

## BOOK REVIEWS

Mathias Énard, *Compass*

Translated by Charlotte Mandell

New York: New Directions, 2017

448 pages, \$35.95, ISBN 9780811226622

French novelist Mathias Énard's ninth book, *Boussole*, won the Prix Goncourt in 2015, and its excellent translation by Charlotte Mandell, *Compass*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2017. *Compass* has been compared to W. G. Sebald's books in their "erudite melancholia." In fact, the word "melancholy" is traced etymologically within the novel when the narrator explains to his lover the connection between *sevdalinke*, the Bosnian equivalent for the Portuguese word for melancholy (*saudade*), and *sevdah*, "a Turkish word . . . borrowed from the Arabic *sawda*, which means 'the black mood.'" The narrator is an Austrian musicologist and scholar of orientalism named Franz Ritter, who suffers from insomnia, and the novel is essentially his nocturnal, delirious dream of melancholy and nostalgia à la Marcel Proust. His memories of travelling transport the reader to the cosmopolitan cities of Vienna and Istanbul, Tehran and Aleppo, and the great caravan routes of the Palmyra desert—some of the major crossroads of the world. There is also his obsession with his elusive love, Sarah, a Parisian Jew and an Orientalist scholar in far away Sarawak, through whom we become acquainted with stories of great women travellers, such as Lady Hester, Jane Digby, Lady Anne Blunt, Gertrude Bell, Isabelle Eberhardt, and Annemarie Schwarzenbach. Proust is also mentioned more than once as having attended a performance of Henri Rabaud's opera *Marouf, the Cairo Cobbler* (1914), based on J. C. Mardrus' translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1898-1904), which he used as a model for his magnum opus *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927)—a book that is also about melancholy and mortality. The narrator even concludes that "without the Orient" there would be "no Proust, no *In Search of Lost Time*."

The novel thus elucidates the fascinatingly intertwined and intertextual history of cultural and musical interactions and dialogues between the East and the West, which shows that “Orient and Occident never appear separately, that they are always intermingled, present in each other, and that these words—Orient, Occident—have no more heuristic value than the unreachable directions they designate.” The translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* by Mardrus, a French physician who grew up in Cairo, studied medicine in Beirut, and learned Arabic as his first language, serves as a great example. This work is often thought of as “the true face of the eternal and mysterious Orient,” yet it has gone through a myriad of adaptations and reconstructions, such as Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* (1888), Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “The Tale of the 672nd Night” (1895), and Joseph Roth’s *The Tale of the 1002nd Night* (1937). The narrator describes these works as a “Third Orient” that feeds on a “Second Orient,” which relies on the works of Orientalists and travellers like Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, who was the first to translate the 14th-century Persian poet Hafez’s *Divan* (1812-1813) into a western language.

Marked by time (the hours throughout the night), the novel is constructed in a stream-of-consciousness mode with long, looping sentences and paragraphs, as if to evince that “everything is connected”—the book’s recurring refrain—and that the East and the West are inextricably linked and interdependent. Stylistically, like an archeological text, the book is interwoven with letters, dialogues, book excerpts, article abstracts, photographs, postcards, journal entries, and field notes. Inserted into the novel are facsimiles of pages of Arabic text juxtaposed with French text from the 2nd edition of Honoré de Balzac’s *The Skin of Sorrow* (1831) and German and Arabic text placed side by side from the original edition of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *West-Eastern Diwan* (1819), which was directly inspired by Hammer-Purgstall’s translation of Hafez. In his delirium, Franz conjures up “all these men, all these souls still walking around us: who was Liszt, who was Berlioz, who was Wagner and all these people they knew, Musset, Lamartine, Nerval, an immense network of texts, notes and images, clear, precise, a path visible by me alone that links old Hammer-Purgstall to a whole world of travellers, musicians, poets, that links Beethoven to Balzac, to James Morier, to Hofmannsthal, to Strauss, to Mahler, and to that sweet smoke of Istanbul and Tehran.”

