Review

How to Cite: McClintock, S, Whitmarsh, P, Pitozzi, A, Alberts, C, Macura, S, Thornton, Z B, Rohland, M and Maragos, G 2019 Book Reviews. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7(1): 8, 1–49. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.1810

Published: 22 November 2019

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McClintock, S, et al. 2019 Book Reviews. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7(1): 8, 1–49.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.1810

REVIEW

Book Reviews

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Diana Benea, *The Political Imagination of Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels* (Universitatea Din Bucuresti: Ars Docendi, 2017). 247pp

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Diana Benea's argument about "Thomas Pynchon's Later Novels" begins with a discussion of his semi-confessional introduction to *Slow Learner* (1984), the compilation of his early short stories published in the middle of the 17- year hiatus between *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and *Vineland* (1990). Benea focuses on Pynchon's seemingly rueful admission about the defects of his earlier writing—including the sacrifice of well-developed characterization to narrative pyrotechnics and meta-fictionality—and his ostensibly more mature concern with being more "authentic" and directing his narrative more toward "shared levels of the life we all really live" (qtd. on Benea, 13). Addressing the critical debate about whether Pynchon's self-criticism here was ironic or sincere, Benea sides with the view that Pynchon was expressing a genuine "turn" (my word) in his approach to fiction. Her beginning with this case encapsulates one of the central dichotomies emerging from a spate of recent-ish studies of Pynchon's writing that detect a turn in the later novels of Pynchon away from postmodern irony and meta-textuality toward greater social realism and an increasing emphasis on political concerns.

Benea's book joins what is by now a sufficiently cumulative body of recent Pynchon scholarship arguing for a political turn in Pynchon's novels. Her first chapter lucidly summarizes what can be synthesized from this more than decade-long critical

trend, defined by combining an emphasis on Pynchon's politics with a move to put him in the vanguard of a theory of the contemporary novel seeking a "new mode emerging after, or rather beyond, postmodernism" (17). What this post-ironic, new political sensibility consists of—in Pynchon and in the wider novel form—has been variously described, but there is an emerging consensus that the shifts orbit the vision of subjectivity: accepting the postmodern argument that subjectivity is mediated by language or other discursive practices, but interested in the recuperation of subjective and moral-political agency. This critical movement finds in Pynchon's later novels more conspicuous ethical and political concerns, an interest in intersubjective communication, and a concern with the relationship of the subject to communities, toward the foundations of which (what must now paradoxically be seen as) "traditional" postmodernism had expressed skepticism. The collective project with which Benea's introduction aligns her has been one of recuperating non-ironic affirmations of hope, sincerity, belief, even transcendence in Pynchon's fiction, and, particularly, of interrogating how Pynchon's "late" novels from *Vineland* forward address how individuals and communities might collectively resist the domination of neo-liberal capitalism and state repression and control.

Adding to the bookshelf of this turn to a "political" Pynchon, Benea wisely declines to align Pynchon with particular political ideologies or philosophies, as other critics have with liberalism, neo-Marxism, or anarchism, instead arguing that Pynchon's late novels may indicate "leanings" toward all these ideologies, and others, but cannot be reduced to endorsement of any single one. She prefers to discuss Pynchon as a "political" author "beyond the confines of any specific political theory" (25). The pluralism of her approach surely mirrors Pynchon's own heteroclite framing of "the political" in historical moments spanning centuries and national cultures, rather than the more contingent marking out of political instances in some of the recent criticism, permitting her reader to see how many and broad are the milieus of politics in Pynchon's narratives, and thereby just how comprehensive his move toward politics has been.

Benea's book is organized more or less as a chronicle of this political and social turn in Pynchon's novels from *Vineland* to *Mason & Dixon* (1997), *Against the Day*

(2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013). The chapters on each individual work pair it with discussions of theoretical approaches including Hardt and Negri's writings about the Commonwealth and postmodern radical democratic politics, Jacques Derrida's seminars on the politics of friendship, hospitality and "hauntology," Michel Foucault's lectures on ethics and care of the self, and Judith Butler's writings about 9/11 and the "possible communities" that arise out of the experience of mourning, outside of the nation state. While comparable studies have also applied theoretical traditions fruitfully to Pynchon, the breadth of theoretical paradigms Benea draws on in her book is one of its particularly compelling points.

Chapter 2 of Benea's book focuses on the pivotal novel in the "turn" between the early and later Pynchon, *Vineland*. Benea discusses the novel's reception history, arguing that reviewers failed to appreciate how the novel was a break with earlier ones: her own analysis develops Salman Rushdie's review of the novel, in which she finds proper acknowledgment of the novel's new emphasis on family/community. The chapter develops an analysis of family and other communities, in light of Hardt and Negri's concepts of the "multitude" and "common." Supporting the idea of a "break" or "turn" in Pynchon's fiction, beginning with *Vineland*, the chapter compares the "ineffective community" (57) of the Whole Sick Crew in *V.* with the more viable communities of *Vineland*.

The first three novels "envision a world" of "isolates" (in the term from *Lot 49*) "without any viable familial options" (40), which begins to change in *Vineland*, according to Benea. Resistance to oppression, domination and control, if it occurs at all in the early novels, is private and individualistic, she contends. From *Vineland* forward, more viable collectivities emerge that have more hope of success in resisting domination and affirming new forms of relationship, affinity and solidarity outside of the structures of social control, ranging back in time to the organized labor movement and forward to the self-determining affinal groups forming within neo-liberal capitalism. Benea argues that *Vineland* represented a shift from some of the familiar tropes of earlier novels, like paranoia. Unlike the early novels, "[n]o longer the only hermeneutic available to Pynchon's characters, the scope of paranoia is significantly reduced" and sometimes "undercut" in the novel (34) in favor of communities

of solidarity and hope such as the Sisterhood of the Kunoichis. The section of the chapter discussing DL and Takeshi Fumimoto, as a "community" dyad formed by an ethical obligation of restoring karmic balance, is particularly well expounded.

Especially important is Benea's statement that the self-organizing communities of *Vineland* are not based on any transcendent or static foundation for personal identity, universals that post-modernism had cast into question, but instead on "a sense of common vulnerability in the face of danger" (60), an idea developed much more in the sections of Ch. 6 on Butler's notion of "precarious life" and communities that emerge from a common condition of mourning. So the "break" between the early and late Pynchon is not so much, in her view, a post-post-modernism as a "shift" *within* post-modernism, an idea that she develops at various points.

The third chapter addresses the trope of the "specter" in early works, from the standpoint of ethical and political considerations in contemporary theory surrounding ghosts and haunting. Benea argues that in the later novels, Pynchon "incorporates a more sophisticated notion of the ghost as the symptom of an act of injustice that has to be addressed and redressed" (77). Chapter 4 follows other critics (such as Kathryn Hume) who have seen *Against the Day* as characterized by "a sense of political urgency heretofore absent from Pynchon's works" (117). In what has become a popular approach to the novel, it reads *Against the Day* as a 9/11 novel and a critique of American exceptionalism in post 9/11 discourses. The chapter's perspective of "hospitality" as ethics based on embracing the Other and alterity, using the Chums of Chance episodes to elaborate an "ethics of visitation intrinsic to hospitality" (29), represents a fresh approach to Pynchon's 2006 novel and to the wider critical discourse on post-9/11 American fiction. Benea's implication is surely right: that by placing 9/11 in the context of earlier labor and anarchist political violence by more "Americanized" political subjects that is more ethically ambiguous than the 9/11 attacks, Pynchon reconfigures post-9/11 discourses about terrorists as "Other" and that his novel makes an intervention in post-9/11 discourses that were already congealing around the bad alterity of foreign terrorism.

The chapter on *Inherent Vice* takes up Ed Soja's analyses of social justice and social spaces and the contrast between spaces of injustice/hope. A lengthy portion of

the chapter concerns Foucault's concept of "parrhesia," and the care of the self/other. And Chapter 6 enlarges on themes earlier discussed, including the death of irony discourse, and the value of relationality and community in the post 9/11 period, utilizing Judith Butler's treatment of communities of mourning in a particularly persuasive way.

These theoretical approaches lead Benea toward one of the snares that other examples of the political turn in Pynchon scholarship have also risked falling into: that in relying on "high" theoretical lenses as a tool to recover political critique in Pynchon's writings—hence distinguishing its own "political" approach from older, formalist studies—this political Pynchon criticism frequently amounts to another kind of formalism (and I am not suggesting this is a bad word). If the turn toward critical political theory, from Adorno to Hardt and Negri, represents the latest phase in the search for a methodology in Pynchon studies, then this theory-application approach still amounts to thematic reading, notwithstanding the particular theories' political gist. We still end up with a kind of formalism. While the content of these more recent studies of Pynchon has turned toward the political, the reading method remains largely formalist.

Another issue with the overall "turn" that Benea's book doesn't escape concerns the questionable nature of the strong divide most of these studies presume between the early fiction up to *Gravity's Rainbow* and the later novels from *Vineland* forward. Appealing, and plausible, as the idea of a "turn" or divide between "early" and "late" Pynchon is, one wonders if this critical turn's insights could lead to a revisioning of the early Pynchon as well (such as J. Hillis Miller has attempted on "The Secret Integration").[1] The tendency to treat Pynchon's novels (and short fiction) as discrete works in a linear publication chronology could bely Pynchon's actual working methods: he famously commented about working on four novels simultaneously. Until more is known about Pynchon's drafts and working method, wariness is warranted about attributing a sequence of development based solely on the publication chronology, which may or may not correspond to the composition history. The

[1] See Miller, Chapter 6.

introduction to *Slow Learner* suggests that *Lot 49* started as a short story that swelled into a novel, and we are left to ponder whether the way in which the Traverse family saga sprawls across several novels indicates a retroactive interest in knitting the novels together into a more integrated family epic, or rather reflects the spinning-out of what became separate works from a single narrative "matrix." It may be that the publication history corresponds pretty closely to the composition history, or it may not align completely—we just don't know. Until we discover more about the novels' genesis and become less reliant on the publication history for analysis of the author's development, we should stay open to a more complicated picture of an "early" and "late" Pynchon. Textual study of the composition history of Pynchon's writing, when that becomes possible, might be the first truly "methodological" approach to Pynchon, in a strong sense. In the meanwhile, Benea's book accumulates persuasive weight for the post-ironic, political Pynchon in the later novels, and contributes some subtle close readings, from a variety of theoretical perspectives, to scholarship of the individual novels.

