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Book Reviews

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Reviews of Coyer and Shuttleton (eds.), Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832*, Rodopi 2014; Poggi,* L'anima e il cristallo. Alle radici dell'arte astratta*, 2014.*

1 M. J. Coyer and D. E. Shuttleton (eds.), *Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832*, Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2014, p. 315. ISBN 978-90-420-3891-2, € 70.

Thanks to the studies of important scholars such as Roy Porter and George Rousseau (Rousseau 2004, Porter 1995), the extra-scientific value of British 18th-century medicine has been solidly established. But while the influence of Enlightenment medical theorization on social, political and economic thinkers has already been stressed (Packham 2012), the issue of the interrelation between early modern medicine and "literary culture" has not yet been systematically addressed. The collection of essays edited by Megan Coyer and David Shuttleton—who both work at the School of Critical Studies at the University of Glasgow—expressly aims to respond to this lack of attention: therefore each contributor tries to chart a different way in which Scottish medicine influenced Anglo-American literature throughout the long 18th century. The peculiar importance of Scotland as a hotbed where physicians and surgeons received a first-rate formation is taken for granted on account of recent works by prominent

Scottish Enlightenment scholars (Withers and Wood 2002). This historiographical understanding shapes the chronological boundaries in which the narrative of the volume is comprized: as the title makes clear, the starting point of the investigation is the formation of the Edinburgh School of Medicine in 1726, while the issue of the Anatomical Act in 1832 is chosen as marking the end of an intellectual season. Significantly, it put a stop to the activity of body snatchers, which fuelled the imagination of many authors up to Robert Louis Stevenson.

The eleven contributions to the volume take different approaches to show how Scottish medicine resonate through literary writings of the period, and each author relies on specific methodological strategies in order to show the two worlds, the medical and the literary, were actually bound up with a more general, cultural as well as philosophical, conception of man. The so-called science of men on which many 18th-century *literati* drew to forge their creations was embedded in a vocabulary closely related to physiological concepts, such as sensibility, irritability, sympathy and excitation. A common thread of the essays of *Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832* can thus be detected in the rhetoric of nervous sensibility, a notion that features as a central tenet in the medical writings of Robert Whytt and William Cullen, maybe the most famous Edinburgh physicians who taught at the Medical School during the 18th century (French 1969, Doig 1993). The rhetorical use of such notion was of course liable to spawn very different types of writings, from a philosophical treatise such as Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to Henry Mackenzie's proto-romantic novel, *The Man of Feeling*. But a cultural understanding of man as a fundamentally sensitive being, whose mind experiences itself in an embodied state and can be subject to nervous excitation (notably, Cullen created the term *neuroses* to indicate particular psychosomatic diseases), is reflected in many literary productions, and the volume of Shuttleton and Coyer sheds light on the fruitful interplay between medicine and literature in the Anglo-American modern world as underlying a common conception of psycho-physiological sensibility.

Although the essays are not divided into sections, some of them deal with topics that are likely to be listed as philosophical, while others treat more closely biographical events of Scottish and American writers in late 18th and early nineteenth century, either as narrated by themselves or reported by biographers. Among the contributions that we can group as philosophical, Craig Franson's "'Nothing is so soon forget as pain': Reading Agony in *The Theory of Moral Sen-*

timents" (p. 23-47) tackles the problematic issue of the relationship between Smith's famous treatise and coeval medical literature. Referring to an important article written by Christopher Lawrence on the social implications of the neurophysiological studies (Lawrence 1979), Franson argues that Smith's theory of sympathy can be seen as underpinning a form of social elitism. There is a theoretical connection, according to Franson, between Cullen's representation of the nervous system as passive in relation to corporeal affections and bodily modifications on one side, and Smith's thesis that physical pain is unable to generate sympathy in the beholder on the other. Based on a strong body-mind dualism, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* thus manages to exclude from sympathetic intercourse people suffering from a merely physical disease, and thereby offers a philosophical apology for existing social ranks: only rich and wealthy people can enter into a moral contract with an observer of their emotional lives, because the needs expressed by the sufferings of the "lower orders" fail to leave a deep impression on his imagination and cannot be conceptualized.

