

ESZTER KRAKKÓ

Győri Zsolt and Gabriella Moise, ed. Travelling around Cultures: Collected Essays on Literature and Art. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. xii + 280 pages. ISBN 9781443809962. Hb. £52.99.

Review

Pro&Contra

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Introduction

Although the subtitle humbly suggests that this volume is a “mere” collection of essays, on reading the book, one immediately notices that it undertakes a challenge of thematic coherence that exceeds the usual aims and scope of “regular” conference proceedings – and meets this self-imposed requirement perfectly. The common denominator that connects the individual essays and the various chapters alike is the theme of *journey*. As co-editors Zsolt Győri and Gabriella Moise (both affiliated with the University of Debrecen, Hungary) claim, the chapters of the volume undertake “a temporal and/or spatial journey – already hinted at in the title – crossing historical and geographical borders but reaching beyond the frontier between them, as well as linking classical literary studies with a culturally sensitive approach” (10). But what makes this journey *Central European* and one in *English and American Studies*? The answer to both questions lies in the “publication history” of the book: its idea was conceived during the 12th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE), which was organized by the University of Debrecen in January 2015.

HUSSE, founded in 1993, serves as the umbrella association for those Hungarian scholars whose fields of interest lie within the scope of English and American Studies in the broadest sense (although there also exists a Hungarian Association for American Studies – HAAS, functioning independently from HUSSE), gathering established and internationally renowned professors, junior scholars, as well as doctoral students. Currently, it has almost two hundred members, all of whom are automatically members of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) as well and thus, belong also to a larger, international community of scholars devoted to a more thorough understanding and the advancement of English Studies in Europe (more information is available at www.husse-esse.hu). Traditionally, HUSSE Conferences are major international events dedicated to the celebration and promotion of English and American Studies within the borders of Hungary and beyond, with presenters from several European countries and even from overseas. The 2015 Conference was no exception either: linguists, historians and scholars of literature and of cultural studies, representing countries from Spain and Poland to South Korea, gathered to present the results of their scholarly research and to initiate and participate in intellectual dialogues.

There was, however, a radical diversion from the tradition of previous Conferences in the sense that instead of adhering to the customs and preparing one gigantic volume of conference proceedings that one would only reluctantly take off the shelf, the organizers (rather sensibly) decided to publish several smaller, but thematically more coherent collections of essays – the present volume is one of them. As the co-editors state

right at the beginning of their complex and insightful Introduction (which serves also as Chapter One), the idea of bringing together the concept of journey and that of artistic accomplishment came quite naturally, since “[a]rt shares a lot in common with traveling as the artist, in the quest for heightened experience, often finds himself or herself on unfamiliar terrain following signs, in search of causes, recognizing hidden correlations, and [...] exploring the human sphere” (1). But embarking on an intellectual journey is by no means the privilege of the artist. According to Győri and Moise, as “[t]he experience of traveling is hardly ever grounded in perceptions of distances covered but in networks of conscious and unconscious associations” (1), so are the readers and audiences invited by artists (including authors) either consciously or unconsciously to take part in the creative process (or processes of creation) and “to consider the often invisible mechanisms at work in social systems, be they gender, class, or ethnic conflicts, stereotypes, and cultural discourses that solidify hegemonies” (1).

One finds that references to the mechanisms mentioned above are also present in the thematic arrangement of the essays (each of which makes up an individual chapter); furthermore, this arrangement is carefully, as well as creatively combined with spatial, social and temporal metaphors of travelling that are represented in the titles of the main parts. In this manner, cultural and social discourses, together with the social constraints that possibly frame the route of the text from authors to readers (who, in turn, may become authors themselves) come to the forefront in the four essays comprising Part I entitled “Censorship, Readership, Fanfiction.” Conversely, (re)visiting the (in)glorious past constitutes the central theme of the four texts belonging to Part II, “Traversing Victorian Culture.” In the two essays of “Her Ways” (Part III), past and present questions of gender (politics) are interpreted through the lens of Post-Modernism and popular culture. In “Lyrical Wanderings” (Part IV), another two texts provide analyses of selected poems and a poetic oeuvre from the perspective of memory politics and (gay) identity construction. Finally, the four essays of Part V, bearing the title “Intermedial and Interartistic Journeys,” examine images and visual practices that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of past and present cultural discourses.

