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Abstract:

Review of *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*, by Theophilus Savvas (2011).

Review of Theophilus Savvas, *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*

David Letzler

How does one write criticism without dogma? To characterize others' work as beholden to theoretical doctrine – suggesting, by contrast, that one's own derives from a more open-minded, “bottom-up” approach to literature – is perhaps our field's most common method of rebuke, but it is rarely a sound one. After all, simply by selecting for one's own writing which texts to examine, articulating some kind of thesis, and excerpting from those texts only the passages best illustrating that thesis, one becomes vulnerable to the same charges regarding fealty to a preordained position and exclusion of competing perspectives as the work one has just dismissed. I do not mean, in observing this process, to diminish the impulse toward close reading; indeed, as part of a generation that has been haltingly trying to move past “Theory,”¹ it seems to me that one of the few remaining arguments for our discipline's importance is based in the notion that one's views may be altered by the reading process instead of simply being reaffirmed in their preexisting condition. Instead, I mean merely to point out that our profession, if it is to argue for the value of the critical process, needs to seriously consider how one writes criticism commensurate with this principle.

Theophilus Savvas' *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past* (2011) is an interesting case study in this struggle, achieving some successes while also falling prey to the many pitfalls of attempting to write criticism from a “bottom-up” perspective. Savvas's Introduction explicitly takes the latter position so as to distance itself from classic approaches to postmodernism: unlike studies from the 1980s heyday of “Theory” like Brian McHale's, Linda Hutcheon's and Fredric Jameson's – each grounded in a specific view about the meaning of “postmodernism” – Savvas claims not to hold any such stance, believing that, in his book, “by looking out from the texts themselves some suggestions will be made towards postmodernism, rather than the other way around” (11). In fact, he believes – invoking E. L. Doctorow's claim that fiction should represent “thousands” of viewpoints rather than a single one – that this “bottom-up” approach is especially necessary for postmodernist criticism, because the postmodern political vision believes in “radical democracy constructed from different perspectives, hence representing a challenge to the hegemony of traditional elites” (9). Problems with this claim should be immediately obvious: for instance, Savvas's book – limited by the scope of an academic monograph and the text-intensive process of close reading

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– cannot present thousands of perspectives, but only five: four of them authors well established in the contemporary Anglophone canon (Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and E. L. Doctorow) and a fifth (William T. Vollmann) who is well on his way to consolidating a stable academic presence. The selection of these five, obviously, already represents a choice about what constitutes postmodernism rather than providing an unbiased sampling of texts from which attributes of postmodernism may be induced.²

Savvas deserves credit, though, for following through on his “bottom-up” premise. His chapters are organized around selective close readings of his core texts – especially regarding their engagement with history – and though they usually arrive at some sort of conclusion, they often do not appear to progress with a specific end in sight. Whether this strategy is regarded by individual readers as a positive result of close reading practices or a flaw in construction – or, for that matter, merely a new Ph.D.’s method for turning his graduate papers into a publishable monograph – may vary, as might judgments of its overall effectiveness. Its attempt to refuse alignment with either a new or preexisting theory of postmodernism does, though, fall short on at least two accounts. Not only is the book’s stated aspiration to flout “received assumptions” regarding postmodernism itself received directly from the postmodernist’s traditional critical phrasebook,³ but Savvas’s argument, when it surfaces, frequently *does* seem to be a received one: namely, Hutcheon’s thesis that postmodern fiction constitutes “historiographic metafiction” that reveals, via its distorted and multi-leveled representation of historical events, that all historical narratives are ideological fictions. Certainly, this is the gist of Savvas’s chapters on Coover and Doctorow, which are probably the book’s weakest sections: grounded in a decades-old argument, the former can only make minute changes to arguments laid out by Larry McCaffery and others about *The Public Burning*, while the latter largely rehashes, twenty years after the fact, Hutcheon’s debate with Jameson over the value of Doctorow’s approach to historicity. This limits the book’s originality and especially its contemporaneity, since Hutcheon’s claim (derived from Hayden White) about the relationship between fiction and historical narrative has begun to seem dated in recent years.⁴

The other three chapters, though – perhaps because their key texts (DeLillo’s *Libra*, Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, and Vollmann’s *The Ice-Shirt*) were published too recently to be incorporated into those formative theoretical discussions of postmodernism in the 1980s – are stronger. The most relevant for this journal, Savvas’s chapter on Pynchon (a version of which has already appeared in the Autumn 2011 *Literature and History*), is perhaps least impressive of the three, as most Pynchonists will have read elsewhere its main arguments regarding subjunctivity, imperialism, the Enlightenment, and the closing of historical flux effected by the drawing of the line. Savvas does make a more ambitious and original claim about how the paradoxes of quantum physics influence

Pynchon's depiction of history, but like most humanists' attempts to establish broad affinities between literature and the sciences, it is more fanciful than rigorous and does not appear able to sustain the larger political claims Savvas wants it to make.⁵ (For instance, that Pynchon may make an anachronistic allusion to Starbucks when Mason orders coffee does not exemplify Einsteinian relativity – much less constitute any sort of damning critique of the Newtonian worldview – but merely shows that storytellers are allowed to do whatever they please in their fictional worlds.)

The DeLillo and Vollmann chapters, though, are both individually solid critical essays and, jointly, begin to establish an argument about postmodern historical fiction that is independent from Hutcheon's. Of course, since there's been less academic criticism written about Vollmann than any of Savvas's other four authors, his close readings and explications – especially his discussion of how Nordic narrative traditions relate to Vollmann's storytelling – are often significant simply as contributions to scholarship. More importantly, though, Savvas's analysis of *The Ice-Shirt* establishes internal contradictions within Vollmann's practice of historical fiction insufficiently discussed by the latter's critics – namely, between his obsession with historical authenticity and his highly unstable approach to it – that suggest a non-Marxist critique of Hutcheon's equivalence between historical narrative and ideological fiction. Savvas develops this position best in his chapter on DeLillo, which depicts the book's narrative of the Kennedy assassination not as a challenge to the Warren Commission's authority but as an engagement with how contemporary Americans negotiate the tricky relationship between the complicated mess of history and the fanciful conspiracies of paranoia, writing that *Libra* “can still allow for the distinction between history (as contingency) and fiction (as conspiracy) to be made, even if for the individual in history, such as Oswald, this distinction is not necessarily readily obtainable” (65). Though to an extent his argument relies upon Tom LeClair's systems-theory approach to DeLillo's work, Savvas develops from it a fresh take on postmodernism's relationship to history that deserves the consideration of other critics.

Given the strength of this point, in fact, it's tempting to imagine the whole book written differently, structured not as a linked sequence of close readings but as a sustained argument asserting that, among more recent formally-innovative American novelists, there has been a move away from the relativist attitude toward history common in the 1960s and 1970s toward one more wary of the danger and ease with which fiction and history may be conflated. That book would've been significantly different from the one Savvas produced: to name a few changes, the chapter on Doctorow (which, oddly, is placed last so as to incorporate the minor 2005 novel *The March*) would be moved to the beginning, with the rest of the book designed to build toward the DeLillo chapter; the evolution of theoretical views on historical fiction within the academy would be discussed more thoroughly; the close readings would be streamlined; and most

notably, the central argument would be established up front instead of being relegated to a few comments in the conclusion. Perhaps that would've been too "top-down" for Savvas's tastes, but I think it would've been a better book, because when allowed to do so by his choice of texts, Savvas's writing is strong enough to demonstrate the independence of his thought from prior theories. Still, even as it is, the book makes some interesting contributions worthy of attention among scholars of American postmodern fiction.

End notes

1. As the existence of two recent books respectively entitled *Theory After Theory* and *Theory After "Theory"* – the first by Nicholas Birns, the second an anthology edited by Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge – might suggest, our profession has a much firmer sense that it is moving away from something that it once called "Theory" than of any cogent definition of that term's meaning in contemporary usage. In my cynical view, "Theory" had, by the end of the twentieth century, largely come to mean (at least in the Anglo-American academy) the attitude articulated explicitly by Stanley Fish, but tacitly held by many others of his era, that it is entirely fine to know exactly what one will think about a book before reading it.
2. For that matter, Doctorow himself understates the number of perspectives necessary for Savvas's "radical democracy" by some six orders of magnitude.
3. Just as the goal of any piece of Anglo-American academic writing in the 1950s and 1960s was to eventually state the words "unity" or "irony," the goal of most literary criticism since the 1980s has been to reach a point where one can write words like "subvert," "radical," etc. The earlier model, at least, was more honest: the easiest way to tell that a recent essay of literary criticism is not "subversive" is if it claims to be so, because that word now primarily demonstrates conformity to academic language.
4. For a detailed version of this argument, see the Introduction of Eric L. Berlatsky's 2011 *The Real, the True, and the Told*, which, though itself indebted to White's work, vigorously critiques what postmodern literary critics have made of it, arguing that treating all history as competing narratives fundamentally silences rather than gives voice to disenfranchised groups, since their narratives cannot compete with dominant ones if they cannot challenge the latter with truth claims.
5. Simon de Bourcier's 2012 *Pynchon and Relativity*, reviewed in this journal's first issue, does a better job examining how Pynchon's treatment of time in the novel is influenced by modern physics, especially as regards the depth of its scientific engagement. However, given that fiction is not beholden to scientific laws under any circumstance, the best approach to time in *Mason & Dixon* still probably comes in Zofia Kolbuszewska's *The Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*, since Bakhtin's narrative terminology was specifically created to address the liberties particular fictional worlds may take with temporality.

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