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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Reviews

*William T. Vollmann: A Critical Companion*, Christopher K. Coffman, Daniel Lukes (eds.), Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016. xvi + 366pp

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It is expected, and therefore not noteworthy, that critical companions come with some introductory throat-clearing, arguing the importance of their subject matter and how it warrants the publication of such a volume, or the need to expand upon the existing literature, fill in gaps, or move it in heretofore unexplored directions. What is noteworthy in this instance is how much space this throat-clearing takes up in this (highly recommended) volume's preface (by Larry McCaffery) and its introduction (by Christopher K. Coffman). Because while, as Theophilus Savvas suggests, '[being] the first significant volume on the author, *A Critical Companion* is a landmark in Vollmann scholarship',<sup>1</sup> the book itself is very interested in asking why this should be.

McCaffery immediately refers to 'an almost inexplicable lack of extended critical commentary about Vollmann's work' (xiv). At first glance, this is not a contentious statement: the notion that Vollmann is undervalued has long accompanied him, and there is some truth to it, even if we are slowly approaching a point where it can no longer be said to apply. But McCaffery adds that:

'...Vollmann's works have [not] been entirely neglected – his books have been regularly (and mostly favourably) reviewed; there's been the occasional article in scholarly journals and features in the Sunday supplements; and he's received his fair share of awards...' (xiv)

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<sup>1</sup> 'William T. Vollmann: *A Critical Companion* ed. by Christopher K. Coffman and Daniel Lukes (review).' *College Literature* 42: 4 (2015): 728–730.

The issue therefore seems to be, not that Vollmann is a relatively obscure figure, but that, as Coffmann notes, 'recognition seem[s] not to have kept pace with his achievements' (1–2). The *Companion* aims then, not to present Vollmann as worthy of *some* attention, but to attest to 'the remarkable significance of... Vollmann's contributions to American literature' and to 'rectif[y]... the extremes present in too many of the published evaluations' of his work ('spitting vitriol or drooling fandom') (1). It is in this context that McCaffery and Coffmann rehearse the 'obvious explanations' for the 'disparity' between the work and the attention it has received (xiv).

McCaffery begins by suggesting that 'some readers are made uncomfortable by Vollmann's graphic treatment of violence and sexuality' (xv) while Coffmann notes that '[e]ven the best scholarly criticism and belletristic assessments seem incapable of proceeding without at least a glancing reference to Vollmann as a subject who lends himself to sensationalism' (10). Vollmann's unsparing depictions of violence and sexuality can indeed prove an insurmountable hurdle for readers, but it is worth asking whether his preoccupation with marginalized groups (Native Americans, 'illegal immigrants', drug users, sex workers, etc.) raises multiple issues regarding representation, appropriation, and privilege that in today's cultural climate might make some scholars hesitate to write about his work (an issue the *Companion* does not address as directly as it could have). To this could be added the difficulty in Vollmann's engagement with the Other: as Coffmann rightly notes, Vollmann does not emulate other writers of his generation, presenting us with figures who prove to be 'like us in essential ways', but offers instead 'figures that provoke discomfort while simultaneously demanding engagement. There is neither an assumption of commonality nor one of compatibility...' (14).

Furthermore, encountering the marginalized, Vollmann appears uninterested in discussions of victimhood or blame ('other people's codes, until they tell us otherwise, must be presumed to be good enough for them').<sup>2</sup> As Melissa Petro argues

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<sup>2</sup> *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003), 3: 122.

in her contribution, Vollmann's work does not for example reinforce the 'notion that sex workers are *either* empowered *or* oppressed' (245). This laudable approach is not however without its dangers, illustrated most clearly in the case of sex work, which brings to the fore what Daniel Lukes calls Vollmann's 'often problematic, sometimes passive-aggressive relationship with feminism' (248); an assessment that slightly understates the extent to which Vollmann's approach can lead him to what seem like indefensible positions. ('I object to the people who call female circumcision female genital mutilation. That's what they want to call it, and they're convinced that it's a hundred percent bad and it should be eradicated no matter what anyone says. It might be true, it might not be true, but I think that sort of thinking is very, very dangerous').<sup>3</sup>

This example can help us appreciate Coffman's 'vitriol or fandom' binary: whether one reflexively wishes to condemn Vollmann for holding 'unpalatable' or 'abhorrent' views (precisely the kind of response his work opposes), or to blithely praise him for his 'daring' (without however interrogating either his thinking or his conclusions – a failure the work itself pushes against), it becomes difficult to offer the kind of measured analysis academic enquiry requires. In this sense, the *Companion* does Vollmann Studies a great service, offering complex perspectives on the challenges of *Poor People* (Aaron D. Chandler), *Europe Central* (Bryan M. Santin), *Rising Up and Rising Down* (Okla Elliott, Joshua C. Jensen), *You Bright and Risen Angels* and *The Royal Family* (Joshua C. Jensen).