This list is already convincing enough, but one should also note that the interrelatedness of the individual chapters, which are to be mentioned later in detail, extends the constraints of this classification. For instance, Andrea Kirchknopf’s essay on recent TV adaptations of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes-stories, which is included in “Her Ways,” could just as well be part of the “Traversing Victorian Culture” section. Conversely, the chapter on the subversion of Victorian ideals of femininity in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Rudolf Nyári (in “Traversing Victorian Culture”) or Nóra Séllei’s “Whose Cup of Tea? Katherine Mansfield in Post-1956 Hungary” and Judit

Kónyi's "Emily Dickinson and Her Readers" (presently both in "Censorship, Readership, Fanfiction"), as texts dealing with idea(l)s and idols of feminism, could easily find their places in "Her Ways." The editors also reflect on this multifarious nature of the essays and point out their ability to offer resistance to the arbitrariness of any kind of classification (an inevitable imperative of any compilation of contributions by multiple authors) by stating that the themes "tackled by the authors of the present volume are pieces of a puzzle to be assembled by the prospective reader" (10). One could extend the puzzle-metaphor and say that the texts resemble pieces of a mosaic or snapshots taken on a journey, which then one can either contemplate separately or assemble into collections or montages of variable elements, thus attributing them with new meanings.

Another shared characteristic feature of the essays is their ability to stand in their own right. According to the editors, the "[i]ndividual chapters [...] have lives of their own and serve as plausible illustrations of how texts [...] can be explored as products or critical reflections of cultures" (10). This claim is also supported by the editors' rather unusual decision not to present the essays in the introductory chapter in the order according to which they are arranged in the volume but rather, offer another possible chain of thought (out of the many) on which they can be strung. In the same manner, Győri and Moise characterize the leading theoretical approach of the volume as "culturally sensitive." This critical approach, in the wake of Michel Foucault, entails "explorations into the dynamics of power which have their resonances in the artistic and cultural artefacts and styles of various eras" (1); a perspective that provides a common theoretical background for the texts represented.

The intellectual journey, for which the point of departure was provided by the Introduction, reaches its first point of junction with the essays grouped under the title "Censorship, Readership, Fanfiction." In the opening essay, Nóra Séllei aptly demonstrates how, "[d]ue to the changes in the dominant aesthetic values, the framing and conceptualization of oeuvres and authors can also fluctuate" (12) through an insightful and informative interpretation of Katherine Mansfield's changing reception in post-1956 Hungary. This is followed by Judit Kónyi's elaborate study on a segment of Emily Dickinson's poetry, aiming "to discuss the reader's role in the process of interpreting Dickinson's poems and the poet's expectations of her audience" (31). Following the two case studies on established figures of Anglo-American literature, Larisa Kocic-Zámbó's theoretically well grounded, as well as highly engaging "Resounding Words: Fan Fiction and the Pleasure of Adaptation" focuses on the relatively undervalued, yet rapidly emerging field of fan fiction studies, which she discusses from the pertinent but largely unexplored aspect of "the repetitive nature of fan fiction plotlines" (53). Part I concludes with "British Novelists on Censorship: A Historical Approach" by Alberto Lázaro, who elaborates on the

repressive nature of censorship and on how authors have (un)successfully fought against it from Jonathan Swift to the present day.

