

Michael Mack. *How Literature Changes the Way We Think*. London: Continuum, 2012. 208pp. Pbk £17.99. ISBN: 9781441119148

In the financially oriented twenty-first century academic institutions gravitate towards useful disciplines whose role is not to enlighten but to equip individuals with practical skills in order to enhance their employability. Simultaneously, the Arts and Humanities are called into question. In these circumstances, Michael Mack's *How Literature Changes the Way We Think* becomes all the more relevant and urgent. The book's main argument is that literature, including all other arts, performs an "ethics of resilience": it opens up a space that resists, disrupts, and destabilises monolithic fictions of homogeneity, whether these be religion, capitalist ideology, or totalitarian systems. By doing so, literature brings attention to the unpredictability and diversity of existence. The argument is fresh and refreshing and Mack pursues it throughout gracefully, with meticulousness and conviction.

The book is well-informed and enriched not only by pertinent discussions of philosophers and theorists such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Arendt, Foucault, Žižek, Heidegger, de Man, and Benjamin, but also by either radical or perceptive readings of literary texts by Ishiguro, Orwell, Doctorow, Celan, Wilde, and Roth, including the TV series *Mad Men*. The book comes out of the emerging field of Medical Humanities: Mack's approach is truly interdisciplinary and, to use terminology befitting the Medical Humanities, the book is like a densely woven neural cross-section of philosophy, literary criticism, medicine and pathology, market psychology, economics, cultural studies, history, sociology, and others. All these different texts and fields of inquiry are mustered with ease and flair. Mack is well aware of the complexities and trappings of his topic and so he signposts the reader at every turn by summing up key points and prefiguring others.

In shedding light to its central premise, the book is like an edifice where the author unlocks its nested compartments, opening doors, trapdoors, closets, and reaching into hidden alcoves, from how mimesis pervades culture to minute discussion of aging and art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Specifically, Mack discusses different versions of representation, a property of both life and art; his task – as he writes in the introduction – is to shift "the emphasis from representation to performance" (p. 1). Through the notions of birth and aging, both in their physical and symbolical dimensions, Mack argues that we are controlled by what he calls "flat mimesis", a process of copying that reduces us to mouthpieces of limiting fictions. He counteracts "flat mimesis" with literature's performance of what he calls "philosophy of birth": "Through their natal or innovative force", he asserts, art and literature disrupt "what we are used to" (p. 19). In Chapter Two Mack probes into the conflict between the mimetic and the counter-mimetic through nuanced discussion of the ideas of testing, experimentation, their preconceived outcome, and of the mind's uncritical misreading of bodily affects. In the third chapter, he explains the mechanisms of "flat mimesis" in further detail by discussing biopolitics, the Nazi genocide, and the insidiousness of neoliberal capitalism.

By re-charting the interaction between the subjective and the substantive, that is, the mind and the constants of life and society, Chapter Four investigates how literature's power of uncertainty shatters fictions of certainty. Although there are numerous book-length studies on the interaction among art, life, and subjectivity (e.g. Barker, Nehamas, Reitz), Mack's original study is not interested in modelling life in aesthetic terms but in proposing a solution to a telling paradox: "Literature's independence from life paradoxically provides a new lease of life. It operates in a free mental sphere beyond substance and yet impinges upon our embodied existence" in ways that neutralises suffering from fabricated categories such as

aging (p. 82). Chapters Five and Six constitute further openings inside the edifice of *How Literature Changes the Way We Think*. By looking, for instance, at different interpretations of Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry, Mack traces the counter-mimetic outlook in Romanticism, illuminating it further by contrasting Benjamin's with Heidegger's views: in other words, the potential disruptiveness of the transcendental with art's subordination to history. The last chapter returns to the issue of birth and aging that is given centre stage at the beginning of the book. Through analyses of Wilde and Roth, Mack – consistent in upholding his polymorphous yet clearly defined argument – arrives at the idea that literature upsets the one-sided and controlling “trajectory traversing birth and death” (p. 176). In this manner he calls attention to the pluralism, diversity, and unpredictability of new categories that can help us cope with our mortal condition.

The function of literature and the arts as cognitive and epistemological tools has preoccupied thinkers from Plato (whom Mack also discusses) to Spinoza, to (post)-Romanticism (especially Nietzsche), to Postmodernism (especially Foucault). All these thinkers form Mack's canvas on which he draws his argument, combining ethics with aesthetics, as he propounds. In his synthetic and interdisciplinary approach Mack spearheads the longstanding theoretical debate about the role of art in life. One of his original claims is that literature does not just refute mimesis but goes beyond it; to quote from the first chapter, “[r]epresentation here transcends itself; it is capable of representing not only a copy of what we already know – however complex rather than flat such a copy may be – but also an image of what is new and what makes us stare and startle” (p. 17). Mack is not at all interested in rejecting mimetic literary modes such as Realism and Naturalism, but in using the sphere of literature *per se* as paradigm or tool for our detachment from the grid of fixed and enforced coordinates that rule our beings.

How Literature Changes the Way We Think is akin to an architectural edifice also because its ideas do not progress linearly in the process of reading but because of their spatial simultaneity across its length: what is really rewarding is that *after* reading the book, all interwoven notions explored therein tend to form new networks or take up added meanings in relation to each other in the readers' minds. This is the kind of book whose ideas carry on maturing like a good bottle of wine after the last page, opening the way to future responses. I will provide an example of hidden interconnections: Mack claims that “[l]iterature is not merely fictitious because it has the implicit capacity of disrupting the fictitious” (p. 72). The categories of fiction, fictionality, and truth are semantically played against each other and reconfigured. In a similar manner, the book's rhetoric of birth and aging also counters birth and aging which, however, belongs to the biological order. After all, “age is not primarily a condition of time passing, but a certain mindset” (p. 26).

Mack's book itself could also be compared to a “certain mindset”. Crucial is the word “*Think*” of his title. The book is not a guide for how to improve our lives through action, but for how to perceive them. Its replacing of representation with performance means that a “mindset” can be a form of action (as opposed to the Žižekian notion of ideology being not in discourse but in action). In this respect, the book *performs* itself and its own central argument. Thus, Mack's book works in stimulatingly unexpected and inspiring ways. Literature disrupts our mindsets through diversity: the diverse medley of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, poetry, TV series, literary criticism, Romantic philosophy, aesthetic theory, and trauma theory – (Mack also states that literature and philosophy have become “indistinguishable” (p. 118)) – performs this disruption *in situ*. The book is a major contribution to the field connecting ethics with aesthetics, marking new trends of inquiry. It will definitely be of

benefit to thinkers, scholars, and students of literary theory, criticism, philosophy, and cultural theory.