

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Time Refigured: Myths, Foundation Texts & Imagined Communities*, edited by Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2005. 382 p. ISBN 80-7308-102-4.

In November 2004, Charles University in Prague hosted a conference on “Myths, Foundation Texts and Imagined Communities” as a part of an international project studying European cultural memory. The book under review here, *Time Refigured: Myths, Foundation Texts & Imagined Communities*, is a tangible result of the conference.

Taking the seminal study of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* as its main point of reference, namely Anderson’s claim that “imagined communities . . . are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,” the individual papers approach the chosen “foundation texts” from a functional perspective, largely ignoring “their supposedly ‘original’ or canonic forms” (1). The attention of the contributors is primarily devoted to the role myths and foundation texts have played in forming a specifically European identity and community.

The book presents academic papers by twenty-three scholars from distinguished universities and research centres worldwide, with the co-editor Martin Procházka and Ondřej Pilný of Charles University, Prague, representing contemporary Czech scholarship. The papers in the collection are organized into four sections or thematic groups according to their treatment of the chosen topic.

The title of the first section—“Approaches”—suggests that the nine featured texts will be dealing with questions of methodology and the viability of various literary theories as applied to problems such as the ambiguity of the terms “foundation” or “imagined” (Jean Bessière), the underlying structure of cosmogonic myths (Anna Brzozowska-Krajka), or the role of nostalgia in the critiquing of the past and construction of the future (Vita Fortunati). All the papers in the first section deserve to be praised both for their rigorous scrutiny of existing theories and methodologies, and their attempt to move towards a sustainable theory of myths for the twenty-first century.

However, the papers by Riccardo Campi and Martin Procházka are truly outstanding in the context of the first thematic group. The former, a lecturer at the University of Bologna, has contributed a paper called “Continuity and Discontinuity in Tradition.” In this paper, Campi juxtaposes Hans Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics with Walter Benjamin’s dialectical approach to the question of continuity and discontinuity in relation to tradition. After a close scrutiny of Gadamer’s idea of the fusion of the past and the present as constitutive of the meaning of a historical object, Campi makes it quite clear who he sympathizes with: “Discontinuity in Benjamin is not an obstacle to historical understanding, but the very condition that makes it possible. . . .

Therefore, the historian must come to grips with the discontinuity, the otherness and the distance separating the present from the past” (36).

Martin Procházka’s *“Imagined Communities Revisited: Beyond Romantic and Technological Approaches to Cultural Identity and Diversity”* boldly takes upon itself the task of blurring the boundary “between the traditional symbolism of myth or ritual on the one hand, and ideologies, advertising strategies or patterns of pop culture on the other” (106). The merit of Procházka’s paper mainly lies in his employment of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “desiring machines” and “fuzzy aggregates” to prove that even “*myths function as machines*, for instance in the form of historical films, TV adaptations of well-known novels, travel films and commercials. These machines do not merely *reproduce* sentiments, desires or values, they also *produce* them” (107). Procházka then goes on to illustrate his point by means of convincing examples, including TV commercials or Milan Kundera’s novel *Immortality*.

“Imagining Europe” is the title of the second section of the collection, which features four texts studying the delineation of Europe as a cultural and political entity. That the “cultural” definition of Europe by no means restricts itself to the “old continent” is clearly demonstrated by Klára Kolínská, who has contributed an interesting piece on place names in Canada and their function in the dissemination of European culture and values. The second part of her essay is a reflection on the current trend of native re-mapping and re-naming of Ontario and its significance for the contemporary Canadian drama, as well as its role in the creation of “a freer and more balanced geopolitical space in general” (189).

Of the four texts featured in the second section, Michael C. Frank’s “The Discovery of Europe in the South Pacific: Travel Writing, ‘Boundary Work,’ and the Construction of European Identity” stands out most. Utilizing the postcolonial theories of Edward Said or Homi K. Bhabha, Frank convincingly elaborates on his thesis that Europe as a coherent community was first imagined *outside* its geographical boundaries, namely in the southern seas, where sailors were confronted with an Otherness that made them *imagine* their European “identity.” Frank interestingly illustrates this point by referring to Georg Forster’s travelogue describing James Cook’s voyage around the globe. The conclusion Frank draws from his observations and close reading of the aforementioned travelogue is that rather than define the common European ground in terms of “content” or “substance,” “we should instead focus on the relational definition of Europe on the grounds of—varying and unstable—conceptions of the Other” (173).

“Functions and Transformations,” the third thematic group of essays, analyses the ways in which individual myths have helped to enunciate European identities, often being radically transformed and appropriated by different temporal and spatial contexts. A good example of such a myth is the myth of Medea. In her essay “The Myth of Medea and the Feminist Imagination in Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” Ann Heilman traces the

transformations of the myth of Medea in the early stages of British feminism and identifies “five central narrative paradigms in Victorian and Edwardian feminist literature” (255).

In contrast to the traditional (and sometimes ancient) myths studied by six of the seven contributions in the third section, Mara Cambiaghi provides a refreshing account of the transformations of the myth of 1968 in British, Italian, and German fiction. Her comparative essay mainly succeeds in stressing the vital role of memory and human psychology in various interpretations and evaluations of this relatively recent myth.

The three essays that form the collection’s last section, “Mediation and Originality,” deal with the question of mediation and its function as a formative principle in the construction of European identities and histories. Here, Monica Matei-Chesnoiu’s paper “‘The Globe’: Romanian Poetry and Shakespeare’s Histories” will certainly capture the Czech reader’s attention. A close reading of an absurdist poem by Ion Stratan, Matei-Chesnoiu’s essay reveals subversive political power in the most ideologically compromised adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in Communist Romania. As for Stratan’s poem itself, Matei-Chesnoiu contends that “Stratan’s fractured view of Shakespeare’s English history, a result of detrimental cultural memory, has the force to work on the times, with the effect of changing the present through the re-evaluation of past cultures through corrosive action” (339–40).