As to the Vollmann cult of personality: The *Companion* includes a series of 'reflections... by many of [Vollmann's] peers, confidantes, and collaborators' (back cover); a decision taken at least in part, one would assume, to attract Vollmann's non-academic fans. It does not completely avoid the risk of providing more fodder for the cult (Jonathan Franzen agrees to exchange work in progress with Vollmann; starts receiving hundreds-of-pages-long manuscripts every nine months! etc.). But overall, essays such as Mariya Gusev's (Vollmann's Russian interpreter), Carla Bolte's

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<sup>3</sup> 'Vollmann Shares Vision (2000) by Michelle Goldberg', in *William T. Vollmann: A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*, p. 128.

(Vollmann's book designer at Viking, beginning with *Argall*), and Priscilla Juvelis's (on Vollmann's artist's books) provide fascinating insights into how Vollmann's myriad intersecting interests feed into his work.

For McCaffery, the 'main obstacle that has impeded the flow of Vollmann studies has been... the bewildering variety and enormous, intimidating profusion of his literary output to date' (xv). Michael Hemmingson has similarly noted that 'Vollmann has been labelled a postmodernist, metafictionist, contemporary and historical novelist, pornographer, journalist, cultural/social critic, travel writer, and memoirist... [h]e is also an accomplished photographer, engraver, watercolorist, printer, bookbinder, poet, song lyricist, and manufacturer of his own bullets for his pistols'.<sup>4</sup> This is (only) a little hyperbolic, but the fact remains that even Vollmann's most dedicated readers often have a hard time categorizing his work, or discussing it as a corpus: the very wide range of both Vollmann's subject matters and the stylistic and formal devices he utilizes from book to book makes this a challenge.

As a result, the *Companion* also offers a wide range of approaches, under four broad thematic headings: 'Engaging People, Space, and Place', 'Engaging Narratives: History, Historiography, Ethics', 'Power, Sex, and Politics', and 'Methods and Mores: Texts, Paratexts, Aesthetics.' This results in some overlap, but as Savvas notes, the 'framework allows Vollmann's major thematic concerns to be brought to the fore.'<sup>5</sup> It is indeed fascinating to note how essays on works that appear quite dissimilar reveal them to be thematically linked. Savvas uses as an example the discussions on empathy in the pairing of Georg Bauer's essay on Vollmann's sociological works, such as *Poor People*, *Imperial* and *Rising Up and Rising Down*, and Miles Liebttag's reading of *You Bright and Risen Angels*. An equally interesting example would be that of the discussion of Vollmann as a historical novelist's treatment of the Real in Buell Wisner's essay on *Argall* and Bryan M. Santin's on *Europe Central* (more on this below).

Finally, McCaffery suggests that Vollmann's work 'doesn't slot neatly into any of the paradigms/pigeon holes that critics normally rely on' (xv). There are indeed

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<sup>4</sup> William T. Vollmann: *A Critical Study and Seven Interviews*, p. 67, and endnote 1 to Chapter 7 (p. 193).

<sup>5</sup> Savvas, *ibid.*

significant difficulties here: for example, as a historical novelist Vollmann is often assumed to be borrowing from and updating writers such as Pynchon and John Barth. While early on such comparisons may have been valid,<sup>6</sup> they have become increasingly misleading: as Wisner suggests while discussing *Argall* in relation to novels such as *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Mason & Dixon*, 'the function of Vollmann's pastiche seems significantly different' (102). And this is the crux of the matter, especially in the case of the *Seven Dreams* sequence, probably the defining project of Vollmann's career.

Critical reaction to the sequence has been muted; even critics who have championed Vollmann's work have often seemed uncertain as to how to discuss it. Robert Rebein, having suggested that the *Seven Dreams* 'could go down as the most significant contribution to our literature since Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha series', notes only that so far they 'have been more or less respectfully ignored, and this is perhaps as it should be, given their length, difficulty, and the overall project's radical state of incompleteness'.<sup>7</sup> The project's state of incompleteness is certainly a legitimate reason for caution. But citing the novels' 'length' and 'difficulty' is tantamount to an admission that scholars have been hard-pressed to know what to make of them, at least in terms of existing theoretical approaches; and understandably so, for, on the one hand, it seems evident that the *Seven Dreams* cannot be discussed strictly within the context provided by classic approaches to postmodern fiction such as Fredric Jameson's, Brian McHale's and Linda Hutcheon's, while on the other, Amy J. Elias' 'metahistorical romance' approach, while getting closest to the core of Vollmann's method, doesn't fully account for his very unusual (for a 'postmodernist') relationship with irony and the Real.<sup>8</sup>

It is in developing this conversation that the *Companion* provides two of its highlights: Wisner's essay on *Argall* and Santin's on *Europe Central*. Wisner contends that *Seven Dreams* 'is perhaps most remarkable for its efforts to advance the historical

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<sup>6</sup> See Tom Leclair's 'The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38.1 (1996): 12–37.

