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Dirk van Hulle. Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. xiii + 271 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Dirk van Hulle. *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. xiii + 271 pp.

Keywords

genetic criticism, modernism, cognitive psychology

Dirk van Hulle. *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. xiii + 271 pp.

Dirk van Hulle's most recent critical volume, *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond* is an ambitious work of scholarship that displays the clear intent to grant more visibility to the discipline of genetic criticism, especially within the Anglo-American literary-critical tradition. Genetic criticism—a Continental approach to the study of literary manuscripts—occupies itself with the genesis (thus “genetic”) of the canonical (if not final) form of texts. In van Hulle's formulation, the various manuscripts as well as other peripheral materials (for example, the paratactic notes in the margins of books from the author's library, as well as notebooks and journals) form a corpus that is analyzable as an evidentiary process which then establishes the “extended mind” of the author in creative mode. The extended mind is a phenomenon outlined in cognitive psychology. This theory claims that the mind is not a dualistic, Cartesian entity that is contained and trained inward; rather, the extended mind actively interacts with its environment. In genetic criticism, this interaction manifests itself in the author's preliminary materials (known as the *avant-texte*) which eventually coalesces in the finalized “work” that is the object of textual scholarship.

In order to illustrate the fruitful connection between extended mind and genetic criticism, van Hulle spends Part I of the book, “The Preservation of Unfavored Traces,” analyzing the collection of documents that are the genesis of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. His contention is that “Darwin's writing method . . . resembles some famous modernist writers' writing practice” (74), and therefore provides a solid example of extended/enactive mind: an excellent platform for establishing the terminology that he will employ in Part II's discussion of extended mind and modernism. The three phases that he identifies in the production and reception of a text are exogenesis, endogenesis, and epigenesis. These categories roughly correspond to established phases of writing: initial notes, ensuing drafts, and ultimately the publication of the work. The author's thorough definition and development of these three moments of textual production in Part I translate well to his extensive studies of Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett in Part II, in which van Hulle challenges two major assumptions in literary studies: the “teleology” of written works, and the popular conception of modernism as a psychologically contained “inward turn.” First, the “teleological” view of literature, in which the final form exerts a retroactive force on the understanding of its composition, van Hulle reconfigures as “dysteleological,” asserting that writing is not a smooth process, but rather is marked by divergences, tangents, lacunae, and dead ends. As for the common perception of modernism as an “inward turn,” van Hulle takes aim directly at Virginia Woolf in

order to make his point. Summoning Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall," he states that her writing displays an extensive interaction with external surroundings, much more than many critics choose to acknowledge. He says, quite succinctly, that "the structure of the text mimics this interactive way in which an intelligent agent negotiates opportunities for action and interaction with an environment," contradicting Woolf's own assertion that modernism privileges psychic spaces rather than exterior ones (148). Following this argument, the author's approach to Joyce and Beckett's notebooks and drafts draws on the example set in his analysis of Woolf.

This section on modernism loses some of the narrow, focused quality of Part I, as it finds itself dispersed over the *avant-textes* of various writers' works, rather than the singular figure of Darwin and his *Origin of Species*. The wide-ranging analysis diminishes, slightly, the incisiveness of the author's terminology. Still, there is a moment in which van Hulle's definitions and examples come to fruition. The "climax" of the book, if indeed we can call it that, emerges in the final chapter before the Epilogue, in which the author discusses Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*. The entire argument seems to lead up to this moment, which is only about three pages long. The passage on Foer's work successfully demonstrates the usefulness of the terms that van Hulle has spent the previous chapters explaining and illustrating at great length. The section is a tightly written demonstration of why we should consider van Hulle's argument about genetic criticism to be both needed and, moreover, convincing. It has the advantage of describing the work of an author that is not as commonly known as his primary examples: Darwin, Joyce, Woolf, Beckett. Van Hulle's work is most effective when introducing the reader to not one, but two peripheral authors and their texts: Bruno Schulz and Jonathan Safran Foer. The reader gets the sensation, given that this subchapter resides nearly at the end of the text, that this is a point of departure for van Hulle's next work: it displays enormous promise for a continuation of the analysis.

On the whole, the argument that the author makes is well-turned, and made additionally accessible to the reader through the inclusion within the text of direct references to the specific URLs of archival collections that contain facsimiles of Darwin and Beckett's early notebooks and manuscripts. However, van Hulle's analysis may seem less useful to audiences that are not fully aware of important differences between genetic criticism and manuscript studies, or to those whose general methodology distances itself from the "taboo" of researching authors and their intents, though van Hulle does acknowledge this problem at the start of his study (4). Overall, *Modern Manuscripts* feels very distanced from Anglo-American traditions of literary studies, which currently trend towards cultural analyses of texts. However, within the field of genetic criticism itself, van Hulle provides an excellent example of how illuminating this type of critique can

be, be it of an individual work or of an author's entire corpus. Regardless of its limited pertinence to textual criticism, van Hulle has written a masterful work that embodies the particular (and, at times, peculiar) methods of *le critique génétique*.

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