# Book Reviews

**460** Haun Saussy. *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2022. Pp. 192. US$37.00 hardcover, US$37.00 ebook.

**Bruce Rusk, University of British Columbia**

Haun Saussy's latest book continues an ongoing project of thinking with Chinese cases to develop approaches to comparison that not only make sense of that literary tradition but that reflect on its ways of making sense. *The Making of Barbarians* examines how users of non-Sinitic languages interacted with the grammatological and literary powers and practices of the dominant cultural force in pre-modern East Asia, China. The book focuses on the period up to the influx of Western ideas and practices in the nineteenth century, with excursions into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the issues at hand. Its argument, in sum, is that China's identity, in literature and more broadly, is bound up with its relationships with the Others around it, and with the processes by which texts could or could not—and should or should not—be exchanged and interpreted across its many, moving, and diverse frontiers.

The introduction offers an important justification of the project by noting an obsession with East-West comparisons in thinking about *Zhong* 中 (Chinese) in relation to *wai* 外 (foreign, but referring "in common usage, to contemporary Europe and North America as the sites of present-day literary prestige" [7]), a slant that props up longstanding habits, not to say biases, in comparative literature as practised in those prestigious places. New examples of the "foreign" (the Barbarians of the title) offer new views of the self—for all of us. Saussy argues that "[t]here is a Self, partly

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consisting of internalized Others; there are Others; there are Other Others; there are Others who are so Other that they are not even recognized as Others; and a complex tissue of relationships binds them all" (9). The book moves through Others internalized and externalized in relation to a "China" that cannot, by this logic, be defined without reference to them.

The first chapter addresses practices of "translation," here referring *stricto sensu* to establishing interlinguistic equivalences. Saussy makes his task both easier and harder by largely excluding the most important sites of translation work in pre-modern China, the production of Chinese versions of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit, Pali, and other originals, and the exchange of diplomatic and administrative documents with non-Chinese speaking states and subjects. Focusing on literary documents reduces the source base considerably; it may also obscure ways in which these two domains—one producing widely-known scriptures inextricable from their status as translation, the other part of the imperial bureaucracy—shaped what it meant to practice translation.



Saussy sets these clear examples of translation against the range of practices through which people in China and elsewhere understood text in Classical or Literary Chinese, the idiom of virtually all learned and administrative discourse. This theme recurs in Chapter Three, on the pan-East Asian space in which Sinitic writing dominated elite literary practice. Saussy carefully engages with recent scholarship on interpretive devices through which a Sinitic text could be interpreted without being "read in Chinese"—yielding a reading in Japanese, Korean, or Uyghur. A person so trained, some argue, is not translating but rather relying on properties of the logographic Chinese script to extract from the source text a reading vocalized and understood in their vernacular.

Saussy takes these arguments seriously but notes an important limit: "Whether something is a translation or not, whether a language is foreign or not, depends on what you are trying to do, what you are trying to prove" (67). Identifications of linguistic equivalence and difference can be a site of fierce disagreement and of misrecognition—a marker of their capacity for ideological work. Such is the case for the relationship between Chinese and surrounding languages, as the book explores in depth, but equally so "within" Chinese. This is apparent in struggles, in China as elsewhere, over local linguistic forms deemed "dialects" of a national language. One effect of the emphasis on pure logography is to reinforce the notion of a single language across time and space, with some cumulative evolution and spots of local colour. Saussy refers several times to "the Chinese written language" (e.g. 29, 69, 139), but for many linguists, this unity is a myth that obscures a long history of translation among Sinitic languages and the need for "native" speakers to learn archaic or standardized vocabulary and syntax in order to read and write literary texts, even if these could be pronounced according to the phonology of one's vernacular, Sinitic or otherwise. Likewise, it is not quite that case that "the particular pronunciation used by the authors of a Chinese text was without consequences for the text's currency"

(65). Some prestigious poetic forms followed rules for rhyming that were based on archaic pronunciations that even "native" speakers had to memorize. Syntax likewise changed over time. With the arrival in Edo Japan (1600-1868) of texts in later Chinese vernaculars, such as novels and plays, the software for reading them crashed and needed updating—and it was clear to all that this was because the underlying language was not that of classical texts (Hedberg). Whether that means it was *another* language is one of those distinctions that helps establish the ecumenical status of "Chinese."

As Saussy discusses in Chapter Four, "The Formation of China," the modern nation state and global forces alike converge toward linguistic pauciculture, but for centuries comparable—that is, recognizable but different—forces operated on cultural elites who participated in written culture and the exercise of power through writing, and through them on a broader population. In this sense, Saussy's contribution is in line with other recent calls for an expansive, historicizing engagement with the nature of imperial formations. As Jenco and Chappell have argued:



> If "imperial" processes recur ceaselessly on a micro-level in conventions that shape individual socialization, and on a macro-level in institutions that culminate in state making—both within and outside designated domestic or state contexts—then it seems any hope for postcolonial emancipation would necessarily have to lie in a cultural critique: to move beyond imperialism would be to advance criticism of the very socialization processes that replicate themselves at different scales and on different levels over time, rather than of any particular political or economic project associated with territorial expansion in a given epoch. (699)

Saussy is advancing just such a critique, in a space of world-historical importance, directed both at his primary field of operations, Euro-American academe, and his object of inquiry, the Chinese literary tradition.

To this end, it is essential to understand how linguistic boundaries were drawn and how they placed texts into—and reconfigured—the literary tradition, based in part on whether or not they were perceived as translations. Saussy notes, as have others, that a vanishingly small number of texts that are clearly translations appear in the traditional corpus, and that few texts from other Asian traditions circulated in Chinese translation—zero from other East Asian vernaculars. Therefore, the slender set of examples carries significant weight. Chapter Two, "Can the Barbarian Sing?", includes close readings of several of these, most little-known outside of specialist scholarship. Concerning two such texts, however, there are questions of provenance that call into question their utility as sources. One, the "Chi-le Song," is mentioned by title in a history that recounts events of the mid-sixth century, but its text is only preserved via an eleventh-century anthology that describes the Chinese-language text as a translation but does not provide an original (50). Later histories retelling these events recopy the song, but some readers doubted its authenticity—the erudite commentator Hu Sanxing 胡三省 (1230-1302) thought it "a fabrication by an epigone" (Sima 159.4943). Indeed, it uses locutions familiar from the Chinese poetic

canon, which could conceivably be the work of an elegantizing translator but could equally well be the product of the longstanding mode of ventriloquism in which a poet speaks for a historical figure, combined with the equally venerable practice of "filling in" (*bu* 補) lost poems known by title only. In this light, it is problematic for Saussy to treat it as an example of "[b]arbarian song [that] survives in ethnographic writing" (49); rather, it is a literary projection with ethnographic undertones.