The novel contains encyclopedic references and allusions to the inter-

mingling of sounds and texts between the East and the West, such as the influence of oriental music on Christoph Willibald Gluck's Viennese operas, the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, the gamelans of Claude Debussy and Benjamin Britten, and Arvo Pärt's "Orient and Occident" (2000). The reader also learns how the Italian musician Giuseppe Donizetti (the older brother of Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti) introduced European music to the Ottoman ruling classes, and how Franz Liszt played for the Sultan at the Çırağan Palace in 1847. There is also the example of Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, who set Hafez's poems to music based on the adaptations of German poet Hans Bethge and whose *Symphony No. 3* (1916) was inspired by Tadeusz Miciński's translation of the 13th century Persian mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi's poem "Song of the Night" as well as Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1865). Franz's most-cited article, "The First Orientalist Opera *Layla and Majnun* by Uzeyir Hajibeyov," also examines the relationship between the Azerbaijani composer and the Italian composers Gioachino Rossini and Giuseppe Verdi. Franz concludes that "the revolution in music in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries owed everything to the Orient," and it was not simply a matter of "an exogenous element put into play to obtain an exotic effect, but a real possibility for renewal: a force of evolution, not a revolution." Intercultural exchange thus takes place in the land between languages, notes, and worlds, which becomes a fertile space for creativity, illumination, and transformation.

However, artists and travellers also fall into illness, madness, and depression in this liminal space, "as if, despite all the bridges, all the links held out by time, a mixed identity turned out to be impossible." The novel opens, for example, with a passage on the Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat, who committed suicide while living in exile in a Parisian garret, and it names many archeologists, linguists, explorers, musicians, and missionaries who contracted diseases, went insane, or were decapitated. Indeed, the self-referential title of the book inside the novel is *On the Divers Forms of Lunacy in the Orient*. At the core of the novel, then, is a heart-wrenching lament for the tragedies of Iraq and Iran, the destruction of Syria, and the idea of "Orientalism as humanism." Towards the end of the book, Franz and Sarah wander in the Montmartre Cemetery in Paris and are reminded of the centuries of transcultural connections that are sadly forgotten and forsaken. The book serves as a tomb, as well as a tome, that recognizes and seeks justice for "all

those who have worked, out of love for music, for the knowledge of Arabic instruments, rhythms and repertoires, Turkish or Persian.” It is a brilliant and important novel for our times of division, violence, and rancor.

—Shao-Pin Luo, Dalhousie University

Nick Mount, *Arrival: The Story of CanLit*

Toronto: Anansi, 2017

373 pages, \$29.95, ISBN 9781487005436

Nick Mount has produced a highly readable history of the so-called “Can-Lit boom”—the time when a largely metropolitan generation of writers first brought Canadian poems and stories to a mass audience. While acknowledging forerunners like Ethel Wilson and W. O. Mitchell, Mount charts how a convergence of cultural forces and individual energies built up over the 1960s, as postwar affluence and technology supported phenomenal growth in the publishing industry. Simultaneously, creative talents sharpened themselves against the grain of an increasingly consumeristic society. Within a generation, he argues, “a country without a literature” became “a literature without a country.” Through turns of phrase like this, Mount attempts to engage both specialist and general audiences. He maintains reader interest by exploiting strategic overstatement and colourful speculation. In this way, he perpetuates certain myths that make CanLit’s central figures appear larger than life. Yet he also does some good myth-busting work, such as his criticism of the assumed importance of the Canada Council. While his book has received backlash from some corners, it has nevertheless achieved a wide readership, and it has helped to shine a spotlight on the emergence of CanLit as a cultural phenomenon.

Micro-reviews in the pages’ margins give Mount space to evaluate specific titles. Thumbnail images of original book covers remind us how far those definitive or ephemeral texts (such as those by Farley Mowat and Audrey Thomas) have faded into the background of history. Although Mount adopts a casual tone in these glosses, they sometimes exhibit the scholarly insights characteristic of the main narrative. He offsets his bold opinionizing by including other reactions to these books culled from published reviews, archived correspondence, and even the public record. In the House of Commons, for example, Conservative MP Thomas “Mac” McCutcheon con-

demned by Nichol as “an affront to decency and a discouragement to serious literary efforts.” Moments like this represent the puritanical, conformist society CanLit authors sought to challenge.

