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Rita Severi. : *Oscar Wilde and Company – Sinestesia fin de siècle*. Bologna, Pàtron Editore, 2001

The book consists of twelve articles, previously published by the author over more than twenty years. This editorial background is important in order to understand the reasons for both the merits and the shortcomings of the new edition. The main topic of *Oscar Wilde and Company* is the role which Oscar Wilde and his works have played in Decadent culture. This huge topic is approached through the semiotic concept of synaesthesia, which is central both to Wilde's texts and to the works of those whom he influenced. Nevertheless, the title of the book, which mentions both Wilde and synaesthesia, only partially corresponds to the actual topics of *Oscar Wilde and Company*.

Rita Severi analyses the texts of many different authors, mainly in English decadent literature, whose creations have been somehow affected by Wilde's imagination. From the theoretical point of view, the focus of the book is wider than would be expected from its title: synaesthesia is just one of the many semiotic phenomena dealt with in the different analyses.

The articles can be divided into blocks: the first three deal with the literary and artistic myth of Salomé (and the profound influence Wilde had on its shaping), articles from four to six deal with different features of Ronald Firbank's works, articles seven and eight with the representation of the woman in Decadent theatre, while article nine can be considered as the theoretical core of the anthology, dealing with the relation between words and images in Pater, Wilde and Firbank. Articles ten and eleven study the shaping of the literary and artistic myth of Leonardo da Vinci and the last article is devoted to an analysis of some hagiological themes in Victorian literature.

The structure of this anthology results in some repetitions within each of the blocks mentioned, but, on the other hand, the topics which are dealt with in more than one of the articles are analysed under different perspectives, which offer an increasing amount of erudition. Perhaps, it might have been better to fuse some of these contributions instead of presenting them in the original editorial form.

In all of these fields of investigation, Rita Severi displays a praiseworthy erudition and a rare theoretical curiosity, which spans from structural semiotics to cognitive psychology.

Nevertheless, the core concept of the book, synaesthesia, is never analysed in-depth, in order to avoid confusion between synaesthetic phenomena and intertextual relations.

In relation to the first concept, Rita Severi suggests some interesting points about the relation between the literary creation of Salomé and Wilde's passion for Gipsy music (chapter 1), or carries out an equally fascinating analysis of the way in which Firbank borrows some structures from jazz music (chapter 6). The articles about the literary use of the myth of Leonardo da Vinci (chapters 10 and 11), or the presence of hagiographic references in English literature (last chapter) refer rather to the second, broader concept of intertextuality. This theoretical weakness is the major shortcoming of the book, which does not offer a unitary point of view about synaesthesia, but rather scatters its interesting insights throughout the chapters (the book offers no conclusions). Nevertheless, this conceptual style is somewhat counterbalanced by the important amount of erudite material offered by Rita Severi.

The last chapter, for instance, is brilliant for the way in which the author investigates a difficult topic (the presence of hagiological motives in literature), rarely approached even by comparative literature scholars. Nevertheless, some theoretical points remain weak: the difference between a "Hebraic" and a "Hellenic" civilisation (p. 170) is assumed without further inquiry and no reference to Leo Strauss's works is made. Also the relation between homosexuality and hagiology is a good intuition, which, unfortunately, the author chooses not to explore further (homosexuality is also referred to in quite a stereotypical way in chapter five – p. 76).

The two articles devoted to Leonardo's myth are extremely well documented, but present some superfluous repetitions and lack a real comparative approach: several very interesting texts are mentioned because of their similarities, but without a further analysis of their differences (which is the second fundamental step in any comparative study).

The most successful part of the book, at least from a theoretical point of view, is chapter nine: "Words for pictures – Notes on iconic description in Pater, Wilde and Firbank." This article shows a very commendable interest in alternative theoretical trends in art theory, such as visual semiotics. Unfortunately, the article was originally published in 1989, and this new edition does not seem to have updated. Bibliographic references are interesting, but date from more than ten years ago. Furthermore, the theoretical principles enunciated in the first part of the chapter are only sketchily applied in the actual analysis of texts.