Arriving Late – By Post

Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (eds), *Postmodern/Postwar—and After: Rethinking American Literature* (U of Iowa P, 2016). 258pp

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In "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," Mark McGurl raises the pressing question of literary studies *today*—its status as an academic field, but also its object of study. He claims that, in the aftermath of postmodernism and its subsequent reincorporation into the interstices of literary modernism, we encounter today something like an alternative, contemporary modernism: "rather than representing merely a loss of originality or glitch in the engine of human innovation, it is continuous with the kind of recycling of world literature evident in *The Waste Land*" (McGurl 342). McGurl's point is strikingly similar to that of one of the essays that concludes *Postmodern/Postwar—and After*. In "Make it Vanish," Michael Clune suggests that contemporary literature provides an alternate rendition of modernist selfhood: whereas modern death was "the experience of the self," contemporary literature explores the possibility of "experience liberated from the self" (248). Counterintuitively, Clune notes, this development "acknowledges that modernism is in some mysterious sense closer historically to us than postmodernism" (249 n. 4). If Clune's assessment is accurate, then contemporary literature criticism faces a perplexing task. As the discursive horizons of modernism overcome postmodernism, the contemporary must wrestle with its *late* relationship to the modernist enterprise.

A central question of *Postmodern/Postwar—and After* is that of how the dynamic between *late*-ness and *post*-ness, or between the period and the break, sheds light on contemporary literary production. If postmodernism merely constitutes a transformation and continuation of modernism, then how late does modernism go? Historical distance lets the contributors to Gladstone, Hoberek, and Worden's

anthology approach their subject with an admirably cautious anticipation—a welcome antidote to the hyperspeed diagnoses of postmodernism's meteoric rise in the 1970s and '80s.

With the rise of the new modernist studies and its general suspicion (adopted here most explicitly in Brian McHale's contribution) of postmodernism as a definitive break from anything, critics of contemporary literature have turned their attention toward the broader category of the "postwar." *Postmodern/Postwar—and After* offers several timely reconsiderations of American literature after 1945, including the work of the high postmodernists from John Barth to Kathy Acker. Following an introduction and opening dialogue (Part I), the book proceeds in three parts: Part II, The Postmodern Revisited; Part III, The Postwar Reconfigured; and Part IV, What Comes After. The titles signal the anthology's general trajectory. Postmodernism must be *re*-visited—whatever it was, it's passed us by. The postwar is nebulous, requiring reconfiguration. Our contemporary moment is still postwar, but the category threatens to lose its critical value if allowed to continue indefinitely, leading to the final section: what comes after, a clause that teases both question and answer.

Postmodern/Postwar—and After is less a collection of proposals or prescriptions than of possibilities for comprehending the contemporary. If there's a critical paradigm for exploring such possibilities it might be Fredric Jameson's "archaeologies of the future," the concept underlying his *A Singular Modernity* (2002) and eponymously-titled 2005 work. Jameson looms large for the editors and contributors to this collection, and Gladstone and Worden acknowledge that the development in Jameson's thought from "postmodernism as an unreadable and vertiginous system to the positing of a 'singular modernity' and, most recently, a renewed interest in the dialectic" signals an opportunity for contemporary criticism (10). Jamesonian "cognitive mapping" offers a platform for some critics in the collection, such as Leerom Medovoi (93–109) and Emilio Sauri (111–123), to reconsider postmodernism itself. Jameson's project gets an intellectual workout in these entries, which push his dialectic of period and break to its contemporary limits, implicit in Jameson's notion of the utopian: "a narrative voice," writes Sauri, "that allows us to grasp the limits constitutive of not only the literary but of contemporary thought as well" (121). It is with

these words that *Postmodern/Postwar—and After* directs us to the driving concern of its third and fourth sections: the issue of the contemporary, its warp, woof and pattern (to paraphrase Pynchon). The difficulty of such a topic lies in its immediacy and complexity. "Contemporary Literature" names no genre, style, form, or media, but attempts to capture the entire system of literary production as it continually reemerges.

To its credit, the contributors of *Postmodern/Postwar—and After* largely resist the temptation to try articulating the whole of the contemporary literary imagination, offering instead "provisional and tentative" (in Deak Nabers's words) excursions into various discourses and methodologies (154). This broad approach complements the editors' goal "to chart new areas of research and inquiry" in the ever-increasing field of contemporary literature (3). The collection will hence be of great value to newcomers to the field of postwar and contemporary literature. Some of the entries offer a helpful overview of major movements or concepts in postwar studies, including postmodernism and authenticity (James), the Cold War (Grausam), the twentieth-century novel (Nabers), the New Sincerity movement (Kelly), digital media (Hayles), and the political novel (Irr). Others offer exciting forays into lesser-known critical discourses. Rachel Greenwald Smith examines what she calls the "compromise aesthetics" of the neoliberal novel, a fictional mode that affirms both the notion of "opaque textual construction and the appeal to actually existing personal and emotional value" (188). Also of fresh interest are Ursula K. Heise's discussion of the contemporary novel in the context of the Anthropocene, and Paul K. Saint-Amour's elaboration (excerpted from his 2015 book-length study, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*) of the "perpetual interwar" which offers a compelling analysis of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a "reading of [its] modernist intertexts, one that identifies them as precursors in more than raw size or formal restlessness" (172).

Some readers may notice gaps in the coverage, however. Despite occasional references to writers such as Philip K. Dick and William Gibson, one cannot help but wonder whether a chapter presenting sustained attention to the issue of genre fiction and popular media such as film and television would have provided an illuminating angle. Printed narrative remains the collection's primary focus: specifically, in

the form we know as the modern novel. Several of the entries intersect and come in contact with each other in various ways, painting an elaborate but accessible picture of the American literary scene after World War II—from the high postmodernism of Acker, Barth, DeLillo, and Pynchon, to the exploratory responses of more recent writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Rachel Kushner, Richard Powers, and Karen Tei Yamashita.

Despite its trend toward the contemporary, the collection features several meditations on the lingering category of the postmodern, its usefulness and applicability. In "Break, Period, Interregnum," Brian McHale revisits his foundational work on literary postmodernism, considering postmodernism as a movement of literary history. Diverging from his earlier treatment of postmodernism as a break or rupture, McHale suggests that what critics have called postmodernism in fact constitutes part of a broader, twentieth-century arc: "all of these developments could be submitted to finer-grained analysis into successive mutations, constituent moments, sub-subperiods," he writes (65). For McHale, in other words, as for many of the collection's contributors, the question of postwar writing and its relationship to the contemporary means inquiring into the methodological practices of criticism itself. The same concern arises in Daniel Grausam's chapter on the "post-Cold War," which suggests that a revised sense of what the Cold War was might help us expand our understanding of what postmodernism was (and is): that's to say, "less a Manichean standoff between two worlds than as a very active and quite hot conflict fought globally and visibly in an age of three worlds" (147). In both Grausam's and McHale's contributions, understanding the contemporary means reconsidering how we frame literary texts.

Whether their focus is on the postmodern or the postwar more broadly, and whether they approach their subject matter in terms of form, style, or historical context, all the contributors return us to the uncertainty of contemporary literature scholarship and its periodization problem. As Grausam declares, the Cold War "forces us to rethink the nature of periodization altogether, since something like plutonium, a pure product of the Cold War weapons complex, remains toxic for 240,000 years" (145). This difficulty of periodization is a perpetual dilemma, especially in the light of ongoing geopolitical upheaval and environmental catastrophes. Despite their

currency, issues such as climate change remain futurological concepts, due largely to the relatively isolated experiences of those impacted by extreme weather. The droughts and food shortages of the Third World aren't seen as climate issues, but as political and economic ones—a compartmentalizing strategy that ignores Dipesh Chakrabarty's declaration that humans have become geological agents (Chakrabarty 206). Contemporary literature challenges this futurological instinct, as in a comment attributed to science fiction writer William Gibson: "the future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed yet" (qtd. in Heise 257).

If the future—the "After" of the collection's title—has already arrived, then contemporary literature criticism is left wondering over the sign of its arrival: the *event* of the future. This envelopment of the present by the future affords contemporary criticism an opportunity to move beyond what Jameson describes as postmodernism's "weakening of historicity," a symptom that, Sauri suggests, finds its "exemplary expression in the so-called 'end of history'" (114). Sauri claims that contemporary literature might best express "the impossibility of imagining something like a 'post-posthistorical' politics in the present" (119). Yet it might also be that historicity reappears, in fact, as the profusion of futurity that we experience as subjects of the contemporary moment—what Heise articulates as the "slowness" of the future's permeation throughout the global present (254). In this framework, contemporary literature's temporal consciousness is shaped as much by the future as by the past, an anxiety toward the exponential possibilities for risk and collapse that accompany Ulrich Beck's idea of "reflexive modernity." According to McGurl, reflexive modernity "derealizes the present by stretching it out, suffusing it with a quality of 'speculative fiction,' in the broadest sense, in ways that literary studies is particularly well-equipped to explore" (331). His argument is for the sociological impact that literary scholarship affords humanities discourses today, but it also speaks to the aesthetic power of contemporary literature.