In "The Origins of a Modern Medical Ethics in Enlightenment Scotland: Cheyne, Gregory and Cullen as Practitioners of Sensibility" (p. 48-73), Wayne Wild contends that Cheyne's famous *English Malady* contributed to a general reassessment of the objective attitude of early Newtonian physicians towards illness. Through the influence of Cheyne, Cullen and John Gregory—the famous founder of modern medical ethics—drew on a repertoire of what Wild calls the "subjective rhetoric of malaise": this means that Scottish physicians of the late 18th century adopted an approach to illness that involved a subjective dimension, in which the personal account of symptoms by the patients was essential to cure the so-called hypochondriac diseases. Confidence between the physician and the patient thus features a key element in the practice of Cullen and Gregory, as opposed to the objective and indifferent approach of former doctors. In the essay of the late Robin Dix—to whom the volume is dedicated—, entitled "The Demise of the Preformed Embryo: Edinburgh, Leiden, and the Physician-Poet Mark Akenside's Contribution to Re-Establishing Epigenetic Embryology" (p. 74-96), he takes into account the graduation thesis of the Scottish intellectual Mark Akenside. In *De ortu et incremento foetus humani*, a thesis defended and published in Leiden in 1744, long before the Haller-Wolff controversy eventually re-established epigenesis on firm grounds, Akenside put forth an epigenetic embryology. Dix remarks on his originality, so far unacknowl-

edged by historians of science, especially since he wrote the thesis a year before Maupertuis' *Vénus physique*, a classic text defending epigenesis, was published. Dix surmises that Akenside might have been prompted to lean towards epigenesis by hearing of Trembley's experiments on the regenerating *hydra*, but then concludes that the most important source for the biological ideas of the Scottish scientist-poet has been Harvey's *De generatione animalium*, a reading he made whilst a student in Edinburgh.

After this group of philosophical essays, we come across some papers which deal with biographical issues. The American physician Benjamin Rush, a signer of the American Declaration of Independence, is the subject of Catherine Jones' "Benjamin Rush: Edinburgh Medicine and the Rise of Physician Autobiography" (p. 97-122). After studying in Edinburgh under Cullen in the years 1766-8, Rush began to teach at the newborn Medical School of the College of Philadelphia and acquired vast notoriety through his practice. In 1800 he set up to write his autobiography, entitled *Travels through Life*, adopting a style which partly reflects the protestant model of a pilgrimage, but Jones stresses that this composition, unpublished until 1905, is rooted in contemporary disputes and controversies at a large extent. By writing his autobiography, Rush intended to legitimate the methods he employed in the cure of yellow fever, which broke out in Philadelphia in 1793 and 1797. Many people believed that his advocacy of phlebotomy as the best means to cure the fever was unfounded and subjected the physician to ridicule in letters and pamphlets. The English journalist William Cobbett ridiculed the "preposterous puffs" of the "Philadelphia phlebotomist" in his magazine, the *Porcupine's Gazette*, in 1797. But Rush's steadfast defence of phlebotomy was related to the theoretical model he adopted in physiology: through a critic of Cullen's doctrine, he elaborated a unitary conception of illness as entirely depending on the motions of the arterial system. In this idea a clear echo of John Brown's physiology is to be heard. In "*An Account of (…) William Cullen*: John Thomson and the Making of a Medical Biography" (p. 240-266), David Shuttleton reconstructs the events surrounding the composition of the first volume of Cullen's biography by the Scottish physician John Thomson. He was invited to write a "Life" of their father by Cullen's two daughters in 1810, who were willing to make justice to the theory and practice of the most well-known 18th-century Edinburgh physician, but harsh controversies ensued the reading of early drafts of the writing before the Royal Society of Edinburgh,

so that the first volume was not published until 1832. If it is true that Thomson's *Account of (...) Cullen* was meant to challenge the established institutional structures of the University of Edinburgh, on the other hand the author also tried to exploit his literary efforts in order to secure himself a chair within it. Nevertheless, the most remarkable trait of the *Account*, as Shuttleton notes, lies in its blending a personal biography with a broader history of Scottish medicine in the 18th century.