<sup>7</sup> *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky (2001) p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Vollmann's sixth writing 'rule': 'We should believe that truth exists.' ('American Writing Today: Diagnosis of a Disease', in *Expelled from Eden*, p. 330).

novel beyond [the] postmodernist phase' (101), and that Vollmann's goal is 'similar to that of the classic historical novel and the realist historicism that underpinned it: to show human life as deriving out of social-historical conditions' (102). Wisner argues that in order to achieve this Vollmann employs a 'textual' or 'historically inflected literalism' (102, 104) that 'represents a new kind of realism, or hyper-realism, which suggests both the inherent dangers and the continued validity of the textual model in relation to the socio-historical real' (104).

This is a bold claim, but one that this reviewer finds convincing, especially when Wisner notes that Vollmann 'employs the insights and techniques of postmodernist fiction, while retaining little of the existential or political anti-historicism that permeates the so-called historiographic metafiction of earlier postmodernists' (104) and goes on to make a case for Vollmann's 'hope for a recuperation of the historical *real*' (109).

This becomes particularly interesting when read next to Santin's analysis of the 'Clean Hands' chapter of *Europe Central*. Santin suggests that '[a]ccording to Vollmann, historical accuracy is not nearly as important as readers' ability to imagine themselves in a particular moral actor's historico-ideological matrix' (143).<sup>9</sup> Santin's discusses Vollmann's complicated treatment of SS Officer Kurt Gerstein, where the empathetic impulse coexists with 'two different – though intimately related – dimensions of judgment': a moral actor's 'ability to judge his own actions within his unique historical situation', and 'our ability as non-participants in [the actor's] Wittgensteinian "form of life", to judge [his] actions from a later historical perspective' (150).

It is instructive to consider this in light of Vollmann's attempt to manifest these 'dimensions of judgment' in the *Seven Dreams*, by simultaneously 'simulating the "actual" past world... through a system of textual icons' (Wisner, 104) *and*

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<sup>9</sup> The seeming contradiction between Wisner's 'recuperation of the historical *real*' and Santin's assertion that Vollmann is not primarily interested in 'historical accuracy' is not as problematic as it may appear. For Vollmann, there is a distinction to be made between historical accuracy and historical truth – for a very useful discussion of the ideas of 'symbolic history' and 'syncretic truth' in Vollmann's work, see Theophilus Sawas' "A long list of regrettable actions": William T. Vollmann's Symbolic History', in *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK (2011): 95–123.

introducing the later perspective in the form of the 'Vollmann'/'William the Blind' persona/narrator. For while *Europe Central* initially seems to be a more 'conventional' historical novel than the *Seven Dreams*, it is finally motivated by the same moral, philosophical and literary considerations: as Santin astutely observes, Vollmann's statement that with *Europe Central* 'the goal... was to write a series of parables about... European actors at moments of decision'<sup>10</sup> reveals a deep affinity with his aim 'to create a "Symbolic History"' in *Seven Dreams*.<sup>11</sup> This reviewer for one will be very interested in future scholarly responses to these views, and to the wider conversations this valuable *Companion* will hopefully spark.

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<sup>10</sup> William T. Vollmann, *Europe Central* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 753.

<sup>11</sup> William T. Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt* (New York, Viking, 1990), p. 397.

*Mannerist Fiction: Pathologies of Space from Rabelais to Pynchon*, William Donoghue, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 185pp

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To say that William Donoghue's book *Mannerist Fiction* is an ambitious undertaking would be an understatement. Donoghue approaches the issue of spatial and temporal incongruities in literature from an enormous scope of perspectives; this results in a fertile scholastic approach that manages to be erudite without being exhaustive. The author describes his project as an examination of 'deformations of the body, mind, and text in certain Western authors between the times of Copernicus and Einstein' (3). The reader immediately understands that the book is much more breadth than depth. The structure of Donoghue's book itself represents an attentiveness to spatial and temporal distortion; he illustrates a chronological progression from Rabelais to Swift to Sade, makes a leap to the center of postmodernism with Pynchon, then retreats into the modernists and finally arrives at antiquity and biblical notions of space and time. While this scheme seems outwardly counterintuitive and anachronistic, Donoghue takes pains to work within a theoretical framework that elegantly elucidates his original ideas on the mechanics of space in fiction.