If reflexive modernity serves as the sociological background of our contemporary period, then its relationship to what Beck calls "first modernity" (Beck et al 2) might serve as a way to conceptualize what *Postmodern/Postwar—and After* proposes as modernist literature's close proximity to contemporary writing. As Mary Esteve

suggests in the collection's opening dialogue, the popularity of post45 studies is in many ways tied to "the success [of] the new modernist studies" (36). Esteve insinuates that critics of the contemporary saw in modernist studies a reflection of what their field could be, yet her comment bespeaks the underlying sense of contemporary *literature*'s repeated returns to the legacy of modernism. If the contemporary designates a temporal category, then the literature of the contemporary represents a response to the indeterminacy of that category, as Theodore Martin intimates: "The contemporary is both the question and the answer. It codifies our historical moment in order to authorize its study; yet to study it is inevitably to be returned to the question of what history the contemporary names, what its boundaries really are, whose moment we're actually talking about" (230). Martin's comment makes clear not only the difficulty of scholarship on contemporary writing, but the stakes of such scholarship. Specifically, it underscores the shared intimacy of contemporary literature and the work of criticism itself; the question of the contemporary is also a question of methodology. The immediacy of literary production necessitates that critics continually revisit their approaches and practices. As long as the future continues to overflow the borders of the present, the contemporary will remain a critical category.

Henry Veggian, *Understanding Don DeLillo* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2014). 168pp

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University of South Carolina Press' "Understanding Contemporary American Literature" series of monographs on individual writers raises a basic question: what does it mean to understand an author, let alone a whole national literature? In *Understanding Don DeLillo*, Henry Veggian inquires into the "whats" and "hows" of the author's production in a way that addresses both academic and non-academic readers: he aims to identify and examine fundamental perspectives on DeLillo's writing, while consistently entering into a productive dialogue with other critics in a way that lets him develop some new emphases of his own. The result, as the series intends, functions as an exemplary introduction to the author. "Understanding" a writer, in Veggian's approach, becomes a way to "comprehend" their work by gathering together the different aspects that compose not only their books, but also their very thought as well as their public character.

From the beginning, Veggian introduces the main axes of his discussion through a three-dimensional analysis of the notion of "American writer": he investigates what the adjective "American" refers to; what a "writer" is; and how their combination might uniquely identify an "American writer." On "American," Veggian stresses the presence of both American history and American culture in DeLillo's novels; on "writer," he addresses DeLillo's belief in the power of art to represent, reshape and almost rescue everyday reality; and at their intersection he tackles the tension between marketplace, economics and the literary business on one hand, and authorship and speculation about the institution of the novel on the other.

Veggian examines the interplay of these issues through a quite linear structure that pursues a chronological path through the writer's career, covering his novelistic and fictional writing from the early years until the latest achievements: the only

exception to this chronological scheme is the choice to discuss all the short stories together in the final chapter. As frequently happens with critical studies about DeLillo, too little attention is paid to his dramatic writing, which though less well-known than the prose fiction nonetheless constitutes an interesting part of the writer's work.

Initially, Veggian introduces the biographical element as a significant key for entry into DeLillo's fictional world, because the novelist "often writes from the intersection where life and fiction collide" (3). Without attempting to rehabilitate a critical instinct to map the writer's life and art onto each other, Veggian recognizes in DeLillo's novels a frequent tendency to *fictionalize* not only events but memories and atmospheres taken from his life. In the course of this "biographical criticism," Veggian presents the reader with topics such as the crowd, terrorism, art and artists, market and consumerism, paranoia and conspiracies, all of them central to DeLillo's fiction and particularly significant in exemplifying his *Americanness* as necessarily plural and multi-faceted. Although these themes are obvious to readers already familiar with DeLillo's writing, Veggian's argument addresses their interrelationship precisely enough that they come to help him offer distinctive, often masterful answers to questions such as "*what* does it mean to be an American writer?" and "what *kind* of America is to be found in DeLillo's novels?"

The book usefully concentrates on the ways DeLillo tackles these topics through his constant research about, and experimentation with, the art of writing, as literature evolves by confronting itself with cinematographic techniques, different media, and images of consumerism in the age of information. Here is possibly where the author most directly aligns with recent criticism about DeLillo, which is often interested in studying the relationships between writing and other means of expression. As a general structure, Veggian subdivides DeLillo's work into four moments: the years from 1960 to 1970, mainly devoted to short story writing; from 1971 to 1985 which is the period of the first novels and essays; from 1985 to 1997 as the moment of his greatest popularity due to the publication of his best-known novels; and from 2000 to the present, considered a period of new experimentalism. The same periodization guides the reader through the subsequent chapters, where summaries of

each book's plot come with deep and insightful analyses about the literary forms and aesthetic aspects of the works. Once again, such a structure helps Veggian in showing *how* DeLillo writes, and *how* his writing interacts with American culture through history.

Writing with an engaging, almost narrative style himself, Veggian starts by focusing on the first novels, from *Americana* (1971) to *Great Jones Street* (1973), as examples of DeLillo's main concern of the period: finding a new way into literary expression. According to Veggian, these works are centered on experimentalism, as regards both language and genre. Consequently, the analysis concentrates on how DeLillo always tries to push language, medium, and genre to their limits, instead of using them in a purely illustrative manner. In the process, Veggian highlights the interplay among various jargons, from the underground media culture to music, American football to science, as well as the interactions of various styles and genres like the road novel, the rock novel, the sports novel or the campus novel with characteristics of the profoundest literature. Of particular interest for researchers will be Veggian's reading of these novels with reference to the idea of "pastiche": a common concern in broad Jamesonian readings of "postmodernism," but here much more precisely considered as a mode of composition that draws on an essayistic attitude typical of cinematographic influences. The scholar, thus, stresses the aesthetic outcomes of the way in which the American writer deals with these elements, so as to identify these first works' unique sort of "metafictional" approach.

A similar tension between opposite forces is found in the works published from 1985 to 1997. Nonetheless, there's an evolution between the periods: in discussing *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991) Veggian suggests that the experimental plan of the narrative structure here is not just exhibited, but is "internalized" by characters themselves, in that the events come to be dramatized "in the form of a plot in which the development of ideas takes narrative form in description, dialogue and affect" (56). Here lies one of the points that make this book a significant and innovative contribution to understanding DeLillo. According to Veggian, the exploration in this period's novels of a fracture between the individual and the society highlights two different and contrasting movements in DeLillo's own approach: one *inward*,

that introduces a more speculative, philosophical and almost metaphysical tendency into his writing (opening the pathway to his most recent novels); the other *outward*, that results in the absorption of characters into masses, crowds, popular culture and consumerism. These two perspectives always coexist in the books, and resolve into characters that perfectly embody the contradictions of American society.

Veggian's reconstruction of the critical debate around "characterization" among DeLillo scholars is impeccable and leads his discussion toward his own contribution to the theme in his treatment of the latest novels. As he points out, if *White Noise* is considered as closing the door on the era in which DeLillo's fiction "experiments" mainly at the level of narrative structure, it also "opens another door onto the more introspective, character-driven fiction of the period that follows" (70). With this focus, Veggian recognizes two main categories epitomized by the characters of DeLillo's works written in the new millennium: artists and prophets. In reading *The Body Artist* (2001), *Cosmopolis* (2003) and *Falling Man* (2006), the scholar considers them as somehow condensing some traits of the early experimentalism with the more dramatic and affective elements of DeLillo's maturity as a writer. In this sense, art and artists seem to be representative of a particular and privileged point of view on reality. Such a view also applies to the way DeLillo's latest writing comes to be a sort of reflection "upon aesthetics within consumer culture while avoiding being entirely subsumed into that very same culture" (76).

Consistently with the choice to explore the different forms of DeLillo's writing, the last chapter is devoted to the short stories the writer published throughout his career. Contrary to the many critics who consider DeLillo's short fiction as just experiments towards, and miniature versions of, his major novels, Veggian argues that we should consider the stories as an independent form that produces specific aesthetic results. He focuses on the insight these short fictions offer into DeLillo's working habits, insofar as they reveal a "modular method" that lets even parts of the novels be regarded as stand-alone pieces: his perspective offers an interesting view of the profound linkage between DeLillo's novels—the recent ones in particular—and short stories. At the same time, it broadens the discussion's focus to include DeLillo's

talent as a writer of short fictions that work "with, to, and against the novel," once more demonstrating the complexity and sophistication of the American writer and contributing to a deeper understanding of his work.

In the end, *Understanding Don DeLillo* represents a very useful tool with which both neophytes and researchers can approach the work of one of the most refined and compelling writers of the contemporary scene, and makes a powerful point in showing the "consistency and continuity" of his writing despite the evident discrepancy between the forms of his major works. One of the study's greatest merits is its constant engagement with DeLillo criticism, which also makes the book a solid compendium of the writer's reception in and outside United States. By taking into account different perspectives as he addresses (drama aside) DeLillo's whole career, Veggian offers a 360-degree view on DeLillo's writing, including those parts generally overlooked by both critics and readers.

Jacqueline A. Zubeck (ed), *Don DeLillo after the Millennium* (Lexington Books, 2017). 263pp

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As its title suggests, *Don DeLillo after the Millennium* focuses primarily on DeLillo's twenty-first century works—prose and plays—up to the point of its publication: *The Body Artist* (2001), *Love-Lies-Bleeding* (2005), *Falling Man* (2007), *Point Omega* (2010), the stories found in *The Angel Esmeralda* (2011), and the little known "The Word for Snow: A Reading" (2014);[2] unsurprisingly, as it came out the year this essay collection went to press, there is only the briefest mention of *Zero K* (2016). A growing number of critics have come to bracket these works under the description of "late style DeLillo." As Matthew Shipe explains, they are characterized by, among other things, a "stripped-down nature of the narrative forcing readers to bear down all the harder, [DeLillo's] prose hinting at connections and meanings that the narrative ultimately refuses to confirm."[3] Compared to the maximalist *Underworld* (1997), character-driven *Mao II* (1991) or detail-filled counterhistory *Libra* (1988), these works are short, compact, minimalist, and, until now, mostly overlooked. However, this collection not only explores what Randy Laist's contribution calls "late phase DeLillo," but will also help generate interest in the most recent novels of a writer who has been hailed—almost always in retrospect—as prophetic on multiple occasions. Jacqueline A. Zubeck, editor and contributor, brings onboard some of the most well respected names in DeLillo scholarship. However, she also involves emerging critics, whose articles occasionally outshine those from the more established voices in the field, suggesting a promising future for the study of an author whose writings have influenced so many.