The central essays of the volume focus on figures of Scottish poets and narrators, whose lives were somehow intertwined with the history of medicine. In "The Construction of Robert Fergusson's Illness and Death" (p. 123-144), Rhona Brown reflects on the different accounts which commentators and biographers have given of the life of Robert Fergusson, the Scottish poet who died in a lunatic asylum at the age of twenty-four. By detecting a sense of profound guilt and self-loathing in many of his compositions, early critics have constructed a myth out of Fergusson's death: they claimed that he suffered from religious melancholia, thereby silencing his real voice and sentiments. On the contrary, he was dissatisfied with Scottish Presbyterianism, therefore the modern interpreters shifted their attitude towards his illness and described it as a form of bipolar disorder. Allan Beveridge's "'Groaning under the miseries of a diseased nervous system': Robert Burns and Melacholy" (p. 145-171) shows how the vocabulary used by the poet Robert Burns to describe his sufferings was borrowed from the current cultural understanding of the functioning of the nervous system. Long quotations from Burn's private letters are used by Beveridge to suggest that the way Burns conceptualized his own melancholic states foreshadowed the Romantic ideal of an empowered sensibility of the poet, who is more likely to suffer from melancholia than normal persons but, as a form of compenzation, has the gift of genius.

Megan Coyer's "Phrenological Controversy and the Medical Imagination: 'A Modern Pythagorean' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*" (p. 172-195) is devoted to the figure of the Scottish physician Robert Macnish, who lived in the first half the nineteenth century and famously submitted some terror tales to the *Blackwood's Magazine* during the twenties. As Coyer duly notes, Macnish's advocacy of the phrenological ideas put forth by Gall, Spurzheim and, especially, Combe, seems to at odds with the practice of a tale-writer who draws on subjective psychological experiences to describe senzations of terror and

distress. While the advocates of phrenology fundamentally endorsed a reductionist theory of the mind—and Macnish himself seems to go down this way in his *Introduction to Phrenology*—, his tale entitled *The Metempsychosis*, published in 1826, is based on the transmigration of the soul of the main character, Frederick Stadt, into the body of a wicked forger, Albert Wolstang. If taken at face value, the structure of the narration seems to suggest that body and mind are two separate and irreducible entities, suitable to be separated without transmogrification of the psychological self. Nonetheless, Coyer does not think that Macnish's literary engagement as a "modern Pythagorean" amounts to a critique of phrenology *per se*, but to an admission of the weakness of any reductionist model: while considering the mind as fully visible by the means of anatomical dissection of the brain when he engaged in scientific studies, on the level of the subjective narration of one's own emotions and feelings, the body appeared to Macnish unable to display the complexity of our inner experience.

Two essays contained in the collection consider the influence that current medical researches and practices exerted on the figure of Sir Walter Scott. In "Blood and the Revenant in Walter Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth*" (p. 196-215), Katherine Inglis argues that the fascination associated with the possibility of reviving an apparently dead body by the means of blood transfusion can be detected in Scott's *The Fair Maid of Perth*, a tale settled in fourteenth-century Scotland. After some experiment on blood transfusion were successfully carried out by Richard Lower in the 1660s, this practice had been neglected for about one hundred and fifty years, until John Henry Leacock defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh in 1816. He demonstrated that the donor and the recipient must be of the same species and showed that transfusions could be used to save lives in case of extreme haemorrhage. His experiments fascinated another Edinburgh physician, James Blundell, who accomplished to save a woman's life in 1825 by injecting a good deal of her husband's blood when she was about to die from postpartum haemorrhage. Blundell proved the importance of using syringes to perform such operation. The conception of blood as the principle of life is a pivotal topic within the history of medicine and Scott, according to Inglis, drew on it in order to construct a novel in which the blood generally symbolizes boundaries: in effect it is used to describe the distinction of kinship and class, as well as the source and the limit of human inner power. Inglis further argues that the scene of the revival of Bonthron may be inspired

to nineteenth-century experiments of blood transfusion, although it is set in the Middle Ages. In "Magic, Mind Control, and the Body Electric: "Materia Medica" in Sir Walter Scott's Library at Abbotsford" (p. 216-239), Lindsay Levy calls attention to the lack of medical self-help texts in Scott's private library, a fact that she links with Scott's stoical attitude towards illness. Levy also contends that the presence of books and ephemera relating to the Scottish quack James Graham are relevant for the interpretation of Scott's biography: the Scottish novelist has become lame since he was a baby, and his relatives made him receive a rather curious treatment from Graham involving ether and electrical charges. In the last part of her essay, Levy reconstructs Scott's point of view as relating to the trial against Burke and Hare, two famous body snatchers who provided Dr. Robert Knox with freshly killed bodies.

