fixed, immobile, crippled, a fate that in many ways the lame figure of the essayist, chained by everyday office routine, also shares. Rural liberty is out of the question here. The most important claim of this book is put forward in this context. These acts of self-limitation so often classify the Elian model as a lesser, incomplete Romanticism.⁷ The motivation for this has, of course, been largely biographical: the well-known tragedies of the Lamb family as well as the personal responsibilities of Charles have typically been seen as impediments in the way of his becoming a great romantic author. Hull, who rarely resorts to biographical explanations, claims that if we see metropolitan Romanticism as not lesser, simply different, then we can see Lamb’s art of essay as complete and altogether glorious.

Hull offers a reading of “Witches and other Night-Fears” (1821) as an example of how Elia’s self-imposed limitedness emerges as power. The very list of what Elia is incapable of (vision, dreaming, transforming the experience of terror and of the sublime into art) actually defines a different and original poetics. “The familiar, domesticated city in which Elia’s place as a prose writer is

established” (77) is set in opposition to the more poetical but less substantial, less solid visions of De Quincey’s “dream cities” as well as to “Wordsworth’s fantastic city in Book II of *The Excursion*” (76). I find the brief comparison with the fellow-metropolitan, Leigh Hunt very much worth pursuing further, yet I am also reminded that Elia’s “ultimately knowable city” (82) is a tiny fragment of the actual metropolis, of which “the absence of all forms of pedestrianism” (80) in the essays is surely an indication. Nevertheless, I find the idea that the spatially limited Elia transforms urban ambulation into a form of writing (reflecting what Hull calls an “epistemological ramble,” 82) quite brilliant.

The third chapter focuses on the essays that describe Elia’s vacations away from London. Once again, Hull sees Lamb as going further than Hazlitt, whose “On Going a Journey” presents relief “from the intense sociability of life in the metropolis” (105). For Hazlitt, the meaning of rural liberty is dependent on the metropolis, but in the Elia essays not even Hazlitt’s temporary relief is allowed. In “Mackery End, in Hertfordshire” (1821) even though Bridget’s “regressive” (107) ruralising is painted in endearing tones, Elia does not experience such a holiday-long “return to nature.” The dilapidated country-house, the very seat of the Gothic, here represents “a distorted image of the familiar, a staple feature of the essay” (108). Further, this distortion is constantly connected to dreams, from which “Elia

awakes into the stable domestic reality of his London home" (113): waking up from the rural dream is clearly presented as liberation. Not "in great City pent," not him! The city and the metropolitan writer appropriate the country, not the other way round.

Chapter 4 examines the description of the urban poor and especially the beggars in the context of the debates surrounding the Poor Law, and the activity of the London Society for the Suppression of Mendicity. Here, for once, Lamb appears to occupy a similar position to those of his poetic contemporaries, Blake and Wordsworth. In his analysis Hull produces the most powerful case I am familiar with for reading essays such as "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" or "a Complaint of the Decay of Beggars in the Metropolis" not as heartlessly aestheticising treatments of the darkest aspect of metropolitan life, but as engaging with this central debate of the age, although in a characteristically roundabout way.

Like Wordsworth, Elia is concerned that systematic attempts to eradicate mendicancy only destroy the fabric of a community, but he disagrees in that for him urban life is not the threat, but the very network of personal connections that is threatened by the reformists. Lamb knew Blake's *Songs* (including the two "Chimney Sweepers") and shared their revulsion from the psychology of "pity" as patronising and impersonal. In Hull's reading, Lamb avoids the sentimentality of pity "through an appropriation of Hogarth's carnivalesque style to a

celebration of supposedly low, plebeian life" (134). He shows chimney-sweepers or beggars not as helpless objects of pity, but in situations of power. The unexpected laughter of the sweep represents a moment when the world turns upside down; like the traditional coronation of the Cockney king and queen; the urban poor are shown as dominant, bursting with *joie de vivre*.

The last chapter focuses on the theatrical world of the essays, and the role that Elia most likes to play on the great stage of the metropolis, that of the fool. Hull points out how, after the distinctly anti-theatrical views expressed in Lamb's vastly influential early paper "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare" (1811), the Elia essays embody a distinctly theatrical practice. (Although I think he should have talked about the Elian "On the Artificial Comedy" as well, where the concept of comic theatre is more immediately relevant). The early essay on Shakespeare suggests that while reading is a creative, interpretative process, watching dramatic spectacles is not. The Elia essays presuppose a reader who moves about London with the detachment of a theatregoer, but they try to seduce him or her into actively looking at specific sights or individuals and engaging in acts of attention and even charity. Thus, Hull argues, Lamb, unlike Hazlitt, Hunt or Coleridge, moves beyond his early anti-theatrical stance to embrace a readerly theatricality. Clowning too, as a role, is based largely on Lamb's beloved comic performers (like Munden). Keep-

ing a safe distance from actual madness, this allows for the creation of a second self, an elusive identity to be acted out in front of the metropolitan reader.

The book closes with a suggested reconsideration of the identity of the author, not as a lonely figure involved in heroic struggle against precursors (à la Bloom), but as a figure of urban sociability, the artist of language that is seen as by its nature, dialogical. In this context, Lamb emerges as neither marginal, nor minor, but as a *par excellence* author.

Bálint Gárdos

Notes

1. Accessed 2 November 2012 <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/reviews/other_categories/article1157920.ece>.

2. H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), and especially his *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

3. Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 190–222.

