



BOOK REVIEW

Martin Procházka: *Transversals*, Prague, Litteraria Pragensia, 2007, ISBN 80-7308-172-0, 167 pp.

In *Transversals*, the author brings together a series of essays devoted to various aspects of the aesthetics of the picturesque, from treatises on late-eighteenth-century gardening, to poetry by William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and George Gordon, Lord Byron, to tales and novels by Sir Walter Scott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, and, lastly, to the relations between myth, technology, and forms of collective social identity that one finds in Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg) and Milan Kundera. As is outlined in the introduction, this book employs the concept of the ‘transversal’ found in French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs* to investigate the radically modern and open-ended nature of the picturesque in Romantic literature and aesthetics, and, in the closing essay, some of their possible implications for the conceptualization of community in our own century.

In its basic sense, a ‘transversal’ refers to a line diagonally intersecting parallel lines; but, in his opening pages, the author shows how this concept has been developed and adapted over time—from its beginnings in Euclidean geometry to its use in various fields such as modern geometry, relativity theory, cybernetics, chaos theory, and bioinformatics—and specific examples are provided in accompanying footnotes. One of the ways Deleuze uses the term is in his interpretation of the significance of style in the writings of Proust, as an expression of ‘aberrant’, indirect communication (as Deleuze terms it) between predominantly closed structures through open systems. About ‘*partial objects that do not communicate*’, Deleuze, writing on sexuality in Proust, asserts: ‘It will be with them as with plants: the hermaphrodite requires a third party (the insect) so that the female part may be fertilized or the male part may fertilize. An aberrant communication occurs in a transversal dimension between partitioned sexes’ (*Proust and Signs* 136). The present author provides a thorough characterization of Deleuze’s initial use of the term before moving to his own readings, which suggest some of its possible applications. In contrast to Deleuze, ‘who, rather metaphysically, locates the birth of transversality in Proust’s modernist art, connecting it with the philosophical operation of the “reversal” of Platonism’ (*Transversals* 4), the author seeks to find traces of an emergent transversality in Romanticism—‘the first art movement that no longer depends on universal rules, norms and styles, [and] is no longer based on a single central canon of aesthetic and other values’ (5)—and observes that a comparable transversality characterizes the structure of his own book. A brief introductory survey of the chapters to follow is then provided, ending with the claim that

In contrast to the novel, the picturesque combines different objects and products of different temporal and value orders: natural sceneries with volatile effects in art, domestic habits, local economies and signs of cultural memory. Thus it forms transversal links seminal for the transformation of Romanticism, which, as I conclude, is ‘vital for imagining the culturally diversified Europe’. (10)

The opening essay, 'Inscribed on Imperial Ruins: The Problem of History in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*', considers the ways in which *converging discourses of emancipation and ruin* emerge in Cantos III and IV of Byron's poem (12). The author discusses Byron's approach, particularly as it relates to the lyrical hero's ambiguously inflected reflections on the ruins of the Roman Coliseum. The author situates these reflections in the context of the traditional eighteenth-century Grand Tour and the educational version of the picturesque it was intended to offer in relation to the existential hermeneutics of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jan Patočka (as well as conceptualizations of carceral totality provided by reference to Michel Foucault) and in these philosophers' approaches to the relationships between history, individual existence, and writing. The reflections proffered in Byron's poem are seen as leading to an existential impasse, disrupting existing conceptualizations of history such as the Stoic acceptance of domination and slaughter in history as an inevitable *theatrum mundi*, or the Whig view of history as a process of progressive emancipation by anticipating the 'problem of history'—a point raised by later writers such as Derrida or Patočka who read the *disjointedness of time* as spurring each individual towards an ethics of existential responsiveness.

The second essay, 'Ruins in the New World: Uses of the Past in U. S. Culture.' focuses on aspects of American writing that are, in some ways, comparable to Byron's ambiguous attitude to the virtues proclaimed by the progressive, liberal history upon which the United States built its political foundations. The essay considers a variety of American perspectives on this—from Hawthorne's warily ironic reflections in 'Legends of the Province House' to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*—the author watching American eyes turned to the past as much as to the future. American perspectives on ruins, perspectives on American ruins, and perspectives on America as a ruin are all considered, including those of American historians on ghost towns and, in a poetically ruminative fashion, Melville on the city of Lima and Jean-François Lyotard on Los Angeles. This culminates in an epilogue that suggests the possible signification that can or might be attached to the ruins of the World Trade Centre, including speculations that, as a financial centre, the area in which the Twin Towers had formerly stood was already in decline before 2001, another ruin in the making. As in the essay on Byron, the ambiguous attitude toward *a brave new world promised by liberal progress* is indicated by a fascination with ruins, a fascination that prompts the observer to speculate on questions of personal responsibility in the face of contingency and mortality.

