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Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature. (Goethe—Nietzsche—Grass) (review)

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“Alles zeigt, daß das Wesen der Zeugung durchaus tiefer zu suchen ist, als in den bloßen Gestalten der Materie” (163).

Villanova University

Dalia Nassar

John A. McCarthy, *Remapping Reality: Chaos and Creativity in Science and Literature*. (Goethe—Nietzsche—Grass). Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2006. 373 pp.

In contrast to so much scholarly work today, McCarthy's latest book is a refreshing and welcome alternative. It also provides a model of what the academy might well seek to emulate. Eschewing already clichéd, in-vogue topics, not to mention second-rate texts as his subjects of study, McCarthy takes on major works and big questions. As a result, his new study is exceedingly ambitious, large in scope and strategically complex. John McCarthy offers an unusual conceptual framework quite different from typical disciplinary fare, but that is what makes this book especially worth reading and thinking about.

With this volume, McCarthy attempts to span the enduring divide between the natural sciences and the humanities. Or in terms long familiar to Germanists, he re-aligns and links the worlds of *Natur* and *Geist* in a new and valuable way. Not only has he brought together such seemingly disparate fields as physics and literature, he also spans the centuries of modern scientific and literary thought. McCarthy's ability to reach across and connect such expanses proves both useful and instructive. While Goethe, Nietzsche, and Grass constitute his literary focal points, his discussions also bring Cusanus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Breiteringer, Wieland, and Kant into play. In similar fashion, his scientific focus extends beyond an introduction and explanation of chaos and complexity theory to include in the considerations such luminaries as Copernicus, Galileo, Poincaré, Penrose, Prigogine/Stengers, Bohm/Peat, Schrödinger, and E. O. Wilson, to name only a few. McCarthy's reach extends back to the Enlightenment and renaissance humanism through all the intervening years up into the present, making connections all along the way. His book is a work of remarkable erudition.

In the first part of the study, McCarthy so to speak establishes his scientific credentials. He may be a literary scholar, but he also knows his science and speaks knowledgeably about modern physics in particular. His expertise is not simply limited to the history of science, for he lays out the actual physics much as Brian Greene does in his books about superstring theory. This undertaking is consequently not for the faint-hearted, as it places demands on its readers and may even require them to venture into uncharted territory truly foreign to literary scholars. The rewards are worth the efforts, however. The text is essentially jargon-free (characteristic for McCarthy's writing in any event), but occasionally challenging because of terminology very likely unfamiliar to many in the humanities. In some instances, a little more background is helpful, even necessary for readers to follow the explanations and argument. Solitons, the strong force, and the ergodic theorem are probably concepts new and unknown to many readers, but a good dictionary (or Google) should suffice. An index listing and defining terms would have been a good addition, a useful aid, and a remedy for that minor infelicity. At times, the first section of the book presents concepts without an entirely adequate context so that they remained, at least for this reviewer, a little too abstract. Otherwise, McCarthy's presentation of the science (and everything

else in this book) is gratifyingly straightforward, clear, and accessible, likewise never simplistic or trite.

The second part of the study turns to three literary masterpieces—Goethe's *Faust*, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, and Grass's *Tin Drum*—for an exemplification of the consilience of scientific theory and literary interpretation. Although I do not agree in every instance with his readings of those texts and think he sometimes pushes the parallels and correspondences too far, McCarthy's interpretations are nevertheless always insightful and exciting. The decision to map the interconnectivity of science and literature is no small undertaking, and McCarthy demonstrates just how rewarding and necessary such an enterprise is. Why he chose on the one hand the science of chaos and complexity instead of superstring theory, for example, or on the other *Faust*, *Zarathustra*, and *The Tin Drum* instead of works by some different authors may puzzle or distress some readers, but McCarthy makes a solid case for his choices. Chaos and complexity theory itself represents a science which unifies apparent opposites (cf. 275). The science of chaos and complexity investigates and maps the interrelations of *chaos* and *cosmos*, of disorder and order. In particular, the theory charts the emergence (creation) of order (meaning) from chaos (apparently disordered formlessness) in the physical universe. In similar fashion, *Faust*, *Zarathustra*, and *The Tin Drum* map possible paradigms for the creation (emergence) of meaning (order) in the turbulence (confusion) of human existence. They are not only literary monuments, they are in a sense "novels of the universe" (270, 331). While each text concerns itself with the re-definition of good and evil, each "novel" also explores, depicts, or asserts the "shift in perspective from the created to the creating moment" (331). In a word, *creativity* is indeed the key concern of McCarthy's book.

Among the many other delights this book has to offer, such as an interpretation of the initials in Oskar Mazarath's name in *The Tin Drum* or definitions of evil from Spinoza to Baudrillard, are McCarthy's etymological explanations of words like *gnome* and *agonistic*, *chaos* and *cosmos* or his explication of Nietzsche's will to power in terms of energy quanta. Equally illuminating are observations that Faust, like today's physicists, seeks a TOE (theory of everything), that *Zarathustra*'s eternal return resonates in both *Faust* and *The Tin Drum*, or that Goethe and Nietzsche provide a foundational intertext for *The Tin Drum*.

Remapping Reality may not appeal to those who dislike the logic of paradox, unavoidable given the science and the texts McCarthy has chosen to elucidate, but it will be a pleasure to those who do. While he pulls down the barriers between humanistic scholarship and scientific inquiry, McCarthy also asserts the sense and value of literature and literary studies in a technological age dominated by scientific modes of thought. That is itself something of paramount importance, since the denizens of the twenty-first century need to understand that the knowledge provided by myth or narrative is as valid and necessary as that produced by science. It is to be hoped that this book finds its way into the hands and minds of the readers its author has wished for (29), readers with catholic interests, tastes, and vision not restricted by the all too prevalent specialization of the contemporary academic disciplines.