

Early Modern Literary Studies

Hassan Melehy, *The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). 277pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 6445 1.

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In his far-reaching study, Hassan Melehy emphasizes the importance of inner-literary and intertextual forms of borrowing for the process of poetic innovation and the formation of generic identities. He offers an original contribution to historical scholarship through his analysis of how Renaissance texts related back to (the memory of) antiquity. Having discussed some short-comings of the New Historicist paradigm in the monograph's introduction, in particular its unwillingness to concentrate on literary forms of transfer, Melehy convincingly demonstrates in the subsequent chapters that reading culturally and historically distant texts frequently requires extensive knowledge of other contemporary literary works to add to the kind of historical, political, or economical contextualization that has become so fashionable.

The first section of the book, consisting like all its four parts of three chapters, focuses on how Joachim Du Bellay's poetic work engages with antiquity. Responding to the French debate about the respective values of French and Latin as literary languages, Melehy reads Du Bellay as deconstructing the Roman claim to original greatness and as putting in play the textual stability of the literary heritage left over from antiquity. Much is made of the rich contrast between the supposed glory of the eternal city and its subsequent collapse into ruins. Through detailed readings of brief textual passages and extended analyses of individual words and their various etymological and conative layers, Melehy argues that Du Bellay redeems that contrast through emphasizing the elusive nature of the process of signification, which itself refuses to offer eternal stability. The Rome that haunts the Renaissance imaginary accordingly relies on a concept of simulacrum that remains essentially detached from the actual city and its historical groundedness. The final chapter in this section discusses Du Bellay's recourse to dreaming as a means to redress this flaw and to suggest, through biblical allusions, that the very notion of eternal (earthly) validity is untenable.

The second section turns to Spenser and his reworking of Du Bellay's struggle with antiquity, which the English writer also transforms into a vision of Christian understanding beyond the divisions between Catholicism and the various Protestant groups in England and abroad. Melehy presents Spenser as appropriating the French writer in an act of literary cannibalism that allows the English writer to claim the prominent place of his French predecessor (p. 90). While the precise meaning of literary canonicity remains somewhat elusive throughout this monograph, the analyses of various textual examples always also address their own engagement with highly respected earlier writers (what elsewhere has been discussed as the anxiety of influence). The trope of choice, in Melehy's study, for that act of appropriation is the evocation of ruins, as they allow later writers to allude to an earlier period's survival and simultaneously to its disintegration. In the discussion of Spenser's various poetic translations, this connection also plays out during the author's reliance on various earlier translations into other languages. By drawing on such cross-linguistic sources, writers assign value to such forms of literary transfer. For Spenser, such appropriations were done in a spirit of conciliation that also extended to religious tolerance; yet the author also frequently 'ruins the ruins' (p. 125) of earlier authors, inserting his own name into the literary discourse instead, thus claiming a place in the literary canon.

The third section is dedicated to Montaigne and begins with a chapter that discusses an essay on education that Melehy uses to address Montaigne's attitude towards classical learning, institutions of instruction, and the formation of a sense of selfhood. The argument implicitly complements some of the analyses recently also made by Jeff Dolven in *Scenes of Instruction*. The points of reference that Melehy traces from Montaigne back to Du Bellay are somewhat less tangible than the linkages discussed with respect to the previous two authors. When the text, somewhat defensively, claims that 'in my view it is a stretch not to find such an affinity' (p. 165), it puts argument above evidence. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the analysis in fact returns to textual passages by Du Bellay that were already discussed in previous chapters, suggesting almost that the connection between various authors rests on a small number of textual similarities. In the final chapter of the Montaigne section, the author's unique engagement with the experience of modernity is discussed at the site of Montaigne's essay on the cannibals and with respect to the way this engages Europe's own sense of cultural identity and historical legacy.

The fourth and final part of the book is dedicated to Shakespeare. A first chapter argues that some of Shakespeare's sonnets are heavily indebted to work by both Du Bellay and Spenser's translation of the French author. In all three Shakespeare chapters Melehy discusses the textual evidence which points to a keen awareness in the writer that

literary survival is nothing that should be taken for granted, with issues like temporality, canonicity, durability, and constancy featuring prominently in both poetic and dramatic passages. The discussion of *Julius Caesar*, in the middle chapter, in fact concentrates on the allegorical relationship between the emperor's own failure and the supposed stability of the Roman Empire as a model for the rise and future of the Stuart dynasty. The argument points to various textual sources, such as Montaigne or Justus Lipsius, to demonstrate that these kinds of ideas were not only owed to earlier and contemporary literary discourses but also to the political and social reality in which Shakespeare produced his theatrical works, and to which his meta-theatrical scenes clearly related. In the book's final chapter, the methodological departure from the New Historicist paradigm and its focus on the social is once again addressed, with Melehy using Montaigne's essay on the cannibals and Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* as literary context for a discussion of the colonial politics of the early modern age. Both works are shown to present ethnic difference as an elusive phenomenon that, outside of literary discourses, is nevertheless all too frequently represented as knowable and controllable. Melehy closes both the chapter and the book with the positive assessment that it is in (canonical) literary works that readers are presented with 'a continuing critical examination' of the exploitative nature of colonialism (p. 255).

Melehy's highly readable book is strongest when it engages extensively with the verbal material of particular passages. The intricate and careful readings frequently tease out phonetic, etymological, religious, and historical details that greatly enrich the understanding of these early modern texts. The approach clearly draws on both philological and deconstructive traditions, at once trusting the power of language to carry particular facets of meaning across time and demonstrating the omnipresent inability of linguistic signs to contain the elusive and slippery aspect of semantic difference. Figures of polysemy thus coincide in Melehy's analysis with the traces of dissemination. The figure that underlies the monograph, the notion of the simulacrum, well demonstrates this aspect in that, in Melehy's use, it emphasizes the utter impossibility of reaching any sort of original. The book nevertheless engages in a search for various forms of *Ursprung* that seem to belie the workings of this particular type of simulated archaeology.

Work Cited

- Dolven, Jeff, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008).