His next example is even clearer. Saussy acknowledges that the "Song of Agan" that he translates (53-54) is not attested before the late eighteenth century, and that

> it is more likely, I think, that the "Song" as we have it today is a later reconstruction reflecting what someone thinks [its purported author] ought to have said rather than what he said. This does not in the least hinder scholars who quote, anthologize, and interpret the "Song of Agan" from citing in their footnotes the *Jin shu* as if that historical work were the source for the poem rather than just the source of the story about the poem's creation. It is as if no one wanted to admit that the song is really a piece of synthetic folklore. (54-55)



However, this passage and its footnotes provide no definitive case of scholars taking this song at face value. The song is not in any footnote to *Jin shu* 晉書 that I have found (without access to the printing used by Saussy, I checked several editions with the same pagination); that history only mentions the title. The eighteenth-century source he cites, a 1775 (*recte* 1778) gazetteer of a county in Gansu province, northwestern China, does *not* include the poem. Saussy only references an online edition, without providing page numbers (155, n. 37). Subsequent gazetteers, completed in 1847 and 1892, *do* include the song in their anthologies of writings on local topics (Huang and Wu 11.36b; Zhang 30.9a). In both it is apparent that the song is by Wu Zhen 吳鎮 (1721-1797), a local scholar in whose collected works it appears. There, an author's note explains that Wu was "filling in" (*bu*) the long-lost song, part of the history of his home region (Wu 1.7b). In other words, it is "synthetic folklore" through-and-through; I have found no example of it being taken otherwise before a popular work published in 1948 and even that author, Charles K.H. Chen (Chen Chengzhi), "passes no judgment on its historical authenticity" (Chen 23).[1] Saussy also does not notice that an entirely different "Song of Agan," origin unknown, circulated in the late eighteenth century, though he cites an English translation of it (163, n. 37, citing Carroll 19–20; original in Xu "Nianbiao," *juanshou*.3b-4a).

It is perhaps no coincidence that it is in the eighteenth century that these "barbarian" songs appeared, under the rule of a dynasty, the Qing (1644-1911), whose emperors and much of whose governing elite were Manchus, descendants of a Northeastern semi-nomadic people and speakers of a language unrelated to Chinese. Manchu was a language of state, not only used internally by the bureaucracy but also publicly displayed, for example in stone inscriptions throughout the Qing territories that contained parallel texts in Chinese and Manchu, often alongside Mongol and sometimes Tibetan. The state produced massive polyglot glossaries, emperors spoke to courtiers in both Chinese and Manchu, and literary works took parallel and

hybrid forms, whether translated between Chinese and Manchu or written macaronically in both. This case—which predates, while overlapping with, the Western influx of the nineteenth century—suggests that the position of Chinese has not always been so central, even at the centre. Rather, it *appears so* in most Chinese-language sources because that is how they were written, as part of a conscious strategy of rule. Earlier, under other "alien" dynasties such as the Jin (1115-1234), whose rulers were the ancestors of the Manchus, and the Mongol-led Yuan (1271-1368), Chinese subjects from the south could be called "Southern Barbarians" (Nanman 南蠻); compare the reference to Chinese as "Man" in a Manchu language textbook (153, n.15). This case complicates Saussy's assessment that terms of barbarization are not strictly relative (40)—he focuses on Yi 夷, but the logic applies to Man as well—but only make sense by a Sinocentric logic and on the basis of Chinese-language sources.

Sinological quibbles notwithstanding, the book provides a rich set of sources and reflections for considering how categories of central vs. alien, civilized vs. otherwise, and native vs. translation functioned in Asia. The comparisons suggested in and by the book help create new maps of civilizations and barbarisms on which on which these labels would shift and overlap over time and space.



## Note

1. Chen does not cite a source for the song, but it was likely one of these local gazetteers. He misreads Wu Zhen's name as a toponym, identifying it with nearby "Agan Town" (*Agan zhen*). Saussy cites the preceding page of Chen's book, perhaps the source of his misconstrual of the "Song of Agan" (163, n. 32). Examples of twentieth-century scholarship taking the "Song" as ancient based on Chen include A'erdingfu and Li and Kim.

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Timothy Bewes. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. New York: Columbia UP, 2022. Pp. 336. US$140.00 hardcover, US$35.00 paperback, US$34.99 ebook.



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We are perhaps at a point in criticism and theory today at which, if you wanted to be a bit daring or avant-garde, you might carry out a strident defence of, or a critique based on, the representative model in some form or other, so entrenched have models of criticism that found themselves in opposition to this mode of reading become in academic discourse. It is to Timothy Bewes's credit, then, that he manages in this book to construct an antirepresentative model that sheds new light on contemporary writing. This is achieved in part by how the book dissects the notion of representation and tracks its legacy within a mode of reading that operates as a kind of cipher or late stage of the thing itself (more on this in a moment). But the novelty of the book and its approach to what we might call, perhaps reductively, the question of method, also makes itself felt in one of its other key topics; namely, what Bewes calls "postfiction." It is fair to say that this is a theoretically dense book, and so to get into what it has to say about each of the issues just mentioned, it is worth giving a systematic rundown of the key arguments. Below, then, is my attempt at doing this, after which we can move onto some further analysis of the book, and an assessment of its contributions and problems. The order in which the arguments are laid out is not necessarily how they are laid out in the book, but rather, what seems to me to be the most lucid way of articulating a complex of claims and positions that are both provocative and, at points, slightly elusive.

The first thing to say is that this book suggests that fiction, and the novel in particular, has changed fundamentally, albeit not totally, in the last fifty years or so. Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to work out the precise delimitations of what counts as fiction, at least when we focus on the group of texts that Bewes designates as "postfictional," which include novels by the likes of W.G. Sebald, J.M.