The third essay, 'Addressing the Ocean: Freedom and Subjectivity in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *Moby Dick*' considers Melville's use of Byron or the Byronic in his celebrated novel, though it also makes considerable reference to the novelette 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,' the subject of a late essay by Deleuze. The author deploys Deleuze's conceptualization of *style as transversality* to comment on Melville's ironic treatment of Emersonian transcendentalism and related utopian ideologies, suggesting that, for Deleuze, Ahab has more than a problematic relationship to the white whale:

Ahab becomes Moby Dick. He will make the nothingness symbolized by the whale the object of his will. And through this nothingness, radical brotherhood, radical equality between humans (as well as between men and animals) can be approached. This radical equality is not determined by belonging to a group or a nation but by the loss of all 'particularities'. (67)

That this extreme form of radical equality also suggests radical annihilation is perhaps acknowledged in the closing paragraph of the essay, where the author quotes Melville writing to Hawthorne on the theme of the tension between the world, subjectivity, and language:

As soon as you say *Me, a God, a Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam. Yes, that word is the hangman. Take God out of the dictionary and you would have Him in the street. (As quoted on 69)

Depersonalization in the works of Byron is pursued further in the fourth essay, 'From Pilgrimage to Nomadism: Byron's Poetry on the Road', which offers a reading of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

partly *via* Deleuzian perspectives but initially *via* Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation of the chronotope (here, the perspective of the road as a carnivalesque meeting point for all social classes), comparing Byron's alternative reading of the Grand Tour with earlier forms of mythically redolent, itinerant movements, whether the classical *nostos* of the *Odyssey* or, as is indicated by the title of Byron's poem, the medieval pilgrimage and related quest narratives. Again, emphasis is placed on the ways the poem dissolves notions of Enlightenment 'Man' and moves away from a goal-oriented journey towards nomadic forms of Deleuzian 'becoming'. This essay culminates with a reference to the Czech Romantic tradition, the author seeing Deleuzian 'becoming-Gipsies' in the characters of Karel Hynek Mácha's novel *The Gipsies* (81).

As in the previous essay, a Nietzschean *becoming something better than the currently conceived notions of the human* seems to be sought after, though the problematic proximity to something worse—such as madness or self-destruction, in the self-imposed flight from limited ego-bound personalities incarcerated in utilitarian forms of mass-produced morality, as opposed to an individualistic ethics of creativity—is acknowledged in reference to certain developments of Late Romanticism.

Deleuzian notions are again employed in the author's approach to what might initially be viewed as the more restfully domesticated, academic territory of landscape gardening. In 'A Tale of Two Orders: Word as Go-Between?', the author considers the significance of the theory and practice of *sharawadgi*, a 'distorted Chinese compound word, or rather phrase,' translated by Y.Z. Chang as 'the quality of being impressive or surprising through carelessness or unordered grace' (83). The author notes the similarity of this kind of lexical expression and its attendant implications to the nonsense words of late-nineteenth-century literature, words whose significance is a major focus of interest for Deleuze, who, in *The Logic of Sense*, derives his own ideas on the relation between 'sense' and 'orders of representation' from aspects of ancient Stoic philosophy.

By comparing an extract from Thomas Whately's *Observations on Modern Gardening* to Deleuze's concept of the literary machine as assemblage, the author considers how a variety of eighteenth-century English writers, painters, and landscape designers—from Alexander Pope and Horace Walpole to William Kent and William Chambers—negotiate comparable territory in terms of the distance to be traversed between *sharawadgi* and more traditionally classical notions of representing and organizing one's immediate natural environment in ways having some kinship to Deleuze's semiotic speculations about Proust and the aesthetics informing modern literary texts.

The second half of the book begins with an essay on Walter Scott's *Waverley*, returning the reader to 'the problem of history' initially addressed in the opening essay on Byron. By focusing on *Waverley*'s significance as a form of Foucauldian heterotopia, this essay seeks to provide an alternative to Wolfgang Iser's interpretation of Scott's characterization of his own historical fictions as 'neutral ground'. Alluding to Scott's use of the term 'picturesque' and reviewing the wide range of aesthetic and political connotations of the concept available at that time, the author suggests that Scott's 'neutral ground' might also be seen as 'a zone of contact and a battlefield' (97). Scott's narrator is posited to be a 'historical ironist'; and, with regard to the plot of *Waverley*, it is claimed that it 'does not have any unity of "origin" or "destiny"' (102). Underlining the poststructuralist aspects of this interpretation, complete with a citation from Derrida relating to the 'realization of meaning as an internal and unfinished history of a specific structure', the author focuses on aspects of potentially picturesque scenery in Scott's novel, such as the depiction of Tully-Veolan, whose description ironically juxtaposes the search for the traditionally pleasing picturesque with the roughness and squalor of the life of its inhabitants, producing a more subversive form of picturesque where conventional expectations are 'replaced by a problematic, irrational heterogeneity of expressions, manners, opinions, styles and cultures' (107–8).