4. Unaccountably, he makes no reference to Gerald Monsman's *Charles Lamb's as the London Magazine's "Elia"* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2003), which reprints some of the magazine texts and offers insights into the ways in which Lamb changed them for the collected edition.

5. Felicity James, [untitled review], *The Byron Journal*, 38.2 (2010) 192–193.

6. P. P. Howe, ed., *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. 21 vols. (London: Dent, 1930–4). Vol. 16, p. 220.

7. Most importantly in the late Thomas McFarland's influential *Romantic Cruxes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

The Quest of the West – Heroes of Transformation

Peter Whitfield, *Travel: A Literary History* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2011)

It is a much-needed break from discourse oriented literary considerations to let such books as Whitfield's *Travel* have a considerable intellectual impact. Finely illustrated and bound, it is an adventure narrative, a natural history, an overview of the roving Western mind, and an account of 4500 years' narratives of geographical movement from within the Mediterranean, Europe, and America. Travel literature as a genre, as the author points out, is in constant formation, open to theory but also exact in its historical and cultural relevance. The author manages to balance his work between academia and artful entertainment, without bias or didactic message but with quantities of wondrous diversity categorized into neat stages of a suggestive larger scope. The historically sequential chapters lead from religious deliverance through political tyranny to global ecology. The style of the book is light and elegant, simple and clear. Whitfield evokes much more than he claims, a vision beyond correct listing and cataloguing, where different genres and disciplines merge to reconnect semiotic elements. His cases of travel writers are linked not simply through the common genre and chronology, but through a single aspect: how travel writing relates to human conditioning. The

author proves authoritative in evaluating works and tendencies, a sharp-sighted enough critic to see the essence of different genres, eras and figures of travel literature. Whitfield's book, neither too scientific nor too artistic, succeeds in evoking new perspectives from an existentialist point of view, perspectives on identity, culture, psychological drive, and the reflective capacity. Both encyclopaedic and narrative, it is an introduction to travel literature studies and a springboard for further comparative research, and also a read for the wider public. Due to the work's specific relevance to the Anglo-Saxon literary world, it is first and foremost an essential supplement to any area of English literature. The traveller's point of view is both a sum and a challenge of prevailing cultural phenomena in the stationary world.

On the periphery of academia, in a shifting phase of its paradigm, travel writing is a vast and growing field of much diversity and contradiction. Its current tendency is mainly the processing of materials. Specific areas of research increase by the day. Conferences, regular venues abound, monographs and reviews are published almost weekly. General overviews of the genre are also appearing, and in their line what Whitfield represents is that golden mean between critical steadiness and the verve of receptivity to travel's associations, maintaining its romance and charm. The discipline now includes an immeasurable field including tourist

journals, scientific exploration, sociological and political aspects of migration such as exile or immigration and anthropological field-work, not to mention military documentation or the legal culture of travel. Literature based on the theme of journeying must be distinguished from these. The criteria for travel and literature are to be mapped contemporarily, as it is done with less academic rigour but more invaluable insight and perspective by Whitfield. Through his efforts it is made clear that the reality of the story is beside the point: whether the narrator relates the truth or a poetic construct is indifferent. The essence of the genre is the transformation of the subject, both the travelling and the reading subject. It is more than general cultural exchange, which effects but does not necessarily transform the subjective psyche. Therefore the abundance of related contemporary discourses such as displacement, globalism, hybridity, mobility, translation, gender or liminality offer themselves to brace travel literature with the necessary theoretical conditioning. Whitfield emphatically invites such considerations but the distance of the book from theory is maintained – it is thus capable of gaining perspective over millennia of consciousness.

Since there is no "single transcendent principle valid for all travel texts" (x),¹ the essence of the genre is transformation itself: it is discourses of transgression that are brought into view by Whitfield's implications. Travel litera-

ture as a self-reflective genre is closely related to questions of identity, and points to the morphing of Western man, beyond his Westernness. A hero's journey, travelling is an allegory of life as movement, as transformation. But it is more directly the allegory of Western restlessness to become one's self in a removed, foreign context. "The writer plays a double part, as both spectator and actor" (x), and thus the interim is established. The Interzone, the liminal field of the traveller is identical to that of the writer. Through this wormhole all other liminal genres come into play within travel writing, and it becomes a clearly structured rite of passage both in its original reality and in its narrative translation.²

Practically, "human history without travel is unthinkable" (vii), and indeed Whitfield makes an initial summary of geographical movement in documented human history in the *Preface*: "First, humanity overspread the earth through the process of migration, forming communities and cultures that flourished for long periods in isolation from each other. Then later, through exploration and resettlement, this isolation was broken down, and the movement began towards the one world which we now inhabit" (vii). In this sense, movement seems as an inevitable and necessary part of life in general. But the "reintegration of mankind" has been brought about by the ceaseless conquests, explorations by the West. Despite Edward Said's deconstructive proposal that the

concept of the West is an ideological fiction and a political enterprise,³ there undoubtedly is a literary phenomenon which can be labelled as "the quest of the West." The psychological, philosophical reasons for Western restlessness are not specified, but the fact speaks for itself that "the literature of international travel is predominantly European" (viii). Whitfield's Eurocentric perspective "tries to identify successive paradigms of [its own] travel and travel literature: we have the literature of exploration, conquest, pilgrimage, science, commerce, romanticism, adventure, imperialism, and so on" (viii). The full view of the progression of eras, however, projects a larger, more general conclusion: "literature becomes . . . an agent, in the gradual reintegration of mankind; it becomes a form of discourse through which one civilisation thinks about another, and about itself" (viii). The following sketch of the book directs attention to the most progressive representatives and developments of travel writing, using the most important general tendencies and backward approaches only as backdrop.