Coetzee, and Rachael Cusk. For Bewes, "postfiction" puts into question and draws attention to the fallacy of what he calls the "instantiation relation." What he means by the "instantiation relation" is the procedure whereby characters, events, or ideas in novels and fiction more broadly are shown to correspond to the world at large. As Bewes puts it:

> the positive use of the term "instantiation" in the context of literary works […] implies that the relation between the work and the world is that of a part to a whole, a particular to a universal; that the work is capable of "instantiating" an idea, a character type, a narrative situation, an ethical or practical quandary; that such instantiation can be directly beneficial for the reader's experience and understanding of the world; that the work makes possible a degree of (no doubt imperfect) knowledge or judgment about life and society, philosophy and art, state and political structures, and available modes of resistance to them. (86)

From this, it ought to be clear that instantiation is a form of representation and is subtly different from full-blown models of signification or communication.



The breakdown in the instantiation relation makes connections between parts and wholes, particulars and universals seem either arbitrary or impossible: indeed, writers like Coetzee and Sebald foreground this situation directly in their work. What arises as a result is a mode of narration that Bewes dubs the "free indirect," which is, as he puts it near the start of the monograph, a "non-anchored, non-centered perspective" (38). It is the moment at which parts and wholes, and connections between different moments, processes, and states break down that the free indirect comes fully into play for Bewes, as a species of free indirect discourse that takes on a more prominent role in contemporary (post)fiction. Postfictional works, having murdered the instantiation relation and brought into being a new form of free indirect expression, give us glimpses of what the thought of the novel itself might look like. Bewes never really talks about what this thought is, in practice as it were, and for reasons explained below, but the observation does allow him to enter into a thorough engagement with Gilles Deleuze's work on the cinema, particularly *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (1985). If Deleuze's work is a necessary precursor to *Free Indirect*, it also allows the book to engage with another key thinker who has made a resolute stand against the representative model: Jacques Rancière. This is how the book ends, then: by trying to track a course between these two thinkers in order, it would seem, to fully cement the arguments made throughout, and to draw out some of the broader implications of these two thinkers' work.

The focus on Deleuze and Rancière draws our attention to a striking aspect of this book, which is the amount of time it spends in engaging with critical and theoretical arguments from across the spectrum of literary and critical studies. This engagement is thorough and enriching and allows Bewes to demonstrate fully the arguments he wants to make. It covers not just Deleuze and Ranciére, but also figures such as Henri Bergson, Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Voloshinov, Georg Lukács, Michel Foucault, David Armstrong, Cora Diamond, Caroline Levine, and more. The book in

this regard will no doubt advance critical thinking, particularly around questions of method, but also in its approach to this diverse range of thinkers. Notwithstanding all this, one does feel at points that an engagement with critical material is taking place instead of an engagement with literary or (post)fictional material. Of course, this is not necessarily a problem, and seeing it as a problem would be the kind of thing one gets the sense that Bewes would militate against. However, it does make the engagement with literary material feel a little thin on the ground, which has the additional consequence of, at worst, leaving the arguments the book makes feel a little shaky, or, at best, leaving the reader feeling a little unsatisfied - I'm more inclined to the latter option. Bewes does, of course, look at other authors apart from those mentioned above, including Patrick Mondiano, Jesse Ball, and Zadie Smith. Yet, one is still left with a sense that a little more exposure to the postfictional universe might have been in order. More could have been said, for example, about Cusk—who is really only fleetingly considered—or some of the other big names in postfiction, such as Sheila Heti, Karl Ove Knausgård, Annie Ernaux, or Vigdis Hjorth. It seems strange that Bewes does not tackle any of these writers in order to illustrate further the insightful arguments he makes in the book.



In fact, the monograph offers a kind of ready-made riposte to this criticism, one that it links to the notion of the thought of the novel itself, mentioned above. As Bewes suggests a few times in his text, the notion of "uninstantiability" as a phenomenon that exceeds individual texts cannot be verified or falsified in any conclusive way, because to do so would be to fall back into the logic of instantiation (85), taking a part as a stand-in for the whole. This observation is undergirded by some philosophical explorations, which range from the history of set theory to Cora Diamond's notion of the "difficulty of reality." In a sense, this paradox means that there is not really much point in looking at other examples of postfiction, because all there is to say from this point of view is that they can no longer be read within the logic of the instantiation relation and that, consequently, nothing can be said about them.

One can see, then, why Bewes is interested in Deleuze, whose work offers a potential remedy to the above situation. Anyone who has encountered Deleuze's work on the cinema will know that he identifies what he calls a sensorimotor break in postwar cinema, in which time and space are knocked out of joint, and which for Bewes is akin to the disappearance of the instantiation relation. But Deleuze also names a whole series of concepts and images that arise alongside the sensorimotor break in cinema, and places this within a concrete historical context. Bewes's book, despite its theoretical eloquence and its originality, leaves one wondering what concepts and figures might be drawn from a mode of literature that thinks itself, or which forces us to think about it on its own terms. Instead, Bewes produces in this book a kind of anti-criticism, the founding of which opens the possibility of thinking about the concepts, figures, and modes of thought that belong to literature, and postfiction in particular, without fully realizing that possibility.

Alexandra Perisic. *Precarious Crossings: Immigration, Neoliberalism, and the Atlantic*. The Ohio State UP, 2019. Pp. 240. US$99.95 hardcover, US$29.95 paperback, US$29.95 ebook.

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"The regional and the global are not necessarily in opposition but rather supplement one another" (177), Alexandra Perisic argues in *Precarious Crossings: Immigration, Neoliberalism, and the Atlantic*, a comparative transnational examination of migrant narratives. Perisic deliberately traverses linguistic traditions with her work in order to outline an argument for the multipodal and multifaceted function of the Atlantic Ocean within global neoliberal relations. Arguing comparative literature methodologies allow us to fully embrace the effects of what she terms "global neoliberalization," Perisic urges comparatists to resist the impulse to begin study of neoliberalism from the dominant countries, rather pondering, "would global neoliberalization generate equal enthusiasm if the story were told from the perspective of the Global South?" (2). An insistence on shifting the perspective from which we consider immigration allows Perisic, and us, to consider the conditions that shape global precarity as a state of existence that ties different subjects to one another despite colonial relations and legacies, national borders, and linguistic communities. Indeed, Perisic argues for using "precarity as a conceptual framework" in such a way that allows us to "account for the growing inequalities within the precariat itself" (12). In other words, the contemporary neoliberal world order has created a precarious class, the contours of which become much more clearly apparent when we allow ourselves to observe and analyze comparatively.



