

## The Figure in the Carpet

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Győri, Zsolt, and Gabriella Moise, eds. *Travelling around Cultures: Collected Essays on Literature and Art*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016. xii + 279 pages. ISBN 978-1-4438-0996-2. Hb. £52.99.

With its photograph of the sinuous, alternate black and white lines of a cobbled Lisbon pavement, which meander snake-like across its surface, the cover of this volume is an invitation to readers to avoid the straight line, and travel among these essays according to their own fancies. The volume itself, which partly incorporates articles based on papers given at the 2015 HUSSE (Hungarian Society for the Study of English) Conference, offers a very rich and varied fare, ranging from issues of reception, censorship, and fan fiction, to Victorian culture, gender studies, poetry, and intermediality. It looks like a variegated oriental carpet the complexity of which baffles the eye and leads one to wonder whether there is a figure in it. The best way to go about reading this collection is, therefore, to heed the sound piece of advice given by its editors, Zsolt Győri and Gabriella Moise: “The topics tackled by the authors of the present volume are pieces of a puzzle to be assembled by the prospective reader” (10).

The onus thus placed on the reader announces what turns out to be a major theme in the volume: the way in which processes of reception contribute to the construction of meaning. This theme is first explored by Nóra Séllei (“Whose Cup of Tea? Katherine Mansfield in post-1956 Hungary,” 12-30), whose study of the editorial history of Mansfield in post-1956 Hungary makes for a fascinating read. Successive editions of her works say at least as much, if not more, about the Hungarian ideological climate of the time as they do about Mansfield herself. Séllei is quite clear that “[t]exts—or even authors in the Foucauldian sense of the word—do not exist *per se*” (12); they undergo a process of acclimatization, turning the unfamiliar other into something familiar, such as a “Hungarian Mansfield” (15).

Despite the difference in focus between their pieces, what connects Séllei’s article and the next one by Judit Kónyi (“Emily Dickinson and her Readers,” 31-52), is the shared premise that authors and their texts do not exist on their own. Kónyi’s article is a wonderful study of the interconnectedness between the editorial history of Dickinson’s poetry, and the readers’ responses to the poems, from the initial stage, when Dickinson’s poetry was heavily edited to suit “public standards” (35), to the most recent

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one, in which the poems are published, so to speak, in the raw, in the form of “facsimile reproductions” (35).

The issue of authorship is next taken up in Larisa Kocic-Zámbó’s article (“Resounding Words: Fan Fiction and the Pleasure of Adaptation,” 53-69). In this dazzling piece, which combines erudite reference to the ancient practice of *imitatio* with state-of-the-art expertise in the field of fan fiction studies, Kocic-Zámbó challenges the notion of the author as a supremely gifted, isolated individual. She argues instead that creation is a process involving “a collective participatory involvement” (63), as is precisely the case in fan fiction.

In “British Novelists on Censorship: A Historical Approach” (70-82), Alberto Lázaro draws our attention to a character whose influence on the shaping and reception of books is central: that of the censor. The originality of Lázaro’s approach is that he does not address censorship as such, but rather the responses of writers to censorship across an extensive period of time, from Jonathan Swift to Salman Rushdie. Their common concern was to manage to publish all the same, through a variety of strategies Lázaro skillfully explores.

Balázs Keresztes’s “Designing History, Crafting the Everyday: Architecture and Book Design in William Morris” (84-100), again, tackles the issue of authorship, in its widest possible sense. This piece proceeds from Morris’s contention that books and buildings have much more in common than is commonly assumed. In the pre-industrial age, a myriad of artisans and craftsmen were necessary to produce a building, such as a cathedral, or a book, which, again, belies the traditional notion of the author, or designer, as an isolated figure.

For its part, Eszter Ureczky’s paper (“Cleanliness as Godliness: Cholera and Victorian Spaces of Filth in Matthew Kneale’s *Sweet Thames*,” 101-17) provides a vivid and cogent exploration of the overarching theme of the entire book, that is, “travelling around cultures.” It focuses on a contemporary novel (1992), depicting an outbreak of cholera in nineteenth-century London. Ureczky convincingly shows that cholera functions in the book as a protean metaphor of filth and contamination that straddles cultural fields as diverse as economics, medical issues, sexual politics, and the effect of imperial domination on the metropolis.

In “Cultural Subversiveness in Charles Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop*” (118-31), Rudolf Nyári analyzes the subversive inversion of expected roles between grandfather and granddaughter, as the old man becomes his own granddaughter’s child. An underlying theme is that of the constraints that drastically curtail authorial freedom: even Dickens is led to comply with

Victorian standards of propriety as, ultimately, Little Nell has to die. The constraints of the time and place in which books are produced and published remain inescapable.

Božena Kucala's "The Myth of Paradise in Graham Swift's *Ever After*" (132-43) deals with the topic of religion in Swift's fiction. Unlikely as this may sound, Swift's *oeuvre* can be construed in terms of the secularization of an overarching narrative, the story of the Fall, and the loss of paradise (133). Authors are not the only originators of what they write; the ghostly presence of grand (meta)narratives is always there to haunt their fiction.

