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Review of Wojciech Dragu's *Collage
in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English:
Art of Crisis*, New York: Routledge, 2020

Wojciech Dragu's volume *Collage in Twenty-First-Century Literature in English: Art of Crisis* is a mandatory tool for scholars of contemporary literature in English. The author handles his argument with precision and succeeds beautifully in showing that the select contemporary novels that have been published since the turn of the twenty-first century make use of the technique of collage in their composition. Compositional techniques are of the utmost importance for the art of the novel from the first successes of the modernist novels at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as the inner monologue or the multiple points of view like in Henry James's, Virginia Woolf's, or James Joyce's novels, as well as in the works of other high modernists. But the turn of the twenty-first century brought to the attention of the public the experimental novel, as pointed out by Alison Gibbons, whose writings are a key reference for Dragu's volume. However, unlike Gibbons, who is only concerned with contemporary experimental writings, Dragu analyzes a species of this broader field of contemporary experimental writing, the novels and prose writings shaped as literary collages.

For all scholarly writers on collage literature, it is important to operate with a clear definition of the term. Dragu identifies as collage writings the texts that display an appropriation of foreign literary sources (most often without being acknowledged) marked by relations of heterogeneity of their "fragmentary and conflicting components". The lack of a coherent narrative (subordinated to the idea of heterogeneity), as well as a requirement regarding the sizable length of the quoted materials complete the definition of literary collage that Dragu operates with (Dragu 11). Collage literature is not an invention of twenty-first-century writers, but it has had a long history since the beginning of the twentieth century, when the Euro-

pean avant-gardes and later the mid-century American avant-gardes brought into the mainstream this juxtapositional form of writing. Drag sketches a short history of the evolution of the term “collage” within an art historical and literary context, which is very useful and informative for the reader unaccustomed to collage writings. The critical sources he cites to support his arguments are abundant and they contextualize the claims he makes in each particular situation.

The concept of collage literature is conflictual in itself and each author who has written on the topic has viewed it from slightly different angles. But collage in the literature of the previous century was perceived as being non-productive, up until the mid-century and the writings of William S. Burroughs, a key writer of the Beat Generation in the United States. Burroughs’s texts are extensively mentioned in Drag’s volume, since Burroughs’s writings were a reference point for the seven contemporary writers surveyed in Drag’s book.

Before engaging with the fourteen volumes of prose discussed in his volume, Drag sets up even better tools for analyzing the particularities of each of these texts. Following Gibbons’s theorizations of multimodality, which refers to the multiplicity of visual and verbal modes that can participate in the organization of a text on the page, Drag classifies the chosen texts with regards to the various modes they employ. This allows the author to notice the differences between them and the way they render artistic meaning differently. Rhetorical Structure Theory is another fortuitous choice of a theoretical tool that adds depth to the analysis. The idea that in literature collage relies on “juxtapositions” of textual units rather than their “subordination” is not new and was first used by David Antin in 1974 (2011, 169) and later taken over by Marjorie Perloff, who illustrated how this juxtaposition manifests itself in the texts of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (1999, 385–87). Drag expands these observations even further, by appealing to Rhetorical Structure Theory, which studies relationships between texts based on their spatial succession. Thus “symmetric relations”, such as Sequence and Contrast relations, in the words of this theory (Drag 37), detail and classify in nuanced theoretical categories the principle of juxtaposition observed by Antin in verbal collages and later expanded by Perloff.

Once the theoretical apparatus is prepared in the first chapter, the remaining six chapters of Drag’s volume are dedicated to a close analysis of prose writings that exhibit the characteristics of verbal collage. The writer analyzes novels/prose texts by David Shields, Lance Olsen, Steve Tomasula, Graham Rawle, Maggie Nelson, and Jenny Offill, who were also consulted by the writer with regards to the collage structure of their writings, as Drag specifies in the introduction. (David Markson is the only novelist who is no longer alive and the author did not consult with.) The analysis proper of these prose texts is also the most valuable part of the book because it constitutes the original contribution of the author to the topic of the collage novel. The chapters have a similar structure, first introducing the reader to each individual author and placing the novels that will be analyzed within the larger context of these novelists’ work. Then follows a section dedicated to the

formal analysis of the collage structure, which in many cases was also noticed and discussed by other critics, making Drąg's argument even more pertinent. Also, the extensive quotations from other texts that disorient and confuse the reader of the collage novels under survey are carefully analyzed by Drąg. There are instances in which the novelist indicated that they wanted to create a collage novel, such as David Shield (Drąg 89–90), while others (David Markson) mention the term “collage” within the novels themselves, pointing to the structural techniques employed in their works (Drąg 48–50). Drąg also provides short abstracts of each text he analyzes, indicating the specific genres they belong to.

The last section of each chapter points to the various crises these collage-compositional techniques represent: the crisis of the author (or “art in crisis”), the “society in crisis”, and ultimately the “self in crisis”. In this final section of each chapter, the reader learns the reasons which prompted and probably determined the use of the collage technique in the composition of each work. This is also the most subjective section, since the three sections seem to be more arbitrarily demarcated, as the crisis of writing/art points to, and overlaps with, the crisis of the authorial self discussed in the third part of the volume.

This volume exhibits an outstanding effort of understanding contemporary fiction in view of an artistic technique that first started to preoccupy writers during the early avant-garde of the twentieth century. The many quotations from secondary sources highlight the comprehensive bibliography the author covered for each author discussed. On the whole, this is an indispensable tool for any reader of contemporary experimental texts in English. This is a groundbreaking volume with regards to the continued use of the literary technique of collage during the twenty-first century. More work needs to be done to see how literary collage affects other literatures and languages outside contemporary English-language authors.

References

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