Mount does an excellent job of contextualizing the aptly named CanLit explosion (momentary but intense) within Canada’s twentieth century from political, economic, and technological perspectives. While many writers receive mention in the main narrative, Mount primarily focuses on a small subset of authors with institutional and peer affiliations that make the irritating short-hand CanLit appropriate to their publications. Inevitably, many writers are left out or given short shrift, and reviewers of *Arrival* have proposed their own candidates for Most Overlooked Author. Robert Kroetsch and his issue of *boundary 2*, which focused on Canadian literature, are conspicuously absent. Is this because the journal came from Upstate New York, where Kroetsch taught? If one sees this collection of postmodern poetry and diagnostic essays as a capstone anthology, then it would seem to fit Mount’s argument that the rise of CanLit ended in 1974. In other words, it represents the moment of arrival, when the outside world took notice of CanLit as a project that was much larger than any individual author.

Like Kroetsch, Maria Campbell also has a book reviewed in *Arrival*—his *Studhorse Man* (1969), her *Halfbreed* (1973)—but neither writer is otherwise part of the history Mount creates. Métis and First Nations authors make only cameo appearances, which may seem like an oversight, although some might have objected to being “appropriated” by Canadian literature. The few indigenous artists who do appear in the book include Norval Morriseau, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Skyros Bruce. Regrettably, Mount does not address the limits of his focus or interrogate the borders of CanLit as a genre or movement. Furthermore, he repeats at least two well-worn CanLit themes: that “mostly it came from Toronto” (meaning more than from the rest of the country combined) and that it was dominated by an “exceptionally white cast of characters,” as Paul Barrett reasonably discussed in *The Walrus*.

Female writers hold sway in Mount’s book, well beyond the hallowed trinity of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and Alice Munro. He records instances of sexism in Canada Council application forms and mocks the “dick-swinging masculinity” exhibited by Irving Layton and others. Even though Mount addresses racism as a recurrent feature in books of the period, such as Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), which effects

a “silent transformation of a Cree chief into a Christian martyr,” writers of colour are largely underrepresented. Harold Ladoo receives the most attention, followed by Austin Clarke, Roy Kiyooka, and Juan Butler. Mount also promotes pioneering LGBTQ writers, including Edward Lacey, John Glassco, Marie-Claire Blais, Timothy Findley, bill bissett, and Daphne Marlatt, and he calls John Herbert’s *Fortune and Men’s Eyes* (1967) CanLit’s “most successful play.” Even so, and perhaps inevitably, some critics have found Mount’s scope inadequate. An online review in *Hook & Eye*, for example, denounced *Arrival* as unpardonably masculine, white, and heteronormative. It even opens with a wall of garbage-can-plus-flame emojis, signalling that Mount is vulnerable to becoming another target in the social justice wars alongside Steven Galloway, Joseph Boyden, Angie Abdou, and Jeramy Dodds.

A focus on CanLit *per se* is part of the reason for *Arrival*’s pervasive whiteness, urbanity, avant-garde fetish, and commercial fascination, yet it dramatizes poignant struggles that brought writers with very little advantage or education, like Alden Nowlan and Gwendolyn MacEwen, to national attention. It also recounts the creative exploits and DIY marketing strategies through which a constellation of small presses redefined Canadian publishing. For authors and presses alike, their commitments were often only profitable as labours of love. While the upstart wordsmiths featured in *Arrival* are now seen as the oppressive old-guard, Mount’s book recalls a different time, when the idea of CanLit was not yet a given.

—David Eso, University of Victoria

John Emil Vincent, *Excitement Tax*

Montreal: DC Books, 2017

97 pages, \$18.95, ISBN 9781927599440

The first poem in John Emil Vincent’s *Excitement Tax*, “A Certain Noisy Relaxed Quality,” establishes the barbarity of America by noting that burping contests and schoolyard bullies are the norm rather than the exception. Then the last line, spaced at a remove from the rest of the poem, simply says: “Makes sense it would hurt plants to flower.” What is said between the lines in this prose poem, like so many others in the collection, is the warp and woof of poetry, living on, as it does, through suggestion, innuendo,

entendre, and allusion. In this collection of bawdy, brilliant verse there is no way of predicting what will come next on the level of either the line or the individual poems; the table of contents even reads like a poem in itself. The imaginative leaps the speaker makes remind one of a high-wire act, and the thrill lies in seeing the acrobat successfully stay aloft, poem after poem. Consider, for example, the following passage from “I Will Only Hit You Once You Little Jesus Christ”: “My favorite thing in Montreal is bilingual signs where both the languages are wrong, the grammar is way wrong, and there are corrections which make the whole thing, on both sides, more wrong. It has such sweet sense. Like a kid trying on coffins.” But it would be a mistake to identify this collection as mere word play or a mere conflagration of parts, as there is also genuine pathos in these wildly ranging poems. It often appears in the last line, which provides the gravitas of a final chord in a musical composition, but also slyly within the poems themselves. In “Your Exit-Wound Tattoo,” for example, Vincent writes: “Sylvia Plath did not intend this to happen. I mean, the whole thing. The present. Had she intended it, we would have been able then to drape her in a giant fur mantle and prevent in fact what did happen well in advance.”