The ancient world provides the pure prehistory for the book, mythology depicting life as an ordeal, a challenge. Three monolithic narratives reflect the major aspects of Western travel writing. Gilgamesh, the father of all travellers, is a supreme knight-errant, a demigod seeking metaphysics in immortality. He is on a direct existential quest, probing the question of existential transforma-

tion. His is the archetypal story of the Fall into the human condition. A divergence from this most archaic trace, the Exodus of the Old Testament is the travel narrative of collective, tribal identity, transformation, and fate: religious and political deliverance into freedom in a new life projected by divine promise. As a counterpoint the Odyssey is a human adventure story of individual challenges and ways of overcoming. The hero's journey consists of a series of liminal events and critical situations of "encounter with the alien" (3). The consequential Classical literature is where the foundation of Western empires of dominance is grounded. Herodotus already reports the clash of cultures with a "hint of contempt" (6). Growing xenophobia motivates the genre from here on, paired with a sense of cultural superiority over all others. This ancient hubris reaches its classical summit in Alexander the Great's imperialistic story. The Romans continued to develop the genre in a "mastery of themselves and their forces" (10).

The Christian era presents the "pilgrimage narrative . . . greatly expanded" (16) in religious tourism, and tinted with "political and racial hatreds" (21), marking the "Crusade as a form of colonisation" (21). Lured further by the East, the genre of travel writing proper emerges with Marco Polo: "the experience itself is centre stage" (26), the experience of a first person. Polo's stories, though superficial in observation, "excited the envy of Europe, and thus created the

essential conditions for the Age of Discovery" (29). A parallel tendency is Mandeville's "intellectual tease" (30): the "search for novelty, for what is alien" (32). The fourteenth century external gaze was, however, disrupted by attempts to internalise movement. A primal instance of Christian mysticism surfacing in travel appears in Petrarch's *Ascent of Mount Ventoux*, inspired by Augustine's warning for travellers to consider themselves. Dante's *Divine Comedy* as an inner journey stands out from the centuries as "a vision of the entire universe, but the development of that vision is presented as a real, personal experience, a real journey involving purification through suffering and awakening. It clearly takes us back to the archetypal paradigm of travel . . . as we move through space . . . we are transformed" (38).

The Age of Discovery was defined by rationalisation of the fear of the other: primarily by branding non-Europeans and non-Christians as inferior. This unfortunate self-delusion stigmatized European and Christian attitudes for four hundred years to come. The ideals of "discovering," "taking possession" (39) were boosted by the apparent success of Columbus's "grandiose claim" (43). Whitfield suggests "mystery and confusion within his mind" (47), and reflects that conquistadors like all conquerors "cannot interpret what they see" (47), amply proven by their travel writings. The scientific Western mind then listed and categorised unfamiliar phe-

nomena revealed by the conquests, concluding great factual collections such as Hakluyt's. The political cause that was served by these catalogues grew even greater in fervour, but "travel was now . . . an intellectual force" (63).

Rationalisation was continued by seventeenth century non-conquerors "observing and reporting" (79) ceaselessly. One movement of opposition to this disenchantment of the world was satire. Another way of interpretation was an integrating, spiritual stance, for example the Jesuit Matteo Ricci's revelation, "who sensed that the only way to understand China was to cease to treat it as a foreign land, and become part of it. This is the great gateway of imagination through which the traveller must pass – to recognise that there is no foreign land, for he is the foreigner" (120). Shakespeare's late work, the last romances illustrate the transformative effect of journeys "as first ordeals then turning points, causing the destruction of the character's old life, and offering the first stage of regeneration into a new" (124). Bunyan's removed goal of the Celestial City is the driving force behind *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Eighteenth century travelling for knowledge broadens the geographical horizon, but also enlarges cultural complacency and hubris. The Pacific still "a realm of mystery" (127), further diversification of movement and knowledge are manifest in travel writing. The age of Reason confirms Western identities through intellectual means, but the

intellect has also produced its own critique in moral philosophy as well as in literature. The fictional travels of Defoe, Swift and others claim to reveal more "truth about humanity" (176) than rational accounts of real journeys. Voltaire prefers to "travel in the mind" (178), disillusionment being the cause of his internalisation.

Candide's escapism gains popular momentum and desperation in the "Romantic age when the purpose of foreign travel was not to confirm one's existing identity, but to take one outside it" (179). The American empire-building era coincided with the birth of many new and democratic disciplines of enquiry such as biology, anthropology, linguistics, archaeology and mountaineering. Scholars and archaeologists begin to find evidence not only of racial and cultural equality but of the other's possible superiority in occupied cultures like India. Artefacts, however, still go to the British Museum. On the other hand, new forms of otherness appear in nineteenth century travel writing such as nature. The "mystical conviction that the life of nature . . . was reality" (206) brought new life to literature in the works of John Muir, and Thoreau and Emerson's transcendental group, whose ideal was a radical turn of the attention to "adventuring at home." Walden is an "inverted travel book" (206), where transcendence is gained through nature. Another reinterpretation of the travel concept was the critique of Twain, Stevenson and others, and the indirect

critique of Edward Lear's surrealistic travel journals. Melville's vision of the human struggle was placed into the wilderness of the sea, outside not only of social but elemental context. Verne and Loti promoted "human power and nature's magnificence" (239). Kipling's depths depict the "savagery released when the veneer of civilisation breaks down" (240). Joseph Conrad is a turning point in travel literature: he "introduced travel as metaphor of shifting identity" (240), and the method of dissecting the self. His heroes are men placed in extremis riddled with inner conflicts, outside the confines of civilisation: he founds the modern theme of struggling to overcome fear, alienation, crisis and self-doubt.