The last essay of the volume is entitled "Transatlantic Irritability: Brunonian sociology, America and mass culture in the nineteenth century" (p. 267-292) and is authored by Gavin Budge. John Brown is Cullen's famous pupil who interpreted his model of the nervous system in reductionist terms: all physiological processes depend on a material "vital force" which can exert a strong stimulation on the body, resulting in asthenia, or give rise to asthenia in cases of very little stimulation. Thus, every disease stems from excessive accumulation or exhaustion of this undefinable vital force that flows throughout the body. Brunonian physicians often prescribed stimulants like opium and alcohol as remedies to various illness because of their capacity to calm down an agitated nervous system. Budge argues that the Brunonianism contributed to shape the sensibility of Romantic poets and also spurred those kind of explanation we now call sociological, due to the influence of another Scottish physician, Alexander Critchton, who wrote an *Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement* in 1798. Critchton gave an account of hallucination—individual as well as collective—relying on a model of perception as a constructive activity of the mind. Interestingly, Budge signals the presence of Berkeleyan echoes and suggestions derived from the Common Sense School in this medical *milieu* which represents the prehistory of psychiatry (Budge 2007). Traces of Brunonianism can also be found in some critical accounts of the nineteenth-century American society given by British authors: Charles Dickens' *American Notes*, for instance, link the nervous excitation of the Americans to the huge amount of hours they spend working in factories, so that they seek only "vapid" and "wa-

terish" forms of amusement. Budge suggests that Brunonian ideas may echo even in recent criticism of capitalist society: through the mediation of Georg Simmel, Brunonian concepts would still resound in some claims of Walter Benjamin. Albeit fascinating, this last point is just hinted at by Budge, and would deserve further investigations.

Considered as a whole, *Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832* may seem to be lacking in thematic and methodological unity. If the common reference of all its essays is Scottish medicine in the long 18th century, one cannot refrain from pointing at the very little space the editors devoted to clarify how such a vast array of studies—based on very different methods of inquiry—can effectively prove an existing relationship between medical ideas and literary compositions. Sometimes it appears that the *trait d'union* between medicine and literature can be found just in the climate of opinions which gave shape to a general understanding of men's embodied spirituality in the late Enlightenment and early Romantic times. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that this lack of unity is far from weakening the globally positive result accomplished by Shuttleton and Coyer, that is to say, the demonstration that the cultural significance of Scottish medicine is vast, wide-ranging and manifold. Therefore anybody who wishes to explore this topic of the history of medicine from an interdisciplinary point of view will find a valuable source of inspiration in their volume.

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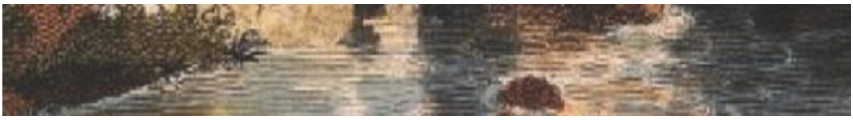

2 Stefano Poggi, *L'anima e il cristallo. Alle radici dell'arte astratta*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014, p. 168. ISBN 978-8815251657, € 16,15.

In his new book, the Italian historian of philosophy Stefano Poggi analyzes and discusses some trends of thought that dramatically influenced the shape of German culture in the first two decades of the 20th century. His aim is to investigate themes, figures and thinkers that are usually neglected in contemporary philosophical discussions, but whose import for the history of German and European civilization was significantly relevant. With this idea in mind, Poggi focuses on many different philosophical, cultural and artistic debates that took place *outside* of the German academic world. His choice to privilege the philosophical reflections of highly educated amateurs such as the collector Konrad Fiedler, the sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand, the architect Henry Van de Velde, the writer Rudolf Kassner, over the works of official professors of philosophy is motivated by the belief that a large part of the German culture was concerned with philosophical issues that did not find an adequate recognition in academic circles.

Indeed, if one has to single out one thread that runs through the different themes dealt with in the book, this would no doubt be the critical attitude towards the theoretical framework of scientific investigation—a negative attitude

