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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Le récit: perspectives anthropologique et littéraire* by Sylvie André; *Le récit aujourd'hui* by Jérôme Game

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# Literary History and Criticism

*edited by Marion Geiger*

ANDRÉ, SYLVIE. *Le récit: perspectives anthropologique et littéraire*. Paris: Champion, 2012. ISBN 978-2-7453-2293-7. Pp. 265. 25 €.

GAME, JÉRÔME, éd. *Le récit aujourd'hui*. Saint-Denis: PU de Vincennes, 2011. ISBN 978-2-84292-336-5. Pp. 174. 19 €.

From an anthropological perspective, as Sylvie André points out, the use of narrative clearly fulfills a basic human need. Moreover, narrative can be seen to serve several essential functions. It helps make sense of the human experience of time, it transmits and accumulates knowledge, and it reconciles human existence with the transcendental dimension that lies beyond ordinary human knowledge and reason. On the most fundamental level, human societies conceive of their origins and foundation in terms of myths, heroic tales, legends, epics, and other literary oral or written narratives. These foundational narratives provide, in turn, the form and sense for other modes of narrative. In general, the importance of narrative models and genres is defined by the function they serve in a given society. Literature and literary studies, for example, are useful for transmitting cultural memory and, in particular “la mémoire idéologique choisie d’une société,” which, in the case of France, comprises, most notably, “les valeurs morales du catholicisme” as well as “une idéologie centralisatrice et bourgeoise” (24). And while new narrative forms have emerged in such media as film, television, and the internet, “le récit, dans sa forme canonique, c’est-à-dire liée essentiellement à un type de civilisation, une civilisation occidentale de l’écriture, est omniprésent dans les productions de la connaissance et dans les médias” (239). At the same time, André notes the increasingly visible evidence of a crisis undermining the epistemological legitimacy and canonical status of narrative forms. In addition to the waning of *les grands récits* noted by Lyotard it is the novel, a narrative model that was the privileged mode of expression for European modernity, that today announces and illustrates the obsolescence of established narrative forms “en mettant en question les conditions même de la représentation” (241–42). And there are numerous analyses of contemporary reality that recognize what amounts to a “révolution anthropologique que préfigurent les nouvelles technologies de la communication et de l’information ainsi que la mondialisation de l’économie, des connaissances et des relations entre les hommes” (242). Jérôme Game, for his part, has assembled a number of essays that seek to make sense of the newly founded and still emerging narrative forms. These essays originated in a “journée d’étude” Game organized at the École Normale Supérieure (Ulm) in 2008. The purpose of the collection, the editor explains, is to analyze “les diverses manières qu’ont les œuvres visuelles, musicales ou corporelles, de *syntaxer*,” that is, to determine the syntax of artistic activities that include “littérature, peinture, cinéma, musique, installation, danse, performance, art vidéo, théâtre, écriture théorique,

ainsi que toutes leurs relations croisées” (16). It is thus the grammar or the syntax of an artistic genre that the different theoretical approaches attempt to disclose in their analyses. Ultimately, the aim is to define and describe an “art syntaxique,” that is, “la capacité de certaines œuvres à réinventer l’alphabet de leur genre (ou médium) au moment même où elles y écrivent pourtant un récit” (16). The most frequently cited theoreticians guiding these investigations are Barthes, Derrida, and Ricœur for the “pratiques signifiantes,” whereas Deleuze and Rancière help understand and evaluate the “intensité expressive” (16). Needless to say, paradoxes and aporia will inevitably arise in the wake of these verbal disquisitions into art forms that can be considered as languages only metaphorically. Thus if music is to be understood as “un organisme mental sans représentation” it will become evident that “l’impuissance du langage face à la musique est dès ce seuil patente” (75). The movement of bodies is similarly resistant to verbal representation because “on peut en danse faire des phrases qui, non seulement ne racontent rien, mais n’ont pas nécessairement de sens” (86). Painting has become self-representational, thus, “la peinture, abstraite ou figurative, a peu à voir avec l’image” (37). André points out that there has always been, at the heart of narrative, a quest for intelligibility as well as a desire to unite “faits contingents et exigence d’ordre, épisode isolé et configuration signifiante, discordance de l’événement et concordance structurelle, individu et exigence d’universalité” (145). The essays assembled by Game no longer seek to validate these aims, thus further reinforcing André’s thesis of an anthropological threshold about to be crossed.

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BAINS, CHRISTOPHER. *De l’esthétisme au modernisme: Théophile Gautier, Ezra Pound*. Paris: Champion, 2012. ISBN 978-2-7453-2328-6. Pp. 334. 80 €.

The decision to grapple with the aesthetics of either Gautier or Pound, much less both, is admirable, especially when the result is enlightening and a pleasure to read. Bains is at home in the salient theoretical issues of the two poets’ erudite world, situating Gautier as a seminal figure for modernists and Pound within the larger international tradition of nineteenth-century aesthetic thought. I came away from his book with a greater appreciation for the genius of the two writers as poets and critics, and of their place in history. Both Pound and Gautier saw poetry as the external indication of the much larger reality actually created. The exterior must be ‘hard,’ enabling the writer’s articulation and polish, in much the way artists perfect formal music or image, thus giving their creations life. Bains leads logically from ‘hardness’ to stone, to sculpture, to form and materiality, and successfully opens up the poets’ aesthetics that are basic to modern poetry. Bains expands on the significant influence Gautier had on the appreciation of poetry and painting. I question Pound’s belief that Baudelaire was inferior to Gautier, without doubting Pound’s poetic genius, while