The historical crux of Donoghue's book is the radical re-imagining of space circa the sixteenth century. The author proposes that events such as the greater accessibility of maps and the Copernican revolution challenged the centrality and uniformity of spatial distribution, and this becomes apparent in the "Mannerist" literature of Rabelais and his successors. Donoghue juxtaposes the gigantism and freak proportions of Rabelais' fiction with the symmetry of Thomas More's *Utopia*, and presents a convincing case that Rabelais was ahead of his time in addressing the anxieties surrounding the mental reconfigurations of space in the early Renaissance period. However, Donoghue follows this insightful argument with a rather tedious exposition of scale in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Here Donoghue examines at length the scalar relationships between Gulliver and his environment as it shifts in size,

and the author concludes that the relationships are more or less proportionate. This seems to weaken or nullify his argument, if he is indeed attempting to show a continuation of Rabelaisian spatial distortion; Donoghue concedes that 'spatially, Swift is a Vermeer where Rabelais is a Mannerist' (49), which suggests that Swiftian notions of spatial distributions are not Mannerist, as Donoghue originally suggests. This seems to be somewhat of a moot point.

Donoghue makes up for this momentary lapse by making a few keen observations in the chapters on Jonson and Sade – here, the author's focus moves towards bodily discourse and grounds itself in the post-Freudian criticism of Melanie Klein and the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt. This theoretical synthesis works well in Donoghue's illustration of both Jonson and Sade, where he argues that both authors are inseparable from their own bodily anxieties and dysfunctions. Donoghue's analysis of Sade is both insightful and dubious; while the author is careful to acknowledge the historicity of Sade's physical and sexual aberrations, the extent of how much Sade's life figures unconsciously in his work remains unclear. Donoghue argues that the geographical features of Sade's work—such as tunnels and blockages—are symptomatic of an unconscious projection of Sade's own blocked vesicles. While the psychosexual elements of Sade's work are by no means a new focus of scholarship, Donoghue's estimation is informed by the spatial idiosyncrasies that are performed in Sade's fiction. This mode of inquiry proves fertile in the pursuit of Mannerism's evolution within Western literature.

The tracing of Mannerism's lineage culminates in the final section of the book, where time and space become unbound; here the author juggles figures as disparate as Faulkner, Heidegger, and Einstein, before finally arriving at ancient notions of space and time. Donoghue's use of close reading really shines here, and he spends a considerable amount of time working with the text while being careful not to make it a tedious exercise. Spatial-temporal confusion is concretized when Donoghue presents a convincing argument linking modernist fiction to emerging scientific ideas. While being careful not to suggest causality, Donoghue links modernist authors such as Faulkner, Joyce, and Proust with the general zeitgeist of the space-time revolution. Notions of space and time are plucked from Heidegger and Bergson

as Donoghue attempts to frame a phenomenological basis for modernist fiction. He makes the astute observation that 'Proust, arguably the pre-eminent modernist writer of his time, had Bergson as his muse' (115). Donoghue succeeds in arguing that theories of time and space are never isolated; they cannot be limited within the separate realms of science, philosophy, and art. Rather, they must overlap, grow organically, and revolt against one another. I think this sentiment is advantageous to Donoghue's project – again, there is a cohesion of a broad range of disciplines spanning millennia. Rather than launch into an exhaustive exploration of each (which would result in a much heftier volume), he provides a succinct synthesis of emerging thoughts and limits them to the sphere of Mannerism.

Donoghue's most impressive chapter, which also forms the center of his book, is undoubtedly 'Hysteria: Pynchon's Cartoon Space.' Pynchon scholars reading *Mannerist Fiction* will certainly appreciate the breadth with which Donoghue approaches Pynchon's work. Donoghue makes a bold claim when he suggests that it is hysteria, not paranoia, that is the master concept of Pynchon's fiction. He argues that paranoia 'feels irrelevant to his [Pynchon's] figures and treatments of space' (87). This claim can certainly be contested, but I think that Donoghue's investigation of Pynchon's hysterical mode is eager to move towards new areas of criticism. Donoghue argues that Pynchon's hysterical register emerges from a blending of real and cartoon space; this register places Pynchon among his postmodern contemporaries, but Pynchon situates this space within entropic, death-oriented systems.

