

geographical and psychological, natural and civilisational.

In a *Postscript* entitled *Re-imagining the World*, Whitfield draws the conclusion that the new paradigm necessitates redefinition of our Western identity after an age of dislocation and dissolution, and millennia of historicalisation/externalisation. It is not the task of this book, but the task of future travel literature to express these new meanings, these new contents of the geographically defined self. Whitfield claims that what everyone is seeking in travel is freedom “to move . . . out of non-being into being” (283). The existential weight of travel literature calls for the urgency of serious considerations in the genre. “Travel is a genre in which matters of ultimate spiritual importance can be discussed” (281), and “the worthwhile travel writer has to keep alive the idea of the inner journey, the transforming experience” (x). And so with this realization, “the genre has come full circle from the era when it was the servant of conquest and domination, political or cultural” (281). The book takes a small but important role in the redefinition of a genre, summarising the past of travel writing, and highlighting the progressive representatives of the Western psyche, heroes and narrators of transformation.

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#### Notes

1. Peter Whitfield is the author of more than a dozen works of history, literary criticism and poetry, including *The Image of the World: 20 Centuries of World Maps* (1994),

*The History of English Poetry* (2009), *The History of Science* (2010), *A Universe of Books: Readings in World Literature*. This book has been reviewed by *The Oxford Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Australian* (in March-April 2012).

2. The roots of liminal, transgressive theories are to be found in Van Gennep and Turner’s anthropology of prehistoric rituals. Theories of otherness such as Lévinas’s also designate the barrier of the self to be overcome.

3. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage & Random House, 1979).

## **(What) Does It Really Mean?**

Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kaščáková, eds., *Does It Really Mean That? Interpreting the Literary Ambiguous* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2011)

Ambiguity is a phenomenon very old and also very broad. It can merit and reward literary interpretation but, perhaps for the same reason, has also the dangerous potential to result in bland analysis and windy (or missing) conclusions. To organize a collection of essays around this ironically Janus-faced phenomenon can be tricky: is the theme of ambiguity narrow enough to organize the essays into an at least loosely coherent collection; if not, is it interesting/relevant enough to offer new insights to the writer and interest to the reader? Especially when the audience of this book is obviously not the common reader of literature

but the educated scholar of today's academic (literary) discourse. In a time and era where the mindframe of the audience is that of the post-post-modern reader where ambiguity is not merely present but rather omnipotent. Where not only meaning but communication too are essentially destabilized, what novelty and innovation can the interpretation of ambiguity still offer us? My expectations are quite vague, even after reading the editorial introduction.

In the first part of the collection there are essays touching upon ambiguity in connection with works of Medieval Literature. Kathleen Dubs, the late collaborator of *The AnaChronisT* and co-editor of the volume, investigates the ambiguous role of Harry Bailly, the Host of Chaucer's *Canterbury pilgrims*: is he a "nouveau literary critic" of Chaucer or a representation of contemporary literary tastes? As an alternative conclusion, Dubs proposes that Chaucer might not have been trying "to educate his audience about interpretation, but about form" – where entertainment is not simply a means to an end independent of meaning, but "a valuable vehicle worthy of attention" (55). Whether Chaucer was trying to say something about the *value* of form remains an unanswered question; especially since, as Dubs also remarks, *The Canterbury Tales* is unfinished in terms of the original design. "Thus if Harry Bailly is Chaucer's nouveau literary critic, it is regrettable that we will never know which tale he would have chosen" (56).

