Nelson, Jennifer. Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein’s Ambassadors

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Citer ce compte rendu

hath deserved” (xvii). In this amalgam of continuity and evanescence lies the
difficult truths Wyatt’s poem explores even as Murphy’s book provides singular
access to the “vse of Poesie” as the original cause for what it means to be human.

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Disharmony of the Spheres: The Europe of Holbein’s Ambassadors.

Jennifer Nelson’s Disharmony of the Spheres presents an insightful, new reading
of homogeneous space during a period coined by Michael Sauter as the
“spatial reformation.” Rather than focus on the unity that often accompanies
homogeneous space, Nelson argues that the positive attributes of “sustained
difference” are encapsulated in Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting, The
Ambassadors (1533), which Nelson uses as a point of reference in her analysis
of sixteenth-century European literary texts and inventions. Drawing attention
to the centrality of the anamorphosed skull, Nelson states her intention to
correct a common misreading that the skull is indicative of “the vain desire for
correspondence among things” (4). Nelson argues that contemporary readings
of the skull by Lacan and Žižek, for example, fail to understand the importance
of disharmony to free will. Nelson argues that Holbein’s anamorphosed skull
is a perspectival technique used to suggest the existence of spatial unity that
extends to the real, only to reveal the opposite—that the painting’s disjunctive
space “interrupts” the real (7). Disjunctive space that interrupts the real is the
conceptual foundation upon which Nelson constructs an argument in favour
of spatial contingency. Nelson’s study examines the ways in which sixteenth-
century Europeans engaged with the concept of contingency, using the work
of Erasmus and the inventions of Philipp Melanchthon and Georg Hartmann
as examples of self-dissimilarity caused by the turbulent religious and political
climate of early modern Europe.

Nelson uses an adapted version of the postmodern concept “transreal-
ism” to describe how “an individual or group seeks to preserve difference rather
than homogenize it in the name of coherent identity” (10), because she stresses
that fragmentation is a precondition of reality experienced individually or col-
lectively. Nelson argues that all three writers and inventors in her study held
a longstanding fascination with sustained difference, or dissimilarity, which
underscores her argument that pluralized realities are inherent to humankind’s
orientation in the world.

The first chapter, “Anamorphosis as Symbolic Form,” both establishes
her conceptual framework and methodology and introduces the elements of
Holbein’s painting to which she refers in the following chapters. The second
chapter, “Melanchthon’s Imperfect Mathematics,” discusses how the Lutheran
reformer—Melanchthon—pluralizes the world by drawing his readers’ atten-
ton to imperfections. Melanchthon’s work on geodesy inspired sixteenth-cen-
tury astronomy, but he also helped Luther complete his 1522 translation of the
New Testament. Although Melanchthon and Luther were friendly, they could
not overcome their differences in regard to how one is meant to approach God.
Nelson argues that two possible readings of the anamorphosed skull capture
the epistemological divide between Melanchthon and Luther. The interpreta-
tion of the skull that aligns with Lutheran theology would read the carpenter’s
square and mathematical instruments as a vain attempt to understand God’s
creation in the face of transcendent death symbolized by the skull; on the other
hand, the mathematical instruments can be interpreted as an affirmation that
the mastery of mathematical instruments is what makes transcendent death
visible, which aligns with Melanchthon’s theology. The second chapter also dis-
cusses monetary exchange and the need for a universal system of measurement,
as well as early timepieces. Nelson points out that Melanchthon’s mathemat-
ics were wholly devoted to a pious understand of God, yet as measurement of
Nature and the cosmos increased, so did the number of discrepancies.

In the third chapter, “Hartmann’s Locative Science,” Nelson focuses on
Hartmann’s inventions, specifically his locative and autonomous sundials.
Nelson argues that the production of timepieces plays a fundamental role in
imperialism, noting that autonomous instruments—which do not require the
input of local information—hold epistemological pretenses that anticipate a
“forcibly harmonized, neoliberal world,” which justifies Nelson’s adaption of
the postmodern concept of transrealism. Hartmann’s instruments played a
role in Europe’s attempt to homogenize the world, which appears to contradict
Nelson’s argument of disjunctive space; but spatial contingency is established
through her observation that, whereas geodesy sought to homogenize the world, Hartmann’s measurements revealed largescale discrepancies that challenged homogeneous space. The fourth chapter, “Erasmus Enumerates Europe,” is where Nelson’s arguments begin to converge. The first three chapters were at times fractured, but Nelson’s analysis of Erasmus’s Adages makes her argument coherent and impactful. In this chapter, Nelson explains that Erasmus’s writing style exhibits his “eclectic humanism,” or the idea that truth exists on a continuum. The final chapter, “The Self-Dissimilar Salvation of Holbein’s Ambassadors,” brings the Ambassadors into discussion with the previous chapters, but also devotes time to a deeper analysis of the painting. Nelson provides a point-by-point analysis of the array of seemingly unrelated items portrayed by Holbein and argues that self-dissimilarity and sustained difference are related to freedom. In other words, it is disharmony that allows free will to prosper. Nelson also concludes that Holbein’s representation of transcendent death through the painter’s portrayal of the skull reveals that life is finite, mathematical, and thus subject to manipulation.

Nelson offers an impressively detailed analysis of the painting, as well as the instruments and texts introduced in each chapter. I found the first three chapters a bit scattered—or perhaps fragmented—simply because the attention paid to minute details makes it challenging to follow the overarching argument, but this may also be a manifestation of the project’s ambition to highlight incongruity and spatial interruption. I found the last two chapters the most compelling, because they drew necessary connections between items in the earlier chapters, providing retrospective clarity. As a whole, Nelson’s Disharmony of the Spheres is a dynamic new way of thinking about changing conceptions of space in early modern Europe. Nelson presents an impressive body of research, and the means by which she explains the value of sustained difference and self-dissimilarity is highly convincing.

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