There is much to be said about what this chapter accomplishes—first, the Pynchon scholar will appreciate Donoghue's range of primary material. In addition to the mandatory inclusion of novels such as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, Donoghue also sheds light on Pynchon's earlier short stories collected in *Slow Learner*. While scholarship has generally dismissed *Slow Learner* as the work of a neophyte writer, Donoghue reveals that Pynchon's preoccupation with spatial modes acts as a 'response to the "enormous forces" of de-differentiation he associates with the system' (99). Far from being mere curiosities of a young writer, Pynchon's early work already establishes a radical reinvention of spatial dynamics that reach their height in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. This chapter is by no means

an exhaustive examination of spatial incongruences in Pynchon's work – such a task would be herculean. However, readers familiar with Pynchon's oeuvre will notice several glaring omissions; within *Gravity's Rainbow* alone, the Zone and the Raketen-Stadt seem like they would be obvious spatial distortions that would lend themselves to Donoghue's inquiry. This is perhaps not as much of a drawback as it is a suggestion for future scholarship.

*Mannerist Fiction* presents a wide range of theoretical and historical scholarship which appeals across disciplines. While there seems to be a sacrifice of depth in favor of breadth, scholars of Rabelais, Swift, and others will find in Donoghue a framework that sheds new light on literary history. Donoghue's chapter on Pynchon is insightful without being exhaustive, and I think that Pynchon scholarship benefits from Donoghue's labors. Donoghue's inventiveness and his skillful synthesis of art, science, and philosophy make *Mannerist Fiction* a valuable addition to the body of literary scholarship.

*Metahistorical Narratives and Scientific Metafictions: A Critical Insight into the Twentieth-Century Poetics*,  
Episcopo, G. (ed.), Napoli: Edizioni Cronopio, 2015. 223pp

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A slim volume with a long title, *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions: A Critical Insight into the Twentieth-Century Poetics* offers a tightly focused consideration of writers and texts that experiment with what it means to be 'meta' – to history, science, or the freshly troubled field of postmodernist aesthetics. Troubled, that is, in that the scholars here join a throng of commentators who are now looking anew at what were once postmodern commonplaces. As Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden put it elsewhere, in studies such as these 'postmodernism itself becomes a question, again, rather than a dominant category' (2016: 15). This is not to suggest that *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions* focuses exclusively on postmodern texts and concerns, but they do predominate, whether in the recurrence of particular authors (Thomas Pynchon, Neal Stephenson) or in the approach that contributors take to the book's entwined foci of history and science. Arising from the 'collaborative spirit' (13) of conferences promoted by the British Society for Literature and Science and International Pynchon Week, this collection contains essays from some of the most astute readers currently working on experimental fiction.

Beginning at the end is appropriate given that Giuseppe Episcopo, in his editor's foreword, describes *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions* as a book variously interested in 'contradictions of temporality' (10). More than this, the essay that closes the collection, Amy J. Elias's 'Cyberpunk, Steampunk, Teslapunk, Dieselpunk, Salvagepunk: Metahistorical Romance and/vs the Technological Sublime', is one of its strongest. Building on her ideas concerning the metahistorical romance – those texts which attempt to 'recuperate the sublime untouchability of the past [...] while believing that it is impossible to narratively apprehend history *as such*' (204) – Elias turns her sights to a panoply of recent '-punk' subgenres. For her the texts that make up these subgenres invoke 'the technological sublime specifically

in relation to questions about history' (202), thus repudiating a tendency to treat the historical sublime as distinct from the technological. Their 'retrofuturist historicism' (206), whereby the present is the outcome of the collapse of past technological progress, make Cyberpunk, Steampunk, and so on, nostalgic for 'utopian visions [that] ultimately *failed*' (208). Elias then contrasts this with Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006), arguing that this novel's mashup of generic chronotopes allows for a 'political commentary on, and evaluation of, utopian and other past political ideals' (215). It does this, moreover, in ways that make metahistorical reflections inseparable from a focus on technology. One can perhaps question Elias's readiness to see Pynchon's 1220 page literary doorstopper as succeeding where more popular examples of '-punk' texts fail, but her command of the material, as well as her dexterous interweaving of theoretical concepts, make for an analysis as convincing as it is innovative. Furthermore, by continuing to nuance theories of historiographic metafiction (a project she began in 2001's *Sublime Desire*) Elias's piece sets the standard for this collection's broader attempts to reconsider canonical ideas of postmodernist aesthetics.