There are multiple points from which Perisic's work departs: neoliberalism (or, more aptly, neoliberalization), migration, postcolonialism, and the Atlantic Ocean. Perisic insists that adopting a comparative approach that observes works written across multiple languages—in this case, French, Spanish, and English—combats the "neoliberal governance [that] mobilizes racialized and gendered modes of marginalization to prevent solidarity between groups" (3), positioning them in opposition to one another despite their shared precarity at the hands of transnational neoliberal markets, policies, and institutions. The comparative approach, thus, draws connections between conditions for migration via the perpetually significant Atlantic Ocean, without ignoring or attempting to flatten the differences and particularities that propel individuals from their points of origin. Literature is a useful vehicle for this analysis, not simply because it holds a looking glass to contemporary societies, but also because it theorizes and opens up space for new concepts and frameworks that can be used to analyze, and to resist, the contemporary neoliberal landscape.

Perisic's emphasis on "global neoliberalization" as a process through which to understand the shift in contemporary immigrant literature is more convincing than her argument about the centrality of the Atlantic Ocean. Drawing connections to her

own experience reading migrant *Bildungsroman* as a young immigrant in France herself, Perisic deliberately pivots discourse about migrants from debates about identity, belonging, and nationalism. Rather, *Precarious Crossings* urges us to think about systemic connections between themes raised in novels that depict immigrants' journeys and lives before, during, and after their displacement from their countries of origin: "Contemporary trans-Atlantic immigrant fictions require a theoretical framework that extends beyond an analysis of the representation and self-representation of immigrants within a national setting" (14). Instead of analyzing the experience of the migrants upon arrival in their new host/home countries, Perisic calls for a shift to reading the causes and underlying themes that preempt, spur, and facilitate the movement in the first place. Thus, the immigrant experiences portrayed in the novels Perisic selects point to global economic systems that order social, personal, and eventually, national affiliations. Furthermore, they allow us to finally pay attention to migration patterns that move beyond, or even eschew, colonial ties while drawing postcolonial connections to twenty-first-century neocolonial or neoimperial capitalistic dominance. Shifting the approach in this way brings the United States into the discussion differently and accounts for the contemporary conditions that unite various populations into global precarity while also calling attention to regional, national, and cultural specificities.



The chapters in *Precarious Crossings* take on thematic similarities between texts from a wide range of countries and settings: the contemporary circulation of goods alongside the memory and residue of the Middle Passage, precarity and debt, multinational corporations and literary genres, the aesthetics and ethics of opacity in precarity, the figure of the immigrant vis-à-vis the terrorist, and the evolution of the English language. The range of authors Perisic observes is correspondingly vast: Maryse Condé, Caryl Phillips, Fatou Diome, Bessora, Roberto Bolaño, Marie Ndiaye, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, Yuri Herrera, and Giannina Braschi. The comparative approach Perisic adopts to read the works calls upon scholarship in economics, world-systems theory, postcolonialism, and political theory to make a case for the continued utility of comparative literature as an approach and methodology. Though not necessarily defensive, Perisic's stance speaks directly to longstanding debates about the field of Comparative Literature in relation to national literature approaches or, quite famously, area studies. Because neoliberalism deliberately traverses national borders, traditions, and languages, Perisic argues, so must literary scholarship in order to fully contend with and, eventually, resist the manners in which neoliberal approaches create a global state of precarity: "Given its global extent, only a multiracial and multilingual approach can challenge neoliberalism," she declares (3). This is not, though, a question of the continued globalization of literature and migrant narratives. Recognizing that neoliberalism is at the heart of contemporary discourse about the relevance of globalization as a frame of analysis, Perisic offers a different angle, "global neoliberalization" (5), and explains: "I contend that the term globalization needs to be qualified as we are currently in the era of neoliberal globalization,

or, as I prefer to call it, global neoliberalization. I favor the second option because it underscores that neoliberalization is a process, one that does not go unchallenged and that remains incomplete" (5). What is strikingly helpful about Perisic's characterization here is her emphasis on the ongoing and continuous nature of the neoliberal project, which allows for scenes and efforts to explain, delay, counteract, and resist it. By taking a comparative and cross-oceanic approach to observing immigration, as depicted in contemporary novels, Perisic makes a strong case for the capabilities and potentialities of deliberate comparative scholarly practice. Furthermore, this approach enables one to draw the connections necessary to thwart the decentralization that Perisic recognizes at the heart of global neoliberalization and the eventual success of neoliberalism (119-120).

In the end, Perisic's insistence that "contemporary authors from the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America have reconceptualized the Atlantic from a triangular to a multi-polar space" by "traveling beyond the postcolonial route that connects the formerly colonized and the former colonizer" (2), seems less useful than the persistently clear emphasis on the progressive and global nature of neoliberal intent. The novels she selects and the themes she identifies therein are striking. The conceptualization of a stratified global class of precarious individuals in the face of transnational neoliberalization also provides a strong explanation for the countercolonial pathways undertaken by contemporary immigrants. Though the Atlantic Ocean is obviously and will remain a vastly significant facet of African Diasporic history and cultural production, what stands out in *Precarious Crossings* is the convincing and useful employ of comparative literature to bring fresh perspective on the contemporary conditions shaping the global economic and sociopolitical order. Written in this defensive age in the history of the field, Perisic brings a clear instance of the stakes of Comparative Literature and the introduction of analytic frameworks that will, undoubtedly, prove useful in the face of ever-increasing mobility and connectivity on the global stage.



Timothy Aubry. *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2018. Pp. 288. US$42.00 hardcover.