In the same section, "Medieval Literature," Éva Zsák explores in detail the manifold interpretation that the role of the Holy Cross in Christ's Passion allows in old English poetry. Meanwhile, dominant patterns in the essay as well as the ones highlighted in poetry are perhaps better characterized by diversity and transition of roles than by ambiguity. Tamás Karáth's essay, the last in this section, focuses on the 15th-century *Book of Margery Kempe*, the first acknowledged autobiography in English literature. Placing the *Book* in the larger context of medieval East Anglian spiritual writing, the *Book of Showings* by Julian of Norwich, and other East Anglian dramatic texts, Karáth shows how medieval devotional writing uses ambiguity on the level of rhetoric and dismisses it on the level of meaning. The roots of medieval ambiguity in interpretation originate in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* where Diomedes recognizes a decisive attribute of the human stance: "our truths, beliefs and explanations are constructed on conscious axiomatic decisions" (22). One of the basic divisions of our axiomatic systems is in turn the careful separation of good and evil – as it has always been a major concern of post-lapsarian humanity, Karáth states. Since in late medieval thinking ambiguity practically equalled evil deception, it is interesting to see how attitudes to ambiguity still remained ambiguous. Describing the inquisitory investigation of Margery Kempe's visions, the *Book* problematizes the dichotomy of literal

and metaphorical meaning – which Margery refuses to reduce to mere ambiguity. Instead, “she is persistent in leading her contenders from distrust of images to an appreciation of images, in which the literal and metaphorical senses almost coincide – without ambiguities” (33).

János V. Barcsák, in one of the theoretical essays of the collection, also takes the axiomatic nature of our thinking as the starting point of his discussion. However, whereas in medieval times ambiguity was a rather undesirable and disturbing phenomenon, Barcsák argues that it is in fact the only movement of thinking that allows for referentiality to reality. The German philosopher Gödel’s Formally Undecidable Propositions theory of numerical systems implies that the very fact that every system is based on axioms deprives them fundamentally of a true referent in reality. The only chance for the system to refer outside itself lies exactly in its undecidable propositions, i.e. in paradox (like “This statement is a lie”), which does not belong either to the true or to the false statements within the system and thus manages to transcend the limits and refer outside it. In contrast with systems in science or mathematics, literature openly recognizes that it not only reflects reality but produces its own references; in fact, the very recognition of autonomous force is where art really begins. This conscious self-referentiality, hand in hand with the liberating formula of paradox (the ulti-

mate form of ambiguity), compels literature always to assert the truth about its relation to reality, and is also the reason why “the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox” (Brooks quoted 200).

The autonomy of literature and art and the uncanny side of ambiguity mentioned in Karáth’s essay directly connect Tamás Bényei’s piece about the ambiguities of the picture of Dorian Gray and Anna Kérchy’s essay about the experience of reading *Alice in Wonderland*. The picture of Dorian Gray in Wilde’s novel problematizes the ambiguity of artistic image and blurs the boundaries between art, artist, object of art and reality. This general crisis centrally evolves in the novel around the phenomenon of *beauty*. As Bényei points out “beauty in and of itself causes a profound disturbance in the art/life dichotomy, if for no other reason than because it appears in both spheres.” What are the boundaries between art and artist; where does his art begin and where does his life end? Is beauty the manifestation of some inner content or “a phenomenally unintelligible entity” that hides no deeper meaning? These questions that Wilde’s text proposes can be seen as early examples of the modernist questioning of the continuity between seeing and knowing (Jacobs qtd. 68).

Anna Kérchy’s essay similarly brings up existential questions in connection with ambiguity. Only, it is now the other side of the artistic process: perception.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* is not simply ambiguous but comes close to nonsense. Kérchy shows the curious interplay between the two typical readerly attitudes: the paralyzed compulsion of making sense of non-sense and the playful ability simply to enjoy non-sense. She wishes "to show how the pleasure of the playfully polyphonic text results precisely because it invites us to fall into nonsense, to drift aimlessly from 'hypermeanings' of overinterpretation to 'pure' textual joys of 'meaninglessness' and back" (105). It is, however, interesting to see – as the argument unfolds – how much we bear and to what extent we can enjoy ambiguity. Kérchy's contemplation of ambiguity through Lewis Carroll's text asks some of the most interesting and compelling questions in the collection. How much do we need to make sense of and understand, no matter what? Where does ambiguity become more disturbing than magical?