Martin Paul Eve picks up this baton well in his essay 'New Rhetorics: Disciplinarity and the Movement from Historiography to Taxonomography'. For Eve, identifying examples of historiographic metafiction, especially as outlined by Linda Hutcheon in her field-defining *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), has now become something of 'a tick-box exercise' (101). Indeed, 'more dominant mechanisms [...] are masked by the application of this label' (104). Arguing that 'it is in fact notions of genre and taxonomography that have superseded this form' (104), Eve offers a deft break down of these terms in relation to historiographic metafiction, before positing the emergence of 'taxonomographic metafiction' (111). Such texts pre-emptively parody scholarly disciplinarity – envisaged as forms of generic systematisation – to critically intervene in academic reading practices (111). Of the examples Eve gives, *Against the Day* and the neo-Victorian novels of Sarah Waters, his reading of the latter is more compelling. For Eve, Waters develops 'a taxonomographical distraction con' (118), baiting readers who are looking ('albeit for solid ethical and ideological reasons' (116)) for dissident sexualities and tales of female confinement, in order

'to expose a contemporary academic blindness to class' (117). This approach breaks with popular Foucauldian interpretations of Waters' texts to show how the author's interest in 'class discrepancy' (114) has generally gone under the critical radar. Eve is wary of using his examples to posit a broader movement (119), and also hesitant about how they might further (or hamper) historiographical metafiction's ethical purposes. Nonetheless, critics would do well to build on his readings, whether in relation to Pynchon, Waters, or other writers of taxonomographical metafiction.

If Pynchon's work is a constant presence throughout *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions* – appearing in six of its ten essays – it is followed by that of Neal Stephenson, whose work is the subject of two. Simon de Bourcier's 'The Turing Test and the Postmodern Subject in Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age* and *Cryptonomicon*' looks at Stephenson's 'ambivalence toward postmodernism: [his] openness to metafictional play, but open hostility toward the ethical relativism which he attributes to postmodern theory' (41). Central here is how both *The Diamond Age* (1995) and *Cryptonomicon* (1999) reject the anti-essentialist implications of Alan Turing's imitation game – a thought experiment in which 'an observer attempts to tell a human being and a computer apart on the basis of written responses to a series of questions' (44). Through a fascinating account of Turing's proto-postmodernism, and succinct close readings of each novel, de Bourcier demonstrates how 'Stephenson recognizes similarities between human subjects and machines, but ultimately asserts an essential difference between the two' (53). Falling firmly under 'scientific metafiction' as opposed to 'metahistorical narratives', this essay is rewardingly to the point, de Bourcier accounting concisely for the nostalgic humanism of Stephenson's intimidatingly dense fiction.

By contrast Sherryl Vint's 'Tracing the Con-Fusion: the Emergence of Modernity in Neal Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*' takes a more expansive perspective on the author, and specifically his humungous novels *Quicksilver* (2003), *The Confusion* (2004), and *The System of the World* (2004). Vint argues that these texts explore how the 'scientific, economic and political forces of the seventeenth century were not simply temporally coincident but mutually constitutive' (57). Adopting Stephenson's use of the term 'con-fusion' in relation to its original meaning – the mixing together

of different liquids – Vint examines how these novels figure intellectual revolutions, whether in physics, finance, or political liberalism, as productively intermingled. Vint's detailed understanding of Stephenson's work is impressive, but she could push her readings further. Notably, her idea that Stephenson 'naturalizes the role of capitalism in democracy and good scientific practice' (75) deserves more investigation. Vint's confusing (in the common sense of the term) final remark that Stephenson's novels therefore bely 'the oversimplified reductionism of other neoliberal doctrines' (76) can, in this light, be seen as encouragement for future scholars to better elucidate his relationship to neoliberalism.

Elsewhere the collection offers further author-focused essays, predominantly on Pynchon. Francisco Collado-Rodriguez, for instance, explores the applicability of historiographical metafiction to *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), while Terry Reilly restores a focus on temporality that he suggests has been missing from discussions of *Mason & Dixon* (1997). Episcopo, in his contribution, draws on Freud's theories of the uncanny to unpack *Gravity's Rainbow's* (1973) complex space-time distortions. Nina Engelhardt, meanwhile, reads *Mason & Dixon* alongside Daniel Kehlmann's *Measuring the World* (2005), and specifically in relation to debates between positivist and constructivist understandings of science. What is arguably *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafiction's* most intriguing essay, though, is free of Pynchon, Stephenson, and concerns with postmodernist aesthetics – Loveday Kempthorne's 'Ion Barbu's *Ut Algebra Poesis*: the Mathematical Poetics of Dan Barbilian'. A 'Romanian Professor of Algebra at Bucharest University who, under the name Ion Barbu, published highly acclaimed poetry' (79) in the early twentieth century, in 1930 Barbilian changed tack and for the next thirty years 'devoted his professional time to mathematics' (79). He did so because he felt 'unable successfully to combine both fields and that poetry had got the better of him' (79). Kempthorne's account of his pursuit of such combination is fascinating, tracing the developments that meant 'Barbu the poet eventually surrendered to Barbilian' the mathematician (96). As the latter, Barbilian was closely associated with 'non-Euclidean geometry and an axiomatic approach to algebraic geometry' (81). Indeed he sought a 'spiritual conception of geometry and poetry as elevated forms of understanding and transcendent and

abstract concepts' (82). Well-versed in existing Barbilian scholarship, and keenly aware of her contribution to such, Kempthorne's essay is an engaging introduction to a figure who will be obscure to most readers.