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Timothy Aubry's *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* can be situated within contemporary debates about the nature and purpose of literary studies and the return of aesthetics to the fore of critical consciousness. But Aubry's book does not plead for attention to the aesthetics of works of art; rather, it is a historical investigation of how aesthetic considerations have shaped literary criticism, and specifically the form now usually shorthanded as "critique." *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* thus, in part, takes the familiar

form of a critique of critique. While critique has sought to banish the aesthetic from consideration, and recent efforts at rethinking literary studies have sought to return it, Aubry argues, in fact, that "political critique" is "aesthetic criticism, but in covert fashion" (3).[1] Aesthetic pleasure, Aubry says, "has served as [the] unacknowledged motive" for "literary scholarship" even when it has professed a "political or ideological focus" (4).

Aubry makes his case—or one of his cases; see below—over five chapters that fall into two conceptual clusters. The first three chapters investigate questions of methodology, specifically those that "have provided many of the governing assumptions and critical methods […] over the past eighty years" (27): New Criticism, deconstruction, and the New Historicism. Chapters Four and Five then foreground the academic reaction to two specific texts: Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988). Here, Aubry addresses the academy's complicitness in the production of these novels' "'greatness'" (28), novels which to Aubry respectively signpost how an aesthetic criticism is nonetheless invested in discovering an ethical or political core, as in *Lolita*, or in which a manifest political purpose nonetheless is tied to aesthetic pleasures, as in *Beloved*. An expansive conclusion expands these arguments to a discussion of contemporary methodological replies to ideology critique, so-called "surface" and "distant" reading.



Aubry, as he notes, understands his purpose not as "identify[ing] the existence of a secret illicit agenda on the part of the scholars I examine" but as "simply trying to reveal what I see as a function that literary criticism performs, or, to put it in another way, an experience it promises to academics and students" (29-30). What I understand Aubry to be arguing here is a dual aesthetic dimension to literary criticism—and, coincidentally, also a dual political dimension. First, literary studies in its post-New Critical turn to ideology critique has not in fact evacuated literature's aesthetic dimension from its considerations; it has always been invested in understanding its texts as aesthetically pleasing, even if such aesthetic pleasure has been masked by other categories, such as the resistant, the subversive, and so on. Second, the very act of criticism itself is bound up in an aesthetic experience, an experience of making that produces aesthetic pleasure and an experience of intellectual stimulation in reading that is itself appropriately termed aesthetic.

In Aubry's book, in other words, "aesthetic pleasure" appears as something that critics have in the encounter with the writing of other critics—or presumably, in their own work—as well as in the texts they choose to discuss. I find Aubry's claims both perfectly acceptable and somewhat haphazardly argued. There seems, to me, nothing objectionable to the claim that literary studies has never not cared for the aesthetic experience of a text. I also find nothing particularly puzzling about the argument that a well-made argument is stimulating. But there are at least two issues with this, both, I think, firmly tied to the question of what Aubry means when he says.

Much about Aubry's book hinges on whether one agrees with him on the choice of terms that express what his thesis is, and that includes the question of how press-

ing its claims are. What is most important here, somewhat obviously, is the term "aesthetic," and its various cognates—aesthetic experience, aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic judgement, and aestheticism, most importantly. Aubry's introduction to these terms begins as though it wants to give us a rundown of their history, starting with Alexander Baumgarten in 1735 before bringing in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. In lieu of an expansive discussion of the long history of aesthetics, or indeed a complication of the term's many potential meanings, it then simply posits a set of definitions (9-10): "Aesthetic pleasure will designate that which derives from and arises during the mere act of perceiving or contemplating a given thing" without regard for its usefulness, purposes or consequences, and may include "confusion, abjection, and self-denial" but is "worth pursuing." From there, "aesthetic experience is one in which aesthetic pleasure is a central or defining feature;" and "the aesthetic, as a category, will refer to the whole array of critical and creative practices designed to arouse aesthetic pleasure" (10).



Perhaps what emerges most forcefully to me from this is that it is almost impossible, under this definition, to fail to find the aesthetic at work in all kinds of dimensions of literary criticism. In fact, I might say, Aubry ends up doing exactly what he cautions political critics about: he fails "to recognize the specificity of the aesthetic" (21); or, more properly, he does not, to my mind, adequately name it. The aesthetic, in the critical practice he later offers, becomes indeed ubiquitous in literary studies, but only because with such a definition, it must. Conversely, when "political" comes to mean, as in his discussion of Saidiya Hartman's work, "broader political consequences" that he feels are missing from her engagement, it becomes difficult to be a political *critic*, rather than an activist.

I want to pick on his discussion of Hartman because to me, the stakes of his approach became starkest here. In a long discussion of Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Aubry asserts that "Hartman […] does not reject aesthetic values *per se*; rather, she simply rejects one set of aesthetic criteria for another" (130). Aubry seeks to recover this adoption of aesthetic criteria, which, he asserts, goes "unacknowledged" (129) by Hartman, even as she clearly, indeed "explicitly," champions certain "aesthetic" choices over others (namely, those of deconstruction and New Criticism). The point here is that things such as opacity, perplexion, and bafflement, even *if* they are *aesthetic* experiences, rather than merely experiences, are not interesting to Hartman for their own sake, or interesting because they arise in "the mere act of perceiving." Rather, they are interesting because in being opaque, they resist. Aubry is aware of this objection, and counters it by asserting that Hartman is uninterested in political consequences, in "practical results" (132). But that seems a troubling moving of the goal posts. What is more, throughout the book, Aubry's theorization of "aesthetic pleasure" presupposes that the "mere act of contemplating a given thing" is easily possible, easily detectable, or indeed even theoretically separable. Talking about *Lolita*, Aubry asserts that "the future-oriented outlook of political criticism also nurtures an aesthetic function well equipped to foster pleasurable experiences in the present"

(165). I suppose there are torturous ways in which we might insist that nothing about "future-orientation" here actually is a "recognition" of the "future consequences" of literary criticism; but it seems much simpler to argue that a utopian—a "Marxist positive hermeneutic," in Jameson's terms—is pleasurable specifically because of the concrete hope for the future it produces. No, this does not deny the value of the aesthetic; but then, I wonder if anyone really does, anyway. More theoretically, this seems an impossible separation, specifically the kind that Aubry takes to task. Given his very narrow definition of what political critics must do if they would fairly assert that they are "endorsing [aesthetic] strategies on the basis not of their intrinsic aesthetic value but of their political efficacy" (131), obviously most political criticism becomes also aesthetic criticism. Political critics that assert merely the primacy and dispositivity of the political over the aesthetic, rather than its immediate production of political revolution, are left caught in the vagueness of Aubry's definition.