Although not completely chronological, the collection begins at the Millenium, with two chapters dissecting *Cosmopolis* (published after 9/11 but set just as the

[2] The *Don DeLillo Papers* at the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas, Austin note a 2012 date for this work.

[3] See Shipe.

dot com bubble burst in 2000). Finding a reviewer from that time with something positive to say about this text is challenging indeed; however, Mark Osteen and Matt Kavanagh attempt to demonstrate that it is concerned with far more than "frosty postdoctoral preoccupations"[4] (one of many phrases used to dismiss the work). But, like earlier DeLillo texts, sometimes its prescience is only seen years later. In "The Currency of DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*," Osteen contemplates the meaning of money—past and present; paper and pixel—with a particular emphasis on its function in relation to DeLillo's 2003 work, along with its possible commentary on a post-Great Recession (2008) world. As the article and *Cosmopolis* protagonist Eric Packer progress, Osteen also considers the larger implications of the epigraph and other writings by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert to the text as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the essay by Osteen, a firmly established DeLillo scholar, is as well researched and insightful as when it appeared in slightly altered form in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* in 2014.

Similarly, in "Collateral Crisis: Don DeLillo's Critique of Cyber-Capital," Kavanagh suggests that *Cosmopolis* deserves to be reconsidered, particularly as a decade has passed since the collapse of the US housing market. For Kavanagh, *Cosmopolis* "traces the breakdown of cyber-capital as a cosmopolitical justification" (30), and he contends it is the last of a series of Delillo texts "anatomizing cyber-capital," "complet[ing] a process of triangulation begun in the epilogue to […] *Underworld* (1997) and continued in his meditation on the 9/11 attacks, published in *Harper's* as 'In the Ruins of the Future' (2001)" (29). Kavanagh draws upon the source material for *Cosmopolis* as found in the *Don DeLillo Papers* at the University of Texas, Austin's Harry Ransom Center (HRC) to support his argument. Among these sources, Kavanagh hones in on an analysis of *When Genius Failed* by Roger Lowenstein, "the Long-Term Capital Management debacle of 1998," and the dangers of "aggressive leveraging" (33) as demonstrated in *Cosmopolis*. This article spells out the warnings sounded by *Cosmopolis*—fifteen years ago—in a world that continues to be dominated by cyber-capital and is once again at the whims of a bull market.

[4] See Kim.

Like Osteen, when Jesse Kavadlo publishes a new piece of Delillo criticism, others in the field should take notice; "'Here and Gone': *Point Omega*'s Extraordinary Rendition" exemplifies why. Using his wide knowledge of DeLillo's writings, Kavadlo demonstrates how this slim 2010 volume "allows DeLillo to revisit familiar tropes and character types," present throughout his career, "in the context of a post-9/11 world" (68). Kavadlo goes on to assert: "[i]f *Falling Man* represents Don DeLillo's exploration of September 11, 2001, *Point Omega*, in many ways, is interested in the world that 9/11 ushered in" (72). While Kavadlo, of course, mentions standard *Point Omega* reference-points Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and *Fog of War*, he ends with André Breton, and this idea regarding what he suggests is a haiku novel: "a novel of rendition in the contradictory senses of both art and absence, what is here and gone at the same time. It is up to the reader to fix the point where we cease to perceive its contradictions—or better to celebrate them" (79). This rich essay offers a new way of looking at one of the few twenty-first century DeLillo texts that already has a relatively significant extant body of scholarship.

While a number of DeLillo critics have noted his tendency toward formal symmetry at the level of a complete text, in "'The Rough Shape of a Cross:' Chiastic Events in Don DeLillo's 'Baader Meinhof,'" Karim Daanoune becomes one of the few to demonstrate how DeLillo also embraces this technique at the sentence level. As Daanoune explains, the chiasmus, derived from the Greek, is a "'rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order' [....] Literally then, a chiasmus is an X, or a cross" (217–218). DeLillo's 2002 short story, "Baader-Meinhof" (*The New Yorker*), sometimes known as "Looking at Meinhof" (*The Guardian*), revolves around Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977* fifteen-canvas cycle, and the story is, as Daanoune reveals, filled with crosses and linguistic chiasmi: all one has to do is look. Whether this almost kabbalistic style is particular to "Baader-Meinhof" because of its content (Richter's cross in *Funeral* is at the crux of the story), is only present in DeLillo's more recent work, or has been there since the beginning is for Daanoune or other scholars to discover; however, given DeLillo's long-standing interest in infinity, the Pythagoreans, and other related subjects, the revelation of other hidden patterns would not be shocking.

Time and again, DeLillo has noted in interviews that his work has been heavily influenced by auteurs of mid-twentieth century cinema, such as Jean-Luc Godard,

Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, and Michelangelo Antonioni.[5] However, with the exception of some articles on *Americana,* one on "The Uniforms,"[6] and a handful of others, to my knowledge, few scholars have thoroughly pursued this potentially productive subject of inquiry. In "Cinematic Time, Geologic Time, Narrative Time," Maciej Maslowski picks up on a reference from a DeLillo interview with *The Australian* to articulate the similarities between *Point Omega* and Antoninoni's *L'avventura* (1960).[7] In so doing, Maslowski shows how Antonioni's film—rather than the film *Point Omega* most overtly references, Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*—shapes the plot and pace of the text, as well as examining *L'avventura's* general impact on the novel as a whole. It is thoughtful and thought provoking. Maslowski puts anyone who doubts the abilities of independent scholars on notice.

Like *Cosmopolis*, *The Body Artist* was not generally well received by critics, or most readers for that matter. It is what most would call a "difficult" book; however, this collection includes a few attempts to penetrate its abstract minimalism. Early in "Mourning Becomes Electric: Performance Art in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Falling Man*," Zubeck asserts that these two works "are particularly important because twenty-first-century art often considers the state of the union after 9/11 and the catastrophe which 'broke the back of [this] American century'" (108). She further contends that "the two performance artists Lauren Hartke and David Janiack answer the call for a counter-narrative, and provide an artist's 'tenderness' and 'meaning' to the 'howling space' of disaster" (109). These internal quotations, of course, come from "In the Ruins of the Future." Zubeck offers an interesting reading of how Hartke embodies the trauma of her husband's suicide and, like Janiack, "alter[s] [her] own flesh in order to communicate […] the nature of grief and the cellular impact of trauma" (109). While it can be read as capturing the zeitgeist of a post-9/11 world, *The Body Artist* was written primarily in 2000[8] and released Feb. 6, 2001, prior to

[5] For one example, see DeCurtis.

[6] See Luter for example.

[7] See Feeney.

[8] See *Don DeLillo Papers*, HRC, Containers 6 and 7. https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00313.

9/11.[9] Zubeck's material on *Falling Man* is less distinctive. She presents commentary on Janiack and his impact on Lianne Glenn, along with the repercussions she experiences as a result of the suicide of her father, the survival of her husband Keith (who walks away from the North Tower), and Richard Drew's photo generally (something that is virtually impossible to avoid, given DeLillo's title); similar observations on *Falling Man* have been published elsewhere in the last few years, including by contributors to this volume like Kavadlo and Graley Herren.

By contrast, Zubeck's recognition of "The Word for Snow," a reading commissioned by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company in 2007, in the collection's introduction does a great service to encourage the exploration of DeLillo's dramatic works, especially due to its limited accessibility (only 1000 copies of the script were published by Karma & Glenn Horowitz in New York). So too does her inclusion of not one, but two essays discussing DeLillo's 2005 play *Love-Lies-Bleeding*, so often passed over.

Graley Herren's "*Love-Lies-Bleeding*: Self Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man" showcases his particular writing style, his in-depth knowledge of drama, and his affinity for Freud. His essay suggests Samuel Beckett and Arthur Miller, among others, heavily influenced this work by DeLillo. Like Herren, Randy Laist notes that *Love-Lies-Bleeding* addresses its contemporary historical context—in this case assisted suicide, specifically, as Herren points out, the Terri Schiavo case (137). Laist's main goal, though, is to situate the play in relation to DeLillo's fiction: in "The Art, the Artist, the Landscape, the Sky: Ontological Crossings in *Love-Lies-Bleeding,*" he asserts that this play is "vintage late stage DeLillo" and meticulously demonstrates how this script both shares content-level concerns with and embraces the form of DeLillo's other twenty-first century works (158). Laist explains how this play, like DeLillo's novels from this period, "follow[s] a trajectory of phenomenological reduction, focusing in on the minutest flickers and nuances of perception" (157), later noting an echo to Heidegger's *Being and Time* (162). Although not mentioned by Laist, *Sein und Zeit* can be heard throughout most of DeLillo's twenty-first century texts.[10]

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[9] See Kakutani.

[10] Since both Herren and Laist make note of it in their chapters (and to provide some context for those who are wondering), the "philosophical joke" that asks "What the fuck is water?" referred to in *Love-*

Other chapters include "Don DeLillo, the Contemporary Novel, and the End of Secular Time," in which Scott Dill explores "embodied duration" to question how, or whether, twenty-first century novels, as represented by *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, can "adequately address the cultural experience of contemporary time" (173). In addition to Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*, which DeLillo does acknowledge familiarity with although Dill hesitates to make this claim (182),[11] Dill also explores another DeLillo source in relation to these texts – Augustine's the *City of God*. Elise Martucci's "Place as Active Receptacle in Don DeLillo's *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories*" does exactly as the title suggests: considers place in relation to each of the stories in DeLillo's 2011 collection, particularly in light of *Placeways: A Theory of Human Environment* (1988) by E.V. Walter. Finally, Zubeck includes "DeLillo's Poetics of Survival: A Case Study" by Jennifer L. Vala, a Ph.D. candidate, who we learn from her contributor's note passed away before she was able to see her work in print. The chapter presents brief overviews of "unexceptional individuals making their way in limited, unremarkable activities" as found in *Falling Man*, "The Ivory Acrobat" (from *The Angel Esmeralda*), and *Zero K*. These individuals "*live on*" in the face of crisis (232).