Recalling the colloquial diction and barbed wit of John Ashbery and Vladimir Mayakovsky, this collection features recurrent characters, such as “Weaselbird,” as well as a polyvocal panoply of other figures, from Pliny the Elder to Odysseus to Hieronymus Bosch. The cumulative effect is an upside-down mirror into our contemporary moment—a kaleidoscopic portrait of postmodern, post-ironic brio and subterfuge. Wisdom, in this collection, comes out of nowhere, like a fount that shuts on and off without warning. Among the directorial asides and free-wheeling fun are lines of astonishing pith, often embedded within a larger context of paratactic, talky play, as in “The Beknighted Dithyramb Book Club”: “I’m not just talking about bad stuff here. After all, even good news gets the old blood pumping, and if it is only really metaphorizable by blood, not, say, for example, by the subsidiary department of puss or the ancillary office of nerve, *we have a pretty impoverished sense of our own battlefield of body idioms* and I’d say it is symptomatic to the degree we never really stood a chance describing ourselves via afterall: just ourselves. Who thought that was a good idea in the first place” (emphasis added). To wit, Vincent’s genius lies not just in the wild cross-hatching of discourses and dictions but also in the sly insertion of lines (as asides) with which other poets would proudly begin or end

a poem. But Vincent has other schemes at hand than the mere espousal of wisdom or wit—namely, to show us how prose poetry can be, in the words of Christopher Fry, a means by which a poet “explores his own amazement.”

Vincent, a master jester of considerable smarts, complicates all binaries by crafting poems that can be read in a multitude of ways. The reader can follow the narrative, look to the squirrely titles for guidance on how to interpret the poem, or take the poems as they are: Escher-like koans that enjoin one to remain light on one’s feet and not crush these poem-puzzles with the imported weight of literalism. Several of the poems’ strongest moments deploy modernist tics of textual emendation, too, gesturing outward beyond the text to a speaker not so much unstable as possessed of a quixotic relationship to veracity and mastery.

Vincent is acutely aware that the poem is a staging of ideas and affects, and he uses this awareness as a kind of propeller to push the boundaries of content and form and to engage the reader in a kind of manic intimacy borne not of shock but surprise. “Some things you simply cannot make up,” says the speaker of “Coprolalia and the Herniated Consonant”: “A rather long pause; five seconds please. // Anyhow, you will be familiar with that half-pause when consonants crowd like bad teeth, and you’ll recognize the half-pause when several thousand people try to stand in crêpe paper costumes and glittery grass skirts for a minute of silence.” These are poems that accrue meaning and heft not through repetition or an appeal to sentiment but rather through showing the reader the underside of their construction, which is issued from a voice denatured by its own eschewal of pretense: “Because all we ever wanted during our furious labor of appeasement was to be, ourselves, becalmed.”

Furious labour, indeed. Vincent’s poetry allows us to witness what camp looks like when filtered through scintillating erudition. We are also able to feel, acutely, what happens when metaphor collides with real life and all its chance, guesswork, and randomness. At turns snarky and moving, and shot through with the linguistic subtlety, emphasis, and risks of definition inherent to true poetry, *Excitement Tax* invites readers on a Don Quixotean journey, though instead of tilting at windmills we are exhorted to take a seat, listen, and marvel. “Behold,” as the speaker of “King Midas’s Idiot Brother” says, “the life of the mind.”