Within the context of the continuing process of European integration, debates about the founding principles of Europe can make a valuable contribution to a critical re-consideration of the epistemology of “Europe” as a cultural and political space. *Time Refigured* is a product of such a debate and ought to be read by all who are not indifferent to questions of “identity”—whether political, social, religious, cultural or regional. The variety of “foundation texts” covered, as well as the amount of approaches and methodologies employed by the authors to study them, may at times seem to point to a lack of cohesion in the collection, but, as Martin Procházka explains in the Introduction, the fragmentary make-up of the collection is quite deliberate: “Not unlike myths themselves, this volume is a *bricolage*, or better—in Deleuzean terms—an assemblage of transversally connected discourses producing cultural memories of Europe as a set of interlinked fragmentary experiences, visions, identities, texts, objects and theories” (12).

In conclusion, I would like to say that in spite of their apparent lack of a common denominator, all the contributions in this collection are highly relevant, and the fact that some of them provide unorthodox perspectives on myths, foundation texts or (imagined) communities, only increases the collection’s intellectual value.

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*Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States*, edited by Antonis Balasopoulos, Gesa Mackenthun, and Theodora Tsimpouki. *European Views of the United States 1*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag WINTER, 2008. 330 p. ISBN 978-3-8253-5479-4.

This collection of essays is the first volume of a new series "European Views of the United States." Being an outcome of the EAAS conference of the same name held in Nicosia, Cyprus, in 2006, its main focus is to explore the topic from different perspectives on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach. The fact that the very first volume of the new series bears this title hints at the changes American Studies are undergoing both in Europe and in the United States. As Antonis Balasopoulos points out in his introduction, America has always, at least to some Europeans, represented modernity in its many forms. The scholars contributing to the book are trying to recast the traditional views and interpretations of American culture.

The book is divided into five sections, each dealing with the subject matter from a different point of view. The first section constitutes a conceptual and theoretical framework, the second brings in the historical view, the third refers to contemporary texts, in the fourth there are essays regarding the visual arts, and the collection is rounded off with a glance at conformity and non-conformity in the commercial sector. Although all the essays are autonomous units with original ideas, the whole book appears coherent and provides a solid insight into the theme. Moreover, as a collection of various approaches, it is not only balanced, but also readable.

Perhaps the most distinctive and outstanding part of the whole body of the book is the opening essay by Donald E. Pease. It centers on the phenomenon of putative American exceptionalism, and it is a contemplation of the future direction of American Studies. Pease reflects on Djelal Kadir's Presidential address delivered at the Inaugural Congress of the American Studies Association in 2004 and compares it with the response of Amy Kaplan, who was then the President of the US American Studies Association. After carefully discussing both views, he suggests that American Studies should be grounded in a comparativist model of imperial state exceptionalisms.

The rest of the essays are more conventional. The second essay of the first section is a study in conformism and non-conformity as literary categories by Heinz Ickstadt. Its focus is on the concept of the transgressive and subversive functions of literature in relation to set social structures and rules. One of the main points that Ickstadt argues is that the subversiveness of literature is not primarily a question of politics, but of aesthetics. In the second section, called "Regions of the Past," it is worth mentioning the essay by Albena Bakratcheva, who insightfully observed the dilemma of being a non-conformist and at the same time belonging to a group of like-minded people. In her essay she analyses the topic by discussing the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on the other Transcendentalists, especially Henry David Thoreau.

The third section, called “Contemporary Textualities,” contains, among others, essays by Andrew S. Gross and Peter Loizos. Andrew Gross offers a controversial study that concentrates on the theme of the depiction of terror and violence in modern literature. He finds parallels between pornography, melodrama and propaganda, and warns against self-censorship, defending the author’s right not to give up aesthetic ambitions in order to stay politically correct. Peter Loizos traces the unconscious inner conformity in the works of two eminent American Jewish writers—Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Loizos reveals that, when writing about American culture and issues, both writers might be considered “non-conformists.” On the other hand, when they address the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, either by means of personal accounts of their travels to the region (Bellow) or in the form of a novel (Roth), they both fail to retain their independent views, and reveal themselves as determined and bound by their cultural and ethnic roots.

The fourth section, dedicated to the visual arts, includes an essay by Hilaria Loyo, who studies the disruption of one of America’s most traditional genres—the Western. She provides a close look at Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, examines the methods he uses to undermine the genre’s clichés, and subsequently doubts that the Western should be presented any longer as a bearer of values that are typical for American culture as such. In this respect it echoes some of the questions posed by D. E. Pease in his essay on exceptionalism.

Finally, the last section, “Investing in Non-conformity,” introduces a case study on the influence of advertisements on the culture of the 1960s. It is a competent analysis of the groundbreaking work of the DDB advertising company, which, as the author Berndt Ostendorf claims, helped create the social climate and influenced the aesthetic and moral criteria of the artistic environment even before all the turbulent changes of the late sixties happened.

Overall, *Conformism, Non-Conformism and Anti-Conformism in the Culture of the United States* is an important contribution to the exploration of the subject matter. It not only raises new questions regarding the direction in which American Studies should be heading but it is also a useful vehicle for novice readers and an inspiring source of ideas and reference for professionals. Above all, it is an important acquisition that sheds new light on the never-ending debates about the shape of the American literary canon.

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