As with any edited collection, some chapters are stronger than others. However, it is an important contribution to the field, which adds to the growing body of scholarship on the most recent works by an author whose career dates back to the 1960s. This volume particularly demonstrates why more attention needs to be paid to DeLillo's formally ascetic "late stage": as in Hemingway's so-called "Iceberg Theory," DeLillo's deliberately concise sentences[12] reveal only a fraction of the depths that lie beneath the surface.

Lies-Bleeding, Act 3, scene 3 appears in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), who repeats the joke to DeLillo in a 2000 letter as a way of describing *The Body Artist*, which DeLillo then repeats in a 2000 letter to someone else. DeLillo then, obviously, incorporates it into his three-act play, after which Wallace reuses it himself in his commencement address at Kenyon College in May 2005, which occurs after *Love-Lies-Bleeding* is staged for the first time (Herren 152; Laist 163). See David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Little, Brown, 1996), p. 445; Letter from David Foster Wallace to DeLillo, 12 December 2000; and a letter from DeLillo to Harry Pallemans, 22 December 2000, as noted by Chase Coale (261).

[11] See McCrum.

[12] See "An Interview with Don DeLillo."

The Roots of the "Scientific Turn" in Modernist Fiction

Nina Engelhardt, *Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). ix + 188pp

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Modernism, Fiction and Mathematics, published in the Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernist Culture series, is a valuable addition to this collection of monographs on modernist art in its intersection with the contextual foundations of material culture, science, philosophy and the like. Nina Engelhardt examines the rich modernist heritage as reflected in four gigantic novels: Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers* (1931), and Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1943). The texts are well-chosen for their polyhistoric character, compactness of subject-matter, and tight connection of mathematical debate to social practice. Engelhardt's book, explaining those connections lucidly, will be valuable both for those who want to deepen their literary studies with a mathematical framework, and for those natural scientists who would like to track the impact of modernist mathematics on the broader artistic sphere.

Engelhardt's book casts light on how literature and mathematics interacted in rethinking the three fundamental propositions we can see as innate to Western tradition since the Enlightenment: "First, all genuine questions can be answered, and if a question cannot be answered, then it is not a question. Second, all answers are knowable, and they can be discovered by means that can be learned and taught. Third, all answers must be compatible" (Becerra and Barnes 13). Her book consists of an introductory chapter, four analytical chapters and a conclusion, followed by a glossary, bibliography and index. The introductory part accessibly condenses her main concerns, particularly the details of the foundational crisis in mathematics from around 1880 to 1920, whose consequences she later tracks through the four novels.

She explains the quest for a reliable and universal bedrock for mathematics, after the disruption of the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries, in terms of three competing schools – formalism, logicism and intuitionism. The formalist David Hilbert attempted to solve the problems by inventing a completely artificial language with unwaveringly precise rules, like artificial grammar, in order to come up with a finite set of axioms for doing mathematics. The logicists, represented by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, defended the idea that the whole of mathematics can be reduced to a set of relations derived one from the other exclusively through logic, without referring to specifically mathematical concepts such as number. This led them into dealings with verbal and propositional logic, hence establishing some contact between the turf of mathematics and of literature.[13] Led by Luitzen Brouwer, the third school claimed that mathematics consists of those intuitively comprehensible mental constructions, like finite series of natural numbers, which are inductive and effective in the sense in which the intuitionistic construction of the natural numbers is inductive and effective; to them, all logical processes are constructs, and logic forms part of mathematics.

This debate began a breakup within the very nature of representation: since the late 19th century, the relativity of phenomena from linguistics and logic to mathematics and physics has implied a non-necessary correspondence to real-world experiences, and consequently a plurality of axiomatic systems. Such polyvalently conceived hypotheses struck at the very root of the principle of the excluded middle, resulting in a world-view founded on counter-intuitive principles nowadays taken for granted – chaos theory, fractals, uncertainty, indeterminacy. Engelhardt examines how these principles moved outward from specialised debates in mathematics, into the age's advanced (literary) art, and thence into the wider culture.

Every chapter begins with a brief publication history and a sketch of the relevant novel's plotline, before going on to consider the particular scientific issues the novels address. Organized by time of setting (from the 1880s to the end of World

[13] In particular, the claim that a logical proposition is a proposition which has complete generality and is true in virtue of its form rather than its content. Here, the word "proposition" is used as synonymous with "theorem" (Snapper 208).

War 2) rather than publication date, the four central chapters systematically lay out the intellectual debate on mathematics itself and the relation between scientific axioms and developments in the political sphere. Chapter 1 begins by discussing the loss of foundations in the political and mathematical worlds alike, expressed as the departure from predetermined representation, an abandonment of *archē* through the scientific crisis and political anarchy (26), as they are brought together in *Against the Day*'s engagement with Quaternion numbers, which reject the representation of reality limited to three dimensions just as the anarchists struggle against a centralised order. This rupture in the monolithic world-view enables the construction and simultaneous credibility of the novel's multiple, apparently contradictory possible worlds. The next chapter analyses the foundationalist debate as reflected in the immanent poetics of *The Sleepwalkers* through multiple protagonists who try to resolve their account of the disorderly world, as "the books and anarchical reality no longer comply with each other" (66). Paradoxically, it is an irrational sacrifice of the character August Esch which restores balance to the storyworld, confirming the persuasiveness of mathematical intuitionism as an underlying principle. Chapter 3's study of *The Man without Qualities* demonstrates that the polarities of the foundationalist debate may diffuse into a continuum whose centre is human morality, a perceptible social justification of the science that formalist doctrine had considered to be void of intrinsic value. The necessity of combining the formalist and intuitionist views comes into greater focus in the chapter on *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose engagement with the roots of uncertainty looks back to the Newton–Leibniz debate on determinism and constant conjunction. Tyrone Slothrop's own indecisiveness as a consequence of his immersion in moral inertia, in Engelhardt's reading, may also be seen as his unwillingness to step outside the Newtonian framework and realise that his inability to act is due to the inertness of a belief in gravity's universality (136).[14]

The study provides useful insights into the relevance of the foundationalist debate to the modernist stakeholders, while also functioning as a competent topical guide for contemporary readers unfamiliar with the intellectual history: it's full of

[14] Engelhardt developed related ideas in an earlier essay for *Orbit*: see "Gravity in *Gravity's Rainbow*..."

well-researched clarifications distilled from the comprehensive novels, and remains smoothly readable despite the abundance of technical terms. Engelhardt's sound research makes robust connections, as in her connection of *Gravity's Rainbow* to the fact that Kurt Gödel proved that set theory can sidestep the law of the excluded middle because it is consistent both with and without the continuum hypothesis – a topic frequently addressed in the novel's opposition of the probabilist Roger Mexico to the determinism of the Pavlovian Ned Pointsman.

Relatedly, Engelhardt acknowledges that the novels mainly engage with the mathematics through exegetical narration and dialogue, so that within literature mathematical issues arise as second-order narratorial phenomena rather than in directly encountered principles and laws. But in her discussions of fictionality she is able to show mathematical ideas at work in less exposition-heavy modes, particularly in Pynchon's more formally experimental work as, for example, in the seemingly infinitely branching episodes within a finite space of the novel that support Leni Pökler's intuitively intimated principle of non-causation: "It all goes along together. Parallel, not series. Metaphor. Signs and symptoms. Mapping on to different coordinate systems..." (*GR* 159).

Beyond simply explaining the relevance of the debates, Engelhardt offers useful, though more speculative, readings of the novels' individual and cumulative implications in light of the ideas their mathematical concerns bring up. *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, emerges less as a demonstrative exercise in formal impossibilities (that would entail denying the general narrative construction and the apparent protean quality of the narrating instance) than as a thesis on the unpredictable power of intuition. If there is an all-pervading agency in the narrative, it may be the encyclopaedically historical humanist thought empowered through the intuitive will to accept the coexistence of paradoxical, but plausible (post)modernist multiverses. The matter of intuition in the exact sciences also runs throughout *Against the Day*: in a retrospective passage, Nikola Tesla recalls a fateful storm in a Balkan mountain range, when he witnessed an enormous lightning discharge which conferred upon him a vision of the future Magnifying Transformer on Long Island, "as if time had been removed from all equations" (368). All the analysed novels contain troves of examples which

juxtapose intuitive aspirations and the mechanised everyday world of capillary rational hegemony, and Engelhardt expertly connects the numerous selected quotes with the relevant political or scientific correspondences they embody, problematise or debate. For instance, the Museum der Monstrositäten in *Against the Day* displays three-dimensional objects combined with painted murals which sometimes merge into an intersection of life and Quaternion mathematics (Engelhardt 35); Broch's novel relies on the explanatory power of mathematics to demonstrate the relations between various forms of knowledge, since to him, the specific style of the epoch is reflected in the absence of a common reference point, thus making "mathematics a model of a state of absolute dissolution" (61); Musil expounds the Bergsonian critique that Prussia at the time tried to mechanise spirit, not to spiritualise matter, and his novel attempts to tie the domains of rationality and mysticism, the ratioïd and the non-ratioïd (Engelhardt 102–104); finally, Slothrop's allowing others to suffer due to his inactivity fuses the physical and moral senses of inertia as a "translation of Einstein's equivalence principle to ethics" (135).

