

Hassan Melehy, *The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England*. Farnham, U.K. and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010. viii + 277 pp. Index. \$104.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-6445-1.

Christine Sukic, Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne

christine.sukic@univ-reims.fr

The French theoretician of the baroque Didier Souiller recommends that the early modern literature of Europe be read as “one unified text” in order to “highlight a representation of the world that would be common to the minds of that period.”¹ In *The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England*, Hassan Melehy supports the same type of global vision. Even though he often focuses on the notion of “literary canon,” and therefore on the formation of a national literature, Melehy establishes subtle links between the four writers on whom he concentrates—Du Bellay, Spenser, Montaigne and Shakespeare—with, as a thematic background or foundational model in a process of imitation, a vision of ancient Rome and its “ruins.”

Melehy’s study will therefore be useful and enlightening for scholars of both French and English literature, as well as for comparativists such as its author, but mainly and hopefully for any specialist of the period who adheres to a vision of early modern European literature and thought as a network of imitation and borrowing to the point of counterfeiting. To that effect, the notion of “simulacrum” (“an image whose relation to its model seriously calls into question any notion of effective representation” [p. 13]) that Melehy introduces at the end of his introduction, serves as a pertinent guiding principle for a study of four authors whose works are characterized by skepticism and an acute perception of the fundamental instability of the world. Thus, the notion of “literary transfer,” as it appears in the title of the book, testifies to a community of thought based on that instability. Its relevance is already demonstrated by the epigraph of the book, which uses quotations from the four authors studied as well as an extract from Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*. The “transfers” are visible on the page itself, from the awareness of the world’s “inconstancy” as expressed in Du Bellay’s *Antiquitez de Rome*, to Shakespeare’s use of metatheatricity in *Julius Caesar*, a common metaphor of the vanity and the mutability of the world.

Following a fourteen-page introduction, the book is divided into four parts (“Du Bellay,” “Spenser,” “Montaigne,” “Shakespeare”), each part in its turn divided into three chapters. It thus forms a coherent whole, even though the first five chapters are new versions of previously published articles on Du Bellay and Spenser. They blend well with Melehy’s demonstration, and the impression of unity is reinforced by the constant reminders that these four parts are meant to echo one another. In the course of the work, Melehy often refers to previous chapters, demonstrating the epistemological associations and inherent logic of the

¹ Didier Souiller, *La Littérature baroque en Europe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988 p. 52). My translation.

book.

The introduction allows its author to situate himself from a theoretical point of view. Interestingly, Melehy seems reluctant to display too strict an obedience to theory as he asserts the importance of New Historicism in early modern studies while regretting a sort of theoretical domination (“many seem to be under the impression that serious research in literary studies necessitates a firm grounding in literary history and often costly trips to archives” [p. 2]). Melehy chooses New Historicism when it is necessary (as in the case of Du Bellay), but resorts to maintaining an “autonomy of the literary text as a privileged site of the confluency and negotiation of discourses” (p. 3) and admits to a sense of formalism (“The principal difference between my approach in this book and New Historicism is that I am considerably more interested in placing emphasis on the formal operations of particular texts” [p. 9]). However, far from refusing theoretical grounding, Melehy asserts a freedom of thought that allows him the practice of formal close reading (as when he advocates the use of the notion of “intertextuality” [p. 5]) but within a historical context that is necessary for a study in which the notions of imitation and literary lineage play such an important part.

The first section of the book is a study of Joachim Du Bellay’s *Antiquitez de Rome* and *Songe*, theoretically grounded on his *Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Françoise*, in which Du Bellay expresses the contradictory desire to “define [France’s] autonomy in relation to antiquity” while asserting the necessity to refer to it “as providing its models” (p. 20). Melehy shows the importance of the classical notions of “invention” and “imitation” as used by Du Bellay, who relies on the medieval concept of *translatio studii* (p. 27). Melehy thus arrives at one of the most crucial aspects of early modern culture: the question of imitation. He also considers Du Bellay’s literary texts as a continuation of his theory (p. 32), a point which could probably be made about all the poets of that period in Europe. The study of Du Bellay’s *Antiquitez de Rome* and his *Songe* gives rise to a fascinating reflection on Rome—where Du Bellay travelled with his uncle in 1553—as a topos of literary greatness that the young poet was disappointed not to find then, except in a state of ruins. But far from producing nostalgia, this disappointment created “a space” (p. 31) in which to produce French poetry in the present and for the future. Rome is thus an “antiquité”—a word that, as Melehy shows, has a two-fold meaning, that of greatness and of decrepitude—a sign, both present and absent, of former greatness in its ruined state. As such, it can be seen as a representation of “mondaine inconstance” (sonnet 3, quoted p. 45), the instability of the world, but also of the written text, which Melehy terms “the fluidity of signs” (p. 49). This fluidity is confirmed in the *Songe*, which is also based on the process of imitation. It is at once a vanity, with its reference to Ecclesiastes, and an imitation of Revelation in the hope of building a New Jerusalem so that the poet may “achieve immortality through the supposed immortality of Rome” (p. 68).