To come full circle and finish at the beginning, Susan Strehle's opening essay 'Making (Im)Possible Futures: Contemporary Historical Fiction and the Shaping of the West' looks at writers whose metahistorical experiments aim to correct gaps in the historical record. They do so by 'un-burying dissonant policies and events that have been erased [...] as Western nations construct and enforce mythic accounts of their own exceptional identities' (19). Her argument therefore foregrounds the postcolonial concerns that undergird (and, arguably, always have done) historiographic metafiction. Strehle argues that writers like Barry Unsworth and Toni Morrison create the 'potential for *imaginary* communities' (24) – not in Benedict Anderson's famous theory of the nation, but of 'unofficial gatherings of diverse, unruled and unscripted groups' (24). These ideas are interesting, though a little inflated; more sustained analysis of specific texts, rather than scholarly sabre-rattling (at Elias's previous work, and at the influence of trauma theory) would have provided Strehle's analysis with greater substance. Though it grabs attention as the volume's opening essay ('the contemporary novels that are richest and largest in their reach are historical novels' (15), she boldly declares), Strehle's piece at times feels strangely proleptic of a study she is yet to write.

Such untimeliness is fitting, of course, for a collection focusing largely on texts that experiment with temporality. *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions* is strongest when its focus is on the former of these terms (though with brilliant exceptions – namely de Bourcier and Kempthorne's pieces). The Günter Grass quotation with which Episcopo begins his foreword – 'the thing that hath been tomorrow is that which shall be yesterday' (9) – subtly forecasts this preference. That said, of the various contributors who engage with Hutcheon's theories of historiographic metafiction in particular, only Elias and Eve can be said to truly push it in new directions. When Engelhardt or Collado-Rodriguez deploy the same concept, their readings, though insightful, generally recapitulate Hutcheon's work rather than develop it. Moreover, given this emphasis on historiography throughout the

collection, one is left wondering what the rationale was for simultaneously exploring science-related topics. Greater editorial consideration of why history and science warrant being thought together in relation to changes in postmodern aesthetics would have strengthened this volume's attempts to intervene in established critical paradigms.

These reservations aside, *Metahistorical Narratives & Scientific Metafictions* is a consistently interesting and – given its delimited areas of interest – a surprisingly diverse collection of essays. Pynchon scholars especially will find this book rewarding, but its wider engagements with experimental fiction, and the directions some of its postmodernist exemplars are now taking, makes it an important read for anyone working on the interconnections of history, science, and literature.

## References

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*Occupy Pynchon: Politics after Gravity's Rainbow*, Sean Carswell, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017. x + 203pp

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Sean Carswell offers us an extremely helpful book. Whereas many Pynchon enthusiasts feel drawn to and challenged by his loose and baggy monsters, they tend to feel that the slenderer volumes lack richness or seriousness or *something*. *Vineland*, *Inherent Vice*, and *Bleeding Edge* have all seemed trivial by comparison to *Mason & Dixon* or *Against the Day*, let alone *Gravity's Rainbow*. Carswell starts with the Occupy Wall Street movement, analyzes its commons-based politics, and then analyzes Pynchon's later works as trying to find such a democratic form of political resistance. His characters all face a problem that has a long history. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, serious Christians worried about how they could live *in* the world yet not be *of* it. In Pynchon's *oeuvre*, the problem is how to live in the neoliberal "Empire" but not be of it. We cannot escape it entirely; we must acknowledge compromises and contaminations, but if we wish to oppose it or live as free of its gain-obsessed values as possible, how can we do that? The slenderer volumes focus on individuals and their immediate circles, and show people struggling with that problem. From that insight, Carswell can then show the same political negotiations being tested by more characters in different ways in the larger tomes.

Carswell first establishes the nature of the neoliberal Empire and possible means of opposition by drawing on Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*; on David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years* and *The Democracy Project*; on Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*; and on David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. What these and other theorists provide is an academically respectable version of Pynchon's "paranoia"—except that the paranoia simply becomes insight. When Pynchon characters seem to go over the edge into insane accusations, Carswell can often show that this is just a part of Pynchon's sense of humor, a tool that Carswell analyzes late in his study.

