

Reviews

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Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg, eds. *The Poetics of Fragmentation in Contemporary British and American Fiction*, Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2019. (£24.00 Hb.). Pp 235. ISBN 9780691159492.

This recent collection of critical writing on contemporary fragmentary fiction attempts to historicize and theorize fragmentation in fiction. The volume comprises sixteen chapters, preceded by a substantial and illuminating introduction penned by the editors, Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg. Its last chapter, written by Alison Gibbons, reads like a coda that emulates, in its fragmentariness, the kind of fiction the volume discusses – a most refreshing gesture of jocularly. The volume is structured into four parts and moves from past and present forms of fragmentation in Part One, which is the most theoretical part of the volume, to readings of particular novels and short story collections in Parts Two, Three and Four. Whereas Part Two is reminiscent of the fragment's nostalgia for the whole, Part Three engages with the urgency of crisis and trauma as reflected in fragmentary works and Part Four enacts a widening of critical horizons into other media and other arts. The volume thus strikes the reader as an ambitious project of broad scope.

The tradition of fragmentariness in art and in fiction, in particular, is not obscured in any attempt to glamorize the fragment into something 'new,' typical of the twenty-first century. After attempting "the near-impossible task of trying to define the fragment," the introduction dwells on its two European traditions – the French moralist tradition going back to the sixteenth century and the German tradition inaugurated by the Romantics – before tracing its history through Modernism and Postmodernism to the present day. This historicizing tendency reverberates across the volume: for instance, in Marcin Tereszewski's

chapter on ruins and totality in J.G. Ballard's fiction, in Zofia Kolbuszewska's comparative consideration of the turn of the eighteenth century and that of the twenty-first century, or in the recurrence of references to Friedrich Schlegel in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Similarly, there is a theorizing impetus at work in the entire volume: the categories defined by Merritt Moseley in Chapter 1 (the braid, the bricolage and the mosaic) dapple many of the other contributions, as well as the introduction's "attempts at taxonomy." A major concern is diagnosing the surge of fragmentariness at the present moment, in the twenty-first century: its causes (nostalgia or celebration?), its lineage (continuity with Postmodernism or a major departure from it?), its present manifestations and interpretations ("tamed and subdued," to use Ted Gioia's phrase, or "hysterical" and "embarrassed into velocity," to use James Wood's characterization of David Foster Wallace, among others) and its handling of time and space, two recurrent concepts in this volume. Bakhtin is, predictably, a household name, and Bakhtinian terms such as centripetal/centrifugal (force), polyphony, heteroglossia, dialogism, and fluidity (of the novel as a genre) pervade the chapters. In terms of the prevalent interpretive frameworks, the reader often takes centre stage: phenomenological readings redolent of Iser's "gaps" and the reader's creative role in reading fragmentary fictions alternate with considerations of the reader's senses (primarily sight, touch and hearing) and cognitive approaches, relating to neuronal networks, "connectivity" (Chapter 13) and Schema Theory (Postscript). The haptic quality of shuffle narratives (Chapter 14), touch and haptics augmenting sight in app fiction (Chapter 12) and "tactile fictions" (Postscript) are some of the issues discussed in connection to multimodal literature, which is "by nature a visually fragmented form" (Postscript). Other media and/or arts included in multimodal fragmentary works are photography (Chapter 11), the visual arts (Chapter 13), digital media (Chapters 12 and 14), and music (Chapter 15); the influence of cinema on literary fiction is also (predictably) mentioned (Chapters 7 and 8). The volume also evinces a preoccupation with mimesis and realism, and the modernist argument is refashioned to fit the fragmentary bill, in the vein of William Burroughs's "life is a cut-up": fragmentary fiction is seen as "more real, more immediate than the manufactured state of wholeness" (Chapter 4), David Foster Wallace's

work is defined as “lower case realism” (Chapter 10) and “fragmentary realism” is coined in the Postscript, which also mentions Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s “metamodern” in connection with the twenty-first century. The spectre of wholeness haunts the volume – its absence is conspicuous, and its presence is conjured whenever possible, in an attempt to restore some kind of unity, whether it is called “cohesion and coherence” (Chapter 3), “connection” as opposed to “fracture and loss” (Chapter 5), or “connectivity and cohesiveness of community” (Chapter 6).

However, this focus on the commonalities of the volume’s chapters might unjustly obscure its stimulating diversity, both in terms of the fictional works discussed and of the critical approaches and innovative readings. The writers and artists with which the chapters engage include: Mark Saporta, B.S. Johnson, J.G. Ballard, David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Julian Barnes, Jeanette Winterson, David Markson, David Shields, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer, Suzanne Treister, Thomas Ligotti, Current 93, Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams, Mark Z. Danielewski, Jenny Bouilly, Salvador Plascencia, Graham Rawle, Steve Tomasula, Eli Horowitz and Russell Quinn, Reif Larsen, Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman, Eric Zimmerman, Jedediah Berry, Alex Chauvel and Rémi Farnos, Chris Ware. The critical readings are no less diverse: Caroline Magnin’s Freudian reading of trauma and fragmentation in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Wojciech Drąg’s argument that David Markson’s *This is Not a Novel* and David Shields’s *Reality Hunger* are collage manifestos, and Alison Gibbons’s multifarious critical collage that resists crafting “the smooth line of an argument” commonly expected of academic writing are but three examples illustrating the exuberant heterogeneity of the volume, its wide scope and the quality of its scholarship.

To conclude, this volume makes for a fascinating read, not only for academics interested in fragmentary fiction, but also for readers interested in contemporary literature in general. It provides the right balance between authoritative theoretical considerations, literature surveys and case studies or close(r) readings of individual works. While it does strive towards coalescence (and a very helpful impetus of imposing some order on the present information overload that plagues the reader of

contemporary literature), it is also inclusive and generous in accommodating conflicting viewpoints and tendencies, much to the reader's delight.

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