A Topography Plagued by Marginality in Victorian Novels.
By Cătălina Bălinişteanu-Furdu. Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre Verlag,
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Specialised in gender studies, in general, and women's studies, in particular, the author of *A Topography Plagued by Marginality in Victorian Novels* enlarges her area of expertise by proposing a fresh interpretative approach to the positionality of the Victorian *Others* through a balanced and well-structured chapteral positioning within her own literary topography.

The intention of reaching gender balance stated in the introduction to the book is materialised in the selection of both female- and male-authored novels to prove her theory of marginality as liable to "plague" (that is, painfully and persistently afflict) both humans and the spaces that they inhibit. Balance is also what seems to have dictated the equal distribution of the six chapters into two sets of three chapters. The solid framework of the book is strongly supported by these six structural pillars chronologically unfolding studies on three women-writers' works (Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights,* Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*), followed by analyses of three men writers' novels (Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). Presented as a prevalent strategy of overcoming marginality and marginalisation, subversion is a strategy used by Cătălina Bălinişteanu-Furdu herself, given that she appears to abide to the principle of gender equality and yet, she contextualises the six Victorian novels to the purpose of focusing on women and on "their attempts at emancipation by demonstrating how their positionality impacts their agency and their personality" (p. 5).

The conceptual delimitations in the introductory chapter transgress themselves the limits traditionally established by spatial theorists in treating "place" and "space" as mere literary categories. The key to decoding the messages reinforced throughout her subsequent analyses of Victorian spaces lies in adopting an interdisciplinary perspective on the significance attributed to opposite spaces such as private vs. public, finite vs. infinite, civilized vs. uncivilized, rural vs. urban, etc.) and in presenting the main strategies identified and identifiable throughout the six chapters. These strategies are illustrative of the ways in which the *Others* experience marginality when embedded in spaces perceived as socially produced and "culturally inscribed with meaning" (Lefebvre 1901, apud Newland 2008: 209). Hence, the exponents of Otherness placed within the social and political context of Victorianism spatially shape their identity in terms of class, gender, and ability status by their marginal positioning within gender-, age- or class-based categories (including women, children, or labourers).

The two-directional influence and interdependency between spaces and individuals populating them lies at the core of the first chapter suggestively entitled "Marginality embedded in opposite spaces". The author provides relevant textual evidence of the construction and deconstruction of spaces in *Wuthering Heights* in accordance with the protagonists "desire, needs, and personality" (p. 6). The undeniable connection between the main characters' marginalisation and the binary oppositions between spaces outlines a cause-effect relationship that is rooted in the classic nature/culture divide: on the one hand, the marginals' instinctual living and rejection of social conventions, their lack of education and low social positioning result in class conflict, displacement and social exclusion; on the other hand, the marginals' rebellion, usurpation of power and revenge are the boomeranging effects of authority being enforced by centrally-positioned charactered who exert oppressive power (both physical and emotional aggression) on the violators of boundaries. The social role that paradoxically makes inhumaneness erupt to the surface most violently on all sides is the master, one of the most revered male roles in Victorian times. An intriguing observation made by the author at the end of her analyses is that Brontë seems to have favoured the punishment of

social and spatial transgressors and the restoration of patriarchal order and spatial balance by the final prevalence of typically Victorian moral and cultural values at the expense of the marginalized individuals.

Chapters 2 and 3 bring into question the attempts at transgressing social and spatial borders made by the protagonists of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell's novels. Cătălina Bălinişteanu-Furdu takes a daring step in her demonstration that women are capable of transgressing social borders by motivating that the female characters need to recurrently appeal to the subversion of conventions (while apparently respecting them) as a strategy to resist oppression or to unite social classes. What is demonstrated progressively, and somewhat conventionally, is that, in assuming the stereotypically female social role of governess, Jane's Eyre marginality is "in perfect accordance with Victorian conventions": being orphaned and socially underprivileged, she strives towards a better social position and a secure domestic space (=home), just like real-life women of Brontë's times; her special status acquired through her education and profession ensures her transition from the private to the public space and the penetration into the center of the social circle and beneath deceiving appearances. The unconventional strategy to which the author of this study resorts herself is to interpret the Brontëan protagonist's journey from Gateshead (one of the spaces exuding "decay, hypocrisy and immorality" underneath the glamorous appearance which is symbolical of the beginning of her marginality) to Ferndean (as the "place where the boundaries between private and public are annulled, where spiritualty and a self-created order prevails" – p. 82) as emblematic of both female and male characters' paying dearly for their transgression by facing "death, enclosure, starvation or deceit" (p. 83). In other words, female characters are made to suffer for their daring resistance to authority and subversion of order, while the male ones for their ignoring Victorian norms. A similar position is assumed in Chapter 3, which explores marginality in different phases and spaces, projected against the background of the divisions between the industrial North and the idyllic South, perceived as representative of the masculine world vs. the feminine domestic sphere. Thus, thanks to the author's examples, we come to understand how the public space pervades the

private one to the point of influencing their inhabitants, both physically and psychologically.

The turning point in the organisation of the book is represented by Chapter 4, which ensures a smooth transition from women- to men-authored novels as the focus of the spatial analysis and marks a significant shift in the circumstances of marginalisation. The author enhances the binary oppositions between inner and outer spaces/ urban and rural spaces, paralleled by the dichotomy civilized vs. uncivilized spaces, and gradually proves validity of the statement made in the title: [Dickensian characters of *Great Expectations* remain] "forever marginal despite transgressing the childhood rural boundaries." The approach to marginality and the response to it found in the rebellion against the Victorian conventions and the subversion of gendered spaces is taken even further in Chapter 5 by dealing with Alice's evading into a fantasy world in order to overcome her marginalisation and exclusion from the adults' world. The validity of these subversive strategies – the derision of Victorian social and moral values, the defiance of traditional roles and the escape into a dystopian world – is indirectly questioned by Carroll who proves that Victorian order is necessary when madness and uncertainty threaten to throw the world into chaos. Contemporary readers who expect some positive viewpoint about subversive strategies in view of feminist theories may be disappointed by the fact that an advocate of women's studies does not openly support the idea of taking refuge in a "Wonder-world" (symbolically standing for the refuge taken into sci-fi "alternative/parallel universes" or today's metaverses/virtual worlds) as a successful strategy to cope with marginality.

Conveniently placed at the end of the book on account of its being based on a late Victorian creation, the "mapping" of Tess of the D'Urbervilles' marginality becomes a mapping of the entire network of connections among the characters analysed in the other chapters. The author focuses on Hardy's reflection of Otherness by identifying and interpreting spatial and temporal coordinates, but does not lay more emphasis on his challenging both social and literary conventions, which imposed male writers to construct their female characters as fitting into some standards of domesticity and morality. One might expect a

supportive attitude towards Tess's subversive embracing marginality whenever given the chance to improve her condition and living "a series of margins/ borders without ever reaching the centre" (p. 195) and appreciate Hardy's ground-breaking outlook on his heroine's continual refusal to manifest a submissive femininity and her rejecting the future that does not seem to bring her a chance to express her new female sexuality.

The strategy of advancing theses and hypotheses on the Victorian writers' treatment of marginality in relation to spaces and subsequently demonstrating them by textual evidence represents one of the strongest points of the entire book. It legitimises the position taken by the author herself and represents a model to follow by the students and researchers to whom this study is dedicated. What also draws attention are the parallels drawn not only between dichotomic spaces, but also among characters already submitted to scrutiny in the previous chapters in order to observe different patterns and degrees of marginality.

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