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BOOK REVIEW

Bru, Sascha; Bruyn, Ben De; Delville, Michel (eds.), *Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 310 pp. ISBN 978-0-7486-9925-4. 19.98 £. Hardcover 80 £.

Literature Now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History. Notes on Contributors Introduction. 1. Archive. 2. Book. 3. Medium. 4. Translation. 5. Subjects. 6. Senses. 7. Animals. 8. Objects. 9. Politics. 10. Time. 11. Invention. 12. Event. 13. Generation. 14. Period. 15. Beauty. 16. Mimesis. 17. Style. 18. Popular. 19. Genre. Notes. Index.

When entering the world of academia and theory, we learn how words seldom have a single, historically steady meaning, so there is no such thing as a common sense of said words. Now and again it becomes inevitable to get reacquainted with the polysemy of “modernity’s contested lexicon” (as David Glover puts it in his contribution for this volume, on page 238), words that act out as “anti-concepts”, in the coinage of Irving Velody, “which can fruitfully generate the envisioning and revisioning of the world that the human sciences engages with” (“The archive and the human sciences: notes towards a theory of the archive”, in *History of the Human Sciences* Vol. 11, no 4, 1998, pp. 12).

It should come as no surprise also that academic disciplines go through regular changes of heart that may or may not be seen as “crisis”, “revolutions” (in its Kuhnian sense) or, in contemporary parlance, “turns”. Quite often, these shifts take the shape of dialectic movements of going back and forth in relationship to certain forces or notions. “History” is one such notion. *Literature Now* aims to become a reference book which discusses the origins, conceptual specificities and scope of applicability of some of the most important keywords being enacted today within the humanities, but from the particular perspective of the study of literature

after the “historical turn”. While the editors argue that the circumference of action of these terms is transdisciplinary, they do push forward the idea that this is still the breeding ground for them: “More than ever, the history of literature is the place when new methods originate, are tested and find their ultimate application” (“Introduction”, pg. 1). The terms themselves, moreover, go through historical development as well, so that *Literature Now* is “not a dictionary with unambiguous and transhistorical definitions, but an open-ended toolbox of vital concepts and transversal methodologies that may guide critical thinking more effectively by exploring the complex meanings and histories of these terms.” (3)

The book is organized in four sections or parts, from the most material to the most immaterial: 1. Channels, 2. Subjects/Objects, 3. Temporalities and 4. Aesthetics. The first section emerges from the notion that “literature never happens in a vacuum” (4), so that much attention is paid to the material forms that make possible the knowledge of literature across time and space, as well as across languages and even specialization. The analyzed key terms are “Archive” (Ed Folsom), “Book” (Sydney J. Shep), “Medium” (Julian Murphet) and “Translation” (Thomas O. Beebee). The ever-growing decentering of normative identities and even of human perspectives informs the section on Subjects and Objects, discussing just what and how literature addresses conscience, subjecthood and autonomy: what follows are the terms “Subjects” (Ortwin de Graef), “Senses” (Michel Delville), “Animals” (Carrie Rohman), “Objects” (Timothy Morton) and “Politics” (David Ayers). By Temporalities the editors mean “the ways in which humans feel about this accumulation [chronological measures] of

existential moments” (13), so the terms that are brought up here create a framework to understand the interrelations of time and literature from the fundamental basis that preside the literary act – “Time” (Tyrus Miller), “Invention” (Jed Rasula) and “Event” (Scott McCracken) – as well as its scale – “Generation” (Julian Hanna) and “Period” (Ben De Bruyn). At last, we reach the realm of aesthetic value judgment, returning to words that have had an immense history in the study of literature, but which are in constant need of being rethought and re-invigorated every step of the way: “Beauty” (Sascha Bru), “Mimesis” (Thomas G. Pavel), “Style” (Sarah Posman), “Popular” (David Glover) and “Genre” (Jonathan Monroe).