The hybridity and permeability of identities that ambiguity can bring about is perhaps best illustrated in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). Ambiguity is now absolutely dominant on every level: Katarína Labudová shows how generic hybridity supports both the bodily and the mental hybridity of characters. As fictional epitomes of such hybridity: cyborgs (in parts naturally, in other parts technologically constructed beings) take a central position in both novels. She shows that

Carter and Atwood's fictions "undermine the borders between reality and fiction, as well as natural and artificial, to create new forms of identities, sexuality and bodies" (149). Not only for the two authors but for their characters too, ambiguity is the primary tool to invent their own histories and social fiction. The conclusions of the two novels are accordingly open-ended. Unfortunately the essay is also without conclusion (or consequence): while it often states the obvious it leaves important questions unanswered or not even posed. Even if the two novels are "open ended" they do have some suggestions - or at least they should have for a critic (other than just being "open-ended"); if not, then in what sense is a critical essay different from the mere detailed restatement of a novel?

Labudová's analysis is followed by another piece related to feminism by Angelika Reichmann about the (female) Gothic elements of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* – the closing essay of the "British Literature" section of the book. Reichman demonstrates that the seemingly realistic fiction and male literary tradition are subverted by traditional narrative elements of male and female Gothic, showing a quite ambiguous relationship of the author (Lessing) with these traditions.

The remaining three pieces of this section discuss different types of ambiguities used as narrative tools in contemporary British fiction, mostly in terms of Empson's classification. Milada

Franková opens her essay with the assertion that for one reason or the other, the post-modern likes and embraces ambiguity. Indeed it does. What might be a change of aspect in the use of ambiguity since ancient times is that the author or artist is given a more active role (intentionally or unintentionally) in creating ambiguity – as pointed out in Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Accordingly, the essay examines mostly from the authorial point of view six sets of contemporary novels relating to six types of ambiguity: a deliberate exercise in ambiguity (Michele Roberts' *Flesh and Blood*), interpretative ambiguity (Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*), experimental ambiguity (Jeanette Winterson's several novels), and ambiguity of irony (Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark) or ambiguity of perception (Jane Gardam). Franková's writing is a great exercise in the presentation of the literary ambiguous; however, as she also notes "any discussion on ambiguity is an endless task" (101). Nóra Séllei's article takes an alternative look on Virginia Woolf's two late novels *The Years* and *Between the Acts* as novels engaging politically and textually in the discourse of the Empire and the Nation. Séllei argues that on the metalevel of narration the text offers stances of criticism by creating an ambiguity in relation to the semiotic process of the making of history and exposing the artificiality of such concepts as nation and empire. (As she says, the text creates "an ambiguity in relation to the semiotic process of the

making of history, the nation and the empire by exposing their making, by revealing that they are artefacts.," 137.) Gabrielle Reuss tries to uncover the highly ambiguous message of April de Angelis's *Laughing Matter*. Reuss examines ambiguity in the play's meticulous historicity and its intertextual references to Shakespeare. As she argues, "The sense of the eighteenth century being our contemporary is enhanced by the presence of the Shakespeare cult and modern colloquial language, set against the ever loudmouthed environment of the theatre." (84.) Further, she raises the question of whether the play really is meant to be a laughing matter and whether it is a melodramatic or an ironic laugh that we utter at the end of the play. Although De Angelis' conclusion to the contradictory "laughing matter" is deciphered by Reuss as merely ambiguous, I think irony is deeply intertwined with ambiguity, if not synonymous with it in this case.

In the first piece of the third part, "American Literature," Ted Bailey discusses the ambiguities of mulatta identity and how black-authored mulatta texts explored and exploited the opportunities latent in mixed identity with an aim to bridge the gap over racial polarity and "to effect a material transformation in the world" (172). Bailey introduces and sketches a certain literary-conjurational strategy which, focusing on character identification, tries to "manage the character's identity so as to establish an oscillating correspondence . . . between

