From Kafka to Sebald: Modernism and Narrative Form ed. by Sabine Wilke (review)

Ben Hutchinson

Modernism/modernity, Volume 20, Number 3, September 2013, pp. 617-618 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2013.0057

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/525188

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=525188
while reading *The Life and Works* in Paris in 1931, summary tables he later drew up in his own copy of *The Life and Works*, an unpublished essay on Confucius from 1943, and the material on Adams from Pound’s notebook for *Thrones*.

In comparison with the cantos that came before and after, especially *The Pisan Cantos*, the Adams Cantos have been the victim not only of misunderstanding but also of sheer neglect. Without insisting that they are always as successful as the best of Pound’s other work, Ten Eyck shows that they are much more successful, and much more interesting, than they can seem. As such, *Ezra Pound’s Adams Cantos* represents an invaluable contribution to Pound studies. The book also opens up new opportunities for thinking about the poetry of the 1930s, modernist poetry more generally, and the histories of found poetry and documentary poetics. W. C. Williams was one of the few who enjoyed *Cantos LII–LXXI* when it appeared, and so *Patterson* (1946–1958) is an obvious comparison, but how do Pound’s innovations compare to the documentary methods of Charles Reznikoff in *Testimony* (1934) or *Holocaust* (1975)? Since for the most part Pound produced the Adams Cantos by cutting a single text, Ten Eyck suggestively compares them to the erasure poetry of Jen Bervin, and one could extend the comparison to a poem like Ronald Johnson’s *RADI OS* (1977). The Adams Cantos might emerge from these and other new contexts, building on Ten Eyck’s admirable study, looking much more significant than many of Pound’s most committed admirers have allowed.


Reviewed by Ben Hutchinson, University of Kent

The essays collected in this volume seek to analyze examples of German-language modernist fiction from a range of narrative perspectives. Tending notably to a psychoanalytic model of literary theory, they are particularly interested in the ways in which twentieth-century literature constructs—or deconstructs—the authorial self. While the volume arguably lacks overall coherence, a number of the individual contributions ask sophisticated questions of complex texts.

Including essays by some of the leading American Germanists, the collection opens with two pieces on Franz Kafka. Stanley Corngold’s thoughtful contribution considers the notion of what he terms “Kafka-memes” in *The Castle*, presenting them as a key component of the “hermeneutic allure” of Kafka’s work (12). For Corngold, it is these “memes”—epistemological leitmotifs that both stabilize and destabilize the reading experience—that create the loose, impressionistic structure of the novel; their recurrence, he argues, produces a “vertigo of indetermination, a perfect *ritardando*, not yet a message: and *that* is the message” (18). By way of example, Corngold suggests that this deferred meaning finds expression in the counterfactuals and conditionals of Kafka’s slippery syntax: what, he asks, is the cognitive force of Kafka’s similes?

Imke Meyer, like Corngold, is aware of the hermeneutic trap of reading Kafka too allegorically, as though his texts could be interpreted once and for all if only the reader were clever enough. Yet her contribution nonetheless argues that “The Hunger Artist” can be read “as an allegory of the performative contradictions of bourgeois subject construction” (29), as an exposition of the ways in which “the subject . . . must consume itself in the very process of its constitution” (39). This aporia of the incommensurability of the bourgeois subject/artist resonates through many of the subsequent essays.

In the second section of the volume, Jens Rieckmann approaches late Hofmannsthal through the prism of Walter Kappacher’s novel *Der Fliegenpalast* (2009). Kappacher’s elegant reconstruction of Hofmannsthal’s creative crisis in 1924 revolves around the conflict between artist and
The third section is devoted to narrative theory. The first of three essays compares Freud’s analysis of the hysteric “Dora” with Arthur Schnitzler’s short story Fräulein Else (1924). Surveying the standard models of trauma theory, Gail Finney follows Dominick LaCapra’s terms in arguing that where Freud writes about trauma, Schnitzler writes trauma. Heidi Schlipphacke contributes a sophisticated essay on Robert Menasse, persuasively contending that Menasse’s emasculated male protagonists—reminiscent, as she notes, of Philip Roth’s characters—embody, through their transvestism and adoption of “female” characteristics, the Austrian postwar politics of “social partnership” in which the two main parties adopted each other’s policies as a way of creating a “stagnating harmony” (100). According to Schlipphacke, Menasse shows that the “Austrianization of the world” needs to be replaced by a post-dialectical model of masculinity. Judith Ryan’s essay on Sebald, meanwhile, is equally persuasive, using the young Sebald’s annotations of a number of French writers—and, in particular, of Michel Butor’s L’Emploi du temps (1957)—to argue that his narrative structures describe a “double movement, centrifugal and centripetal” (136). Such an approach illustrates the value of using Sebald’s library as a hermeneutic tool for appraising his own work: narrative theory is informed by literary practice.

The final section turns to the notion of autobiography. Lorna Martens considers Christa Wolf’s Kindheitsmuster (1976) as an example of autobiography as psychoanalysis, arguing for the close—if complex—relationship between the psychoanalytic and the feminist perspective on childhood. In Wolf’s narrative, suggests Martens, writing, like remembering, emerges as a therapeutic process that invokes fear in order to vanquish it. Walter Sokel’s closing meditation on his own “provisional existence” does something similar, recalling his experiences in the Vienna of the 1930s in an attempt to understand why he did not emigrate immediately. “I behaved toward the annexation the way one behaves toward death,” he records, “We all know we will die at some point. But exactly when remains a mystery” (169).

If Sokel’s reflections provide an engagingly personal conclusion, it is not clear what they contribute to a volume subtitled Modernism and Narrative Form. As such, the final essay functions as a microcosm of a book that, despite numerous stimulating pieces, is ultimately less than the sum of its parts. Indeed, what Corngold terms Kafka’s frustration of the “reader’s expectation of a narrative telos” (21) mirrors the experience of reading this volume: there is little sense of cumulative gain. The professed aim of the collection is to bring the work of Kafka into “conversation” with both his contemporaries and his inheritors (2), and there would certainly be a lot of value in such a project. Yet beyond the first two essays, Kafka’s narrative influence is not discussed; it seems odd, to take just one example, to neglect his manifest presence in Sebald’s work. The second of four sections, moreover, is titled “Kafka Effects,” and yet Kafka is barely mentioned in the essays on Hofmannsthall and Goll included here.

This misunderstanding is compounded by the somewhat misleading title, where neither the chronology nor the implied teleology corresponds to the contents (the most recent author considered is not Sebald but the Austrian novelist Robert Menasse). The structure of the collection thus feels a little as though it has been retrospectively imposed on a heterogeneous group of articles on twentieth-century German literature; in this, the book perhaps reveals its origins as a Festschrift (for Richard T. Gray) a little too clearly. These problems of structure and thematic coherence aside, however, the volume contains a number of rewarding essays on both major and minor modernists.