Another form of travelling around, or, rather, between cultures, is explored in Andrea Kirchknopf's piece ("A Scandal in Bohemia' to 'Clowns': The Decreasing Power of Irene Adler in TV Adaptations of *Sherlock Holmes*," 146-63). The travelling is between the culture of the written text, and that of television, with particular reference to two recent TV adaptations of the same *Sherlock Holmes* story (one British, the other Russian). Kirchknopf shows that the codes of TV series have a distorting effect on the codes of literature, leading to significant alterations in the production of meaning. Contrary to expectation, the character of Irene Adler was given a far greater degree of autonomy in the original, nineteenth-century story, while her agency is drastically curtailed in the twenty-first-century TV series. This makes for a depressing read, as these adaptations contribute to the "(re)establishment and consolidation of conventional gender boundaries strengthening patriarchy" (161).

Not unlike the piece by Ureczky, Dóra Vecsernyés's "Voicing Silence: Music and Language in Janice Galloway's *Clara*" (164-81) is about revisiting the nineteenth century through the prism of twenty-first-century fiction. The focus is on the figure of Clara Schumann, the long-suffering wife of composer Robert Schumann, whose own precocious musical talent was left to run to seed when she became a wife and mother of eight. The journey is not only between fact and fiction, but also between different modalities of the aural experience—language, music, even silence—which are all central to the novel.

Kristóf Kiss's "'Those Shadowy Recollections': The Role of Children and Recollection in W. B. Yeats's 'Among Schoolchildren' and William Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode'" (184-97) provides an illuminating comparison between two of the most famous poems of their respective authors. This is a well-argued piece, built on a close reading of the two poems, whose echoes and dissonances are explored in detail and with great subtlety: an alert reader is another name for a discerning critic.

"Experience in Thom Gunn" (198-210), by István D. Rácz, tells the story of a journey, as Thom Gunn is shown to have travelled from one identity

to another. Beginning as a Movement poet, Gunn embarked on a journey of self-discovery, which led him, decades later, to recast himself as a gay poet. Yet, this linear account is belied by Rácz's subtle analysis of Gunn's poetry: even in his Movement days, a gay subtext was present in such poems as "On the Move." What, again, connects this piece with others in the volume is the demonstration that the meaning of a given text is dependent on the kind of "interpretive community" (202) one belongs to.

Zita Turi's "Medieval and Early Modern Pageantry in Contemporary British Culture" (212-27) provides a remarkable account of the secularization of pageantry, in various forms, in the twenty-first century. The focus is on three contemporary performances, all staged in 2012, of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Damon Albarn's opera, *Dr. Dee*, and the pageant of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, directed by British film director Danny Boyle. These three events elicit responses that give them a ritualistic flavor. The article explores the connections between these modern productions and their forebears, with the decisive twist that what used to be Christian ceremonies have now become secular.

In "The Caryatid and the Collector: British Travel Writing and the Material Past in Early Nineteenth-Century Athens" (228-44), Efterpi Mitzi describes what, for once, can be properly called a defining moment for the "construction of national and cultural identities" (229). Mitzi's paper gives a fascinating insight into the mind of Mary Nisbet, Countess of Elgin, whose letters tell a tale not of a grand project to save masterpieces from destruction, but of crass, unadulterated greed, reflecting a craving for the "symbolic capital" (231) the Parthenon marbles represented. This is a case of travelling between conflicting cultures, the imperial powers of Britain, Turkey, and France, and that of the hapless Greeks, who could not prevent the plunder from taking place.

Emma Bálint's paper ("Novelization as 'Image X Text,'" 245-58) belongs to the ever-expanding field of intermedial studies. It addresses the contemporary process of novelization, by which films are transposed into the medium of novelistic prose; as such, it can be read as a companion piece to Kirchknopf's paper on the *Sherlock Holmes* adaptations, as it considers the opposite process of turning images into text—in this case, the novelization of *Red Riding Hood* (2011), the movie, into a novel by the same title.

"Touchy Issues: Visual Elements, Tactility, and Vulnerability in Postmodern Literature and Comics," (259-79), by Eszter Szép, is another take on the issue of intermediality, focusing on the very special cases in which "visual elements interrupt the narrative and the reading process" (259). An added dimension is the way in which the sense of touch is called forth by the

images, leading to a sense of vulnerability that gives a peculiar edge to the works under discussion: two works of fiction (Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* [1989] and W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* [2002]), and a graphic novel (Miriam Katin, *Letting it Go* [2013]). The engagement with the body that is implied in these works is a departure from the view that exploring texts is an activity of the mind, thereby enriching our approach of what it means to be a reader.

Once the book is closed, its reader realizes that all the pieces of the puzzle, indeed, click into place: beyond the obvious differences in the topics addressed, the overall unity of the volume is provided by the multifaceted exploration of the dialectics between authorship and readership, in all their forms. As was also suggested by the cover of the volume, there is no direct, straight line between the author and the reader, but rather a long, tortuous route, along which various transactions take place. Yes, there is a figure in the carpet after all.

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