
Robert Lumsden prompted an interesting discussion in the first issue of *Transnational Literature* with the question, ‘Does literature exist?’ In his contribution to the symposium, Lumsden questioned whether literature might be ‘[t]he name for a state of mind we bring to the reading of some texts, but not to others’. In *Reading Literature after Deconstruction*, he describes the event of interpretation as ‘a flowing together of reader and writer in an immediacy of mysteriously reciprocal responsiveness beyond calculation, an engagement of mind with mind beyond the enunciations of analysis’ (73). Quoted out of context, his statement probably looks like sentimental impressionistic mysticism – which, to a degree, it unashamedly is.

For Lumsden, ‘there is no model of literary criticism nor of philosophic enquiry deserving of compliance. … The reader consciously appropriates, even dominates, the theorist at every point according to what he or she decides is most useful at the time of reading.’ (4, 16). Lumsden is adept at summary and categorisation, which brings the thinking of the theorists he deals with – Iser, Gadamer, Derrida, Lyotard, Adorno, de Man, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, et al – into sharp focus. His representation of their thinking is rarely reductionist, and he frequently does what is so often not done, by showing theory at work on texts, on nineteenth and twentieth century poetry in particular. Within the first ten pages, for instance, Lumsden has already divided our ‘pre-conceptual’ ‘primary responses’ to texts into three ‘pattern[s]’ – ‘surface-to-depths’, ‘discontinuities’, ‘associational’ – and launched into a multiple reading of the Grimm Brothers’ *Little Red Riding-Cap* to demonstrate them in action (4-15). This both aids comprehension and makes the book quite an enjoyable read.

The practical bent of Lumsden’s thinking coincides with a refreshingly old-fashioned enthusiasm for the ‘magic’ of poetic language. ‘Poetry’, he says, ‘is best taken as an attempt to speak to the world’s strangeness’ (200). Our function as interpreters is to ‘translate’, as best we can, this speech into a discursive prose which necessarily falls short of the original statement. This requires deep attention to the text: the kind of fore-given commitment to the ability of literature to change our reality advocated in his contribution to the *Transnational Literature* symposium, and too readily discounted both by individual readers and those who formulate university curricula. When he spends a couple of pages complaining about the destructive effects of ‘mobile telephony’ on the ‘possibility of intimacy’ (60-62) it is because he rightly sees that such intimacy is as necessary for the study of literature as it is in any human relationship.

Observing that ‘[w]hatever account to the contrary they may give, the majority of literary critics behave in practice as though the intention of an author were recoverable from a text’ (99), Lumsden embarks in Chapter 3 (‘Intention’) on a discussion that treads adroitly the tightrope of this disjunction between theory and practice. His conclusions manage to be both revelatory and commonsensical. Illustrating his point with a reading of a random computer-created ‘poem’, Lumsden observes that ‘[t]he imperative to try to make meaning, even of something we know to have been produced automatically, is all but irresistible’ (107). In keeping with current critical orthodoxy, he acknowledges that ‘“a writer’s intention” remains nothing more certain than our attempted reconstruction of that intention’, but goes on to suggest the unfashionable...
notion that ‘a writer’s consciousness may be experienced by a reader ... by means other than rational demonstration’ (115). Lumsden’s book, in its most interesting points, proceeds by elucidating these ‘means other’, both by way of practical demonstrations of post-structuralist theory at work, but also via some more ‘arcane’ directions.

Prompted by the oft-cited analogies between deconstruction and kabbalah and negative theology, a subtle ‘spiritualism’ pervades Lumsden’s work. Concepts like ‘Tao’ or the ‘Tat Tvam Asi’ of the Upanishads, or indeed, the Book of Job’s ‘God’, are functional aspects of his thinking, marking similar spaces to Derrida’s ‘trace’ or ‘differance’: ‘Both are versions of a sense of something there which can’t be seen but persists because we are unable to vouch for its existence’ (284). In his discussion of ‘Types of Poetry’ in Chapter 5, Lumsden focuses on the inability of paraphrase to capture a poem’s meaning or intent: ‘The hope which accompanies the attempt can only be that of a renewed awareness of the possibility of an absence left in the wake of the sudden exhaustion of the discursive: a residual awareness of the imperfections of explanation’ (211-12). The work of literary studies is better able to cope with this ‘gap’ than any other discipline. Readers, writers, and literary critics, therefore, need not ‘submit their unique ways of working to the demands of other disciplines, as though notions of evidence which hold in the sciences, or historical studies, or philosophy, or linguistics deserved universal application’ (43). Of course, this is liberationist rhetoric, but for those who feel the strain that such ‘foreign’ theoretical paradigms have placed on literary studies in the last thirty or so years, it is a rhetoric that will seem quite timely.

I have two criticisms of the book, though both are minor. The final chapter, ‘Translation’, although attempting to pull together the diverse considerations of the previous chapters, more nearly falls victim to what the rest of the book so tenaciously avoids: submission at the hands of the theorists it discusses – in this case, Derrida. Even the practical exemplar (Bradley’s reading of Othello versus Leavis’) seems ‘tacked-on’. More troubling, however, is Lumsden’s assault on metre in Chapter 4. While he is right to argue that rhythm – that is, the stresses ‘we readily feel when we are freely making meaning out of a verse’ (171) – should be paramount, the polemic tone of his argument tends to suggest that to read according to metric conventions is necessarily to fall into bondage to a machine that ‘devastates ... nuances’ (174). He acknowledges that there is pleasure in ‘beat[ing] time ... as we chant some verses’ (176), but only to scorn those who enjoy it. For a book that displays a marked interest in the teaching of poetry, he seems here to ignore the revelation that the discovery of metrics can be for a novice. Moreover, the ‘beat’ of poetry – not just its ‘groove’ – seems to me part of its primal appeal. The sheer physicality of ‘chant’ – like the body, regular but not mechanical – is part of its meaning.

Lumsden’s book is a valuable resource, particularly for students and teachers of poetry, but also for those with an interest in the place of theory in literary studies. Rarely ever is theory illustrated so clearly in practice. Lumsden’s passion for poetry, and its place on university curricula, is laudable, and a voice currently much needed among professional academics.

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