Other articles manifest the same discrepancy between theoretical curiosity and textual analysis, often adopting semiotic tools in a superficial way: in chapter seven, for example, there is a very laudable reference to Greimasian semiotics, but the difference between actants and actors is not fully understood, and there is no reference to the more recent theoretical texts of Greimas (such as *Du Sens* or *Du Sens II*).

Besides this theoretical shortcoming, the articles concerning the representation of women in Decadent theatre are extremely acute, and put forward an amazing erudition and very subtle analytical remarks (for example, the way in which Rita Severi uses proxemics in order to interpret the relations between men and women eating at the same table is very interesting, - p. 121). Overall, *Oscar Wilde and Company* is a book worthy of some note, which suffers badly from the dislocation afforded by the heterogeneous editorial origin of its parts and their lack of bibliographical upgrading. However, it is nonetheless relevant for both the originality of the topics approached and the meticulous work of research carried out by the author.

The book includes a useful index of names but shows several typos in the footnotes.

Massimo Leone

Beth S. Wright: *Painting and History during the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Beth S. Wright's book is a fascinating discussion of the interrelation of historical narrative and painting in France 1815-1830, with a final brief chapter centred on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1831) providing a pointer to post-Restoration history painting.

The book begins with a discussion of three ways of 'imagining the past' in 1827: Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*, Vernet's *Julius II* and Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*. Through a discussion of these paintings and their allegorical, realistic or associative functions Wright introduces and defines the classical notion of history painting and shows the reader (continually invited by Wright to visualise the context) how the paintings were received and how the Aristotelian concepts behind the notion of history painting had come to be insufficient for those who had lived through the Revolution. What Wright does not discuss is the fact that, as her book amply and good-humouredly illustrates, for many critics (and Academic artists) this notion was perfectly satisfactory and stasis was all they required.

The second chapter deals with the contemporary context and the complex political responses to and implications of writing and painting history in the aftermath of the Revolution. The development of new approaches to historical narrative are considered, as are the economic considerations of popular engravings and illustrations which were influential in creating public demand for images such as Delaroche's heroic dramatisation of monarchs about to lose or having just lost their heads, fiercely reproached by critics such as the Saint Simonian Piel for martyring monarchs and mis-representing history as a result.

Wright isolates and discusses three ways of representing the past in the early nineteenth century; approaches centred on object, gesture and thought. These approaches are exemplified by the 'pious viewing of relics' of the Troubadour school, Delaroche's 'witnessing of catastrophe' and the Delacroix's Romantic fusion of present spectator and past moment. These approaches and their literary equivalents, called 'phantasmagoria', 'dramatization' and 'psychic identification' by Wright are then explored in essay form in Chapters 3-5. The final chapter deals with 'historiography's legacy' in the Visual Arts. Wright draws from a wide variety of sources. Running through the book are the voices of critics who disparagingly assessed works as diverse as Couperin de la Couperie's *Sully Showing His Grandson the Monument Containing the Heart of Henri IV* and Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (both from 1819) for failing to satisfy the correct criteria for history painting. The result is an account not only of the developments in viewing and writing the past after the traumatic experience of Revolution, but of what Wright calls the representation and resurrection of the past in the Visual Arts.

The subtitle *Abandoned by the Past* is taken from Benjamin Constant ('abandoned by the past, without memory or hope') and Wright uses it in her concluding paragraph to describe how the French nation moved from a traumatic (Revolutionary) present in which their past was 'wrenched away from them and rendered meaningless,' to a situation in which they could move into the future 'wholly themselves, because they had arrived at an understanding, however partial or evanescent, of that which had occurred before them.' Wright's book convincingly argues that the representation of history could no longer exclusively be about satisfying Academic criteria or reproducing one 'myopic' author's point of view and that it came increasingly to be about communicating multiple aspects of the past to multiple viewers and readers.

Wright's book works best when she is dealing with the primary source material: painting, historical narrative and critical response. At times the style becomes overwrought sacrificing clarity in the attempt to synthesise. Wright's book is nonetheless an invaluable interdisciplinary aid to those working in

French studies and is a beautifully produced book, with illustrations placed close to their discussion in the text.

Sinéad Furlong, Trinity College Dublin

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