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Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text (review)

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convincingly argues that it is in the very nature of parody, particularly the parodies of Naturalism with which she is concerned, to rely not only on the intentions of the author but also on the reader's reactions to these intentions and the complex relationship between the two that results: parody is one (perhaps the one?) area of literary production in which authorial intention must be taken into account.

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*Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text.* By ELIZABETH MCCOMBIE. (Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs). Oxford University Press, 2003. xx + 219 pp. Hb £55.00.

Elizabeth McCombie's approach to the comparative study of music and literature might be called an interdisciplinary formalism, of a disarmingly subtle kind. She begins from the premiss that one can point to 'abstract, non-mimetic patterns that music and poetry have in common' (p. 97). The patterns she finds between Mallarmé and Debussy are described in the Glossary, which concludes the text, and which sums up the figures around which she builds many of her analytical chapters. Its headings are: *arabesque*, *éclat*, *enroulement*, *éventail*, *explosante fixe*, Möbius strip, *pli*, and *thyrsus*. However, it would be wrong to conclude from this that McCombie is simply proposing topographical structures that one can map onto either music or literature. Her forms, rather than being concretely present in the works analysed, appear as supplements to them, constructed, as we read or listen, in an intermediary space between words and music, asymmetrically related to each (McCombie is as sensitive to the differences between the arts as to their similarities). They are structures that represent, in various modes, an interplay between a tangible, fixed or ordered element, and a movement that discovers unpredictability, invisibility or absence. McCombie's commentaries on Mallarmé's writings (for example, *La Musique et les Lettres*, 'Billet à Whistler', or *Un Coup de Dés*) and on Debussy's music (including the *Préludes* and *Jeux*), coordinated in her study, at the end of the book, of Debussy's *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, are always directed towards the points at which traditional musical or verbal logic is evaded, perturbed or perverted; she can see these points, not merely as moments of loss, but also as part of a positive pattern. I am not sure to what extent I am convinced by her occasional apparent claim that there is a 'precise modelling' (p. 199) at work here. Indeed, on the most concrete level, her presentation of Mallarmé's prose sometimes lacks a certain precision: there are too many errors in the quotations, which might sap the reader's confidence in the interpretations. (The worst instance is on pp. 36–37: there are five such errors in one paragraph, two of which are omitted commas; this makes one feel uncomfortable when McCombie goes on to say that 'the air provided by the commas gives a dynamic energy to the page'.) The merit of McCombie's figures seems to me that they provide, rather than anything precisely verifiable, a means to look towards the unverifiable; the thyrsus, for example, she says, 'is a keyhole through which the manifestations of hesitation, reflection, and linear improvisation, either in the poem and poem as music individually or between them, may be viewed' (p. 196). Perhaps one could

say, taking up this metamorphosis of the thyrsus, that her achievement is to have turned figures into keyholes, to have shown how a concern with abstract structures can, at least in the space between music and literature, set up endless aesthetic perspectives.

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*Correspondance Vielé-Griffin–Ghéon*. Édition critique établie par CATHERINE BOSCHIAN-CAMPANER. Paris, Champion, 2004. Hb €50.00.

In 1896, the twenty-one-year-old Henri Ghéon wrote an enthusiastic article in *L'Ermitage* in praise of Francis Vielé-Griffin's collection of poems, *Chansons à l'ombre*. This provoked a grateful response from Vielé-Griffin in the form of a letter in which he expressed his delight in finding that in Ghéon, 'l'interlocuteur virtuel des heures lyriques s'incarne, comme ce fut ma foi' (p. 45). These expressions of mutual esteem led to a correspondence and friendship between the two men that continued until Vielé-Griffin's death in 1937. Catherine Boschian-Campaner's edition of this correspondence includes a substantial introduction, which begins by outlining the careers of the two men and goes on to trace the development of their relationship, as portrayed in the letters. Background information about some of the main events and issues referred to in the correspondence throws light on certain references in the letters that might otherwise be obscure. Comments in the Introduction and in footnotes to the letters themselves fill in details of the decline of the relationship between Gide and both Ghéon and Vielé-Griffin, a deterioration that is evident in the letters. The figure of Gide looms large throughout them, as the object of both admiration and irritation for the correspondents, and Boschian-Campaner suggests in the Introduction that the relative neglect into which Ghéon's *œuvre* has fallen can partly be ascribed to Gide's publicly expressed refusal to acknowledge any merit in the work Ghéon produced after his conversion to Catholicism at the age of forty. The letters themselves reveal a relationship in constant development, both from a personal and artistic point of view. After initial assurances of mutual admiration, regular meetings make the bond between the two men a more personal one. The letters then range from discussions of Vielé-Griffin's succession of new cars to more intimate professions of friendship and support, particularly in those written during the First World War, when Ghéon served as an army doctor. The dominant concerns of the letters are, however, literary. As well as discussing their own work in progress, both men comment on the contemporary literary scene in Paris, making this correspondence useful not only for what it can reveal regarding Vielé-Griffin and Ghéon themselves, but also for its details of French literary activity at the time. The frequent discussions concerning *vers libre* bring up various issues concerning its acceptance and adoption, and Ghéon's comments linking *vers libre* to possible communication to a wider audience are illuminating in relation both to his own work and to the wider context of contemporary perceptions of this form. This clear and comprehensive edition includes an extensive bibliography and indexes of people and works referred to in the Introduction and the letters. Although the proofreading leaves a little to be desired, this book is an excellent point of