The book thus offers both context and interpretation for literary readers. In another vein, it aligns with those historians of science who consider it their primary goal to assert the interdependence of the history of science and the history of mathematics. This group of scholars includes George Sarton, Otto Neugebauer, Bartel van der Waerden and many others, who "saw science as a grand rational edifice and its history as a chronicle of how this structure came to be" (Alexander 476), although by the end of the 1950s, the field of the history of mathematics had become increasingly hermetic and inaccessible to general readers. In the recent decades, considerable work has been done to bridge the gap by making use of social, cultural and political approaches to the mathematical essence of wider social processes.[15] Engelhardt, however, combines the cultural histories of science and mathematics in ways that might challenge the faith in that monolithic "rational edifice." The history of math-

[15] We may mention Herbert Mehrtens (history of mathematical modernism and countermodernism), Joan Richards (mathematical approaches and social reform in 19th-century England), Massimo Mazzotti (political uses of mathematics in the Kingdom of Naples) and Adrian Rice (the institutional development of modern mathematics) (Alexander 477).

ematics is inseparable from its exact or social applications and vice versa, and this requires us to think of the mathematical episteme outside the postulated realm of eternal rationality, seeing it instead as historically and culturally contingent as well as something that, in its variations, can influence the more tangible domains, like physics, biology and society, whose upheavals are isomorphical expressions of the debate on the formulation of human thought itself.

Engelhardt's work also prompts questions beyond those she directly addresses. A recurring theme is that of uncertainty, in all its meanings, from the purely mathematical, to practical decisions, physical applications, mystical overtones, or social ramifications. From the Chums of Chance's ambiguous ontological status to characters' contradictory fantasies and truth-value destabilisation in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this monograph paves the way for further inquiry into a fundamental concept of the present-day human and technical condition, which different fields have approached through tools and terms like the Uncertainty Principle (Heisenberg), the incompleteness theorem (Gödel), or undecidability (Derrida). All of the texts analysed in the book – and by extension, the polysemous world they represent – demonstrate that undecidability precedes the very production of the determinate meanings among which the interpreter decides so that a particular reading could come into being.

There are very minor quibbles to be had with formatting: the study would profit more from the original, and standard, Viking pagination of Pynchon's 1973 novel, for example. But those are minor technicalities of a technically impressive book: Engelhardt's readers in their various fields will derive much benefit from her painstaking work tying so many tangential fields together. This multidisciplinary investigation into the influences of modernist mathematics appropriately invites the reverse overflow of ideas from the humanist branch into the so-called hard sciences, which gave rise to much of the literary impetus in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Marshall Boswell, *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination* (Bloomsbury, 2019). 170pp

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Marshall Boswell launches an effort to understand "the mixture of envy, hagiography, and resentment that has come to mark Wallace's presence in the contemporary literary imagination" (1). Boswell—a novelist and critic with well-regarded publications on Wallace to his credit—attempts to clarify the author's lineage and track the resonances of his influences and legacies in the contemporary American literary scene. Such a clarification, he suggests, requires him to dilute the celebrity—epitomized by James Ponsoldt's film *The End of the Tour* (2015)—that has stymied truly critical investigation of the author, who committed suicide in 2008. Boswell's title has an intriguing double meaning: he investigates the *effects* predecessors had on Wallace, as well as those he had on his successors. To make this case against a Wallace of isolated genius, Boswell provocatively reads Wallace's texts alongside those by John Barth, Richard Powers, Jeffery Eugenides, Claire Messud, and Jonathan Franzen.

In an analysis of the continuum between Barth's *The Tidewater Tales* (1982) and Wallace's controversial novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," Boswell takes strides to correct what has long been an oversimplification of the "patricidal" relationship between Wallace the *post*-postmodernist and his generational father figure, the ostensible "funhouse denizen" Barth. Contrary to received interpretation, in this novel Barth is, for Boswell, "correcting the casual charges of sexism" (21) that have been previously levied against him by focusing on an intimate and intricate relationship between a Chesapeake Bay-sailing writer and his pregnant wife, an ideal reader, each bound in the dynamic process of meta-textual and collaborative narration. The novel is, in some ways, a polar opposite of Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* collection (2000), in which the male voice is indisputably and annoyingly dominant. In demonstrating Barth's fully dimensional acceptance of the

equality between fictional man and wife as spinners of linked but challenging tales, Boswell subtly lays the groundwork for the defense of Wallace he will make in the final chapter, in which he grapples with Yale Professor Amy Hungerford, a purveyor of "Wallace snark" (125) who has proudly and notoriously claimed that, although she has not read *Infinite Jest*, Wallace is *certainly* no genius. According to Boswell, Wallace's bold ambition—like Pynchon's, Gaddis's, and Gass's—chafes Hungerford, who rejects the swaggering, "bandana-wearing [and] masculine" (131) paragon of a certain kind of 20th-century writer. Hungerford relies on untenable authorial stereotypes to back up her assumptions, which Boswell suggests are belied by the vulnerability and fear of the characters in Wallace's fiction. In the "me-too" age, when Wallace has been credibly accused of boorish and even violent behavior by women such as Mary Karr, Boswell usefully re-focuses criticism on the characters' lives rather than the author's life, without making excuses for the latter.

Detailing the work of Richard Powers—like Wallace, an Illinois native—Boswell suggests that meaningful parallels between these contemporaneous authors have gone largely unobserved. Both are intrigued by the intersections between irony and cynicism; both are captivated by the ways in which science and technology will transform society and the ways in which writers chronicle society. Powers's *Prisoner's Dilemma* (2002), like *Infinite Jest*, zooms in on a typical (a.k.a. dysfunctional) American family struggling to stay afloat. Cagily, Boswell reads both works through the lens of the American TV show, *Married with Children*, that Powers and Wallace were (probably spellbound) watching in the late-1980s and early-1990s. As Boswell implies, the relationship between two literary novelists and a pop-cultural franchise that plays up a down-trodden protagonist are interesting and ironic. In interviews in his lifetime, Wallace confessed his fascination with mass-media; Powers, somewhat more reclusive, has failed to do the same. In, respectively, *Infinite Jest* and *Galatea 2.2*, Wallace and Powers show a sustained interest in the ways in which contemporary trends in technology can improve, and destroy, our world.

Moving forward to Wallace's posthumous "effect," Boswell considers "The Anxiety of Influence" (to use Harold Bloom's famous phrase) in Jeffery Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot* (2011). One of the novel's protagonists, Leonard Bankhead is a

Wallace clone: he dips Skoal and is seen by his peers as "brilliant, mercurial, and depressive" (Boswell 62). In an engaging analysis, Boswell argues that this novel—written by one of Wallace's peers—provides an "allegory for the contemporary post-postmodern novel" (62). Here, and elsewhere, Boswell slides gracefully into recent critical debates about whether Wallace's "sincerity eventually overcomes his irony."[16] In this chapter, Boswell illuminates the ways in which Eugenides allows his 19th-century British romance template to be cleverly undercut by some of the postmodern gamesmanship we associate with Wallace. For my money, Eugenides and Boswell's lively interpretation of Eugenides make a strong case for Wallace's brilliance, and for the anaemic nature of much commentary on him.

Boswell does a masterful job sorting out the "intertextual engagements" (83) of Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006). Although the affluent intellectuals in Messud are not like the tennis-stifled kids and horrified junkies in Wallace, Boswell is, strikingly, able to pinpoint parallels that readers might well miss. Just as *Infinite Jest* "is permeated by an 'infant leitmotif,' *The Emperor's Children* is [dominated] by the symbolism of children writ large" (84). *Infinite Jest* is, of course, populated by adults in search of (or in defiance of) their inner infant, the entity they blame for their subsequent lack of maturity, success, and security.

Ultimately, Boswell's collection of essays plays a significant role in Wallace scholarship. With his intertextual examinations of the novels and stories against the work of his peers, Boswell zeroes in on the depth and breadth of Wallace's vision. Boswell joins other recent works—such as Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace* (2016) and Beatrice Pire and Pierre-Louis Patoine's *David Foster Wallace: Presence of the Other* (2017)—in taking a dual approach to Wallace's "effects," first examining how crucial Wallace's surrounding culture was to him, and then how he has been equally significant for the culture we're now in. Along these lines, the Australian scholar and novelist Tony McMahon, who has written eloquently about Wallace-effects in the field of music, points out that our understanding of Wallace should not be allowed to "congeal prematurely around well-established paradigms" (91). Those paradigms

[16] See Konstantinou, for instance.

have previously tended to isolate Wallace. Instead, we should continually challenge the strategies and circumstances and framings with which we approach the textual output of a late-20th-century master; recent critics have investigated Wallace's output in light of international trends in literature, film, and visual arts; in the future, these trends should certainly continue. In late June 2019 I had the opportunity to present a paper at the sixth-annual conference on Wallace at Illinois State University, where the author taught in the 1990s. On the day I presented my paper, I crossed paths with a kind but curious young man who asked me why I was in Normal, Illinois on a sweltering summer day. When I told him, he nodded and said, "It figures. Every summer *you guys* show up." I hope we, captives of Wallace, always do.

Ralph Clare (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). xvii + 262pp

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The idea of a companion volume on David Foster Wallace's work is weird, as the work, a literary cosmos, explains itself fully, read aright. Few authors and narrators are so self-consciously explicit about their acts of communication as Wallace and his characters. Nevertheless, the work *seems* daunting, and most readers need a vade mecum on the journey of reading this multifaceted author. *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace* might have been such an introductory guide. The press states that its Companions "are a series of authoritative guides, written by leading experts, offering lively, accessible introductions to major writers" and other subjects ("Cambridge Companions"). Judging the Wallace companion by these standards, numerous problems emerge. It covers with scholarly vigor and varying success a range of matters relevant to Wallace's work, but the focus and difficulty of the articles implicitly assume a particular audience: advanced literary scholars who need an introduction to Wallace - but not to the jargon and typical concerns (such as literary influence, critical history, and identity politics) of professional scholarship. Many of the volume's chapters would be difficult for a good undergraduate major, let alone an interested "common reader," to understand. This *Companion* is neither accessible nor introductory in a general sense. Granted, the publisher's companions on authors are typically just as arcane. But its companions on music, with their mix of articles by scholars and by practitioners, manage to introduce their subjects accessibly and thoroughly, as do many guides for the perplexed issued by other publishers. In what follows, this volume is judged by the standard of such accessible and thorough guides, in relation to the interests of engaged but non-professional Wallace readers.