Marlis Wesseler, *The Last Chance Ladies' Book Club*

Winnipeg: Signature Editions, 2017

147 pages, \$16.95, ISBN 9781773240183

The villain of Marlis Wesseler's *The Last Chance Ladies' Book Club* arrives "hunched like a question mark," an obvious image that nonetheless tidily frames the novel's frustratingly intractable central tension. The man in question is Donald Eston, a recent arrival at protagonist Eleanor Sawchuck's retirement home and less recently the subject of a book by his daughter, classified as fiction but marketed as memoir, that details the violent sexual abuse Eston subjected her to throughout her childhood. The book, *Many Rooms*, was written in the 1980s, and Eston's daughter committed suicide after its publication, leaving Eston himself legally unscathed but socially exiled. This disconnect between legal and communal justice—Eston has moved to a retirement home to avoid the stalking and harassment that reliably follow fresh editions of his daughter's book—has left Eston in the perpetual ambiguity of the accused, an ambiguity that infects Wesseler's novel. Is Eston's introduction here a bland expression of his formal function in the text—where he does, after all, represent a central enigma—or has the text contorted his body into a piece of punctuation to signal that he exists primarily to adorn the end of an unspoken question? Neither Eleanor nor the novel seem to land on whether it is the criminal or the crime, the real man or the literary character, that is at stake.

*Last Chance Ladies' Book Club* never fully determines what type of power is represented by literary expression itself. Eleanor knows how to respond to Eston the literary creation, but she cannot take a position on Eston the man. She reads through *Many Rooms* "with a mix of ashamed fascination and abhorrence and finally a hatred so profound" that she feels "as if she'd never breathe properly again." Literary experience here takes a physical toll on Eleanor's body, constricting her ability to breathe. She is only able to repay this concrete effect of hatred against a man of her imagination through repeated dreams, in which she strangles the father from *Many Rooms*—a man who precedes her experience of the real Eston and who, in her dream world, never comes to look like him—with hands that are suddenly "young and powerful." *Many Rooms*, then, seems to damage its reader in return for an explicitly imaginative catharsis that settles with a crime but not its perpetrator. Night after night, Eleanor dreams a person

who is not quite herself taking revenge on someone who is not quite Eston.

If Wesseler's novel-within-a-novel conceit keeps the horrors of Eston's crimes at arm's length, they are summarized by the narrator thoroughly enough to wound the reader, even at a remove. This dynamic effectively recalls the unpleasantly familiar contemporary experience of having endless access to stories of injustice in arenas where one has little control and no stake other than a moral one. In novel form, however, this spectatorship comes entirely unmoored from concrete consideration and is distilled into what is, for the reader, the purely moral question of whether or not to "punish . . . a flesh-and-blood Donald Eston." For Eleanor, Eston's physical presence quickly seems to overpower his depiction in the book and his status as a mystery. She observes early on that Eston "seem[s] able to straighten his back" from its question-mark hunch—a repeated detail that signals a central concern: if *Many Rooms* has transmuted Eston into a literary symbol, his flesh and blood seem determined to push their way out of literary boundaries, and Eleanor wants to punish a real human being.

Or, more particularly, she wants to see him punished, as it becomes clear quite early on that Eleanor is unlikely to do anything herself. This is the novel's strongest choice and a source of endless frustration. Wesseler presents a wry slice-of-life comedy with an alleged sexual predator next door and lets the former, with all its warmly realized characters and pleasant diversions, take precedence over the latter. If the reader is frustrated at Eleanor's inaction—Eleanor is barely able to speak to Eston, let alone confront him—they must also measure it against the patterns of contemporary life, in which stories like Eston's proliferate casually through social media feeds and barroom televisions without even the expectation of attention. The flesh-and-blood Eston could be removed from the novel altogether without a major effect on most of the storylines, yet Eleanor's inability to deal with him is the story's thematic centre. It is an acute comment on the dangers of abstracting questions of justice to the point where real-world application of the solutions becomes difficult.

Wesseler does careful and effective work to foil Eleanor's memories of love and romance from her own youth with the painful memories contained in *Many Rooms*. But the bleak possibility underlying Eleanor's inaction, which is repeatedly underscored by various characters' expressions of regret at having read the book in the first place, is that *Many Rooms'* capacity to engender hate is the totality of its possible functions. Wesseler offers several

counterpoints to this perspective, but none by way of a positive argument. The plotting at every turn seems to discount the possibility that Eleanor's greater knowledge of Eston has motivated her to greater action or greater good. Late in the book, Eleanor finds that she is too "deficient in both love and hate" to do what seems necessary. It is a compellingly human admission in the face of inhumanity, but it leaves Eleanor, and the reader, with not very much at all to *do* about a fictional remembrance of a decades-old crime that feels urgent, familiar, and, worst of all, real.

—Chris Shalom, Dalhousie University