10.2478/abcsj-2023-0030

Sten Pultz Moslund, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen and Martin Karlsson Pedersen, editors. *How Literature Comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction.* Edinburgh UP, 2021. Pp. 276. ISBN 978 1 4744 6131 3 (hardback); ISBN 978 1 4744 6133 7 (electronic).

In contemporary scholarship, matter and material entities are of primary interest within larger nonhuman contexts such as climate change, the digital turn, or the animal rights movement, which are consistently traced back to their material components. With *How Literature Comes to Matter*, editors Sten Pultz Moslund, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen and Martin Karlsson Pedersen place matter at the head of the discussion, seen from a post-anthropocentric perspective. Though the volume's main concern narrows down to the material, its research object expands to include two directions less frequently investigated in Anglophone contexts: non-Anglophone literatures – with important examples from the French, Italian and Danish traditions – and some past literary works by authors such as Georges Perec, Sylvia Plath and Ayi Kwei Armah. As such, *How Literature Comes to Matter* constitutes an original source of information as well as an inspiration for further research. Its often frenetic writing vividly renders the vibrancy of matter.

The book investigates the pertinence of post-anthropocentric theory to literature, rather than the bearing of literature to recent post-anthropocentric thought. Above theory itself, it underlines the vitality, "significance and agency of more than human realities," with close readings in such different areas as postcolonial, queer and feminist works, romantic and modernist literature, science fiction and postmillennial crisis novels (22). As the editors acknowledge in their introduction, they continue a line of critical enquiry initiated by prominent figures such as Bill Brown, Timothy Morton, Timothy Clark and Maurizia Boscagli, as

well as the celebrated Jane Bennett and Graham Harman in the fields of New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology. The book is thus far from emerging in a methodological void. The history of New Materialism(s) includes many famed authors and has been anthologised in volumes such as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms* (2008), Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's *New Materialisms* (2010), and – most prominently – Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010). A recent addition is Christian Moraru's *Flat Aesthetics* (2022), which focuses on recent American literature to attempt a definition of contemporaneity from the perspective of New Materialism. Marco Caracciolo's *Slow Narrative and Nonhuman Materialities* (2022) and *Contemporary Narrative and the Spectrum of Materiality* (2023) both reconnect narrative theory and the nonhuman world in literature. To these one could add several volumes dealing with nonhuman agencies, the Anthropocene and ecocriticism.

The human subject, although an integral part of the discussion, undergoes a process of "de-anthropocisation" (4, 12, 14). The editors argue for the need to explore the way "objects, matter and human-reality relations come into play in ways that are not entirely governed by *anthropocentric knowledge* and meaning constructions" (16-17, my emphasis).

The eleven chapters in the volume are grouped into four sections. The first of them, "Matter-Oriented Perspectives on Literary Techniques," opens with an essay by Karlsson Marcussen. The author advances a material reading of texts through an encounter between post-anthropocentric theory and narratology. At the centre of the argument is the notion of description. Traditionally seen as static and associated with the nonhuman, it is set in contrast with the human being perceived as vivid and dynamic in narratology. Such a strict, binary distribution of roles needs rethinking in light of the material turn in theory, which Karlsson Marcussen does in her analysis of Georges Perec's short story "Still Life/Style Leaf" (1981). She shows how in the story, the *mise en abyme* which seems to institute a deconstructive textuality actually "points to something beyond itself": a moment of full presence ensured by the materiality of letters and the material surroundings described therein (38). Marco Caracciolo's essay similarly illustrates the manner in which the setting of the story reveals itself as dynamic and relevant. His essay reads

Italo Calvino's novel *Mr Palomar* (1985) alongside British artist Jon McNaught's graphic novel, *Kingdom* (2018). In both cases, Caracciolo identifies leisurely paced narratives which act to discourage hasty processes of reading and thus encourage the contemplation of the surrounding world (50). By means of specific verbal and visual strategies respectively, Calvino and McNaught succeed in rendering time slower and thus more substantial, "thicker," so as to do justice to the ample rhythms of nonhuman materialities.

Fictional texts, especially those written in the past, are by definition the reflection of a subjective take on things. Even so, nonhuman objects may act from within texts to undermine subjectivity and provide a lateral perspective on reality. "Object Intrusions in Subject-Centric Text" is the focus of the volume's second section. Sten Pultz Moslund first analyses Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968). For this highly political, historical and social text, Pultz Moslund proposes an unconventional matter-oriented and post-anthropocentric reading. He sets forth an "*aisthetic*," or sense-aesthetic interpretation that is concerned specifically with the physical dimensions of the world in Armah's work (75). The descriptions there connect the body of the protagonist with the "flesh of the world" (76) – the rich tactile imprint of surfaces, organic smells and sounds. Choosing to focus on impersonal matter at its intersections with bodily feeling does not deny the novel's political and social insights. Rather it deepens them. The way the nonhuman forces of life impact the human subject are also at the heart of the second chapter of the section, where Martin Karlsson Pedersen interprets Sylvia Plath's poem "Tulips." The poem stages a hospitalised, lethargic human subject confronted with a bunch of red tulips. In a Heideggerian key, the hostile presence of the tulips suggests the obscure potency of the earth. It is by means of such vital aggressiveness that the tulips act to revive the human being, "[t]he agency of Plath's tulips [being] founded on their hostility" (100). The agonistic relationship that develops dismantles a view of the object as inert and passive and underlines its freedom from human command.

Subject and object swapped roles also in the fiction of the more distant past, it seems. Moving to nineteenth century Danish literature, Torsten Bøgh Thomsen discusses agency in Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales whose protagonists are inanimate objects. Things are dominant

in Andersen's fairytales, where they criticise and displace the human from a position of mastery, challenging the latter's autonomy in the process. The human subject loses "its position of mastery and becomes thing-like" (119). As such, new light is cast on the romantic paradigm where the human subject traditionally occupied a central place.