which, in the most extreme cases, turns into an open rejection of its methods and results (p. 8). In the first two decades of the 20th century, Poggi remarks, a strong concern for "last things" arose as a consequence of a lack of faith in the possibility of human progress, which soon became a distinctive element of the philosophical landscape that different authors appropriated and articulated in different ways. That concern went hand in hand with a new interest in the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, as well as in the work of Goethe. For many thinkers of that period, Goethe was not only the writer who composed the *Faust*; he was also the author of the *Farbenlehre*, in which an alternative theory of the colours was formulated in opposition to Newton's standard account. What was at stake in Goethe's *Farbenlehre* was the search for a new way of conceiving of the relation between the natural and the ideal, between nature and the individual. Goethe's insistence on the qualitative dimension of the research paved the way for the recognition of the role played by the subject in the process of construction of the object of experience (p. 48). The point was not that of acknowledging an alleged private character of the senzation caused by a luminous impression, since that would have amounted to a confirmation of the very assumptions that were at the basis of the adoption of the quantitative approach to scientific inquiry. Rather, what Goethe wanted to achieve was to highlight the unity of internal and external, of the organism and the world. A proper understanding of the nature of colours should move from the anti-dualistic view that where, in external space, there is a particular movement of atoms, there is also necessarily a particular quality, say, the quality of red. And conversely, where there is the red, there is also necessarily a particular movement of atoms.

The cult of Goethe which became so prominent at the turn of the century was evidence of a deeper discomfort with many ideas of modernity. A different conception of nature and reason was needed, which could satisfy the demand for a more complete and profound knowledge of reality. In his works, Poggi remarks, Goethe had brought to the fore the fact that two were the ways in which nature could be known by human beings, science and art, the latter being more fundamental than the former. In accordance with Goethe's teaching, art was conceived of in strictly non-realistic terms: it was commonly believed that the truth of a work of art did not consist in its success in faithfully depicting the external world. Its success depended, rather, on its capacity to express the

"inner necessity", the "intrinsic life of the figures", to use Kandinskij's words (p. 109). Art represented, therefore, the privileged way of access to the essence of reality. When conceived of in this way, it is evident that art bears many similarities to the mystical experience. It comes to no surprise, therefore, that, in order to explain the cognitive value of art, both artists and the numerous thinkers who, from different points of view, reflected upon art made use of the language of the mystique. Art is an ecstatic gesture through which the artist—similar in that to the mystic—turns his attention to what reveals itself in the soul of human beings.

All these issues and their interconnections are discussed in the six chapters that make up Poggi's *L'anima e il cristallo. Alle radici dell'arte astratta*. What is particularly interesting from our point of view is the conception of interdisciplinarity, and the consequent methodology of inquiry, that emerges from the one hundred and something pages of the book. Poggi convincingly shows that German culture was populated by reflections that originated at the intersection of philosophy, natural sciences, religion, theory and practice of art (literature, sculpture, painting). These reflections lacked the systematicity of academic philosophy: they were less rigorous attempts to provide a consistent view of the nature of reality, or the nature of our knowledge of reality, than a group of insights that aimed at meeting the needs of a period of social, political, cultural and existential turmoil. However, it was their naïve character that made it possible for them to be so present and widespread in German cultural debate. The realization of this fact is an important achievement of Poggi's work. In the numerous historiographical cameos of which the book is composed, Poggi highlights the strict relationship that links the notion of interdisciplinarity to the history of ideas. The dissemination of ideas, their capacity to be perceived as genuine options and to be truly effective in influencing the mentality of a large number of people (and not simply that of the trained specialists in that particular field), depends upon their relative simplicity and their theoretical ductility. Such a ductility is the feature that marks the difference between the interdisciplinary potentiality of an idea and its limited, technical import, between history of ideas and history of philosophy.

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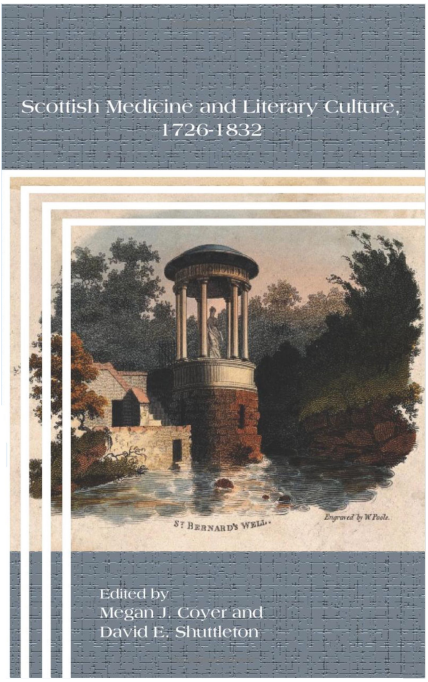

Cover of Coyer and Shuttleton (eds.), Scottish Medicine and Literary Culture, 1726-1832 *(Colored engraving: W. Poole,* St. Bernard's Well*).*