

humankind, the evening of the century, the acknowledgement of entropy as a force in the universe (and thus of the end of the world as an inevitability) and terror of primitive forces at work within the self. In his excellent founding study, *The Early H. G. Wells* (first published in 1961) Bernard Bergonzi brought out Nordau's *Degeneration* as a key text of the decadence. *The Time Machine* and *Heart of Darkness* can be seen in the context of Nordau's *fin du globe*: 'A dusk of the nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world.'<sup>1</sup> The Fin de Siècle was decidedly fashionable when Bergonzi wrote his study, with an edgy truancy which was both appealing and topical. It continues to stir good literary studies, including this one on Wells and Conrad by Linda Dryden, and another, newly published by Oxford University Press, by Alexander Bubb on Kipling and Yeats. The Decadence is alive and well.

**MICHAEL MACK, *CONTAMINATIONS: BEYOND DIALECTICS IN MODERN LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND FILM* (EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016) ISBN 978-1-4744-1136-3 (HB) £70.00 [OLGA ANTSYFEROVA]**

A new book by the prolific scholar Michael Mack of the University of Durham embraces the problematic of five major studies he authored before: on classic German philosophy, Hanna Arendt, Spinoza, and interactions of philosophy and literature. However, he propels his field of research to a new level of interdisciplinary analysis to include, among other things, medical biology and neuroscience. *Contaminations* deals simultaneously with ethics of literature, film studies, intellectual history and sciences. Mack is a truly interdisciplinary scholar whose writings demonstrate undoubtable merits and occasional faults of this approach and fruitful methodology to which the future might belong. Undoubtedly, in the current situation of a post-postmodern crisis manifesting itself in philosophy, sciences and humanities, to say nothing of politics, one feels the great need of a synthesising theory, especially if that theory seeks to appropriate and analyse today's most contradictory and hot topics by putting them in dialogue with both classical literary texts and the latest scientific innovations. Mack finds a rationale for his rather inclusive theory in the figure of *contamination*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 5.

After the Deconstructivists' successful efforts to disavow the binary oppositions of Western logocentrism, it would have been a challenge to present something new in the matter of blurring the boundaries and transgressing the borderlines. Mack accomplishes this task, focusing upon a concept originating from biology (*contamination* is stated as a negation of purity and immunity), which allows him to join 'pure entities' previously considered more or less incompatible (mind/body, society/nature, Sciences/Arts, subjectivity/objectivity, action/contemplation, sacred/profane). The author expertly traces historical oscillations in theorising these binary oppositions and finds his own approach, grounding it both in Spinoza's scepticism and in the pioneering philosophical, scientific and cultural theories of today (such as propounded by Slavoj Žižek, P. K. Nayar, Roberto Esposito, Donna Haraway, Antonio Damasio, and others). The main target of Mack's critique is dialectics which 'separates two entities and traverses from one to the other (finally negating negation)', whereas 'contamination allows for the simultaneous interdependence of what has previously been conceived of as separate or opposed' and 'offers a new prospective on negativity' (1). Demoting one of the most important categories in intellectual history, this finely put formula is followed by numerous and diverse clarifications, elucidations and rationale which constitute an essential part of the book. Introducing a relatively new for the Humanities *figure of contamination*, Mack sheds sufficient light on the contextual meanings of the figure, giving such synonyms and paraphrases as *symbiosis*, *entanglement*, *fusion*, *hybridity*, *interdependence*, *fluidity*, *mediations*, *conflation*, or else – something that *enmeshes*, *comingles*, *coexists*, *flows together*, *implicates with each other*. This diversity of signifiers speaks to both the intellectual flexibility and the synthetic character of the *figure* in question. The *figure of contamination* gives an opportunity to bring together such seemingly clashing phenomena as 'contamination of discourses' and 'environmental contamination' (3). Mack mobilises the title figure even for rather traditional comparisons which could have done quite well without this innovative rationale: the scholar 'practises contamination' while correlating 'often separated historical periods (such as nineteenth-century and modernist literature), national literatures (American, British and Italian), genres (tragedy and comedy), media (cinema and literature) and philosophical/scientific and literary writings' (5).

