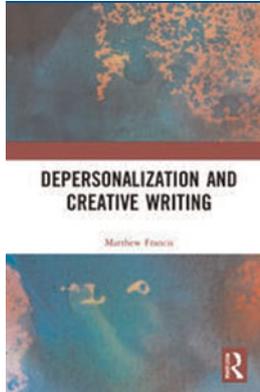


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode



Depersonalization and Creative Writing

By Matthew Francis.
Routledge. 2022. £120 (hb). 188 pp.
ISBN: 9780367530686

I wonder whether the common expression ‘to be beside oneself’, denoting some kind of overwhelming emotion, attests to the near ubiquity of depersonalisation? And the Greek word *ἔκστασις* (*ekstasis*), meaning literally ‘to stand outside oneself’, from which we derive ‘ecstasy’, indicates the long history of the positive side of the experience: the attainment of that sought-after Archimedean point, or God’s-eye view, from which objective truths can be perfectly perceived and poetry inspired. But it’s in the nature of a psychiatrist’s work to encounter troubled people.

Matthew Francis, a celebrated British poet and Professor of Creative Writing, was an awkward, intellectual, sex-starved young man, knocked back at the age of 19 by his father’s death. Later on, as a generally alienated, cannabis-smoking postgraduate student at Sussex University, he was suddenly struck, ‘as if a switch had been flicked’, by a sense of profound remoteness from the world, accompanied by acute anxiety. He suffered repeated pathological episodes of depersonalisation, for which he received helpful psychiatric treatment. His book is dedicated to the memory of Dr Anthony Ryle.

Since not everybody is a talented wordsmith, we sometimes struggle to ‘elicit’ the history of a patient’s state of mind. Francis’s memoir, which forms the first part of this book, is therefore salutary reading since it conveys the profundity of his youthful mental disturbance. The second part gives us a wide-ranging, scholarly review of both the psychological literature on depersonalisation and depersonalisation as it appears in literature. It also shows how the concept can be found, even advocated, in the work of literary theorists from different traditions, such as T.S. Eliot, Victor Shklovsky and Roland Barthes.

Finally, Francis addresses technique in both poetry and prose for writers:

‘I had thought, influenced by the romantic myth of the suffering artist, that it might be necessary for me to be ill in order to write, and decided that that was too high a price to pay. What I found, on the contrary, was that recovery from illness made writing possible: I needed both.’

Does this mean that Francis recommends a breakdown for aspiring writers? Emphatically not. ‘One of the advantages of studying’, Francis says, ‘is that you can learn from the experiences of your teachers instead of having to have them yourself!’

It’s a pity that the exorbitant price of this slim volume is likely to restrict its readership.

Stephen Wilson , Royal College of Psychiatrists, London, UK. Email: stephenwilson.oxford@gmail.com

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The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World

By Iain McGilchrist.
Perspectiva. 2021.
£89.95 (hb). 1500 pp.
ISBN: 9781914568060

The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World is the magnum opus of Dr Iain McGilchrist. It spans two volumes, 28 chapters, 8 appendices and a total of 1579 pages. Initially, I did not understand why the author would write such a huge work that very few people will read due to the sheer volume of text. However, having finished it, I believe I understand why he went into such detail.

Iain McGilchrist makes the point over and over again that the right hemisphere is the ‘master’ and that the left hemisphere is the ‘servant’ and that the problem with our current Western world is that the servant has usurped the master. He builds on his previous work *The Master and his Emissary* and he shows again and again that the left hemisphere focuses on details and is overconfident, thereby missing the big picture (which the right hemisphere is much better at understanding) and the uncertainty that is inherent in life. Reading more than twenty chapters in which this message is proven through referencing the breadth and depth of research leaves no doubt that this thesis is correct. Even my left hemisphere was convinced.

Then, having conclusively proven his point, McGilchrist goes on to leave the detail-focused logical analytical left hemisphere behind and appeals to the reader’s right hemisphere to come to grasp (as a ‘Gestalt’) that consciousness is primary, that matter arises from consciousness and that ‘things’ as such do not exist. Everything is in flow, is a process and connected. McGilchrist quotes philosophers and physicists. He appeals to myth and religion as explanation and proof. He concludes that ‘God’ is primary and omnipresent but disagrees that God is omniscient and omnipotent – it is that Nature gets to know herself through a constant process of creation that is neither predictable nor determined. McGilchrist states categorically that he does not believe in an ‘engineering’ God, but something more akin to a life force, which is not restricted to animate matter.

As a rather determined atheist, I struggled with his work – but hear me out. I could feel how my left hemisphere was sneering, while my right hemisphere was listening to the left, but not convinced by it, with the newfound incontrovertible knowledge that the left hemisphere is overconfident and very often wrong. I sat with the ambivalence that the work engendered in me and still am.

What McGilchrist is trying to show us is that we are wrongly limiting ourselves to the left hemispheric reductive way of thinking. Even when we use our overarching right holistic way of making sense of things, we cannot even hope to ever understand life and the universe fully as our brains are far too limited. But at least we can try.