In most of the chapters we will come across another of the terms analyzed elsewhere in the book, which not only creates a crisscross motif or network as it shows in an engaging way the key importance of all chosen terms. The same holds true for some content or theoretical engagement. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* shows up in “Archive” and “Style”. Hegel’s philosophy of history stars prominently in “Politics” but is also discussed in “Senses” and “Style”. *Style* will lead to *Medium*, *Medium* to *Senses*, *Popular* necessarily runs into *Genre*, and most are open to the abstract, disembodied notion of *text*, which paradoxically leads to aspects of materiality. The editors are aware that many other words could have been chosen, and they have come up with a choice that leans more towards contemporary concerns, which is but yet another proof that History is always being revised not only in its lessons but also its very conditions of possibility. Therefore, despite the absence of this particular keyword - “materiality” - it does act as a sort of “hidden” term throughout. “Like paper

and type, each physical feature of a book shapes the reading experience and constitutes a kind of material thinking that impacts the processing of information” (Shep, 41-42). Whether dealing with digital archiving, the human senses or forms of popular genres, there is always already an issue of materiality presiding over the interaction with the text.

The book’s main concern, subject matters or corpora all come together undoubtedly in literary history. The editors and authors do not argue that all the concepts find their origins in the literary province (in fact they argue against insularity) but they do present literature as the core for the concepts’ test-drive, and most of the examples are quite canonical. Consequently, and as Murphet puts it, “the literary master signifier” still reigns in the pages over all other “signifying practices” (49). But if the editors never promised this book to be about anything else than literary history, arguing then that certain notions are not expanded enough towards other fields is uncalled for. Nonetheless, when discussing the archive, for example, practices such as tumblr or instagram, which are not addressed, would create a new venue for theoretical thinking not only about literature proper or text, but also the constructedness of identity, the redistribution of the senses, and true interdisciplinarity, and so on. That is the point of theory, after all: to reach an upward level of abstraction and subsequent applicability, avoiding excessive specialization. Some authors do indeed engage with other media, and show how literary history insights lead to influential work in other fields. After all, Michel Delville is the author of *Crossroad Poetics*. But others less so, so it befalls on the reader to see how far she can take those insights to other levels and/or fields. Jonathan

Monroe, for instance, opens a salvo: “In the digital era’s all-inclusive discursive environment, what counts as ‘genre’ or ‘discourse’ must be understood to include an endless production, circulation and relay of visual, sonic and other non- and more-than verbal as well as verbal material, the whole range of what digital media makes almost effortlessly available” (Genre, 257).

To be precise, there is engagement with some new digital practices and realities in the book, and sometimes cinema or other forms have a role, but very briefly and insufficiently in order to consider a wider “transmedial landscape” or some such notion, and I do believe that the very history of literature has much to gain from such an approach. Nonetheless, some authors do open up such a possibility, looking at both historical examples (once again, the many editions of *Leaves of Grass* is a prime example) and current practices, inviting researchers to expand their tools and methods as well: “Since books are frisky, malleable and promiscuous, literary historians both today and tomorrow must also be nimble, agile and deft” (Shep, 45).

Such a refreshing take of the terms also leads to a reconsideration of the role and constitution of the production of those objects that, for a long time, were seen as hovering above trivial existence. “The emergence of the media in our modern and postmodern sense has fomented a radical materialization of culture *tout court*, and a retroactive sense that all the time-honoured genres and categories that have preserved literature as an autonomous and ‘spiritualised’ exception to the means-end rationality of capitalism have always and already been absorbed into the economics of cultural production, exchange and consumption” (Murphet, 56). If this

seems to decenter literature's privileged spot within the realm of art and culture, it does in fact enliven it as an advantaged site for questionings and method- and tools-improvement. In other words, it brings to the fore the special power of literature as a quasi-universal stage for critical-analytical thought.

Finally, if most of these terms have applicability for the most common practices of close reading of singular works, the authors are very aware of the many scales of reading, engaging with larger systems and analyses of wider corpora, following Moretti's notion of "distant reading" (one other crucial reference quoted transversally across the book).