the reader and the figure's two racial personae" (176). This means that the text tries to achieve an optimal balance in the reader between complete identification and absolute distance as the respective poles. A *conjunctural catharsis* is the aim, which happens at an "aesthetic distance" when "the members of the audience become emotionally involved in the drama, but not to the point where they forget they are observers" (Scheff qtd. 172). Conjunction as opposed to complete identification is to be favoured on the basis of the sceptical contention regarding the role of empathy in literature. Baily quotes Saidiya Hartman, who states that " 'empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration' and hence 'empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead' " (167). The only point in Baily's argumentation that leaves space for some inconvenient suppositions is the lack of further investigation into the already contended nature of *empathy*. What if someone identifies with the whiteness and also the blackness of a character but fails to identify with some other but similarly important feature of that character (for example an attribute of his/her temper or personality)? If this happens (and why would it not?), then conjunctural catharsis fails to take place because of "overdistancing" and, as a result, the strategy does not reach its goal. In other words, is it so obvious that people can only and exclusively

not-identify when divided by racial boundaries?

The other piece in the "American Literature" section explores the interpretation of time in Nabokov's *Ada* and Melville's *Pierre* simultaneously. The motif that Márta Pellérdi especially highlights is the incest between the main characters in both novels, which incestuous relationship as a theme is used by both authors to illustrate several ideas. The characters of *Pierre* and *Ada* are metaphorically grandchildren of the incestuous mythological creatures, Terra (Earth) and dark-blue Coelus (Sky). Heaven and Earth's incestuous marriage is metaphorically inherent in *Pierre* (the protagonist of *Pierre*), Van, and Ada (protagonists of *Ada*), and through symbolic parallels in all human beings: *Pierre*'s long-standing battle between Earth and Heaven, i.e. horological (terrestrial) and chronometrical (celestial) thinking is parallel to the unfolding entrapment between Free Will and Fate in *Ada* through the introduction of the "third co-ordinate," the other incestuous son of Terra: Cronos (Time).

The collection closes with a sort of self-reflexive note: a piece on the future of literary studies and on modern-day rhetorics; which both allow one to draw interesting conclusions. Anton Pokrivčák wonders what has become of literary studies, what are its chances of survival and what, in the end, is its function. That is an interesting and compelling question to ask, at least for us who are directly involved in it. After

reading this collection of literary essays I am not sure about the answer. I am sure about one thing though: we have to ask these questions more often. The essays are good craftwork – apart from some printing and grammatical/syntactic mistakes; however, many of them left me wanting a deeper insight or a more compelling problem-proposal, *Ambiguity* offers an endless range of opportunities for interpretation but as noted by the authors of the collection themselves, the investigation of ambiguity might be an endless task (talk?), which also means that the topic might be quite vague for an essay, and, especially, for a whole collection of essays. Pokrivčák is anxious to see cultural studies taking over literary studies, and he brings up “usefulness” as one of the main arguments of those who push cultural studies to the front. Although I definitely disagree with the notion of literature having to serve some purpose, I do think that literary studies have to have *some* effectiveness. According to Pokrivčák, among many possible answers to the question “what does literature communicate?” “in a post-relativistic and, hopefully, post-ideological literary criticism, the natural ones may be those which would re-connect the meaning of literary work to human universals.” More particularly, such an answer can be found in Dickinson’s poetry – “the sense of pleasure and beauty, which is also the sense of truth and knowledge, the enrichment of our being” (223).

The final essay of this book presents the rhetorical use of the ambiguous, in President Barack Obama’s speech as an example of a great contemporary rhetorician. Ann Dobyns analyzes how Obama uses the ambiguous in his speech on racial issues as a tool to unpack and negotiate differences and understand their complexity, and then eventually trigger ethical judgement as well as action in his audience. I think this is a perfect ending to this collection: at the end of the day, after a literary journey, ambiguity must come down to a better or worse, hopefully ethical “judgement about how to live in the world together” (241).

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## **Fantastic Liminality**

Sándor Klapcsik, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction* (Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 2012)

There is an abundance of essays, studies and books on science fiction, fantasy and detective novels. The poststructuralist approach applied to analyze contemporary cultural phenomena, especially literature, is one of the favorites used to gain insight into the workings and mechanisms of present-day works of art, as well. Agatha Christie, Stanislav Lem, Neil Gaiman and Philip K. Dick are also among those popular writers whose works have been extensively interpreted and theorized about. Sándor Klapcsik’s