Perhaps, then, my problem is that it is unclear to me who Aubry builds up as the opposition to his argument. Aubry asserts an "axiomatic" "opposition to aesthetics" (1), claims a "near-universal reproach" (2) of aesthetic judgement, identifies "form" as the "apparent enemy" of "political criticism" (3), suggests that "it is frequently assumed within academic literary studies that attention to form entails aesthetic pleasure" (11). He further asserts that "[s]cholars," unnamed, "have a habit of overstating the capacity of both literary texts and criticism to subvert or reinforce hegemonic power structures" (22-23). Furthermore, he claims that "many scholars at [H.L. Gates's] time" were "allergic to the notion of aesthetic value" (91; but not Gates), and in Saidiya Hartman's time, "the aesthetic" had a "disreputable status within the academy" (134). And, of course, many people say Timothy Aubry raises an entire argument on a strawman. The thing is: all of this may, possibly, be true! But Aubry's definitions seem tailor-made to get people like Hartman both coming and going. Whether we argue that her categories are not meant to be aesthetic categories, and merely become so under Aubry's definitions, or that they are aesthetic, even if she doesn't explicitly say so, he can say: precisely! I'm catching the unacknowledged aesthetic motive.



I don't think it is a coincidence that in the course of his introduction, Aubry weakens his claims, without retracting them. Early on, as I have noted, he suggests that aesthetic pleasure is the "unacknowledged motive" of literary scholarship (4; 29). Somewhere in the middle, Aubry turns to claim that "underlying the apparent diversity of methodologies, ideological positions, and theoretical premises within academic literary studies are […] underdiscussed[] aesthetic preferences" (24). By the end of the introduction, aesthetic pleasure has turned into a "function" (30) of literary criticism. The strongest version of Aubry's book (the claim to motive), I might say, is unsupported by Aubry's evidence; the weakest version of his book—we all have aesthetic preferences—is unremarkable. In between, there are versions that might be traced and made helpful, but too much hinges on doing Aubry's work of finding what he really wants to claim. Aesthetic questions matter for literary studies of whatever

monolithized methodological persuasion. They have always done so; the very word "literary" in literary studies implies some form of aesthetics. Perhaps the point that Aubry ends up making, then, rather than being about motives and functions, is about the inescapabilty of aesthetic judgement in any process of reception—and certainly in the extraordinarily broad way in which he frames it. Aubry's book does a good job of producing one selective history of that inescapability, and it is certainly a good sales pitch to suggest that he is, beyond writing this good history, also uncovering a "covert" history, a motive, a preference, or function. It is well worth reading for that; I doubt there is anything radically new in here, though.

## NOTE

1. The "is" is a problematical emendation, admittedly, because the sentence in Aubry's book is not terribly grammatical.



MARY JACOBUS. *On Belonging and Not Belonging: Migration, Translation, Dislocation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2022. Pp. 248. $29.95 hardcover, $29.95 ebook.

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In *On Belonging and Not Belonging: Migration, Translation, Dislocation*, Mary Jacobus embarks upon an intellectual journey informed by her early encounters with the migrations and displacements of World War II. Drawing on a diverse selection of texts, Jacobus forms a prism through which she examines the referential world and its contemporary migration crisis. Her book reads as an essayistic meditation on questions seminal to our present moment and considers how notions of belonging and not belonging are negotiated and transformed by migration, translation, and dislocation within and across geographic, historic, and literary spaces. Jacobus does not aim to "resolve" the tensions inherent in this dialogue; rather, she plays with and around them, in an ongoing game of hide-and-go-seek, underlining the "contradictory impulse" at the heart of her inquiry into migratory writers and artists: that of "simultaneously wanting and not wanting to belong" (1), while never able to embody either position fully.

Walter Benjamin's theory of translation is central to Jacobus's enterprise; it is through his idea of a work's "translatability" as lying "in its potential to engender new meanings in other linguistic and cultural contexts" (7), that we can understand her technique of connecting between diverse literary genres such as prose, poetry, and plays, and multiple media such as words, photography, visual arts, and films, from different historical periods and varying geographical locations. Jacobus highlights

ways in which authors and artists attempt to "liberate the language imprisoned in a work" through focusing on themes of not/belonging, migration, and displacement, to reiterate that which cannot be communicated at all, namely the text's untranslatability, which echoes the metaphysical and existential condition of the migrant, itinerant, exile, refugee, and other. This shared impulse warrants discussing the texts in conjunction, although some readers might be uncomfortable with the lack of a more historical, literary, or aesthetic approach. As such, the book emerges as Jacobus's own act of recreation and remediation. The chapters (with the exception of the fifth) orchestrate three authors/poets/filmmakers, alongside critical thinkers such as Said, Adorno, Derrida, Heidegger, Kant, Hegel, Levinas and Agamben, who provide background 'music.'

The first chapter, "Identity Poetics," explores the possibilities translation offers the writerly subjectivity, opening it to the unfamiliar, the frustrating, or the enabling. The evocative term, identity poetics, introduced as "identity constructed and discovered in another language, rather than inherited or given" (11), is a process that is flexible and ongoing, and hence "potentially transformative" (12). The chapter juxtaposes the freedom Jhumpa Lahiri experiences writing her book *In Other Words* in Rome in her acquired Italian with Ovid's alienation expressed in *Tristia*, written during his exile from Rome on the Black Sea. For Lahiri, linguistic exile is a "homecoming" that affirms the "distance and desire, silence and longing" that are at the core of her postcolonial identity (20). Alternately, banished to the "beyond" (24), Ovid resists adaptation, even as he laments the deterioration of his Latin along with his writerly identity. Jacobus observes that *Tristia* "paradoxically affirms the triumph of the literacy whose loss it laments" (27). The third text, David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life*, reconceives Ovid's exile as a linguistic encounter with the other who is already within as well as beyond him. If the discussion of Lahiri and Ovid focuses on their poetics of identity, Malouf's writerly identity remains problematically unexamined. Three photographs of the Danube, a river that runs through the discussions of Ovid, Malouf, and Heidegger (in the coda), by Inge Morath, are reproduced within the chapter with no clear analytic function.