By the turn of the century, an old paradigm was indeed over. Robert Louis Stevenson's dictum "There is no foreign land; it is the traveller only who is foreign" (243) echoes mystical interpretations of the Middle Ages on a popular level. There has been a "paradigm shift in travel writing in the past hundred years . . . travel has something vital to teach us, and writers must undergo some form of personal transformation" (243). Much migration of writers going on, much searching. "Where is the transcendent knowledge in our hearts, uniting sun and darkness, day and night, spirit and senses?" asks D.H. Lawrence (253). The escapism of Durrell, Van der Post transcending the travel genre in his visionary, philosophical travel books, Paul Theroux's satirical spontaneity, all

glorify the benefits of travel for their transforming effect. Feminism on the other hand is a merciless critic, "exposing the mentality of male power underlying much travel writing" to "free the idea of exploration and endurance from some of its historical burdens" (274). Bruce Chatwin takes travel writing to being a postmodern collage. In his revolutionary approach he breaks down conventions lacking context and psychological depth. And besides all this formal experimentation, there is still room for serious, informative, compassionate objectivity in the contemporary genre. Kerouac's *On the Road* was a decisive road novel for the second half of the century, sending generations on the road. He portrayed travelling as a quest in the mythological sense. Bowles's characters face the annihilating force of the sky in North Africa, and either die, or redefine themselves in the foreign context. Despite the artless tourist invasion of the world, "yet another aspect of consumerism" (viii), most recently environmental writers have put down a new cornerstone, extending the role of travel literature. Peter Matthiessen's work is presented as the culmination of moral and environmental travel, "indebted to the 'deep ecology' of the existential philosophers such as Heidegger. . . . 'The secret of the mountains is that the mountains simply exist . . . they have no meaning, they are meaning'" (281). In today's travel literature the force of change proves to be both actual and theoretical, both personal and collective,

geographical and psychological, natural and civilisational.

In a *Postscript* entitled *Re-imagining the World*, Whitfield draws the conclusion that the new paradigm necessitates redefinition of our Western identity after an age of dislocation and dissolution, and millennia of historicalisation/externalisation. It is not the task of this book, but the task of future travel literature to express these new meanings, these new contents of the geographically defined self. Whitfield claims that what everyone is seeking in travel is freedom “to move . . . out of non-being into being” (283). The existential weight of travel literature calls for the urgency of serious considerations in the genre. “Travel is a genre in which matters of ultimate spiritual importance can be discussed” (281), and “the worthwhile travel writer has to keep alive the idea of the inner journey, the transforming experience” (x). And so with this realization, “the genre has come full circle from the era when it was the servant of conquest and domination, political or cultural” (281). The book takes a small but important role in the redefinition of a genre, summarising the past of travel writing, and highlighting the progressive representatives of the Western psyche, heroes and narrators of transformation.

Zsuzsanna Váradi-Kalmár

Notes

1. Peter Whitfield is the author of more than a dozen works of history, literary criticism and poetry, including *The Image of the World: 20 Centuries of World Maps* (1994),

The History of English Poetry (2009), *The History of Science* (2010), *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*. This book has been reviewed by *The Oxford Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Australian* (in March-April 2012).

2. The roots of liminal, transgressive theories are to be found in Van Gennep and Turner’s anthropology of prehistoric rituals. Theories of otherness such as Lévinas’s also designate the barrier of the self to be overcome.

3. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage & Random House, 1979).

(What) Does It Really Mean?

Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kaščáková, eds., *Does It Really Mean That? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2011)

Ambiguity is a phenomenon very old and also very broad. It can merit and reward literary interpretation but, perhaps for the same reason, has also the dangerous potential to result in bland analysis and windy (or missing) conclusions. To organize a collection of essays around this ironically Janus-faced phenomenon can be tricky: is the theme of ambiguity narrow enough to organize the essays into an at least loosely coherent collection; if not, is it interesting/relevant enough to offer new insights to the writer and interest to the reader? Especially when the audience of this book is obviously not the common reader of literature

but the educated scholar of today's academic (literary) discourse. In a time and era where the mindframe of the audience is that of the post-post-modern reader where ambiguity is not merely present but rather omnipotent. Where not only meaning but communication too are essentially destabilized, what novelty and innovation can the interpretation of ambiguity still offer us? My expectations are quite vague, even after reading the editorial introduction.

In the first part of the collection there are essays touching upon ambiguity in connection with works of Medieval Literature. Kathleen Dubs, the late collaborator of *The AnaChronisT* and co-editor of the volume, investigates the ambiguous role of Harry Bailly, the Host of Chaucer's *Canterbury pilgrims*: is he a "nouveau literary critic" of Chaucer or a representation of contemporary literary tastes? As an alternative conclusion, Dubs proposes that Chaucer might not have been trying "to educate his audience about interpretation, but about form" – where entertainment is not simply a means to an end independent of meaning, but "a valuable vehicle worthy of attention" (55). Whether Chaucer was trying to say something about the *value* of form remains an unanswered question; especially since, as Dubs also remarks, *The Canterbury Tales* is unfinished in terms of the original design. "Thus if Harry Bailly is Chaucer's nouveau literary critic, it is regrettable that we will never know which tale he would have chosen" (56).