Further chapters are devoted to Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Hawthorne's tale 'The Artist of the Beautiful', though the book closes with an essay entitled 'Beyond Romanticism? *Imagined Communities* Revisited', which does indeed go beyond the Romantic period to which the majority of the book is devoted, providing an analysis of the role of myth by focusing on texts that are more contemporary. This essay questions the usefulness of the distinction 'between the traditional symbolism of myth or rituals on the one hand, and ideologies, advertising strategies or patterns

of pop culture on the other' (150). Quoting Benedict Anderson's book in relation to its claim that communities are 'imagined' and that the way to distinguish one from another is 'the style in which they are imagined' rather than in terms of falsity or genuineness, one of the aims of this essay is to consider 'to what extent Europe can be imagined as such a community' (150). The author again enlists aspects of the thinking of Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari regarding 'myths functioning as machines', providing the example of a Czech commercial for beer that tells the legend of the arrival of the Czechs to their homeland, but in *hantec*, a Brno dialect, thus playfully shifting the homeland from Bohemia to Moravia, which is accentuated by the fact that subtitles in standard Czech are provided for non-*hantec* speakers. Hence, this advertisement plays off of feelings of local patriotism. The author sees this as a form of bricolage that, in line with the thinking of Deleuze and Derrida, subverts the distinction between time as 'continuity' and time as 'radical, irreducible difference' (152). Anderson's approach is negatively viewed as seeming to maintain

the radical, fundamentalist separation of the two ways of imagining. This strategy is not of Anderson's own making: it can be traced to Walter Benjamin's notion of 'art in the age of mechanical reproduction', and even to [Erich] Auerbach's two concepts of temporality in Homer's epic and the Old Testament. (152–3)

This is certainly the case, since Anderson makes explicit reference to and quotes both Auerbach and Benjamin in his discussion. The author takes issue with what he sees as the over-schematized characterization of the style of imagining communities offered by Anderson, turning to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* to support the claim that 'the imagining of the homogeneity of modern nations' (154) has been disrupted by minority discourses that 'speak betwixt and between times and places' (154, quoting Bhabha). This point is seen as particularly relevant to 'the imagining of Europe' (154), with which the remainder of this essay primarily concerns itself.

By way of an analysis of aspects of Novalis's essay 'Christianity or Europe' and Milan Kundera's novel *Immortality*, the author postulates appropriate ways to interpret theoretically this 'imagining'. The author observes 'surprisingly divergent tendencies' in the Novalis essay: on one hand, it tends towards the 'integrating power of national culture'; on the other, towards 'the diversifying force of individual creativity' (156). As the author points out with reference to Deleuze's reading of Leibniz and the Baroque in his late book *The Fold*, Novalis's imagery can be read as a positive evocation of *difference in unison*; but, at other times, can be read as having disturbing intimations of imperialistic hegemony. In relation to *Immortality*, a novel clearly concerned with questions of style and the problematic nature of human individuality, the author focuses on Kundera's attempts to find 'the antidote against the decayed Romanticism, hysterical sentimentality, which threatens to undermine the grounds of European culture' (163). This is partly based on Kundera's use of his *computer metaphor*, on the 'architectonic, structural value of music' rather than an over-simplistic identification with forms of emotion, and on the element of international intratextuality involved in Kundera's different drafts of the book, as different editions of the novel emerged in different translations and in a partially revised form (163–4). While the author sees this as a useful move in the direction of a more culturally diversified Europe, his final appeal is to the 'aesthetic of the picturesque' (164), with which the bulk of the essays in this book are specifically concerned, and which is seen as an alternative and ultimately more feasible way of creating the 'transversal links' that might help to develop this process.

There is much to ponder after reading this book, all those transversals that the author sees as linking Romantic aesthetic creation with Post-modernist thought. The reader is prompted not only to recognize these transversals and to make a Foucauldian 'aesthetics of life' from the 'aesthetic of the picturesque', but also to do so passionately, which seems to recall Nikolaus Pevsner's claims for the potential of the picturesque:

See, analyse what impresses you, and for what reasons. You will then realize that we have available an infinitely richer body of materials for artistic creation than classical theory would

make you believe. Use it in your work. To this day we cannot do better than to follow this advice. (*Architectural Review*, 115 (1954), 228)

If others could equally see 'an infinitely richer body of materials' in those artistic creations of Romanticism and other movements, the author suggests that Europe would be more culturally diverse and Post-modernism recognized as a tendency and perspective that has been surfacing since before Romanticism and still remains a vital force with future implications.

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