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ACLA 2024 René Wellek Prize, Monograph: Co-Winner

Committee:

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Melanie McMahon, *The Violence of the Letter*, University of Michigan Press

We are delighted to co-award the 2024 René Wellek ACLA Prize to Melanie McMahon's brilliant first book, *The Violence of the Letter: Toward a Theory of Writing*. The prize committee found that despite its relative brevity (at about 150pp of text), this work is ambitious, groundbreaking and sweeping—reading it, we were at times excited, at others bewildered. The conceit of this work is to attend to a matter so fundamental that its absence from sustained critical engagement bespeaks its very centrality to literary study: the invention of the alphabet as a mode of writing and its rise to nearly universal significance as a form of language representation, or the role of alphabetical writing in the “entanglement of writing with an excess of power.”(2) This history, which originates in the classical Hellenic period, is traced through the contemporary as one marked by a continual self-disavowal—writing that effaces the very power of the alphabetical imaginary.

McMahon argues that understanding the role of rise and spread of alphabetical writing is crucial because “the Greek invention [of alphabetic writing] is inextricable from the ascent of the European West.” (6) In moves that are as dazzling as they are convincing, McMahon conjures Kubrick's monolith in *2001* before diving into masterful critiques of both Levi-Strauss and Derrida's encounters with the problem of the alphabet. She uses this to set the grounds for addressing the role of “alphabetization” in topics as that range from the writing of the story of Oedipus to the history of the institution of the school, with turns between Hobbes, the Bible, Achebe, Columbus, Monet and the Apple Watch.

For McMahon, the adoption of the alphabet is not only ideological, it is epistemological to the forms of power that have defined Christian, Western European – and hence, colonial – history: “Alphabetic writing becomes the enabling medium—and its products the many exemplars—through which the bounded soul is transformed from a mere cultic rumor into a solidified and separate entity that does not change and does not die.” (69) On reading McMahon one encounters a scholar taking thrilling risks and usually surviving. Some statements (“There is no subject apart from the alphabetized subject,” 131) may at times seem to replicate the universalization that itself is critiqued in a work that substantially speaks to a “Western” tradition. But McMahon thoughtfully argues for the

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supremacy of this alphabetized subject in the face of a past marked by a world in which language circulation was as served by oral transmission and pictograms, even as she calls for its comparative relevance to language domains that emerge from other histories. Our point of arrival, one of a humanity bent over computers and smartphones designed around alphabetical writing, provides stark proof for this claim.

While as with any work so broadly ambitious, it is no doubt possible to question certain details that appear in the astonishing array that McMahon has collected. Nonetheless, the overall effect is one that demands certain essential reconsiderations of our presumptions around the supposedly transparent representational system that continues to define the prevalent human form of writing. Moving beyond the critiques of writing found both in poststructuralist and deconstructive theory, McMahon writes lucidly and persuasively for a reckoning with the violence that underlies the history of alphabetical writing, and the continued forms of power of which it has been a part.