Artistic practices of the Victorian period and their Post-Modern interpretations come to the forefront in the texts belonging to the theme “Traversing Victorian Culture.” Balázs Keresztes explores how the artistic oeuvre of 19th-century author and craftsman-archeologist William Morris can be re-evaluated through considering how “the interlacement of architecture and book design” (85) contributed to his views about the ideal relationship between “design and craft” (98). Eszter Ureczky presents a much bleaker picture of the Victorian era in her insightful analysis of Matthew Kneale’s 1992 neo-Victorian novel, *Sweet Thames*, “the fictional recreation of the devastating 1849 London cholera epidemic” (103). In “Cultural Subversiveness in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*,” which is yet another example of an effective close reading, Rudolf Nyári investigates the potentials a fatherless Victorian household with an empowered female figure entails – nothing but grim prospects. The Victorian cycle becomes complete with Božena Kucala’s “The Myth of Paradise in Graham Swift’s *Ever After*” (published in 1992), which she reads as “a secularized version of the overarching grand narrative of the loss of paradise” (133).

Both “Her Ways” and “Lyrical Wanderings” present two essays with shared thematic foci. The underlying theoretical background for the first pair of texts is provided by feminism and Gender Studies. Dóra Vecsernyés addresses in “Voicing Silence: Music and Language in Janice Galloway’s *Clara*” how, even though via “the indirect mode of the narrative itself” (180), contemporary Scottish writer Galloway still manages to give “voice to the often suppressed and forgotten female genius of Clara Schumann” (165), while Andrea Kirchknopf narrates a much bleaker story when picking a BBC and a Russian serialization of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes-stories for a parallel analysis. Her overall conclusion is that “Irene Adler’s character becomes increasingly flat in the two adaptations” (159) due to the “consolidation of conventional gender boundaries strengthening patriarchy” (161); but these are not, as one would think, the boundaries of the 19th century, but those of today. Similarly, István Rácz’s “Experience in Thom Gunn” focuses on a by-and-large marginalized figure when choosing to reflect on the elegies of excellent 20th-century gay poet Thom Gunn, while Kristóf Kiss provides insight into the workings of memory in yet another parallel analysis: that of a poem by W. B. Yeats and of another one by William Wordsworth.

In Part V, entitled “Intermedial and Interartistic Journeys,” each text emphasizes “the critical relation that exists between artistic practices and the social reality in which they take place” (8) from the Middle Ages until the present. For instance, Zita Turi deals with instances of (at times commercialized) re-enactment of “Medieval and Early Modern Pageantry in Contemporary British Culture,” while Efterpi Mitsi analyzes early 19th-cen-

ture British travel writing as a manifestation of “colonial identity politics” (4). Perhaps it is not by chance, and it shows yet another sign of thoughtfulness on the editors’ part that the last two essays of the volume take the reader back to its opening with addressing questions of text, authorship and readership either through interpreting “Novelization as ‘image X text’” (Emma Bálint) or through investigating texts in which “visual elements interrupt the narrative and the reading process” (259) and therefore, they create moments of “connection between reader, character and author” (274), in other words, involvement (Eszter Szép).

Providing a circular structure of interpretations, however, does not mean that the compilation closes up the possibility of future interpretations. On the contrary, it invites its readers, let them be established scholars or only novices in the field of English and American Studies, to follow the route paved by the close readings in/of literary and cultural studies it provides and to embark on new intercultural journeys, opening up new vistas and exploring into yet unvisited terrains – this book will serve as a perfect itinerary along the way. A perfect itinerary that has two limitations as a scholarly volume: including an Index at the end would help those having special scholarly interests (a minor limitation), while listing the contributors according to their surnames instead of their first names would facilitate finding more information about them (a diminutive one). These minute things not considered, the compilation aptly fulfils the role it was destined for and “illustrates the diversity of cultural products and phenomena while bringing to view the way texts emerge, engage with real life, and become consumed” and at times also “commodified” (10). Perhaps the editors agree with the hope that this excellently edited volume of cutting-edge scholarship will be consumed by many but never commodified.