The title of the second chapter, "Of Birds and Men," a play on John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and its dustbowl migrants, intertwines forced migration with bird migration in the region of the Mediterranean to "admit the poetry of transhistorical time into the urgency of contemporary migration studies" (37). Taking Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI (the flight from Troy), translated by Seamus Heaney, as an "immigrant's landing-story with epic dimensions," Jacobus reads Aeneas's descent into the underworld as "translation anxiety" that "memorializes" the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, locating it in the founding myth of the imperial past (41). Jacobus turns to Kant and Derrida to underscore the limits of legal hospitality and illustrates the foreigner's emergence as a legal entity through Justine's confession in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. She draws parallels to contemporary women migrants trafficked as sex-workers, whose forced "repentance" in an alien language becomes

translation as effacement. The trio is completed by Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 documentary, *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*), that offers multiple ways to see the Mediterranean migrant crisis on the island of Lampedusa. In a classic coming-of-age story, Samuele, a young bird-hunter, gradually becomes aware of the "silent trauma" unfolding on his island. The chapter encourages its readers to see African migrants as integral to "western" culture and concerns, and asks how we should respond to the call of the other.

"The Coastal Paradox," the title of the third chapter, is a term borrowed from fractal math loosely translated into a literary metaphor alluding to "forms of memory that are both unpredictable and subject to gradual erosion, sometimes disappearing altogether" (64). Jacobus connects the Italian lyric poet Eugenio Montale, the American poet Elizabeth Bishop, and the Irish novelist Colm Toibin through lyric "particulation," namely, their particular knowledge of what has been lost and gained by leaving their childhood coastal environments: "farther is closer […] closer is more intensely and deeply seen […] language can in itself provide a form of stability within the tidal come-and-go of both poetry and forgetting" (92). In this chapter, focused primarily on aesthetics rather than ethics, Jacobus arranges the texts in an uneven dialogue with art works: an etching by Montale, two watercolors by Bishop, and Toibin's connection to a painting by Tony O'Malley, to show that "particulation […] implies the most final parting of all: the severing of the mark from the mark-maker, and the absence of poet or painter from the scene described" (92), signaling towards a deeper absence, toward (not)belonging.



Robert Walser, Walter Benjamin, and W.G. Sebald are the protagonists of the overly ambitious fourth chapter, "Displaced Persons." While the authors were all displaced by world wars, their unequal circumstances of displacement—a term that remains critically unexamined—and of death have the effect of emptying tropes such as homelessness and exile from a coherent meaning. While German is their shared linguistic home, and they have in common a passion for books, not unconnected to their penchant for walking/wandering, Jacobus's discussion does not add to the scholarship on these well-known thinkers. Although Walser and Benjamin constitute literary interlocuters for Sebald, whose texts are always haunted by the absence-presence of others, the conversation between them fails to cohere into a clear statement. Walser's and Benjamin's handwritten manuscripts are reproduced but not analyzed. Benjamin's influential thoughts on photography's "optical unconscious" are referenced only briefly; however, given that Jacobus employs the photographic medium liberally throughout her book, more attention to its theoretical dimensions would be welcome. Nabokov, Gogol, and Proust also vie for space in this overcrowded chapter.

The Czech photographer Joseph Koudelka, an itinerant border-crosser, whose art "makes the border visible as a site of aesthetic inquiry and political protest" (120), is the main protagonist of the fifth chapter, "Border Crossing." Jacobus reads his seminal Romany photographs rather naively as an ethical engagement along the lines of Levinas. His European *Exiles*, depicting "isolation and detritus" on the

fringes of prosperity, is examined, albeit too briefly, through Agamben's notion of "inoperativeness" (135), "the impoverishment [and dehiscence] of both human- and object-worlds" (141). The strength of the chapter lies in the interconnected violence that borders inflict on human *and* physical landscapes, which is further illustrated through Koudelka's project *Wall: Israeli & Palestinian Landscape 2008-2012*. This chapter includes twenty-one photographs, but critical approaches to photography theory are blatantly missing. Jacobus ends with Agamben's "'*homo sacer*' (152), which leads her into the final chapter, "Rewilding *Antigone*," where Agamben's *State of Exception* frames her analysis of Heaney's translation of *Antigone*, with an ear toward Irish and American Patriot acts. Anne Carson's translation, commentary, and visual interpretation, *Antigonick* (2012), places Antigone's insubordination as a rebellion against the "state of exception," marking the limits of the law; while Tacita Dean's 35mm film version, *Antigone* (2018), based on a poem by Carson, addresses the notion of blindness in a contemporary familial riddle. Jacobus's rather intricate analysis implies that the work of Carson and Dean ultimately constitutes "radical remediation," insofar as their translations make us question our conception of the "Sophoclean original" (167). Jacobus ends by tying Dean's "aura of obsolescence" into Benjamin's "unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (182).



The strength of Jacobus's profuse volume lies in its associative connections, which make for an intriguing meditation on the existential crisis expressed by migratory creators and highlights the connections between movement and creativity. However, central terms would benefit from deeper exploration, not all chapters are equally cohesive, the main inquiry is often overshadowed by excessive detail, quotations and comparisons frequently exceed analysis, and the visual material lacks critical grounding. That said, the volume, with its wealth of materials woven creatively together, offers a delicate map of the migrant's constant state of (be)longing.

Jhumpa Lahiri. *Translating Myself and Others*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2022. Pp. 208. $21.95 hardcover, $14.95 paperback, $14.95 ebook.