The volume is divided into sections on historical and cultural contexts; early works and short-work collections; major novels; and themes and topics. Clare

introduces the volume by pointing out the difficulty of "mapping" (7) Wallace's work and importance. The companion is meant to contribute to this mapping. However, the introduction's hagiographic tone foreshadows that the volume might miss an essential point on the map: Wallace's dark humor, his sense of the "funnysad" (Wallace, "Empty Plenum" 91). Clare deprecates treating Wallace too reverently, but perpetuates that reverence with observations like "Wallace's corpus is at once as dense and complex as it is revealing and profound" (5). The volume's largely reverent chapters follow Clare's lead and ignore Wallace's irreverence and plain humanness. One could argue that Wallace's dark humor is a tangential feature of his work that serious readers can pass over, but this review assumes on the contrary not only that humor is too salient to ignore—his major work is titled with *Jest*, after all, and is full of funny material—but that consideration of humor is necessary to understand Wallace's style, worldview, and approach to fiction as a form of resistance to unfunny ideologies that cause suffering. Of course, in an introductory volume one can't cover everything, and it may seem unfair to criticize the volume for bypassing Wallace's humor and other matters, like the importance of family. But this reviewer assumes that what is obviously important in Wallace—i.e., what strikes the "innocent" reader, who has no professional need of interpretive *angles*, as important—needs discussion in a canvasing introduction.

The opening section on historical and cultural contexts is dominated by discussion of books, making it a section on *literary* contexts. The discussion is often illuminating, but very little is said about history or culture beyond occasional observations on events during Wallace's life: as when Marshall Boswell establishes Wallace's basic cultural situation through a discussion of Fukuyama's *The End of History* (1992), the history talk is often just more book talk. Boswell's informed essay places the author in uneasy relationship with the apathy and irony of Generation X: attitudes that Wallace condemns, confesses to, and resists in his writing. The essay is useful for today's young reader, who needs to know that Wallace's "trafficking in pop-culture references," while de rigueur in fiction now, "was still *new* in the in the early 1990s," that it represented a generational shift in attitude, at least for writers, and that "Wallace was instrumental in capturing and analyzing" this shift (21). But generational placement is

tangential to broader cultural concerns that preoccupy Wallace, such as the effects of corporate culture on the individual or the corruption of language. One questions the prominent placement of such a minor contextual matter. Andrew Hoberek reviews Wallace's place in the broader context of American literary history. His discussion of relationships with forebears is conscientious, his comparison of Wallace and Melville particularly valuable. However, one misses consideration of Wallace's relationships with eccentrics like Poe and Lovecraft, with whose macabre work Wallace's clearly resonates. Lee Konstantinou completes the contextual section with a smart piece on Wallace's "bad influence" on younger authors. He argues that writers coming after Wallace have acknowledged Wallace through resisting him. Strategies of resistance include trying to "discredit, disavow, or overcome his characteristic literary style" (54), which now seems ugly and obtuse. True enough, but one needs to bear in mind that putting Wallace at the center of a history of literary influence may be exaggerating his significance, and what is more, simply tells us that a key context in which Wallace should be placed is, well, Wallace Studies—a limited point at best. This section leaves plenty of crucial non-literary context unexplored: math and science, and their history, among many other concerns and referential frameworks present throughout Wallace's work.

The next section, on all the works but the big novels, is more satisfying. Matthew Luter pitches *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* as heavily influenced by linguistic concerns. He names Barth's metafiction, Wittgenstein's late philosophy, and Pynchon's play with literary codes as sources of this influence, and rightly reads peculiarities of the early works, such as the "interruptions" in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," as due to that influence. He sees Wallace trying to escape the influence by finding "a way that literary fiction could communicate genuinely with an audience" (77), replacing postmodern irony with sincerity while acknowledging irony's pervasiveness. True enough, but this focus on Wallace's postmodernity and ethics takes funny stories like "Westward" too seriously, missing the point that Wallace is trying to entertain (and thereby, as I suggested above, to illuminate suffering—the suffering of the child actors more than the workshop participants). This humorless attitude, alas, pervades this volume. It appears in the next chapter, Adam

Kelly's otherwise admirable coverage of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Kelly brings out interesting features of that weird collection, such as "Wallace's fascination with the insidious ideologies that underlie apparently neutral language use" (90), as in the confessions that seem earnest but actually reinforce male privilege. But Kelly misses that the confessions and other pieces are rich with black humor. The *B.I. #2* interviewee's insistence on honesty about relationships in which he is so dishonest is intentionally funny, as a prophylactic against ideology. Again, humor reveals painful truth, a feature of Wallace that needs emphasis. Next, reviewing *Oblivion*, David Hering captures the pathos-riddled pessimism of the stories by reading Wallace through the moral concerns of Nietzsche and Cioran. This angle makes sense, given the lack of moral sureties and the pointless suffering depicted in the stories. The narrator of "Good Old Neon," with his sleep problems, attempts at self-help, and anguish over imposture, mirrors afflictions of both philosophers. One again wishes for examination of the collection's black humor, as seen in "Mister Squishy." Jeffrey Severs's chapter on the nonfiction affords welcome relief from solemnity. He ably bestrides the manifold subjects of the nonfiction, acknowledges the funny Wallace of the unfun cruise and lobster festival, and affirms that "there is much fiction in Wallace's nonfiction, much mythmaking" (116), an instructive thing to remember about work in which so much is false.

Since the two big novels can't be boiled down to tidy, informative essays, the authors tasked with presenting them craft selective takes on the novels. It seems an editorial mistake to limit discussion of these works to short chapters (14 pages for *Infinite Jest*), or even to single chapters. One searches the introduction in vain for an explanation of this limitation, and the missing rationale leaves a less knowledgeable reader unsure about the importance of these novels within Wallace's career. Nevertheless Mary K. Holland writes with insight on narrative fragmentation and recursion in *Infinite Jest*, and notes that paradoxically, these features imply "a kind of totality" that Wallace desiderates (130). She argues less convincingly that *Infinite Jest* is a historical novel, suggesting that it predicts historical progress into a twenty-first century of dehumanizing "entertainment." But the novel is more saliently antihistorical, depicting an America where humans endlessly repeat their original problems,

particularly violence, without progress. Clare Hayes-Brady's selective take on *The Pale King* claims that the work is Romantic, with characters like Cusk interpreted as "palely loitering" knights, sickly and unable to do great deeds, susceptible to accessions of the supernatural (e.g., the phantoms that appear to IRS rote examiners). This offbeat, often opaque reading of the novel is likely to be helpful only to advanced students of literature. *The Pale King* is foremost a dark, humane satire of bureaucratic culture, and by ignoring this obvious reading, Hayes-Brady leads the novice reader astray.

The choice of themes and topics for the final section is problematic. Excluded are important matters like disability and, most objectionably, the family, which appears everywhere in Wallace as malign presence, cause for hilarity, and site of pathos. Admittedly, Wallace writes of so many themes and topics that choosing the right ones is difficult. Of the topics selected, the most essential is the aesthetic, discussed by Robert L. McLaughlin with an approach focusing on language and narrative. He shows how Wallace juxtaposes instances of various discursive modes (A.A. recovery language, confession) in order to question the sincerity of speakers and render discourse strange. For McLaughlin, this discursive defamiliarization results in "the relationship between the author and reader being compared to actual human relationships" (162); we must dedicate ourselves to understanding the speech of the other, in fiction and in life. This point captures how Wallace merges the aesthetic and the ethical. One wishes, however, that McLaughlin had taken up the aesthetic strategies of narrative fragmentation and recursion that Holland discusses. Wallace uses them everywhere, not just in *Infinite Jest*. The second topic covered, politics, is less salient in Wallace's work and perhaps of less interest to readers grappling with it. Andrew Warren makes it clear that his discussion covers politics as national governance, not specialized notions of politics, like biopolitics or gender politics, which one might argue are indeed salient in the work. Warren detects the author's main political concern, the notion of democracy, and addresses a key theme, "broken authority" (176), that underlies political features in the work from the presidency of Johnny Gentle to the Wheelchair Assassins' project to the fascination with McCain. Matthew Mullins takes on spirituality and religion in

Wallace, another less prominent topic. Aside from characters maimed by religious zealotry, as in "The Suffering Channel," and gestures towards spirituality in some essays, the topic doesn't get much attention, so Mullins has a hard time of it. His points are perforce actually about ethics. He implausibly makes habits serve for rituals and thus constitute a form of worship, concluding that for Wallace, "spirituality is not simply a matter of choosing to believe or worship but becoming aware of how our daily habits have shaped us into certain kinds of worshipers" (197). He tries to make Wallace's interest in community a spiritual subject, but otherwise hasn't much to write about, which is a problem of editorial choice. The same is true of the next topic, race, which Lucas Thompson struggles to develop. He makes the most of what's there: Wallace as self-consciously a privileged white man, some rather racially offensive characters in *Infinite Jest*, and the collaborative book on rap music, which Thompson praises for emphasizing the style's significance. But overtly racialized incident in the work is rare, so Thompson resorts to a questionable argument that this rarity is intentional, that "Wallace tried either to erase or else look past various identity markers" such as race (215). This argument for intentional avoidance of what's not there is not only hard to substantiate but will be of dubious use to readers who want to understand what *is* there in the work. The next topic, geography, has more presence in Wallace. Jurrit Daalder concentrates on Wallace's representations of his native Midwest, arguing credibly that behind these representations are the ur-Midwests of *Main Street* and *Middletown*, and that Wallace occasionally—as in the post-9/11 "The View from Mrs. Thompson's"—saw the Midwest as a synecdoche of entire nation. But one should be wary of this impression that Wallace's geography is chiefly Midwestern. *Infinite Jest* vividly presents the Northeast and Southwest, and *Everything and More* ponders European geography. The final topical chapter, by Joseph Tabbi, concerns Wallace and systems. However, it doesn't define "system," discusses cybernetic systems without clearly relating them to Wallace's works, and includes digressions on postmodern modes of fiction, so that one can't easily discern what the chapter is about. One grasps that late in life Wallace was interested in bureaucratic systems and that *The Pale King* addresses

their functioning and effects on individuals. Oddly, Wallace's interest in logical and mathematical systems is passed over. This is a disappointing end to an earnest but often disappointing volume.