Drawing on Occupy manifestos and Graeber's analysis of alternatives to Empire, Carswell shows how Pynchon looks for a commons philosophy that might work in the modern world. Any consciously organized resistance will quickly lead to yet another oppression, so forming a new political party or school of thought will not solve the problem. Varied and unconnected dissatisfied people, however, can briefly work together against a common enemy, as was shown by Occupy, and as appears at times in Pynchon novels. Individuals can also to some extent withdraw from the gain-oriented definition of life. Carswell's analysis of Doc Sportello in his close-knit Gordita Beach community shows someone living with a commons-orientation. Doc knows that most of his work as a PI is contaminated by Empire, and acknowledges that truth. The cases Doc takes on while we are following him, however, will not pay him anything, and he takes them on anyway. However, he too benefits from not paying. His lawyer supports him with no likelihood of fee; a limo-driver friend often gives him rides; and Doc gets information from his computer friends without expectation of benefit to them. When he has a chance at real money from Golden Fang, he refuses it as contaminating, but does bargain for an immaterial return, the freeing of Coy Harlingen. Doc does make some money that will fill his coffers for a while by laying a bet, where he bets against odds on Mickey Wolfmann genuinely having been kidnapped to prevent his dispelling his fortune as atonement for past crimes. He bet on an exploiter actually having and acting on a good impulse.

Carswell analyzes *Vineland* through *Bleeding Edge* in sequence, one to a chapter, and then branches out. His "A Snappy 'Ukulele Accompaniment" chapter explores Pynchon's humor as expressed through his use of 'ukuleles and banjoleles. These appear when groups are enjoying themselves; they can be easily played and are reasonably portable; they hearten opposition movements and bring factions together in temporary harmony. Their reliance on chords rather than controlled lines of music lead Carswell to political musings about Control. They embody the wackiness that characterizes Pynchon's humor and exaggeration. Carswell's final chapter branches out to show how his anti-Empire mode of reading Pynchon can be applied to other contemporary writers, and demonstrates with Haruki Murakami and Ali Smith.

Other critics have tackled Pynchon's non-organizational Leftist politics. Samuel Thomas, drawing on Adorno, sets his analysis up in terms of the violent, destructive line cut across the wilderness in *Mason & Dixon* and the Virginia boy's riddle about a peanut. The one embodies Empire, and the other, floating free, offers mystery, humor, personal experience, insight, and lightness of being as the values of life. Michael O'Bryan argues that postmodernists have not understood Pynchon's politics because their theories descend ultimately from Marxist thought, and Pynchon's comes out Anarchism. Martin Paul Eve sees incrementalism in Pynchon tempered with pessimism. Each little rebellion is worth making, but for its own sake and for the spirits of those who make it, rather than for any hope of serious improvement. Seán Molloy argues for Anarchism modified by a spiritual tradition that sees our world as the battleground between something like Heaven and Hell, something with transcendent elements and the control- and gain-oriented forces of Empire. Colin Hutchinson has argued that Pynchon shows some feel for interpreting our world as a fallen realm, and adds to the picture that Pynchon sees things going in cycles, not progressing. In this reading, the various books show cyclic attempts to move against the control society. All now seem to agree on Pynchon's principles being anarchist, but these are seen as coming in many flavors, including those influenced by Classical Greek, Christian, and Buddhist thought. What Carswell has done is to relaunch this discussion via a recent anarchic happening, the Occupy movement. He showed how this kind of temporary coalition of different interests worked in a single situation and then disbanded. In the future, something like it, in other configurations, may reassemble. Thus, this commons-based politics can continue to keep alive various values ignored or repressed by government forces. Were it to try to unify, it would quickly become a tyranny, so temporary, shifting alliances are the best response to coercive government.

For reasons unclear to me, Carswell ignores the community that forms around the airship *Inconvenience* in *Against the Day*, and also its ancestor, the black market in *Gravity's Rainbow*. While both are based on trade, and therefore partly on gain, they seem to me to be important early steps in Pynchon's thinking about

alternative ways of living life largely outside of Empire. They represent two kinds of community, the one relatively organized on an airship, and so, perhaps, not anarchic enough. However, its inhabitants are said to be flying toward grace, a religious dimension largely ignored in *Occupy Pynchon*. The blackmarket of *Gravity's Rainbow*, though, is highly dispersed, somewhat like the network of friends drawn on by Doc Sportello.

Carswell's analysis makes frequent use of Brian McHale's subjunctive spaces to show Pynchon playing with possible political attitudes and actions. They are not realistic, and Pynchon knows they would not work out that way in the world of Empire, but only by exploring their strengths and weaknesses, and only by encouraging positive thinking, can Pynchon see any chance of individuals freeing themselves to at least some degree from the structure imposed by Empire.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare. Two editors of *Orbit* are contributors to one of the volumes reviewed, so this review has been checked and approved by other members of the editorial team.

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