With so many different authors, from slightly different backgrounds and experiences and generations, each chapter has predictably its own style and approach. Most are written in a dense yet appealing way (Jonathan Monroe's chapter on Genre is startlingly a tad little impenetrable) that will serve as an excellent departure point for students. It does not shy away from heavy duty theory, of course, or with other equally loaded and debatable subjects and terms, but it does provide the reader with the means not only to quickly traverse its specific origin, development history, applicability and open-endedness as it makes clear many of the areas that still warrant further work. Some of the authors engage with their own academic or professional experience in order to deepen the terms they are exposing, as is the case of Ed Folsom (who works at The Walt Whitman Archive), "illustrating", in a way, the immediate concerns and implications of thinking of these notions under these terms. There is always a "Further reading" section at the end of the articles: these mainly quote books (instead of single articles or chapters,

but there are those too) that encompass the basic bibliography of any given concept, but more often than not they also immediately demonstrate the terms' wide-ranging capacity.

Some of the chapters present very clear-cut structures, that start from a basic definition and then problematize it not only through its usage history but also its applicability (e.g., J. Murphet describes medium at the onset as “what, by interposing, prevents *direct* communication between two points but in doing so extends communicability itself – either outward in spatial reach, or inward in temporal durability”; pg.46). Others, however, present a sort of short thesis. David Ayers chapter on “Politics”, for instance, invites a sort of return to Hegel, not where Hegel presented a progressive, detached view of society (an “upwards course”, in Sarah Posman’s concise description, p. 230), and even less so his problematic hierarchy of civilizations and cultures, but rather from what can be described as “an optimism about ethical practice” (Ayers, 133) that informs much of theory today, “even though Hegel has become the principal object of the critique of ‘Western’ thought” (idem). This allows Ayers to deal with the new, contemporary dimensions of the notion, such as new ways of addressing communities (through Nancy) or biopolitics (via Foucault, Agamben and Badiou, but not Esposito).

The editors quote in their introduction, as a model for their endeavor, Raymond Williams’ 1975 *Keywords: A vocabulary of Culture and Society* (which would be updated by *New Keywords*, ed. by Tony Bennett et al. in 2005). *Literature Now*, however, is closer to Frank Lentricchia’s and Thomas McLaughlin’s co-edited collection *Critical Terms for Literary*

Study, which was highly influential throughout the 1990's with undergraduates all over the world. Like *Critical Terms*, *Literature Now* engages with literature as the departing point for the discussing of notions with profound social and philosophical implications. It also engaged with terms that seemed closer to the "literary thing" (*author, figurative language, rhetoric*) but then opened up to wider contexts (*imperialism, gender, ethics, determinacy/indeterminacy*, and so on) with scholars that were already leading names at the time or that would become theory staples (J. Butler, J. Fiske, J. H. Miller, W.J.T. Mitchell, among others). It is quite possible that *Literature Now* may become one of those to-go references used in introductory courses (but not only).

Navigating through the book has its hurdles. Unfortunately, the contemporary eradication of the footnote in academic writing is an unavoidable reality (in my view, a disgrace). Despite all the jargon and celebratory tone around hypertext and multitasking, it seems that the simple task of checking quickly with your eyes the bottom of the page you're reading for bibliographic information is a no-no. Hence, the endnote (which, in the digital realm, is infuriating). In this book, with very few exceptions, endnotes have been indeed reduced to become mere repositories of source information, so that those who love excursus will see that desire denied. Moreover, the endnote section is organized by the number of chapters, while the chapters' pages themselves are headed by the key term and the author's name, which complicates searching the respective note (unless you prepare yourself with double bookmarks). A minor quibble with a major contribution to the field of literary and cultural criticism in general.

Literature Now does provide at one time a first taste of theory that one must engage with in order to enter the world of academia, of constant reevaluation of notions and bodies of work, and already a sophisticated, not always easy effort to dialog with multiple sources, disciplines and regimes of knowledge. In a time where internet access may create the illusion that we have facilitated access to everything (after all, you are reading this on a digital environment you can access anywhere, or you have printed it using digital tools), but hide the fact that we do not have the time to muster sufficient elements and build up personal tools, this book does not pretend to be a one-time pit-stop, but rather a multifaceted tool that invites one to re-read and re-assess critically not only the terms themselves but also the critical take of the author's contributions of the terms. And, surely, for years to come.

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