In sum, this well-intentioned introduction is a satisfactory overview with some incisive interpretations as well as some questionable emphases. It lacks a lot. Most inexplicable is the failure to address Wallace's humor—a feature that wins many of his readers. Hypertrophied tennis arms, dismissal of a prose poem book by an index of faults that includes the square root of the ISBN, Lemon Pledge as sunscreen, and so on—such funny stuff is essential Wallace and can yield scholarly meaning. But it's as if humor isn't academically important enough to discuss here. This problem reminds one that Wallace often ridicules academics' concerns and discourse, as in the silly academic history of James Incandenza's movies in *Infinite Jest*. One wonders whether any of this companion's contributors is on the wavelength of the writer who deplores professors "so thoroughly cloistered, insecure, or stupid as to believe that academese is good intelligent writing" (Wallace, "Twenty-Four" 267).

In this collection lie many stimuli for further study, valuable orientations for students, and illustrations of the richness of Wallace's work. One wishes, as said at the outset, that these were more accessible, given the publisher's criteria of accessibility for its companions. And one wishes that the gist of Wallace, that brilliant companion so soon lost, were more present here—not only humor but families, dead-end jobs, mental illness, exposure of fraudulence and representation of death. These riches remain in his work, reading and rereading which is of course more profitable than reading what academics, however enthusiastic, have to say about it.

David Cowart, *The Tribe of Pyn: Literary Generations in the Postmodern Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015). 258pp

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David Cowart's *The Tribe of Pyn* contributes to deciphering the ever-elusive identity of literary postmodernism through a study of contemporary authors who have been influenced by or are in conversation with the totemic figures of US postmodernism's first generation. This takes Cowart back to the themes—influence, borrowing, symbiosis—of his *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing* (1993), but this time he both narrows his temporal focus and widens his address from the purely academic to the general reader (though the work remains demanding and in-depth).

Cowart addresses "postmodernism"'s influence on ten different works (short stories, novellas, or novels) by ten different authors. Those he selects constitute a next generation of postmodern authors, academically a "terra incognita" (9) after their more fully-studied literary ancestors—Pynchon, DeLillo, McCarthy and co—with whom Cowart traces points of convergence and divergence. Cowart's study of influence often explicitly draws on Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of influence* (1973). But *The Tribe of Pyn* owes as much to Bloom's late-phase work—*The Western Canon* (1994), *Genius* (2003), and *How to Read and Why* (2000)—in its inclusive scope, treating literature as a non-linear continuum and using postmodernism as the center of a circle that encloses both the past and present of writing as an art form.

Cowart does not exactly engage in close reading—it would be impossible to provide a thorough treatment of all these works in the fifteen to thirty pages they each get—as he aims instead to give a fully theorized answer to a modestly phrased question: "what are the relations between one artistic generation and the

next?" (192). This is a complex question: besides the obvious issues of influence and intertextuality, in the current context it also contains matters such as marginalization and the creative opportunities that stem from it, the end of grand narratives, the end of postmodern irony, and the question of what will follow after that.

Cowart draws on authors from a wide range of backgrounds in order to properly assess the full spectrum of American literature influenced by the postmodern generation. Rachel Ingalls's *Mrs. Caliban* (1982) introduces the mind as the "venue of intertextuality" (30) and uses irony as a "bridge between the modern and the postmodern" (38). In Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973), Cowart traces the interplay between race, colonization and language and the inherent problem of those who write from the margins to address both the oppressors and the oppressed. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), written by the Native American Michael Dorris, brings forth questions of identity, both ethnic and national. Feminism and history feature heavily in Cowart's analysis of Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), with the author's fully realized matriarchal vision subverting readerly expectations. The chapter that discusses Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X* (1993) is among the most interesting in the book, at least in part because Cowart admits that he is not particularly fond of the novel, drawing unfavorable comparisons to Pynchon's techniques, though acknowledging that it contains elements distinctly postmodern and/or American: history and its ownership (or author), the "distrust of totalized forms" (84), and "American innocence" (88) and identity. While Cowart obliquely admits that he used to think *Arc d'X* "completely without merit" (81), he praises Erickson's "epistemic discernment" and his—albeit flawed—"ambitious narrative" (81). He finds, however, that Erickson's admiration for Pynchon does not make him a successor but rather an epigone, who can easily fall into the trap of mannerism. A different value-judgment impels the next chapter on Richard Powers's *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993) (indeed, Powers is mentioned throughout the book, both as an accomplished and influential author and as an admirer and successor, not mere epigone, of Pynchon). The nature of storytelling is the predominant theme

here, as Powers incorporates familiar stories in his narrative only to reveal their dark nuances. The pastiche of postmodernism (not the original postmodern pastiche) is Cowart's focus in Chuck Pahlaniuk's *Choke* (2001): here the "discriminating eye can discern affinities in every postmodern quarter" (107), partly due to what Bloom might call its "belatedness." As *Choke* addresses an audience of "Gen-Xers and Millenials" (108) who might be inexperienced with the works of the influencing generation, Pahlaniuk is able to use and re-use all the postmodern literary tricks for readers who may "mistake [them] for the next new thing" (108). In Ann Patchett's *Bel Canto* (2001), the main issue, according to Cowart, is the relationship between art and war or terrorism (or freedom fighting, if you will), which raises a tension between reality and aesthetics (Cowart aligns Patchett with the latter). Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) includes an abundance of postmodern themes and tropes that Cowart—though this is his longest chapter—merely touches upon: the encyclopedic novel, analogue simulations of the digital, the labyrinth (and its necessary dead ends) as form and plot and game, the overbearing ancestors of the work, the "deflection of meaning or signification" (173)… all are found within the novel's experimental and innovative pages. Finally, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011) deals with time and consciousness, and the language games that pervade the two, in an almost Proustian way: Cowart does an excellent job in discerning affinities between the two vastly different novels.

What my survey does not convey is how consistently Cowart keeps his chapters related to each other through relation to a sort of underlying map of postmodernism: he constantly draws parallels across chapters, calls back to the texts that influenced his authors, and brings in other literary references beyond that. He is well aware that the connections he makes are not necessarily those the authors themselves would acknowledge. Influence is not always easy to define and discern, so his model of it is capacious: "[s]ometimes influence is […] dispersed: a presence like spores in the air, as opposed to something a writer might consciously embrace" (127). While it stops short of the

systematic theorizing of *The Anxiety of Influence* and of an all-embracing stipulative description of everything that readers and academics alike should be familiar with (à la *The Western Canon*) it works perfectly as a pastiche of Bloom's early and late methods, applied to the field of "postmodernism." It stands on its own by offering a solid opinion on how literature works around the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first: "[f]rom the vantage point of the twenty-first-century's second decade […] one can advance the argument that younger writers have continued to 'make it new' without needing to dismantle the postmodern aesthetic crafted by a parental generation" (199). Throughout the book, but especially in its coda, Cowart discusses whether "postmodernism" has *any* kind of future or is about to be replaced by some post-postmodern movement. He takes a different tack from the dominant idea that the postmodern era in art and culture has ended, siding instead with the smaller group of critics claiming that postmodernism has a long future ahead:

> Unless some emergent aesthetic can be shown clearly to repudiate the epistemic features of postmodern fiction (the proclivity to pastiche, the ironic self-referentiality and recursive structures, the problematizing of representation, the "incredulity towards metanarratives"), pronouncements regarding its superannuation, like those on the death of the novel or the end of history, risk inviting some variant on Mark Twain's famous quip: "reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated" (199).

Cowart's analyses of influence suggest that no such repudiation has occurred. He thinks, for example, that the "new sincerity" widely associated with David Foster Wallace's legacy is not around the corner, that the "anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching" (Wallace, *Supposedly Fun* 81) may never even come, let alone replace the aesthetic that influenced Wallace (he convincingly shows that Pynchon deliberately includes an homage to Wallace's

novels in *Bleeding Edge*, thus co-opting the younger author's work into postmodernism "proper"). As the title suggests, the elephant in the room throughout is always Pynchon, on whom Cowart has published two monographs. Though Cowart never refrains from mentioning him where appropriate, it is at the end of the book where he finally allows himself to assess not only the effect an author like Pynchon has on those that come after him, but also the effect of the next generation on Pynchon.

All this is slowly untangled from the very beginning of the book, as Cowart first lays the groundwork, presenting to the reader the questions that serve as a starting point for his work and then by carefully reading ten different works under this light. The major difference between Cowart and *Anxiety* Bloom is that Cowart wants to examine the whole rather than the isolated cases, to see the movements within the (postmodern) movement rather than the struggle between single authors and single predecessors. In that sense, he becomes not Bloom's epigone but his successor, able to offer a bird's-eye view of literary postmodernism as an aesthetic not threatened by any new or emergent movement, as it shows no signs of slowing down.

In conclusion, *The Tribe of Pyn* is both a personal work and an academic endeavor. Cowart is not afraid to show his personal preferences and his love, or lack thereof, of certain authors, and his readings of the novels examined are correspondingly idiosyncratic. They always, however, keep a clear goal in mind: to uncover the plethora of interconnections between the old and the new, the established and the ambitious. For Cowart, postmodernism, in its many guises, has a long way to go still. This study serves as a starting point for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) who want to examine the works of the ten included authors, but also to get a vision of the connections in the background. It can also be read by those who want a better understanding of what postmodernism is and what lies ahead for literature, especially American. It would be impossible to produce such a book without Cowart's erudition and his decades-long preoccupation with the field.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: McClintock, S, Whitmarsh, P, Pitozzi, A, Alberts, C, Macura, S, Thornton, Z B, Rohland, M and Maragos, G 2019 Book Reviews. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature,* 7(1): 8, 1–49. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.1810

Published: 22 November 2019

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

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