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*Translating Myself and Others* is an elegant and rich volume collecting a series of essays published in the last seven years by writer, professor, academic, and translator Jhumpa Lahiri. Although she is mainly renowned as the Pulitzer-winning author of the novel *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), in this case we explore her identity as a translator, as is evident from the title, with which Lahiri currently predominantly identifies. In the introduction to the volume, she maintains that writing in English is for her "a form of cultural translation" (2), despite being the language that she acknowledges she knows better. She points out that the characters in her most acclaimed novel spoke in

Bengali in her head, requiring translation into English before arriving on the page, and she also adapts the popular Cartesian motto as "I translate, therefore I am" (2). Among her earliest memories, she recognizes a "translation trauma" in a moment when at school she had to write a greeting card for Mother's Day, and she struggled to choose between the English word "Mom" and the Bengali "Ma." If the geography of her background is complicated by the unstable correspondence between the Bengali language and the split territory of Bengal and Bangladesh, linguistically Lahiri's world has acquired further complications while travelling between the UK and the US, while Italy grew in her imagination. More specifically, in the volume Lahiri presents herself as a translator from Italian. Born, as she also states in the introduction, in a "linguistic world split in two" (2), Lahiri has, over the years, built her reputation on her ability to present herself in Bengali, English, and Italian: the first her family language, the second her native language, and the third the language with which she chose to reinvent her persona. She embraced this new identity when she decided to learn a language to which she had no connection, as many language learners do. She continued developing this new self in Rome, where she lived before being appointed Professor of Translation and Creative Writing at Princeton University, in New Jersey, where she currently resides. What is special about Lahiri and makes her stand out as an original writer is her decision to stop publishing in English and deliberately privileging a language that is not her native one and, despite its large circulation, does not have the same global impact: Italian. Only later were those books translated, either by herself or by others, into English. Consequently, I find it important to point out that Lahiri's evolution as an author writing in Italian and a translator coincide, according to what she claims, from many viewpoints: first of all, a chronological one. In fact, in 2015, while residing in Rome, Lahiri wrote the book for which she is most renowned both in Italy and in the context of the teaching and the learning of Italian, *In altre parole* (later translated into English by Ann Goldstein as *In Other Words*), which was her first work in Italian. The book originated with her attempt to ask the very same question posed by the essay that opens this collection, "Why Italian?", also first published in 2015. It was originally delivered in Italian as a speech at the University for Foreigners in Siena, upon the conferral of her honorary degree in the teaching of Italian Language and Culture. Hence, in both her fiction and in her essay, Lahiri carried out an interrogation that one would expect from an author who decided to devote herself so deeply to another language.



By following those coordinates, it appears evident that for Lahiri this volume is the opportunity to "retcon" her life from the viewpoint of the translator. By organizing the essays according to their chronological order of publication, from "Why Italian?" to "Calvino Abroad"—published originally in Italian in 2021 and whose Italian original is present in the appendix at the end of the volume—she aims to build a retroactive narrative exploring all the passages of this process of acknowledgement of an identity that has long lain inside her. Among the ten essays that constitute the volume, the most fascinating one is perhaps "In Praise of Echo," which was first

presented in 2019 in the United States as the Valentine Giamatti Lecture at Mount Holyoke College, and then in 2021 in the UK as the Sebald Lecture at the British Centre for Literary Translation of the University of East Anglia. It was also translated into Italian by Tiziana Lo Porto and delivered as a keynote address for the opening of the 2019-20 academic year at Luiss University in Rome, Italy. A watershed in Lahiri's reflection on translation, the essay opens with a reflection on Ovid's interpretation of the myth of Echo and Narcissus, in which Lahiri recognizes poignant metaphors of the act of translation. Lahiri's argument proceeds by engaging Ovid's *Metamorphosi*s as a case of translation in the wider sense, considering Ovid's work on classics of Greek mythology "an encounter with, and rerendering of, a preexisting literature composed in another tongue" (45). Inspired by Ovid, Lahiri describes the many ways in which translation is recognized as a process of transformation and metamorphosis, not only in relation to her own conversion from English to Italian, and from writer to translator, when she engaged for the first time in the translation into English of Italian writer Domenico Starnone's novel *Lacci*. It was through her increasing familiarity with Italian and her solid partnership with Starnone, whom she befriended while living in Rome and three of whose books, so far, she has translated into English, that Lahiri decided to entirely devote her writing to a language that did not require her to translate from one world to another. Following *In alter parole*, Lahiri accepted the challenge of self-translating the subsequent *Dove mi trovo* (2019) into English as *Whereabouts* (2021), which she announced would probably be her only work of self-translation, and she explored poetry alongside prose in Italian for the first time in *Il quaderno di Nerina* (2021). During the same period, she embarked on a new challenge by deciding to translate Ovid's masterwork from Latin into English in collaboration with her colleague from the Classics Department at Princeton, Yelena Baraz. Full of inspirational moments, the volume is enriched by an appendix containing two essays in Italian, one self-translated by Lahiri—the aforementioned "Calvino Abroad" ("Il Calvino del mondo")—and the other translated by Starnone, "Traduttrice di me stessa." It concludes with an interesting bibliography of texts on translation, which Lahiri adds to trace back her profile as a scholar of translation. Yet, despite the solid bibliography on the topic and the extremely interesting points addressed in the essays, overall I believe that *Translating Myself and Others* confirms the predominance of Lahiri's image as a writer rather than the possible relevance of her contribution to translation theory, and not only because it is beautifully written, like her best fiction. I would not point out this as a criticism, because as an avid reader of Lahiri's fiction and prose, I enjoyed the book thoroughly for contributing to expand in multiple directions her complex identity as a writer, which only partially emerges from the published books. In fact, I would recommend this book to professional literary translators, because it turns out to be precious in providing inspiration for a profession that needs to be carried out with passion, an ingredient often forgotten today in the constant rush from one deadline to another that constitutes life as a translator, and not only by relying on the skills and theories on which

translation is built. The beautiful image that Lahiri selects, when she highlights that the same passion moving Echo to approach Narcissus also moves the translator to convert other authors' words into new forms, should be handwritten on a sheet of paper and placed on the desk of any translator while performing their work, which Lahiri defines as "an elaborate alchemical process that requires imagination, ingenuity, and freedom" (46). In conclusion, *Translating Myself and Others* appears to me as a beautiful ode to the profession of the translator and to translation as a unique form of art that is able to make texts live through new metamorphoses, from language to language and from place to place, engraved with the affabulatory talent that only an exceptional writer could add to such a topic.