In the same section, "Medieval Literature," Éva Zsák explores in detail the manifold interpretation that the role of the Holy Cross in Christ's Passion allows in old English poetry. Meanwhile, dominant patterns in the essay as well as the ones highlighted in poetry are perhaps better characterized by diversity and transition of roles than by ambiguity. Tamás Karáth's essay, the last in this section, focuses on the 15th-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, the first acknowledged autobiography in English literature. Placing the *Book* in the larger context of medieval East Anglian spiritual writing, the *Book of Showings* by Julian of Norwich, and other East Anglian dramatic texts, Karáth shows how medieval devotional writing uses ambiguity on the level of rhetoric and dismisses it on the level of meaning. The roots of medieval ambiguity in interpretation originate in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* where Diomedes recognizes a decisive attribute of the human stance: "our truths, beliefs and explanations are constructed on conscious axiomatic decisions" (22). One of the basic divisions of our axiomatic systems is in turn the careful separation of good and evil – as it has always been a major concern of post-lapsarian humanity, Karáth states. Since in late medieval thinking ambiguity practically equalled evil deception, it is interesting to see how attitudes to ambiguity still remained ambiguous. Describing the inquisitory investigation of Margery Kempe's visions, the *Book* problematizes the dichotomy of literal

and metaphorical meaning – which Margery refuses to reduce to mere ambiguity. Instead, “she is persistent in leading her contenders from distrust of images to an appreciation of images, in which the literal and metaphorical senses almost coincide – without ambiguities” (33).

János V. Barcsák, in one of the theoretical essays of the collection, also takes the axiomatic nature of our thinking as the starting point of his discussion. However, whereas in medieval times ambiguity was a rather undesirable and disturbing phenomenon, Barcsák argues that it is in fact the only movement of thinking that allows for referentiality to reality. The German philosopher Gödel’s Formally Undecidable Propositions theory of numerical systems implies that the very fact that every system is based on axioms deprives them fundamentally of a true referent in reality. The only chance for the system to refer outside itself lies exactly in its undecidable propositions, i.e. in paradox (like “This statement is a lie”), which does not belong either to the true or to the false statements within the system and thus manages to transcend the limits and refer outside it. In contrast with systems in science or mathematics, literature openly recognizes that it not only reflects reality but produces its own references; in fact, the very recognition of autonomous force is where art really begins. This conscious self-referentiality, hand in hand with the liberating formula of paradox (the ulti-

mate form of ambiguity), compels literature always to assert the truth about its relation to reality, and is also the reason why “the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox” (Brooks quoted 200).

The autonomy of literature and art and the uncanny side of ambiguity mentioned in Karáth’s essay directly connect Tamás Bényei’s piece about the ambiguities of the picture of Dorian Gray and Anna Kérchy’s essay about the experience of reading *Alice in Wonderland*. The picture of Dorian Gray in Wilde’s novel problematizes the ambiguity of artistic image and blurs the boundaries between art, artist, object of art and reality. This general crisis centrally evolves in the novel around the phenomenon of *beauty*. As Bényei points out “beauty in and of itself causes a profound disturbance in the art/life dichotomy, if for no other reason than because it appears in both spheres.” What are the boundaries between art and artist; where does his art begin and where does his life end? Is beauty the manifestation of some inner content or “a phenomenally unintelligible entity” that hides no deeper meaning? These questions that Wilde’s text proposes can be seen as early examples of the modernist questioning of the continuity between seeing and knowing (Jacobs qtd. 68).

Anna Kérchy’s essay similarly brings up existential questions in connection with ambiguity. Only, it is now the other side of the artistic process: perception.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is not simply ambiguous but comes close to nonsense. Kérchy shows the curious interplay between the two typical readerly attitudes: the paralyzed compulsion of making sense of non-sense and the playful ability simply to enjoy non-sense. She wishes "to show how the pleasure of the playfully polyphonic text results precisely because it invites us to fall into nonsense, to drift aimlessly from 'hypermeanings' of overinterpretation to 'pure' textual joys of 'meaninglessness' and back" (105). It is, however, interesting to see – as the argument unfolds – how much we bear and to what extent we can enjoy ambiguity. Kérchy's contemplation of ambiguity through Lewis Carroll's text asks some of the most interesting and compelling questions in the collection. How much do we need to make sense of and understand, no matter what? Where does ambiguity become more disturbing than magical?

The hybridity and permeability of identities that ambiguity can bring about is perhaps best illustrated in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Ambiguity is now absolutely dominant on every level: Katarína Labudová shows how generic hybridity supports both the bodily and the mental hybridity of characters. As fictional epitomes of such hybridity: cyborgs (in parts naturally, in other parts technologically constructed beings) take a central position in both novels. She shows that

Carter and Atwood's fictions "undermine the borders between reality and fiction, as well as natural and artificial, to create new forms of identities, sexuality and bodies" (149). Not only for the two authors but for their characters too, ambiguity is the primary tool to invent their own histories and social fiction. The conclusions of the two novels are accordingly open-ended. Unfortunately the essay is also without conclusion (or consequence): while it often states the obvious it leaves important questions unanswered or not even posed. Even if the two novels are "open ended" they do have some suggestions - or at least they should have for a critic (other than just being "open-ended"); if not, then in what sense is a critical essay different from the mere detailed restatement of a novel?

Labudová's analysis is followed by another piece related to feminism by Angelika Reichmann about the (female) Gothic elements of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* – the closing essay of the "British Literature" section of the book. Reichman demonstrates that the seemingly realistic fiction and male literary tradition are subverted by traditional narrative elements of male and female Gothic, showing a quite ambiguous relationship of the author (Lessing) with these traditions.

The remaining three pieces of this section discuss different types of ambiguities used as narrative tools in contemporary British fiction, mostly in terms of Empson's classification. Milada

Franková opens her essay with the assertion that for one reason or the other, the post-modern likes and embraces ambiguity. Indeed it does. What might be a change of aspect in the use of ambiguity since ancient times is that the author or artist is given a more active role (intentionally or unintentionally) in creating ambiguity – as pointed out in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Accordingly, the essay examines mostly from the authorial point of view six sets of contemporary novels relating to six types of ambiguity: a deliberate exercise in ambiguity (Michele Roberts' *Flesh and Blood*), interpretative ambiguity (Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*), experimental ambiguity (Jeanette Winterson's several novels), and ambiguity of irony (Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark) or ambiguity of perception (Jane Gardam). Franková's writing is a great exercise in the presentation of the literary ambiguous; however, as she also notes "any discussion on ambiguity is an endless task" (101). Nóra Séllei's article takes an alternative look on Virginia Woolf's two late novels *The Years* and *Between the Acts* as novels engaging politically and textually in the discourse of the Empire and the Nation. Séllei argues that on the metalevel of narration the text offers stances of criticism by creating an ambiguity in relation to the semiotic process of the making of history and exposing the artificiality of such concepts as nation and empire. (As she says, the text creates "an ambiguity in relation to the semiotic process of the

making of history, the nation and the empire by exposing their making, by revealing that they are artefacts.," 137.) Gabrielle Reuss tries to uncover the highly ambiguous message of April de Angelis's *Laughing Matter*. Reuss examines ambiguity in the play's meticulous historicity and its intertextual references to Shakespeare. As she argues, "The sense of the eighteenth century being our contemporary is enhanced by the presence of the Shakespeare cult and modern colloquial language, set against the ever loudmouthed environment of the theatre." (84.) Further, she raises the question of whether the play really is meant to be a laughing matter and whether it is a melodramatic or an ironic laugh that we utter at the end of the play. Although De Angelis' conclusion to the contradictory "laughing matter" is deciphered by Reuss as merely ambiguous, I think irony is deeply intertwined with ambiguity, if not synonymous with it in this case.

In the first piece of the third part, "American Literature," Ted Bailey discusses the ambiguities of mulatta identity and how black-authored mulatta texts explored and exploited the opportunities latent in mixed identity with an aim to bridge the gap over racial polarity and "to effect a material transformation in the world" (172). Bailey introduces and sketches a certain literary-conjurational strategy which, focusing on character identification, tries to "manage the character's identity so as to establish an oscillating correspondence . . . between

the reader and the figure's two racial personae" (176). This means that the text tries to achieve an optimal balance in the reader between complete identification and absolute distance as the respective poles. A *conjunctural catharsis* is the aim, which happens at an "aesthetic distance" when "the members of the audience become emotionally involved in the drama, but not to the point where they forget they are observers" (Scheff qtd. 172). Conjunction as opposed to complete identification is to be favoured on the basis of the sceptical contention regarding the role of empathy in literature. Baily quotes Saidiya Hartman, who states that " 'empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration' and hence 'empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead' " (167). The only point in Baily's argumentation that leaves space for some inconvenient suppositions is the lack of further investigation into the already contended nature of *empathy*. What if someone identifies with the whiteness and also the blackness of a character but fails to identify with some other but similarly important feature of that character (for example an attribute of his/her temper or personality)? If this happens (and why would it not?), then conjunctural catharsis fails to take place because of "overdistancing" and, as a result, the strategy does not reach its goal. In other words, is it so obvious that people can only and exclusively

not-identify when divided by racial boundaries?

The other piece in the "American Literature" section explores the interpretation of time in Nabokov's *Ada* and Melville's *Pierre* simultaneously. The motif that Márta Pellérdi especially highlights is the incest between the main characters in both novels, which incestuous relationship as a theme is used by both authors to illustrate several ideas. The characters of *Pierre* and *Ada* are metaphorically grandchildren of the incestuous mythological creatures, Terra (Earth) and dark-blue Coelus (Sky). Heaven and Earth's incestuous marriage is metaphorically inherent in *Pierre* (the protagonist of *Pierre*), Van, and Ada (protagonists of *Ada*), and through symbolic parallels in all human beings: *Pierre*'s long-standing battle between Earth and Heaven, i.e. horological (terrestrial) and chronometrical (celestial) thinking is parallel to the unfolding entrapment between Free Will and Fate in *Ada* through the introduction of the "third co-ordinate," the other incestuous son of Terra: Cronos (Time).

The collection closes with a sort of self-reflexive note: a piece on the future of literary studies and on modern-day rhetorics; which both allow one to draw interesting conclusions. Anton Pokrivčák wonders what has become of literary studies, what are its chances of survival and what, in the end, is its function. That is an interesting and compelling question to ask, at least for us who are directly involved in it. After

reading this collection of literary essays I am not sure about the answer. I am sure about one thing though: we have to ask these questions more often. The essays are good craftwork – apart from some printing and grammatical/syntactic mistakes; however, many of them left me wanting a deeper insight or a more compelling problem-proposal, *Ambiguity* offers an endless range of opportunities for interpretation but as noted by the authors of the collection themselves, the investigation of ambiguity might be an endless task (talk?), which also means that the topic might be quite vague for an essay, and, especially, for a whole collection of essays. Pokrivčák is anxious to see cultural studies taking over literary studies, and he brings up “usefulness” as one of the main arguments of those who push cultural studies to the front. Although I definitely disagree with the notion of literature having to serve some purpose, I do think that literary studies have to have *some* effectiveness. According to Pokrivčák, among many possible answers to the question “what does literature communicate?” “in a post-relativistic and, hopefully, post-ideological literary criticism, the natural ones may be those which would re-connect the meaning of literary work to human universals.” More particularly, such an answer can be found in Dickinson’s poetry – “the sense of pleasure and beauty, which is also the sense of truth and knowledge, the enrichment of our being” (223).

The final essay of this book presents the rhetorical use of the ambiguous, in President Barack Obama’s speech as an example of a great contemporary rhetorician. Ann Dobyns analyzes how Obama uses the ambiguous in his speech on racial issues as a tool to unpack and negotiate differences and understand their complexity, and then eventually trigger ethical judgement as well as action in his audience. I think this is a perfect ending to this collection: at the end of the day, after a literary journey, ambiguity must come down to a better or worse, hopefully ethical “judgement about how to live in the world together” (241).

Zsuzsanna Czifra

Fantastic Liminality

Sándor Klapcsik, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012)

There is an abundance of essays, studies and books on science fiction, fantasy and detective novels. The poststructuralist approach applied to analyze contemporary cultural phenomena, especially literature, is one of the favorites used to gain insight into the workings and mechanisms of present-day works of art, as well. Agatha Christie, Stanislav Lem, Neil Gaiman and Philip K. Dick are also among those popular writers whose works have been extensively interpreted and theorized about. Sándor Klapcsik’s

Liminality in Fantastic Fiction is breaking new ground when it synthesizes the three areas and scrutinizes the versatile works of these four authors from the perspective of liminality. The book “intends to serve as an introduction to liminality in postmodern culture and fantastic fiction” (5), but it achieves more: the enterprise of investigating liminality from the point of view of poststructuralism ventures into the depth of studying liminality and examining what kind of liminal positions open up in fantastic fiction (detective fiction, fantasy, and a selection of different subgenres of science fiction, for example cyberpunk or alternative histories).

Liminality is the axis around which the four chapters of the book rotate. Agatha Christie’s detective stories are dissected from the point of view of certain spatial and thematic forms of liminality that might appear covert at first sight. The chapter demonstrates that the detective is a liminal figure, who represents a constantly fluctuating movement between the margins and the center of the society, since cultural traditions and hierarchical binaries of social structures are of ambivalent nature. This ambivalence is enhanced by the rationality of the detective story, since the figure of the detective is the representative of Enlightenment rationalism, therefore any criminal case is a puzzle to be solved so that the original, pristine order of the world could be restored. Nevertheless, according to Klapcsik, Agatha Christie’s detective fiction hovers

around both this rationality and the irrationality of thematic and narrative deviations. Fantastic (Gothic) elements appear in *The Thirteen Problems*, “A Christmas Tragedy,” “The Bloodstained Pavement” or “The Idol House Astarte.” In those novels where the head of the family is murdered (*Crooked House*, *Ordeal by Innocence*), the transitional period is informed by a Bakhtinian carnivalesque, and the emergent, new social order is dependent on the detective’s successful investigation. The argument successfully proves that Christie’s detective fiction, similar to other detective stories, corresponds to Victor Turner’s oft-quoted theory on the temporary and re-constitutive characteristics of liminality. The liminal chaos of cultural, social and hierarchical positions is reinstated by actions taking place in liminal periods (the duration of the investigation) and usually in liminal spaces such as trains (*Murder on the Orient Express* or *4.50 from Paddington*). In addition, Christie’s detective novel is characterized by an abstract chronotope: the texts hinge on a never-changing, abstract space-time structure, since neither Miss Marple nor Poirot change in character throughout the span of Christie’s published stories. The liminality of narration is made apparent in narrative transgressions or “narrative games,” misleading focalization, and metafiction. Klapcsik aptly argues that Christie’s or her fictional writer-ego’s self-reflexive presence in the text (*The Body in the Library* or *The Murder of*

Roger Ackroyd) subvert the traditional thematic and narrative boundaries of detective fiction.