The human body could not be absent from a volume dealing with the material. "Carnal Realities: Lively Flesh in Feminist and Queer Readings" are therefore the timely focus of the volume's third section. Tracing feminism's extensive history, Tobias Skiveren deplores the absence of a substantial New-Materialist feminist incarnation. In order to open the door to such a perspective, Skiveren suggests "carnacriticism" – a new type of criticism that he envisions specifically to reflect the immediacy of the flesh. Analysing Danish writer Maja Lucas's novel *Mor* (2016), Skiveren investigates "what it feels like to live as a specific corporal configuration, subjected not only to the powers of discourse, but also to the *recalcitrant materiality of the flesh*" (143, my emphasis). The body and the way it internalises time and space are amongst the chief preoccupations of New Materialism. Time comes into sight as the main focus of the present paradigm insofar as it is dominated by concerns for the future outlook of the planet. Yet, the more palpable materiality of *space* and its multiple links with corporeality are equally of interest to authors who write about the mutual influence of the two entities. Laura Oulanne's essay alone takes into account a spatial redimensioning of the body in her discussion of the modernist fiction of Djuna Barnes. Combining a queer phenomenological reading and a New Materialist one, Oulanne underlines the twofold feat that Djuna Barnes accomplishes: dismantling gendered notions of domestic space, on the one hand, and undermining anthropocentrism, on the other. Barnes is shown to translate even the most abstract notions into a language of rich materiality and physicality.

Since the body is determined not only by space but also, more dramatically, by time, the temporal dimension of corporeality – or its queer redefinition – is addressed by Karin Sellberg in her analysis of Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time* (2015). A "queering" of time as non-linear defines embodiment in both novels. Such a perception of the body and time acts to fracture "the grand narratives of identity formation, complicating individual characters

and problematising narrative function" (177). Rather than linear and teleologic, time is rendered as entangled and plural, constantly reshaped by relationality and relationships.

How Literature Comes to Matter all but demands a consideration of capitalism and the Anthropocene. Appropriately, its concluding section – "Capitalism, Crisis and the Anthropocene" – provides one. It does so by implicitly raising issues that have not been satisfactorily solved to date: given the prevailing flat ontology, what does contemporary thought require for a critique of capitalism? Is such a critique still necessary? Can we still talk of the human's destructive agency if everything is a unitary continuum? Working on apocalyptic and dystopian fiction, Rune Graulund focuses on resource depletion and scarcity in capitalism as they appear in Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl* (2009). By Graulund's account, informing the novel's perspective is an instrumental understanding by which we perceive the world in terms of *use.* That perspective, fully realized, issues in the sobering message that our future is an entity that we have already spent. Finitude is the consequence of the future depletion of material resources in an "ever more populous yet also impoverished world" (195). Depletion not only affects us materially, but it serves to undermine our sense of connectedness and community. Such, Graulund maintains, are the destructive effects inherent in financial capitalism. Martin Karlsson Pedersen investigates these selfsame effects while considering Alex Preston's novel *This Bleeding City* (2010). Money-signs are shown to have an effect of "abstraction, acceleration and excess" upon the human, both at bodily and affective levels. Karlsson Pedersen designates the perspective characteristic of the novel as 'dry ontology' (223). It issues in a new type of subjectivity, characterised by human isolation and disconnectedness of the sort experienced by the novel's protagonist.

Given the vastness and all-encompassing effect of capitalism, nothing seems capable of providing an escape from the environmental apocalypse towards which we seem inexorably headed. Still, certain novelists have conceived means to counter this rather grim prospect. Maurizia Boscagli's concluding essay on Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (2014) leaves us on a hopeful note. The novel proposes escaping the paralysis of the apocalyptic imagination through an alternative to the now moment, a type of futurity that is already part of the present. Inspired by

Félix Guattari and Walter Benjamin, Boscagli employs the concept of aura to show how it infuses Lerner's writing: in the novel, reality is revalued through flashes of illumination that make it auratic again. Shocking us awake, the aura that the protagonist experiences in quotidian objects "stands as an attempt to survive and overturn the solipsism, isolation and decline of experience put in place by late capitalism" (244).

An unconventional Afterword by Timothy Morton closes the book. Alluding to the polysemy of "matter" in the volume's title, Morton explores the process of our attaching significance to matter in time – making it matter. He underlines the extent to which the process is about human beings themselves rather than things, and he analyses meaning as an implicitly anthropocentric notion. In an effort to undermine our present understanding of objects, he brings in the Anthropocene, thereby adding a whole new dimension to the matter. He lays forth how our perception of objects focuses on their mere present, to the exclusion of both their past and future. We are oblivious both of the objects' geological origin – the matter they have been made of – as well as their future – the waste they turn into and which marks our impact at a geological level, the Anthropocene. Ignoring the past and future of things leads to their shortened life span and renders them insignificant: "The cup-for-humans was just a tiny blip, precisely because the for-humans logic forgot about clay (the past) and garbage (the future), and imposed a present on the clay that was simply a human-scaled present" (261). Morton concludes with a statement on the profound ambiguity and non-teleology of matter.

The strength of this volume lies above all in its remarkable thematic capaciousness and depth. As such, it renders an enormous service to contemporary literary studies. Moslund, Karlsson Marcussen and Karlsson Pedersen have entirely succeeded in demonstrating the relevance of material studies not only to literary studies but equally to ecocritical scholarship.

ANAMARIA SCHWAB,
Transylvania University, Brașov, Romania