For a literary scholar who might find herself on a more traditional side, the unquestionable benefit of the contamination theory elaborated by Michael Mack is the special role he ascribes to literature: 'literary works

confound stable and pure forms of categorisation' (3); 'Literature confronts social and scientific discourse with the contaminating complexities of experience.' (83) Such phrases substantiate the necessity and practicability of literature, justifying its status as a cornerstone in his theorising in particular and in the overall rethinking of the world, the Anthropocene and (post)humanism in general. Thus, Mack's reading of Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* (2010) involves a contamination of hermeneutics with empiricism and claims to discover 'a new form of literature's socio-cultural significance' – as it 'potentially changes our ways of interacting with the fictitious core by which we deceive ourselves about substantial issues such as climate change' (13).

Contamination of Nature with Society accounts for the collapse of the Natural Order seen as the main premise in the writings of Herman Melville, H. G. Wells and Ralf Ellison. Wells's *The Invisible Man* is interpreted in the context of Robespierre's reign of terror (following Jack Williamson's *H. G. Wells: Critic of Progress*, 1973) and of social invisibility (referring to A. M. Lippit, who correlates the experiment described by Wells with Roentgen's discovery of X-rays). Mack foregrounds the social and historic implications of *The Invisible Man*, maintaining that Griffin 'has become [...] a ghost of the French Revolution that has turned into a reign of terror' (79). It must be mentioned, though, that Mack's sophisticated analysis sometimes leads to rather derivative conclusions. Thus, recapitulating his interpretation of *Invisible Man* by Ralf Ellison, Mack writes: 'Invisibility here is a question of perception, of the societal refusal to recognise the existence of someone or a group.' (89) With *Moby Dick*, 'the most astonishing of Melville's achievements is to have undermined the divide between [...] the supposed purity of nature as opposed to the potential depravity of human society' (97), which allows us to view that great novel as another example of contamination. Nevertheless, the correlated idea of 'the inscrutable unpredictability of nature which is as unstable as the sea' is hardly original.

To my thinking, the methodology of 'contaminating literary and scientific forms of enquiry' works well both for the newest texts and the classical ones, though in the latter case some propositions sound somewhat categorical and oversimplified (this concerns, for example, Mack's claim to discovering that for Henry James perception was a form of action (3)). This time-tested trope of Jamesian studies cannot be substantially reanimated even by associating James with Hitchcock, as the two artists have already been paralleled in the recent book *The Men Who Knew Too Much: Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock* (edited by Susan M. Griffin and Alan Nadel,

2012). It does not mean, though, that Mack's interpretation is mainly reiterative. As I have already pointed out, his claim that in James 'perception is a form of action' falls short of being a novel idea: 'What has so far been neglected is that James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors* idiosyncratically reveal observation as the kernel of action.' (131) At the same time, elaborating upon it, the author makes some interesting and original observations referring mainly to James's topicality for the current situation: 'James's back and forth between perception and action, between meaning and deed has a special pertinence for our contemporary digital culture, which accentuates the blurring of the difference between audience and production.' (129) Interestingly, as the point of reference for his interpretation of *The Portrait of a Lady* Mack takes the following premise: 'Henry James and Alfred Hitchcock in different yet related ways show how actions without perceptive work of understanding can have deleterious – if not lethal – effects.' (130) The fate of Isabel Archer is chosen to illustrate the latter point: 'Lacking enough perceptive capacities, Isabel Archer buys into the manipulations of Osmond's aura.' (133) Here, Mack highlights his own attempt 'to show how literature illuminates larger societal issues' (136). According to him, the drama of Isabel's life is preconditioned by her lack of perceptive capacities. (Speaking of dramas, it is not completely justifiable to ascribe the collocation 'the drama of consciousness' to Nina Baym. It was Henry James who coined the phrase in his preface to *Roderick Hudson* (see *The Art of the Novel*)). The problem with Isabel Archer is that she 'compartmentalises thought and deed, perception and action, reading literature or philosophy and embarking on an active life' (149). In other words, Isabel stands aloof to the practice of contamination: she 'repudiates any osmosis between books and reality' (149). Anyhow, this approach helps to see Isabel's situation from a slightly different angle.

*Contaminations* may be considered a breakthrough, a successful attempt at bringing together the Sciences and the Arts, an impressive endeavour to trace the roots and transformation of the figure of contamination transcending the disciplinary, medial, temporal, generic and other boundaries. All this makes *Contaminations* a thought-provoking and stimulating *interdisciplinary* study. As far as *intradisciplinary* (for instance, literary) aspects are concerned, it should be remarked that conclusions relating to literature occasionally lack originality. Sometimes the road leading to a conclusion looks more enticing than the conclusion itself. Was this not the author's contaminating intention?