If the first chapter explores how conventional detective stories might resonate with fantastic themes of such genres as horror, fantasy and science fiction, the second chapter of the book examines Neil Gaiman's fiction mainly from the vantage points of generic, narrative and thematic liminality. Gaiman's texts are heavily laden with intertextual allusions and stylistic bricolage, therefore they provide an excellent ground for the argument to find evidence of how Gaiman's writings transgress generic, narrative and thematic boundaries and how they oscillate between various genres. In order to analyze these transgressions, the argument leans on the fantasy concepts of J.R.R. Tolkien and Tzvetan Todorov, among others. As the chapter finds these fantasy theories inadequate to describe the liminality in Gaiman's fiction, it turns to Linda Hutcheon's reading of irony and parody, Mieke Bal's studies of vision and Wolfgang Iser's reader response criticism. The analysis mainly focuses on Gaiman's short stories. *Anansi Boys*, *Neverwhere* and *The Graveyard Book* exemplify that plural narrative perspectives result in subjectivized narratives and estranged fantasy, liminal fantasy, where "the fantastic is no longer interpreted as a realm different and distant from consensus reality" (57). "Murder Mysteries," on the other hand, divert from the conventions of Farah Mendlesohn's concept

of portal-quest fantasy and the embedded narration technique characterizing Club stories, as the narrative crosses the ontological boundaries between the two different levels of narration. Therefore the argument maintains and underlines Brian McHale's frequently referenced notion of the ontological aspect of postmodern fiction. Klapcsik elucidates the consistent intertextuality in Gaiman's stories with Genette's – rather outdated – version of hypertextuality and draws the conclusion that the dependence of texts on one another is primarily based on imitation in the texts. This issue of imitation is justly raised – for example "Shoggoth's Old Peculiar" is a "pseudo-Lovecraftian text" that revisits Lovecraftian themes and style – but simulation, which would be a much more sufficient theory (regardless of whether it is based on Deleuze's or Baudrillard's version) is not put into motion here. In contrast to this, Iser's idea of the textual gaps filled in by the reader and Paul deMan's concept of self-reflexive irony (permanent parabasis) are outstandingly well used in showing that Gaiman's liminal fantasy "lays bare its own fictionalizing process and subverts its fictional, fantastic world" (58).

The third chapter proposes that Stanislaw Lem's fiction is a medley of science fiction and detective fiction elements, where the epistemological puzzles, among other things, provide a basis for the ontological aspects: Lem's novels subvert the limits of both science and science fiction, therefore they (especially

Solaris) need to be labeled as meta-science and meta-science-fiction, respectively. The argument also concentrates on a Lacanian version of mirroring, as the mirrored subject in the alien planets is reflected with “a difference, refraction, oscillation, a rupturing surprise” that is termed the *revenge* of the mirror. The logic of the chapter, similar to the other chapters of the book, follows a well-defined deconstructive trait informed by deMan’s (*Allegories of Reading*) and Nietzsche’s (*Human, All Too Human*) concepts of the reversal of cause and effect, where the cause is the result of the reconstruction of what happened after the event had an effect on the environment: this argument is used to illustrate how Lem’s fiction drifts towards a liminal space between detective fiction and science fiction. In the technologized environment, the detectives, Pirx or Ijon Tichy investigate cases involving malfunctioning robots, hiding aliens or androids. Although the chapter focuses on “the inability to judge whether one encounters the real or a simulated image, original or replica, Self and the Other” (118) most of the cutting-edge postmodern theories (mask-theory, simulation, virtuality, avatars) remain more or less inarticulated. The metaphoric nature of language, on the other hand, is expressed and assessed to a great extent, and it is convincingly argued that Lem’s works often self-reflexively parody (or mirror) themselves and the genre, therefore these stories might be taken to be satirical

science fiction parodies or self-parodies. As the chapter is founded on the argument that Lem’s works are the result of a linguistically conscious and self-reflexive effort, the question is raised whether the close-reading of these texts is hindered by the fact that Klapcsik reads them in translation.

The first three chapters designate a line leading to the probably best formulated and articulated fourth chapter on the interpretation of Philip K. Dick’s stories from the point of view of “urbanity, liminality, multiplicity” (121). After an impressive introduction into paraspace, cyberspace and spatial hybridity based on the notions of Homi Bhabha, Scott Bukatman and Elizabeth Grosz, the liminal spatiality of some of Dick’s novels is examined on the basis of the difference and oscillation between modernist planning and postmodernist play in urban architectural spaces. The book argues that the clear-cut modernist boundaries and pre-negotiated spaces based on centrality are replaced by de-centered, constantly changing, asymmetrical and unmappable space. “Post-modernism is constituted in cyberspace,” a quote from Paul Smethurst – via many other influential critics, for example Marshall McLuhan’s, Charles Jencks’s and the obligatory notions of Frederic Jameson – introduces virtuality by which the chapter argues that some of Dick’s stories (“The Commuter,” *Ubik*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, “The Minority Report”) are set in such places/spaces, in which

the conventional, modernist ways of moving around (corporeal journey) are coupled with the postmodern, digital space of speedy flows, flux, the oscillation of commutation. The subchapter on “cyberworlds and simulacra” studies the liminal and plural nature of cyber- and paraspaces of *A Maze of Death*, *Ubik*, “I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon,” or *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Although the argument seems to mingle different notions of simulation, it manages to reveal how Dick’s multiple worlds resemble and anticipate the contemporary cyberspace of digital networks based on simulacra.

In sum, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction* is a well-written, thoughtful and focused book rich in interpretations and

close readings of canonic texts written by the probably most important authors of the genre. Nevertheless, the advantages of concentrating on the notion of liminality in fantastic fiction from a poststructuralist point of view have their own drawbacks. Liminality is a term that has too many definitions; the concept have been assessed from countless different points of view, and as the “Preface” and the “Introduction” demonstrate, the term itself has become a liminal, transgressive, border-crossing, in-between, elusive concept that is very hard to put into motion and use for specific reading purposes.

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