The study of Spenser naturally follows that of Du Bellay, since the English poet translated the two works evoked by Melehy as *The Ruines of Rome* and *The Visions of Bellay* (both published in *Complaints* in 1591), poems that until recently have been viewed as “an awkwardly composed series of sonnets” (p. 75). Was that view prompted by the fact that the poems are close imitations of continental counterparts, and that, as such, they may question a national vision of English literature? Melehy subtly shows how Spenser is at once a close

imitator of Du Bellay, but one who also imitates the pattern of the latter's French model towards Rome — ascribing to Du Bellay's sonnets "the status of ruin" (p. 84)—a paradox that Melehy calls "defensive imitation" (p. 77).² Melehy's study of Spenser's translations of *Visions* by Petrarch and Du Bellay is particularly enlightening with its meticulous study of the text's history, beginning with Jan van der Noot's *Theatre for Worldlings* (first published in English in 1569), about which Melehy indicates the "astounding confluency of languages, traditions and adaptations that is illustrative of both the Renaissance and the Reformation" (p. 96). Van der Noot is indeed a wonderful example of a Renaissance intellectual who travelled Europe extensively and borrowed from many poets. Melehy reproduces a sonnet by Petrarch ("Standomi un giorno solo a la fenestra"), then Marot's version, van der Noot's, and finally a version in English. Proceeding strictly from the texts themselves, he then analyzes them in detail in order to demonstrate the "process of literary transfer that is at work" (p. 97), at once an imitation and a creation. With its exposition of such literary networks of borrowing and imitating, the second part of the book is particularly rich. Melehy augments the notion of imitation by associating it with Spenser's social origins and the importance of his social mobility, as well as his religious identity (through which "ancient Rome allegorizes the Catholic Church" [p. 113]).

The question of the self—already addressed by Melehy in his philosophical essay *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject*—provides an apt transition to Montaigne.³ Melehy introduces the relationship between father and son in the question of imitation. This gives rise to interesting reflections on the use of citations and Montaigne's relation to Latin and classical knowledge, a "patrimony [that] is shaken to its roots by its reinscription and displacement by writing in French in the *Essais*" (p. 141). Again, the main question is that of imitation and invention. Melehy shows how the *Essais* are built around Latin quotations stripped of their "*auctoritas*" (p. 147) and feminized through the use of the "mother tongue," and he astutely associates Montaigne's preoccupation with mutability, instability, and vanity to "Roman vanity" (p. 171), and so to Spenser and Du Bellay.

In the same way, Melehy places Shakespeare's sonnets within the context of the European sonnet, and, quoting A. Kent Hieatt, reasserts Shakespeare's debt to Spenser's translation of Du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome*.⁴ Considering Shakespeare as one should, that is, as the contemporary of his contemporaries, he examines the sonnets that raise the question of the poet's durability (especially, 17, 55 and 60) and addresses the question of the status of the poet as a canonical author. He finds in the sonnets the same concern with time and the durability of poetry, as well as in *Julius Caesar*, where the author examines Shakespeare's treatment of "the relationship between constancy and theatricality" (p. 227) in the light of

² This concept could be used about other English poets of the period such as Samuel Daniel and the way he both accepted and rejected the Italian models in order better to promote the national identity of English literature.

³ Hassan Melehy, *Writing Cogito. Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

⁴ A. Kent Hieatt, "The Genesis of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: Spenser's *Ruines of Rome: by Bellay*," *PMLA* 98.5 (1983): 800-814.

Justus Lipsius' *De Constantia*. Finally, Melehy analyzes Shakespeare's borrowing of Montaigne in *The Tempest*, appropriately ending his study with the question of "representation."

Melehy identifies new sources, or confirms them, and establishes aesthetic parallels between four early modern authors through the use of very fine close readings of the texts. He often refers to previous chapters of his book, thus offering a network of possibilities of various types, aesthetic or cultural. The question of the "literary transfer" is fundamental to the understanding of early modern literature, and Melehy's aesthetic approach shows the simultaneous appearance of epistemological metaphors common to authors who lived in a world perceived as precarious and where one had to invent new models on the "ruins" of old epistemes.

Professor Melehy's style is elegant, without the affectation of unintelligible jargon. This certainly adds to the pleasure of reading his book. My only regret is the absence of a conclusion, in which the author could have confirmed his global vision of European literature in a more theoretical section, while bringing together all the threads of his fascinating study. Fortunately, this does not harm the overall quality or coherence of the book. Professor Melehy could expand on the notion of "literary transfer" in another study that would be most welcome by his readers as a stimulating companion piece to this one.

NOTES

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Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne