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Book Reviews, Spring 2021

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Tim Personn, Bryan M. Santin, Sergej Macura, Rick Wallach, Brian Jansen, Ali Dehdarirad, Mark Rohland and Jason Kahler

Book Reviews, of:

Baskin – *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace*

Özcan – *Understanding William T. Vollmann*

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Jon Baskin, *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* (Stanford University Press, 2019): ix + 179pp

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In 2009, an essay entitled “Death is not the End” appeared in the inaugural issue of *The Point*, a literary magazine that had been co-founded on the campus of the University of Chicago by the essay’s author, Jon Baskin. In keeping with its title, the essay was a statement on David Foster Wallace’s untimely death the year before, an early assessment of his legacy as more in line with the modernist task of attending to the problems of subjectivity than with postmodernist diagnoses of culture. Five years later, Baskin was named by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as one of the “new intellectuals” (see Goldstein), part of a group of young para-academics who prefer engagement in the public sphere to participation in an academic institutional landscape in crisis. Still, Baskin eventually joined academia in 2018 as associate director at the New School for Social Research. And the publication of his recent study *Ordinary Unhappiness: The Therapeutic Fiction of David Foster Wallace* by Stanford University Press as part of their Square One series is further evidence that academia could not ignore this exciting critical voice for long. But while the slim volume represents the best that popular writing on academic topics has to offer, the stated intention behind the Square One series to publish books that are “accessible” to a “broad, educated readership” seems to have led to some strategic choices—such as Baskin’s decision to prioritize Wallace’s fiction over the author’s non-fictional work and to simplify key debates for ease of exposition—that run the risk of compromising the scholarly impact of this otherwise critically important intervention.

Ordinary Unhappiness expands on arguments presented in Baskin’s 2009 essay and incorporates materials he wrote for his subsequent PhD thesis, some of which were first published in an anthology on Wallace and philosophy in 2014. The book now situates these ideas with a view to broader contexts, especially the development of Wallace Studies as a veritable research discipline that has a substantial corpus of scholarship to look back on. The first wave of Wallace critics had read his fiction as illustrating theoretical positions drawn from specific academic debates about postmodernism; the second wave of scholarship, in turn, argued that Wallace met the hazards of postmodern self-consciousness by endorsing a form of anti-intellectualism that was variously described

as “blind faith” (Adam Kelly), a “leap of faith” (Zadie Smith), “post-ironic belief” (Lee Konstantinou), or an abdication of the subject’s will to the rule of institutions (Mark McGurl). The value of Baskin’s contributions to these debates becomes apparent in light of the fact that, even though the main ideas of *Ordinary Unhappiness* were largely worked out a few years ago, their updated presentation now allows him to convincingly challenge some of the more canonical criticism published in the meantime.

In fact, Baskin responds to major critical voices in Wallace Studies by revisiting, and even reconciling, his earlier opposition between subjectivity and culture. As such, he returns to the topic of culture in the guise of the Wittgensteinian concept of an entire ‘form of life’ in need of the kind of philosophical therapy that serves as a reminder of how our everyday concepts operate in the social context of communication. “The patient is the whole culture” (35), Baskin writes, responding to the first-wave implication that Wallace’s fiction was targeting discrete theoretical problems rather than “the theoretical mode of thinking and seeing as a whole” (15). In addressing the alienation that often results from this mode, however, Baskin eschews the second wave’s anti-intellectualist answers, instead regarding Wallace as a harbinger of a *different form of reason* that values compassionate self-knowledge over the analytical, even ‘suspicious’ detachment familiar from traditional manifestations of “critique.” This is the crux of Baskin’s ambitious project of developing a philosophically therapeutic criticism that not only revolutionizes accounts of Wallace’s work but also shows a way forward for literary studies amidst the shift in academic trends since the late 2000s from a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” in Paul Ricoeur’s influential phrase, toward what has become known as “post-critique.” For the most part, this project of a ‘therapeutic Wallace’ succeeds brilliantly. At times, though, Baskin’s book cannot escape the changes to publishing that have been coeval with his rise as a public intellectual. In fact, the space he inhabits, as a para-academic who also resides in the world of academe, is one where various competing demands intersect, perhaps the most obvious of which is the temptation to argue for the fresh overall claims through a shorthand that fits accepted clichés without supplying necessary theoretical backgrounds.

This is not to say, of course, that the study lacks such backgrounds altogether. Its Acknowledgments page reads like a Who is Who of key thinkers today, some of whom—e.g., Robert Pippin and Irad Kimhi—were Baskin’s professors during his graduate years in Chicago. The presiding authority on questions of philosophical therapy, however, was the late Stanley Cavell, and Cavell’s presence in Baskin’s analysis is tangible on virtually every page. For Wallace Studies, this is a happy occurrence. In 1989, Wallace

enrolled at Harvard to study with Cavell, reading his works and taking one of his film seminars. And while Wallace withdrew from the class, his biographer D.T. Max would later describe Cavell as one of Wallace's "literary models" (132). To date, however, accounts of the Wallace-Cavell connection have been merely aspirational. And while important steps toward a more in-depth discussion were taken in recent years by Clare Hayes-Brady and Jeffrey Severs, it is only now, with Baskin's study, that we finally have a long-overdue sustained reading of Wallace that takes advantage of the richness of Cavell's work on philosophical therapy.

So, what does therapeutic criticism in a Cavellian vein look like on the page? As Baskin explains in his philosophically dense first chapter, therapeutic criticism begins by assembling a record of previous interpretations of a work. In this record, we can trace the philosophical 'pictures' that inform thinking in a 'form of life.' That this form of life is *ours* is the self-reflexive starting point of the therapeutic critic, who aims, as Cavell puts it, to bring "a particular culture to consciousness of itself" (qtd. 28). This involute formulation describes in a nutshell Baskin's Cavellian "strategy of interpretation" (14), for which the three major chapters of *Ordinary Unhappiness*—on Wallace's two mature novels and one collection of short stories—serve as compelling test cases. What distinguishes this therapeutic approach from critique in the "hermeneutics of suspicion" mode is that Baskin does not distance himself, or Wallace's readers, from the culture of narcissism and detachment he encounters in Wallace's fiction. Rather, he acknowledges his own entanglement in this 'form of life' to pursue the promise of self-knowledge, a valuation of the category of the self that more traditional forms of critique might dismiss as a kind of reactionary false consciousness. This therapeutic focus, though, allows for a similar acknowledgment on the part of the reader, who is under the influence of a philosophical 'picture' and may now free herself from this frame of thinking that prevents her from seeing what a literary work is trying to show. Baskin's book is therefore of interest even beyond the disciplinary boundaries of Wallace Studies and intervenes in the previously mentioned methodological skirmishes on the topic of post-critique. In fact, Baskin's "experiment in seeing how philosophy and literature can work together" via Wallace's fiction exemplifies what literary analysis in a post-critical paradigm that does not abandon the goal of personal and social transformation might look like (133).

To be sure, the book's claim that Wallace's fiction is *already* therapeutic in this sense would seem to make the critic's job redundant. Baskin's answer to this challenge relies on a flattening of the difference between the lay reader and the academic. The 'pictures'

that guide common sense thinking, Baskin shows, are still virulent in scholarly work, and by compiling a record of this work, the therapeutic critic can identify and treat them. Fortunately for Baskin, as part of a third wave of Wallace criticism, there is ample material for his integrative approach at this point. This allows *Ordinary Unhappiness* to fruitfully push back against some influential scholarly positions. In fact, with Cavell in tow, we might say, Baskin brings Wallace Studies to consciousness of itself. This proves to be particularly successful with respect to three critical commonplaces: that Wallace's fiction represents a kind of "new sincerity"; that it is part of a contemporary turn to belief (whether secular or post-secular); and that it has a fundamentalist streak.

Thus Kelly's work is taken up in an extended argument on why Wallace did *not* end up writing the sincere fiction he is often said to have called for. Baskin's response to what Konstantinou has read as Wallace's "post-ironic" belief is equally powerful. In the case of both scholars, Baskin shows that their interpretations underestimate the significance of self-knowledge in Wallace's 'therapeutic' fiction, an argument that follows from Baskin's persuasive claim that Wallace attempted to *undermine* the dichotomy between ungrounded belief and reasonable justification that is a central piece of the new-sincerity and post-irony readings. A similar pushback against anti-intellectualist conclusions is evident in Baskin's chapter on Wallace's *The Pale King*, which addresses McGurl's reading of Wallace as "naively affirmative" toward institutions like AA and the IRS (124). Baskin agrees that Wallace has a form of existentialist institutionalism quite at odds with the postmodernist mainstream, but he rejects the charge of naivety by building on McGurl's acknowledgment that Wallace sorts institutions according to their "social ends" (124). This important turn reinforces the genuinely philosophical nature of Wallace's exploration of self-consciousness, which Baskin rightly views as a throwback to much older questions about our 'real self' and an 'examined life': questions going back to Plato, whose *Republic* bookends Baskin's study.

It is a testament to Baskin's range that he not only negotiates such ancient questions but also responds to contemporary discussions in popular media. The recent biographical revelations that Wallace was, in his romantic relationships, closer to the "hideous men" he depicted in his fiction than many of his acolytes would acknowledge are therefore a pervasive subtext to the whole book. In fact, it is one of the strengths of this timely study not to sidestep controversy but rather to inquire into the lasting value of Wallace's work in light of these allegations. That is the motivation for Baskin's impassioned plea: "back to the books" (22). For this reviewer, at least, it reaffirmed the value of the work, especially in Baskin's third chapter, which analyzes—quite appropriately given the

charges—Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. The chapter is symptomatic of Baskin’s therapeutic approach: instead of detached theoretical pronouncements, we get a close and immanent engagement with our own entanglement in the world of Wallace’s “hideous men” in the Cavellian spirit of bringing a culture to consciousness of itself.

This engagement has Baskin consistently thinking *with* motifs from Wallace’s oeuvre. For instance, he treats the figure of a boy about to plunge into a community pool in the story “Forever Overhead” as a symbol for the kind of intellectual distance he also recognizes in the collection’s older ‘hideous men.’ In each case, Baskin shows, Wallace’s characters withdraw from human relationships to score a seeming victory over the central challenge of the collection: how to reconcile the human need for acknowledgment with the danger of a loss of autonomy. This line of inquiry comes to fruition in a particularly subtle reading of “Octet,” a metafictional story that has often been viewed as a test case for a reader’s susceptibility to Wallace’s fiction. Responding to the best available criticism on the story by Kelly, Smith, and Stephen Mulhall, Baskin shows that all three miss its *therapeutic* point. While the critics focus on the question of whether Wallace, the author, is to be trusted, Baskin turns to *the reader*, for whom “Octet” may drive home the insight that both fiction and life are grounded in a general basis of trust underlying all human relationships. This mutual dependence is repudiated when we appeal to a ‘picture’ of language as immune to misunderstanding that absolves us of our responsibility in matters of communication, and it is this “craving for certainty” that Baskin sees as the cause of the ‘hideousness’ in Wallace’s collection (110). That the same desire is also deeply rooted in *our* ‘form of life,’ and shared by many not commonly described as misogynistic or violent, is the therapeutic punchline of Baskin’s third chapter, which attends to the Cavellian task of foregrounding “the background against which the hideous men speak” (91).

Baskin’s brilliance at this task makes those moments where he struggles to provide key contexts stand out even more. Part of the blame for these gaps may be attributed to the publisher’s desire to “avoid narrow specialization” while still wanting to be “compelling.” This is a very thin line to ride with respect to both Wallace and Cavell. To be sure, there are moments in *Ordinary Unhappiness* where it is abundantly clear that Baskin’s para-academic career at *The Point* has prepared him well for the tightrope act. A stand-out in this regard is the author’s ability to show in non-technical prose how Wallace’s fiction allows for the recognition that our ‘form of life’ privileges habitual theorizing over all other modes of engagement, such that even the lay reader—in

Baskin's estimation the real target of Wallace's 'therapy'—may learn that his own struggles with human interaction resemble the theoretical hold-ups of the academic philosopher who overemphasizes certainty. But what is often true of journalistic approaches to academia applies here, too: the decision to stay away from the nuances of particular debates runs the risk of simplifying matters such that concepts are distorted and avenues for further inquiry cut off. Thus Baskin's avoidance of an academic nomenclature prevents him from historicizing Wallace's development of a different *form* of reason as part of the move away from the legacy of logical positivism, which both Cavell and Wittgenstein criticized in their works, and which has since been superseded by post-positivistic schools of thought.

Baskin's omission of an in-depth academic framing is even more consequential with respect to the "strategies familiar from twentieth-century art" that Wallace supposedly transcended (87). Postmodernism, regarding which Wallace was more ambivalent than Baskin lets on, thus becomes synonymous with sardonic nihilism, the large variety of alternative conceptions of the postmodern notwithstanding. In fact, as Wallace told Larry McCaffery in 1993, he appreciated the fiction writer's ability to give his text away to the reader for her to make sense of it, viewing this as a key takeaway from "Barthian and Derridian poststructuralism" (McCaffery 40). This indicates that Baskin's own therapeutic focus on the reader may actually not be in conflict with some influential versions of postmodern thought. There are similar missed opportunities in Baskin's treatment of romanticism, a key concept in Cavell's later thought, which Baskin directly associates with the intellectual distance that drives the hostility of Wallace's 'hideous men.' At this point, Baskin would have benefitted from the academic literature on Cavell, for instance Simon Critchley's account of a specifically Cavellian 'romanticism' that is not detached but rather "a descent – a downgoing – into the uncanniness of the ordinary" (139). Elaborating this 'romanticism,' which is very much in line with Baskin's view that philosophical problems are problems of everyday language, could have led to a deeper discussion of Wallace's sources for the kind of self-knowledge he advances in his therapeutic fiction, drawing transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau closer into the circle of his philosophical interlocutors than Baskin's short treatment of romanticism allows him to do here. It might also have productively challenged Baskin's 'pragmatist' orientation in the chapter on *Infinite Jest*, which yields unprecedented insights into the novel's opening sequence but stays within a long line of critical approaches to AA in Wallace's most famous novel. In fact, Cavell's interest in 'romanticism' as "the discovery, or rediscovery, of the subjective" (*Claim* 466) marks

a significant difference to the emphasis on mere ‘communal’ authority that is often attributed to Wallace’s AA by readers with a pragmatist bent.

Someone who could have guided such a negotiation of scholarly terms is none other than Wallace himself, this time in the guise of the essayist. For while Baskin argues that Wallace resisted “analyses” and favoured representation of the “consequences” of philosophical ‘pictures’ (112), this is mostly true of his stories and novels. As a writer of non-fiction, Wallace came up with many analyses of our ‘form of life’ and provided incisive interventions into the discipline of aesthetics. But, ostensibly constrained by its self-imposed brevity, Baskin’s book features few references to the non-fiction. This absence is particularly striking in light of those moments where Baskin *does* refer to Wallace’s essays, for instance in a remarkable footnote on the concept of ethos; here, a disagreement with Kelly on Wallace’s understanding of the rhetorical appeals in “Authority and American Usage” allows Baskin to handily resolve long-standing questions around the issue of trust raised by stories like “Octet,” thus showing the promise of reading Wallace in terms he drew from the rhetorical tradition himself. In the end, then, the serious reader of Wallace and Cavell might wish that *Ordinary Unhappiness* had been a bit longer—and this conclusion is both no small praise and a good omen for an author’s first book.

Işıl Özcan, *Understanding William T. Vollmann* (The University of South Carolina Press, 2019): 129pp

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For casual fans of William T. Vollmann and “Vollmanniacs” alike, a single-authored monograph that aims to introduce readers to Vollmann’s entire, massive *oeuvre* has been long overdue. Unlike extant anthologies and article-length pieces on Vollmann, Işıl Özcan provides a zoomed-out, 360-degree-view of Vollmann’s career up to 2018. At the outset, I want to be clear that, to the degree that it is possible to grasp Vollmann’s entire body of work, Özcan largely succeeds. The fact that parts of Vollmann’s *oeuvre* remain undertheorized here (which I address at length below), even for a book designed to be an introductory survey, speaks more to Vollmann’s unique, prolific talents than to inherent faults in Özcan’s excellent scholarship. If any author deserves to be included in the University of South Carolina Press’ “Understanding Contemporary Literature” monograph series, it

is Vollmann: a vital, daunting, protean writer whose astonishing combination of talent, ambition, and productivity seems on the verge of outstripping the critical vocabularies that aim to clarify his thirty-three-year (and still counting) literary project.

This scholarly dilemma is thrown into relief when one glances briefly at other monographs in the “Understanding Contemporary Literature” series that focus on American writers typically grouped with Vollmann, such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace. Those books utilize familiar chronological frameworks and critical terms: an early period characterized by a central set of thematic concerns worked out in emulative apprentice novels (Pynchon’s *V.*, DeLillo’s *Americana*, Wallace’s *The Broom of the System*), a midcareer zenith phase in which that central set of themes matures in a *magnum opus* (Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*), and a post-masterpiece career period that features an evolving “late style” that riffs anew on those signature themes (Pynchon’s *Vineland*, DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*, Wallace’s *Oblivion*). When surveying Vollmann’s career, though, these frameworks prove deficient. What makes Vollmann so taxonomically odd, as Özcan implies with her nonlinear chapter-structure, is that he has produced arguably several *magnum opuses* at different points in a career that features multiple, nested arcs bunched around a constellation of interlocking topics: love, gender, sex, power, politics, violence, ethics, empathy, class, race, history, and ecology.

Largely eschewing the usual linear, chronological analysis of an author’s career, Özcan orders the book thematically, drawing attention to the most significant works Vollmann has produced within different thematic clusters. Chapter 1 provides a thumbnail sketch of Vollmann’s early life and career from 1987 to 2018, and it usefully charts the growing critical and scholarly interest in his work during the same period. Chapter 2 identifies “the complex hold of death” as the overriding concern of Vollmann’s most important early works, which Özcan contends are: *An Afghanistan Picture Show* (1992, but written in the early 1980s), *Whores for Gloria* (1991), *Butterfly Stories* (1993), and *The Atlas* (1996) (13). Fully transitioning her analysis into a nonlinear thematic structure, Özcan uses Chapter 3 (“*Kissing the Mask, The Book of Dolores*”) to examine Vollmann’s obsession with gender, sex, and the nature of femininity highlighted in several of his experimental nonfiction books from the early 2010s. Chapter 4 (“*Poor People, Imperial*”) breaks down Vollmann’s nonfiction writings on poverty, the fraught nature of representing the economic Other, and the necessity of composing socially engaged, Steinbeck-inspired realist prose on behalf of the disadvantaged and disenfranchised across the globe. Chapter 5 (“*Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*”) is devoted to scrutinizing Vollmann’s most ambitious

work, a three-thousand page, seven-volume tome that earnestly seeks to “answer a simple question: when is violence justified?” (54). Chapter 6 explores Vollmann’s most decorated work of fiction to date, the National Book Award-winning *Europe Central* (2005), a World War II novel of sorts “comprising thirty-seven interlinked stories” which chronicle “the ill-fated lives of several historical and imaginary characters from the Eastern front of the war” (63). Chapter 7 analyzes three of the five completed novels (1990–2015) in Vollmann’s proposed seven-volume “Seven Dreams” cycle of symbolic, deeply researched historical novels that dramatize clashes between white European and American colonizers and various indigenous peoples on the North American continent over a 1,000-year period between roughly 1000 and 2000 AD. In the book’s brief coda (“Conclusion”), Özcan ruminates on Vollmann’s place both in the American literary scene and in the broader global literary context, arguing that Vollmann should be regarded as a significant writer in two vital areas of contemporary literary scholarship: “the so-called ethical turn in literary criticism, a burgeoning area of inquiry that coincides with contemporary fiction’s increasing interest in ethics without completely intersecting with its concerns, and the ‘world-ing’ of American literature within the context of globalization” (108).

Long-time Vollmann readers will likely find that the chapters on *Europe Central* and the Seven Dreams series are the most original and illuminating. Summing up the ethical impulse driving *Europe Central*, a novel that focuses on the horrors of Stalinism and Hitlerism on the Eastern front, Özcan gets to the heart of Vollmann’s complex motivation for writing a non-American-centric World War II novel. “His purpose is not to reiterate the evils of these totalitarian ideologies; it is a given that these ideologies are morally bankrupt,” Özcan writes: “Vollmann instead attempts to imagine and represent the ways in which such evil shapes human lives and questions whether individuals have the capacity to make and remake their moral compasses, the willpower to redefine the morally right *and* wrong for themselves outside ideological confines” (63). In this chapter, Özcan also describes Vollmann’s profound artistic debt to Danilo Kiš, the Serbian writer whose novel *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* functioned as a veritable blueprint for *Europe Central* because, Özcan argues, it showed Vollmann “how the parable and the documentary are alike in their moral responsibility to truth” (73). At least for this reviewer, an enthusiastic Vollmann reader himself, Özcan’s analysis shed light on a nagging formal conundrum experienced while reading several works of Vollmann’s most demanding fiction ranging from *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987) to *The Lucky Star* (2020): the ways Vollmann there combines aestheticized, whimsical parables and factual, documentarian realism.

Perhaps the most intriguing argument that Özcan posits in these two standout chapters, though, revolves around the notion that the Vollmann-Kiš intertextual encounter should be understood as “a breakthrough date... in the [historical] continuum of world literature” (78). Özcan grounds this argument in an innovative theoretical framework advanced by scholars such as Wai Chee Dimock and Donald Pease, who have theorized “emergent American world literature through transnational and transtemporal [sic] literary encounters,” allowing readers to think beyond nation-state-bound timelines and toward deeper, planetary time horizons (77). In her next chapter, Özcan makes a related claim concerning the global importance of Vollmann’s Seven Dreams project: “The Seven Dreams series seems to inscribe American literature into what Wai Chee Dimock calls the ‘denationalized space’ of deep time, the *longue durée* of world history that eliminates borders and periodizations” (83). Özcan’s theoretical approach here seems especially significant for Vollmann studies because she concludes that Vollmann’s centuries-spanning, transcontinental historical novels arrived before a critical apparatus existed to explain them fully (84). This point dovetails with previous claims made by Vollmann scholars such as Christopher Coffman, who notes that the lens of postmodernist theory has only ever brought Vollmann’s hybrid books into partial focus (Coffman 3-4). Özcan ratifies this notion that a few of Vollmann’s groundbreaking works seem to outpace their contemporaneous critical vocabularies when she turns her attention to *The Dying Grass: A Novel of the Nez Perce War* (2015), the 1356-page fifth volume of the Seven Dreams series which features a highly experimental formal structure that combines description, dialogue between characters, internal monologues, and flashbacks all without quotations marks or standardized paragraph breaks. This experimental form, which leaves large chunks of white space on the page and “reads like prose poetry or free verse,” is so unique, Özcan writes without a hint of hyperbole, that Vollmann invents “one of the most innovative typographic layouts in the history of the novel” and thus “delivers a new form of storytelling” (98). A highpoint of the monograph that truly advances Vollmann studies, Özcan’s analysis of this novel shows not only why “*The Dying Grass* stands in Vollmann’s *oeuvre* as a mature masterpiece,” but also how “it is one of the most exciting, promising contributions to the art of the novel” (99).

While the monograph’s other chapters may not offer groundbreaking literary analysis for experienced Vollmann readers, they should prove useful for general readers who are looking for a way into his writings. Özcan’s breakdown of *Rising Up and Rising Down*, a frequently discussed but rarely read tome of mythic proportions, is arguably the best introduction to that seven-volume work written in fewer than 10 pages. By revealing that “the major purpose of *Rising Up and Rising Down*” is “to urge the reader

to rely on empathy to make his or her own decisions,” Özcan puts this signature nonfiction work into direct conversation with the empathic goals of Vollmann’s imaginative fiction. Similarly, in another chapter, when Özcan groups together *Poor People* and *Imperial*, she illustrates precisely how Vollmann’s nonfiction writing about poverty and class seriously “grapples with the question of writing sociology and collecting facts,” and how “Vollmann aims to achieve an effect that a novel might not: he provides reality in its unadorned, simple form” (52–53). For those curious about Vollmann, these chapters will help them decide whether they should invest the time it would take to dive into some of the deeper parts of his oceanic body of work.

Perhaps the most glaring flaw of *Understanding William T. Vollmann* is the amount of Vollmann’s writing that receives little to no attention here, even though previous scholars and writers have pointed to it as crucial for “understanding” Vollmann. For instance, in the chapter on gender, femininity, and sex, Özcan chooses to examine *Kissing the Mask* (2010) and *The Book of Dolores* (2013): two decidedly late, minor works in the Vollmannite canon. One wonders why she did not build this chapter around a work such as *The Royal Family* (2000), a nearly 800-page detective novel that is hardly mentioned in her entire monograph, but which Vollmann scholar Daniel Lukes has described as the “millennial summa of ‘90s and prostitute writing,” and arguably “Vollmann’s best novel” (266). In addition, Özcan barely mentions the two major early novels that first put Vollmann into the same critical conversation with David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, and Richard Powers in the early 1990s: *You Bright and Risen Angels* (1987) and *Fathers and Crows* (1992). Finally, Özcan neglects three of Vollmann’s most important story collections—*The Rainbow Stories* (1989), *13 Stories and 13 Epitaphs* (1991), and *Last Stories and Other Stories* (2014). The omission of *The Rainbow Stories* seems like a particularly conspicuous absence, for as D.T. Max reports in his biography of David Foster Wallace, this was the story collection that spawned Vollmann’s reputation as a major talent in the minds of Wallace, Franzen, and other likeminded writers of his generation (Max 130).

After careful examination of Özcan’s omissions, though, one can only wonder: is this a structural fault of her book or just an inevitable byproduct of trying to analytically capture, with perhaps a touch of Ahabian hubris, the Great White Whale of Vollmann’s entire *oeuvre*? Deepening this question is the fact that Özcan’s monograph is even shorter (by about 20 or 30 pages) than other works in the “Understanding Contemporary Literature” series. On the one hand, I am convinced that this is arguably the best short, single-authored introductory monograph on the career of William T. Vollmann to date, even if Özcan has made (or so it seems) a deliberate commitment to produce an

especially succinct introduction. On the other hand, though, it raises a basic question about our ability to comprehend Vollmann's body of work in a way that is reminiscent of the classic "blind-men-touching-an-elephant" analogy: defining the essence of Vollmann's literary project while only grasping parts, not the whole. Although this question can only be answered once Vollmann's career is complete, Özcan seems to have set the stage for a serious conversation about Vollmann's long-term reputation in both American and global literary history. If Vollmann scholars once feared that Vollmann would never quite garner the attention he deserved, Özcan is cautiously optimistic that he will receive canonical recognition in a way that calls to mind either Herman Melville (posthumous renown as a literary prophet ahead of his time) or William Faulkner (late career, Nobel Prize-winning fame):

Maybe no revival can be as groundbreaking as the so-called Melville revival of the 1920s, which began in England and spread to the United States in waves. Similarly, the swelling of interest in Faulkner in the 1940s, which divided his career radically into two periods, brought him not only recognition but a Nobel Prize. A similar moment may be near at hand in contemporary letters [for Vollmann]. (5)

If William T. Vollmann's career ever takes a Faulknerian or Melvillean turn, and he is finally recognized as "North America's foremost living novelist and its greatest nonfiction writer" (as Robert L. Caserio claims on the book's back cover), Işıl Özcan will likely be a crucial reason why.

Pynchon in Dialogue with the Philosophy of Modernity

Martin Paul Eve, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 229pp

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Martin Paul Eve's *Pynchon and Philosophy* begins with a chapter that sets out the groundwork for studying the philosophical domain of Thomas Pynchon's fictional practice—a daunting task in its own right, but one that has been long overdue to undertake—by examining the tradition of reading Pynchon as a writer of "hostility towards theoretical and philosophical paradigms" *per se* (2). As Eve suggests, even if

certain characters or narrative voices in Pynchon's novels do express this open disdain for any philosophical classification's power to explain the phenomena of the worlds those novels model, that opposition alone merits deeper analysis of the intellectual context necessary for the opposition to exist. The first allusions to or mentions of a modern philosopher in Pynchon's work derive from his debut novel *V.* (1963)—most famously treating a praeternatural manifestation of words attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and parodying another putative Wittgenstein line in song—so he has kept direct, indirect and tangential company with the philosophical domain from the very start of his novelistic career. A treatise on Pynchon and philosophy has thus been necessary for more than half a century, and the abundance of ideas in Eve's study, with well-spotted points of overlap between the American author's oeuvre and those of Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno, promises that it has been worth the wait. The study's originality is further corroborated by the conciseness of its list of direct critical precursors: above all, Samuel Thomas's Frankfurt School-inflected *Pynchon and the Political*, Hanjo Beressem's Lacanian *Pynchon's Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text*, and several pieces by Jeff Baker, like "Amerikkka Über Alles" (7–8). In these forerunners, and in Eve's book as he builds beyond them, the studied philosophy "forms the structuring device" (8), whereby Pynchon's entire canon is studied in relation to a given philosophical concept, always bearing in mind the shifting nature of Pynchon's polyphonous narrative voices.

After the introductory case for reading Pynchon as more than just a repudiator of philosophical frameworks, the book follows a neatly organised structure, dealing with the three philosophers in relation to Pynchon in the following non-chronological order: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno. Eve duly explains the reasoning behind this structure in thematic terms: "Building upon remarks on relativism that emerge at the end of the third chapter, Part II moves into an analysis of Michel Foucault" (11), while "Part III opens with Chapter 6, which begins to form the locus point for all this work, be that in a hostility to Wittgenstein's logical positivism, or an affinity with late Foucault's views on revolution, by introducing the work of Theodor W. Adorno" (12). Each philosopher gets two chapters: those on Wittgenstein and Foucault analyse Pynchon in relation to each philosopher's early and late works respectively, whereas with Adorno, who kept a relatively unchanged aesthetical trajectory throughout his career, the first chapter develops with regard to *Negative Dialectics*, and the last chapter discusses *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Aesthetic Theory*, whose publication dates straddle that of the former book.

Across the chapters on the distinct philosophers, the study makes several mentions of the (post)modern concept of ambivalence, which may be understood as an immanent

feature of Pynchon's authorial discourse. In this, Eve doesn't simply recapitulate prior political approvals of Pynchon's ambiguities as generatively open-ended (Joanna Freer) or as reflecting the complexity of his understanding (Thomas Schaub). Rather, Eve pays attention to the *logical* implications of ambivalence, as in his paradigmatically minute analysis of the exact structures of V.'s Wittgenstein parody song, which posits that the speakers in the amatory game declare hostile hospitality and hospitable hostility in their assigned roles. He delves into the level of the song's propositional constituents p , q and r to demonstrate that its set-up constructs an environment of affect supporting a logical model, and that the rebuttal undermines the logical model while admitting its conclusions (37). On the track of mutually conflicting ideas essential to the multiple meaning of Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* takes part in normative ethics insofar as it defines "correct behaviour for philosophical discourse, derived from a logical stance" (38), while the transcendental Wittgenstein holds the view that ethical propositions do not relate to any state of affairs, i.e. there is always the element of the ineffable involved (an idea Pynchon was still working with in his later fiction, as with the secret society of the tetractys in *Against the Day*). From here, Eve carefully avoids a totalising assessment of Romantic motifs in Pynchon's reception, as the "It's OK to be a Luddite" essay prophesies a merger of Luddite sensibility with the technology it opposes, thus compromising Romantic ideology internally. Pynchon makes this point through several examples of erasure, or an act of displacing the historical moment for the sake of an ideal image of self and nature (43, 55), like the conformist slogans of McClintic Sphere about restricting emotions for the greater social good. By the same token, the *Tractatus* is also an infiltrated text, offering no assurance of how to verbalise the ineffable world, and Pynchon uses several fictional conversations to deride it with flair. Another thematic strand to recur throughout *Pynchon and Philosophy*, from the Wittgenstein sections onward, pertains to the novelist's resistance to the notion of linear time – the very frequency of prepositions like 'through' or 'into' and adverbs like 'back' forcefully suggests more than one direction of movement through time, with the aid of constant overwriting and the semblance of simultaneity.

It is in the chapters on Foucault (4 and 5) that Eve initiates a discussion of Enlightenment which will persist through the rest of the book, reverting to Foucault's 1957 text "Psychology from 1850 to 1950," which postulates the methodology of the natural sciences as the base for all concepts of Enlightenment, similarly to some other relevant sources: Habermas's succinct phrase "observation, experiment, calculation," and Pynchon's oft-criticised source Max Weber (86). Eve is especially accurate in

drawing parallels between Foucault and Pynchon, rightly warning that each novel's Enlightenment-illuminating topos must be viewed through the time- and space-specific lens of actual events: the example of the Jesuit telegraph from *Mason & Dixon* may intimate that to Pynchon, technology is the crucial element of Enlightenment, beyond the French desire to achieve political ascendancy in North America. Given the novelist's constant techniques, mentioned above, of erasure and simultaneity, Eve seems right to suggest that Pynchon would probably endorse the parallel coexistence of various definitions of Enlightenment issued by Foucault in his career: "He [the Foucault of 1978] does not give any detail on the English and American stakes of Enlightenment, he merely points out that they are different" (97). Eve provides another precise, complex illustration of Pynchon's philosophical compatibilities on another topic: the consequences of state power, which he analyses through Foucault's division of political rationality's effects, which include both individualisation and totalisation, a dualism which pervades *Gravity's Rainbow*. And then, since Foucault identified critique with Enlightenment—in the lecture "What Is Critique?" (1978)—as the movement in which the subject questions truth concerning its power-effects and questions power about its discourses of truth (Eve 111), and insisted in 1983 that modern philosophy should assume interrogating "present-ness" as its primary task, Eve shows how plenty of more general motifs in Pynchon may be related to this structure of thinking, especially trans-temporal metaphors that explicitly span the historical setting and readerly present in novels like *Against the Day* (112). Drawing on Samuel Thomas's division of violence in *Vineland* (as either an idea or lived reality), Eve demonstrates that the preterite masses in Pynchon can only incrementally introduce the will to revolution and ultimately harbour hope, in the utopian projects which are constantly defeated but the desire to eliminate oppression still persists (115). The complexity of Foucault's meandering thought also finds its counterparts in Pynchon's ambivalent stance towards sloth, since to late Foucault, the relationship to one's self is the true sphere of ethics: Slothrop's own betrayal of the duties placed on him, for example, can be seen as the disregard of the Foucauldian task of self-care, even as in other writings, like "Nearer, My Couch, to Thee," Pynchon associates sloth with successful resistance to linear time and all it represents.

The last two chapters heighten focus on state oppression along the lines of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which partially rests on the idea, countering Hegel's optimism, that human thought has achieved identity between subject and object, reason and reality, only through suppression and ignorance of their differences. Eve sides with Adorno that

a non-identitarian approach should remain critical and not construe contradictions from above, and it would “pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing” (Adorno qtd. on 134). Examples of one-time marginal acts committed by individuals, like Tchitcherine’s redemption through not hunting down Enzian, or Blicero’s escapist transcendence which fails to annihilate “the cycle of infection and death,” theoretically fulfil Adorno’s criteria of negative utopianism, although the repetitive “past-ness” resounds ominously in Blicero’s permanent regression to the Deathkingdom (135), making the topic much more complex than just a reduction to the essence of fascism. Chapter 6 ends with a prudent delineation of Pynchon’s much-discussed materialist standpoint, and Eve finds a number of examples from *Gravity’s Rainbow* which interpenetrate both this and the next world, like spiritual séances and near-death experiences in dreams. The same text shows that when the world from beyond (thing-in-itself) invades this world, “mechanisms of perceptual concepts that permit understanding [...] banish the phenomenon into the realm of the noumenon” (140). In another advance from Adorno, regarding the interchangeability and homogenisation of subjects, Eve suggests that many instances of conflated identities in this novel may be a product of Their system of control which even takes possession of Kantian time and space, thus exposing idealism to poignant irony. Further on, in Adorno’s understanding of myth, rational thought has shoved aside or destroyed that which is “other,” and created destructive forces of rational industrialism, which, in an Adornian deduction that Eve frequently cites, resulted in Auschwitz as the terminal point of perverted enlightenment. The human urge to dominate nature stems from an irrational fear of the unknown, and natural entities do react to human interference in Pynchon, like the Tatzelwurms or the Figure from the Vormance expedition. Finally, looking outward from thematic analyses to a philosophical framework for Pynchon’s project as a writer, Eve’s analysis of Pynchon’s relation to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* explains that “truth in art arises through its power of critical negation” because artworks’ internal content negates reality and is combined with their materiality (159); they have an additional layer that gives them appearance, which to Adorno is their spirit. Only when the artworks exhibit determinate negation can they express truth – accordingly, the production context and the modelled content of any work by Pynchon must be assessed in order to define their determinate negation.

This book’s overall advantage lies in the fact that it extracts an entire system of ideas—cohering despite its varied sources—from three major European philosophers, distributed across Pynchon’s universe at the points where the fiction builds contexts

upon them – hitherto, a web of relations at best partially analysed. Eve’s book is also notable for offering a vision of Pynchon’s ideological outlook that—by contrast to much of the most recent intellectual historicising of Pynchon—doesn’t take the 1960s as its focal point: he rather extends the philosophical and political basis of Pynchon scholarship to comprehend the fruitful two centuries of Enlightenment thinking. As a consequence of this productive methodology, readers will be able to open up analogous logical paths into any suitable episode or motif in Pynchon’s whole opus, and find the whole novelistic worlds enriched with these philosophical subtexts or contexts. That in turn may serve as the indispensable stepping stone towards future philosophy-based studies of Pynchon, and demonstrate that beneath the surface of his apparent chaos lie more connections with examples of reflection of the highest order.

Michael Lynn Crews, *Books are Made Out of Books: A Guide to Cormac McCarthy’s Literary Influences* (University of Texas Press, 2017): 332pp

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Books are Made Out of Books is a landmark accomplishment. Michael Crews offers a rigorous exploration of Cormac McCarthy’s archived notes, journals and original manuscripts from the sprawling Cormac McCarthy Papers housed in the Wittliff and J. Howard Woolmer collections at Texas State University in San Marcos. This magisterial study has already justifiably become the standard reference on the archival material and on the question of who McCarthy’s stylistic predecessors were. By exhaustively citing McCarthy’s references to specific authors, ethnographers and philosophers from his letters, marginal notes on original manuscripts and free-standing notes he wrote to himself, Crews paints a detailed picture of the sources of McCarthy’s inspirations, and aversions. It is, quite simply, indispensable to any serious scholar of McCarthy’s work.

This is not, however, a study of McCarthy’s work unified by a central theme *per se*, like Lydia Cooper’s *No More Heroes* or Dianne Luce’s *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian Period*. Nor is it intended to be. It is encyclopedic in scope, rather than as functionally myopic in theme as most exegetical studies. Crews’ focus isn’t even McCarthy’s finished works. Instead, he sets out to bring some order to McCarthy’s notes on the authors and anonymous sources who have influenced him

by matching the novelist's comments to himself with the finished works they seem to have influenced or thereby refined. Unlike, say, Daniel Robert King's excellent *Cormac McCarthy's Literary Evolution*, whose interest is both biographical as well as critical and focused on the novelist's work itself, Crews' focus is on the archival material and he proceeds from that to the works.

The superstructure of Crews' work is his alphabetical, rather than chronological, listing of sources pertinent to each of McCarthy's novels, screenplays, and plays in the order in which they were published or, in the case of the mercifully unpublished *Whales and Men*, when they were written. Under each listing of a source—for example Herman Melville—Crews analyzes what McCarthy gathered from his predecessor, often cross-referencing his discussions with related material from other sources. In a refreshing nod to clarity Crews generally refrains from discussion of literary influences which might be *deduced* from McCarthy's writings if they aren't explicitly mentioned in the author's notes. He methodically traces those sources to their original texts, traces them back the other way to their loci in McCarthy's work, and assesses why and how the master elaborates new meaning and vision out of the raw material with which he has absconded. Whereas the novelist's indebtedness to Melville, or Faulkner, or Paul Valery (for examples) has been traced or deduced by other scholars, this is the first extended work which utilizes his archives in a precise and targeted manner.

The scholarship is superb and thorough. Having spent many hours in the McCarthy archives myself, I can attest firsthand to the acuity of Crews' eye. The archival material, donated by the author in 2007, fills ninety-eight file boxes (one of which, the earliest draft of the as yet unpublished novel *The Passenger*, is sealed away until after the book is finally published). Each box contains up to a dozen folders of assorted fullness. Quite a few researchers—like Luce, or Leslie Harper Worthington with particular regard to McCarthy's relation to Mark Twain—have mined these archives for particular insights into particular texts, but this is the first and most complete study of the archives on their own terms.

McCarthy's notes, comments, musings and self-directives are as often squeezed elliptically and cryptically into the margins of his manuscripts or between lines of type or handwritten text as they are ordered in bullet lists on otherwise blank pages. The challenge to any researcher trying to pull these inchoate comments together is, obviously, daunting. Nevertheless Crews has been indefatigable in systematizing his subject; so detailed is his reportage that he convinces his readers he didn't miss so much as a squashed gnat between a staple and a waterstain in all the archives' many

boxes and folders. Not satisfied to have transcribed, ordered and listed them all, and tagged them according to the numbered folders within each box, he exhaustively traces McCarthy's often fragmentary citations to their original sites in the books, journals, letters or articles to which the master refers and gives us the more complete versions of those references. This was no small feat, considering how much esoteric reading or reading of archaeologically out of print volumes the novelist mentions in his notes.

I confess to being impressed, if not dazzled, by the tight focus of Crews' scholarship. I am also much impressed by how often he convinced me that his interpretation of McCarthy's *bricolage* was spot on. If he left any stone unturned – and within the ambit of his stated enterprise, I honestly can't find many – it was probably because he thought there might be a Mojave rattlesnake hiding under it. An example of his thoroughness is his discussion of McCarthy's interest in Italian "spaghetti western" filmmaker Sergio Leone. Crews relates that McCarthy wrote a letter to Leone biographer and critic Robert Cumbow after reading Cumbow's *The Films of Sergio Leone* (1987). Not content merely to report the exchange in general relation to the novelist's western fiction, Crews apparently obtained Cumbow's book as well and quotes from it as part of his discussion. As far as the depth, breadth and completeness of his work are concerned, I can only say: *Bravo*.

This book is an invaluable resource to anyone studying McCarthy's influences, thematic concerns and, especially, the evolution of his style. Crews is careful to observe how, for instance, the incorporation of fragments, phrases or even individual words contributed to the layering up of what has become by now the sage of Santa Fe's inimitable vocabulary of fossil words and his orchestral prosody. As one of many possible examples, he tracks a mention of Herman Melville's phrase from *Moby Dick*, "federated along a keel," to McCarthy's use of "federated" in describing the members of *Blood Meridian*'s Glanton gang riding across the badlands. As I mentioned above, McCarthy's gestures toward Melville have been remarked many times but this was a particular instance of tracking an obscure phrase of his predecessor's to a specific application of his own in such a different context. Here we can see how Melville impacts not only the narrative arc of McCarthy's work, but nuances of expression as well. Of course, this kind of relational acumen and pinpoint analysis also showcases Crews' familiarity with McCarthy's *oeuvre* itself.

Prior to this work, any scholar wanting to research the archives had no alternative but to travel to San Marcos and slog through those boxes and folders themselves. Short of publishing the entire archive in bound replica folios, it's hard to imagine a more

useful and convenient systematization than Crews' for scholarship of the contents of the collection. This is a *very* well organised book. It had to be. Considering the sheer volume of information Crews has excavated from the archives and the thoroughness of his pursuit of its inferences and ramifications, in fact, it's something of a triumph of textual architecture. Its elaborate yet lucid crossreferencing sometimes feels like the critical equivalent of Cortazar's *Rayuela* or Pavic's *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Ordering his chapters chronologically by novel or play, and then subordering them alphabetically by the names of writers mentioned by McCarthy in his notes, strikes me as the only sane way to get a handle on the mass of material with which he works here. This imposed order was probably his best gambit. From a purely referential perspective, it is doubtless the most utilitarian arrangement any would-be critic or student confronted with a term paper assignment could hope for. The table of contents as Crews cleverly set it up will itself save researchers the problem of running their fingers down the works cited pages.

On the other hand, in what must seem like a trivial caveat, Crews can't help indenturing himself to this approach to the reordering of his documents. Because, as he demonstrates repeatedly, McCarthy made notes for, say, *Blood Meridian* on his *Suttree* manuscripts, Crews obligatorily writes substantial analyses of material pertinent to *BM* in his *Suttree* chapter and then refers his readers of the *BM* chapter back to the material in the previous section. But he is clear enough in his directions to his reader that it still works. Perhaps this struck me as more disconcerting than others might find it, and I'm sure Crews thought over his design several times before deciding, all things being equal, this was the least confusing solution.

Otherwise, despite the breadth of scholarship here, I found no cuttable fat. The book is very stingy with mere erudition for its own sake. There were a few speculative comments offered, but even these were, I think, well grounded in McCarthy's habits of style and design. I would also argue that these few moments, where they occur, constitute stimuli to the critical imagination. Crews' work is lean and mean in all the important ways.

Any students, graduate students and scholars working on matters of influence, style and theme in McCarthy, as well as anyone working in the area of reader-response criticism, will think of this work as a gold mine of information and fresh perspectives. Another thing: although highly useful to serious scholars, this book is beautifully written and contains touches of humor and whimsy throughout. In addition to his canonical academic standing, Cormac McCarthy has long since transcended his early cult status and is now blessed with a sizable, well-educated lay readership. Given his

challenging vocabulary, range of concerns and demanding syntax, this could hardly be otherwise. I do not doubt this charmingly written book will find another significant readership among these lay readers as well as in the carrels of our ivory towers.

Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (University of Chicago Press, 2017): 286pp

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On the second day of her recent US Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Judge Amy Coney Barrett characterized textualism thusly: “the judge approaches the text as it was written, with the meaning it had at the time and doesn’t infuse her own meaning into it” (qtd. in Naylor). As she has noted elsewhere, “textualists emphasize that words mean what they say” (856). At the same time, she went on to note that textualists do not always agree—it “isn’t a mechanical exercise” (859)

Even ignoring debates about whether textualism or originalism simply function as fig leaves for Republican policy preferences, Coney Barrett’s comments, at a glance, would seem to border on the incoherent or contradictory in their insistence on simultaneous transparency and depth—all the more galling given her undergraduate training (at Rhodes College) in English literature, which, as Merve Emre notes in *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America*, is a discipline that has historically aimed to cultivate what we call “good” reading—aware of nuance and history, equipped with “imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense” (Vladimir Nabokov, qtd. in Emre 1)—and embodied in the various tropes of the “critical reader,” the “close reader,” or even the later, Sedgwickian, “paranoid” reader. But, as Emre takes great pains to point out in her persuasive and ambitious monograph, such a focus overlooks the tremendous power that “bad” reading (her tongue-in-cheek designation for the habits of those socialized into the practices of “readerly identification, emotion, action, and identification” [3]) in its various forms has had in shaping identities and shaping the world across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: ironically far *more* power in most cases than the model of good reading advocated for within the privileged sphere of the English department. In this claim, Emre is not breaking entirely new ground; one recalls Michael Warner’s influential account of “uncritical reading.” Where Emre *takes*

this point, however, is unexpected, as she presses readers to consider the frequency with which our most famous good (scare-quotes hereon assumed) readers and writers were called on to be bad readers as well—as evidenced variously in her book by William Faulkner’s chairmanship of a short-lived campaign to use American writers to promote friendly contact with the Soviet Bloc; the rise of American Studies as a discipline (reflecting, she says, “a link between reading a canon of American literary works and a reader’s capacity to feel and communicate love” [66]); or the rise of university study abroad programs, linked especially at women’s colleges with a way of reading literature “to learn to speak, feel, perceive, and interact with others” (4).

The power of Emre’s work, and its timeliness, lies in its challenge to easy answers: to the reductive sorts of calls made by some humanities educators (if not STEM-struck administrators), perhaps (understandably) trying to staunch the flow of hemorrhaging enrolments, for expanded literary or liberal arts education in the face of our current social and political climate—as though the ability to close read might be panacea to our current woes (see, for instance, Peter Brooks’s “conversion” to the belief in “careful, detailed, close analytic reading ... [as] an ethical activity” in the wake of Bush torture memos). At the same time, the book is cautious not to dismiss the value of this work either, and her focus on good readers “reading badly” suggests the possibilities—implied throughout, though spoken only directly in *Paraliterary*’s final pages—of what it might mean for literature departments to think beyond a particular set of reading practices that persists, and persists even (and this is key to Emre’s project) for those literary critics today convinced that *their* way of reading is somehow radical or different. Emre targets “surface reading” in particular, but the observation resonates across a realm of seemingly non-normative reading practices staked out in the so-called method wars (including the later, Sedgwickian *reparative* reader): it is hard to imagine these methods as genuinely radical, non-normative, or “bad,” Emre contends, when they seem to produce precisely the same sort of “complex readings of difficult texts” (255) as “critical” close reading does, using a toolkit of familiar techniques for textual engagement to do so. It is telling, she notes, that these would-be bad readers so often turn to “metaphors and abstractions, promises and aspirations” (255) in lieu of clear methodological description.

The above examples—Faulkner to American Studies to study-abroad—should suffice to demonstrate that Emre’s subtitle is ultimately something of a feint; what *Paraliterary* really presents is not a history of bad reading or an account of its characteristics *per se* (there is, for instance, no discussion of the way Holden Caulfield

has been periodically taken up as a model for emulation or Humbert Humbert as a romantic hero), but rather an account of the kinds of subjects produced by bad reading, with particular focus on an international context and the post-war rise of a notion that reading literature could literally change the world—moving and instructing political adversaries, improving and educating allies, transforming readers.

Emre's monograph (understandably) evades the potential ouroboros of this notion's roots (i.e., which came first, the bad reading practices/subjects produced thereby or the attempts to harness those practices/subjects?) by taking close reading as the early twentieth-century institutional norm for her point of departure, and proceeds by reading literary works alongside the titular paraliterary productions of "serious" American culture: legal documents, bureaucratic files, conduct books, intelligence reports, biographies, maps, newspapers, magazines, diaries, and so on. Lest this account read as purely new historicist in orientation, Emre points out a key difference: for her purposes, paraliterary texts are not merely traces to supplement a literary object, but actually *frame the way literary objects are processed*. Put straightforwardly, Emre's suggestion is that to have read literature in the context of these paraliterary artifacts (or to have read them as one involved in the preparation and circulation of said artifacts) is to take literature as performing the same *kind* of tasks. Thus, while Emre is not prepared to make a positivist case for literature's ability to, say, nurture us ethically, her account nevertheless sets out parameters by which literature *might* teach us to feel or imitate or act; indeed, the book's final chapter, in taking up John A. Williams's *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), notes that the novel's adoption of the bureaucratic dossier as formal conceit (ostensibly collecting photostats of documents related to the "King Alfred Plan," a fictional project for the eradication of African Americans) ironically led to more direct, effective social action (however rooted in Williams's complete fabrication) than the politically engaged paranoid reading or reparative reading of contemporaneous literary theorists.

Stretching across more than one-hundred years of history beginning in the early twentieth century, and moving fluidly between dozens of authors, canonical and lesser-known (the aforementioned Faulkner and Williams are joined by Henry James, Mary McCarthy, Sylvia Plath, James Baldwin, and Flannery O'Connor; also discussed at some length are F.O. Matthiessen, Gregory Corso, and Beverly Bowie, whose *Operation Bughouse* is a forgotten post-WWII satire of military intelligence), *Paraliterary* broadly

takes up in each chapter a “way” of reading badly, tying together a particular set of paraliterary and literary texts and institutions. “Reading as Imitation” pairs novels with public lectures to examine how a way of speaking about Henry James’s novels came to fuse with a way of *speaking*, bestowing “literary stature” on speakers themselves, particularly in the context of early study abroad programs; “Reading as Feeling” takes this idea further by asking how feeling might be communicated through the body in reading, threading together an argument about Sylvia Plath, the Fulbright program, and the birth of American Studies by examining how texts might “breed love” (60)—Plath’s marriage to Ted Hughes, in this schema, enacting a kind of literalization of the aim of the Fulbright program to promote love between nations. A third chapter, “Brand Reading,” explores the tension by which American literary texts are both linked to corporate texts (in this instance, those produced by the American Express Company, from the imagery of early traveller’s checks to the language of advertising copy) and come also to be their own (particularly American) brand, thus offering a glimpse into how branding becomes central to consumption (literary and otherwise) and national identity. Remaining chapters pursue how the ideology of photographic “sight reading” as “proto-virtual reality experience” in glossy magazines (144) affected the discourses of literary reading and writing (connecting Flannery O’Connor’s preoccupation with sight and seeing with her distaste for photography as a genre [162]); the link between the bureaucratic labor of institutional organizing and the “literary” labour of the writer (175); and the related link between John A. Williams’s use of formal bureaucratic conceits (mentioned above) and his (and other Black writers’) exclusion from said international organizing.

The complexity, nuance, and sympathy of Emre’s argument, and her transdisciplinary positioning (straddled somewhere between book history, literary criticism, and sociology)—to say nothing of her polymath’s grasp of American literature, international political order, and the imbrication of the two—presents challenges. Her account of James detours into the expatriate novel and the tension between his status as a model for *both* imitation and autonomous aesthetic production; it requires, too, teasing apart the complexity of young women reading James’s impersonation of young women from young women’s imitation of James’s young woman characters. Even at its densest, however, Emre’s prose remains sharp—witty and attuned to powerful turns of phrase. The account is seasoned, too, with unexpectedly charming literary-historical asides pulled from extensive archival research (that, for example, Baldwin refused to let Jack

Kerouac sleep on the floor of Baldwin's Paris apartment, or that O'Connor preferred the smell of *National Geographic* magazine to its photographs).

But what is perhaps most exciting about *Paraliterary* is the possibilities it suggests for future research, many of which Emre herself seems to recognize in her closing call for expanding our sense of literature and what it can do—a call that both registers and gropes for a way to counter the pressing dangers of precarity, insularity, and methodological infighting to English departments today. While the connection to *Paraliterary*, Emre's first monograph, is never made explicitly, for instance, her follow-up work, the popular biography *The Personality Brokers* (2018) takes as its subjects (seriously, and on their own terms) the mother-daughter developers of the Myers-Briggs Type Index—a personality test crafted in large part via extra-institutional “bad” reading of Carl Jung's personality types. And even as *Paraliterary* takes for its central guiding notion the role of bad reading in the post-war international order, one could very easily pivot to integrate this analysis (as she explicitly declines to do [16]) into important critiques of American political power in the world.

One could similarly turn Emre's gaze inward toward the domestic subject: to return to the anecdote with which I began this piece, the originalist jurist might be better understood and framed, with the reading practice of Coney Barrett and her peers, through this lens, forged in quasi-civil/political institutions like the Federalist Society, which have multiplied in American law schools and whose reach has no doubt filtered into the English departments full of those putative good readers, long a reservoir for law school applicants. And Emre's tongue-in-cheek taxonomizing might craft space for understanding other ways of reading, “rooted” (as she explains) “in contingent scenes of political, cultural, economic, and emotional actions” (257): one imagines a way to frame the cynical or uncharitable reader (one thinks of Sokal-style hoaxes), and work toward a theory of those using the cues of the good reader to malign ends.

But to attend to the power (for better or worse) of bad readers to make things happen, finally, is to also ask us to rethink and (if it is worthwhile) reaffirm the utility of “good” (close, critical) reading that literature departments have held inviolable for so long. That project is far beyond the scope of a review, but Emre herself has floated, via Twitter, a justification for its persistence: we don't talk enough, she joked recently about re-reading Jane Austen, about “how useful it is for figuring out if a dude is lying to you, or when a letter's true writer is a jealous fiancé, or demonstrating to your new [girlfriend] that she's a better writer than your old one.”

Matthias Stephan, *Defining Literary Postmodernism for the Twenty-First Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 206pp

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Observing that the new millennium has seen a surge in considerations of the demise or mutation of postmodernism, in *Defining Literary Postmodernism* Stephan raises a fundamental question: how can one argue for the end of postmodernism if there has never been a definitive definition of what it is (or was)? In the first four chapters of the book, he surveys and evaluates various critical concepts that prominent scholars have previously used to try and define postmodernism, highlighting the paradoxes and problems of these ideas so as to set his own argument in motion. This argument consists of his attempt to establish a properly “reductive” definition of literary postmodernism: one simple and capacious enough that all texts that meet it can be called “postmodernist.” This he does mainly by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical concept of the rhizome, as the metaphor for what he calls a “postmodern structure of consciousness”: this is “a structureless structure and is best epitomized by the metaphor of the rhizome” as an expansive, yet centerless, system which does not privilege one part over another (6). Nevertheless, while Stephan claims that he uses the rhizome as a spatial metaphor to *define* literary postmodernism, one gets the impression that this claim has not been adequately substantiated throughout. His useful identification and criticism of the insufficiencies of the previous attempts at a unitary definition of postmodernism is straightforwardly valuable. However, his own articulation of a new perspective for understanding postmodernism is less definitive.

The lack of a substantive definition seems to originate from the fact that the book’s main argument is primarily oppositional, above all disputing Brian McHale’s influential early identification of the dividing line between modernist and postmodernist fictions as the historical shift from epistemological to ontological “dominant.” The heart of Stephan’s definition, by contrast, is the notion that literary postmodernism comprehends both epistemological and ontological questions. He posits that the “postmodern” genre is best defined by the answers it offers to those questions, not by the questions themselves. At his most convincing, he explains that the rhizome is the most suitable metaphor to explain postmodernism because, “as we have no vantage point in the rhizome from which to answer such questions with

any objectivity,” in postmodernism “[t]here is, simply, absolute uncertainty to those philosophical questions” (7). This helps better understand what Stephan means by his “reductive” definition of postmodernism, though never explicitly explained: namely the rhizome as the metaphor for a structure that includes a broad range of questions, both epistemological and ontological, without leaving out or foregrounding one or another. Therefore, he aims to offer this reductive definition as opposed to the loose capaciousness he identifies in previous theories of postmodernism, which identified under that term a nonexclusive collection or “list of techniques, characteristics, or the use of a single technique or methodology as a synecdoche for the broad aspects of the mode.” In this respect, he observes that while “metafiction, parody, intertextuality, play, and irony” are often cited as postmodern characteristics, they “also exist outside of a postmodern paradigm” (35).

As hinted above, one of the distinctive qualities of *Defining Literary Postmodernism* throughout is an interesting debate apropos McHale’s use of the dominant in defining (post)modernist fiction. In chapters five and six, as he moves from critiquing other models to propounding his own, Stephan uses detective fiction and science fiction as representative epistemological and ontological genres, respectively, to challenge “the idea that such texts are tautologically modernist” and postmodernist (82). He chooses these genres precisely to emphasize “the failure of McHale’s definition” (7): “both modernist and postmodernist texts can be found that discuss, primarily, epistemological and ontological questions” (81). However, although McHale defines the passage from modernism to postmodernism in terms of the change of dominant, in *Postmodernist Fiction* he himself mentions that even within the same text one can think of many different dominants (and in subsequent work he loosened the categoricalness of his definition yet further). Furthermore, considering that “the distinction was never absolute” (McHale 2015, 15), McHale’s argument seems to provide a general framework within which to understand (literary) postmodernism where he characterizes the change of dominant, possibly, in terms of a cultural tendency that was particularly prevalent in the last three decades of the 20th century. Nevertheless, Stephan posits that his own “structure of consciousness” approach is more suitable for understanding detective and science fiction in relation to postmodernism because the difference between modernist and postmodernist poetics does not lie in the type of questions asked but “in the means by which these questions are answered” (81).

Based on the epistemological element of investigation, in chapter five Stephan presents a tripartite reclassification of the detective genre—as having classical,

modernist, and postmodernist modes—as opposed to the well-established classical, hard-boiled, and anti-detective categories. However, his attempt to resituate postmodern detective fiction in the genre seems finally untenable. He argues that “investigation is the main focus of the genre, and therefore I base the explanation of the genre on this epistemological element” (85). Nevertheless, even though one considers the process of investigation, rather than any ultimate solution, the primary goal of detective fiction, it is not possible to disregard the solution, or its absence, altogether for generic reasons. Indeed, Stephan himself explains that in postmodern detective fiction “the ‘solution’ is simply that there is (and can be) no traditional solution” (86). He suggests that this realization “is sufficient to satisfy this criterion of a ‘solution’” in postmodernist fiction (85). Therefore, the term postmodern, rather than anti-detective, fiction “is the one that mostly clearly reflects the development of investigative methods” and is better suited within the genre of detective fiction (85). As a challenge to McHale, this reclassification—an “epistemological structure... in which the possibility of a single conclusion is refuted” (98)—involves a basic problem. Predicated on the impossibility of any definitive solution, it implies a multiplicity of inconclusive potential solutions that is somewhat in tune with McHale’s idea of the possibility of an unhierarchical ontological plurality of worlds in postmodernism. While Stephan characterizes this as an “epistemological structure in which there is no absolute knowledge” (98), McHale understands it as a literature whose main preoccupation is ontological. Stephan’s attempt to resituate postmodern detective fiction would only completely succeed if it could show that McHale would be wrong here, but doesn’t finally show that either model has more explanatory power. Although Stephan provides us with an opportunity to view the postmodern detective novel through a different perspective than the well-trodden critical paths, in his new classification not much changes, stylistically and structurally, in comparison with the previous categorizations of the genre.

Broadening the scope of the postmodern structure of consciousness by textual analyses of ethical, psychological, and political questions is one of the merits of Stephan’s book. Chapter seven applies his structure–framework to Svend Åge Madsen’s novel *Tugt og utugt i mellemtiden* [*Virtue and Vice in the Middle Time*] (1976). He aims to show that besides epistemological and ontological elements, ethical and political issues, too, can be activated in relation to the postmodern structure of consciousness. To support his argument, Stephan offers a comparative analysis of Madsen’s novel with Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. He claims that while Pynchon’s novel corresponds

with older understandings of postmodernism, it is also in tune with his redefinition of postmodernism. For instance, he observes that like Madsen's novel the "invocation of the detective fiction genre is also prevalent" in *Gravity's Rainbow* (168). Following this line of thought by providing further detail in terms of genre analysis would offer up promising insights for future research. For example, the impact of epistemological uncertainty vis-à-vis social justice can be analyzed through a more in-depth look at Pynchon's novel, as Stephan does in Madsen's.

From a critical standpoint, the final chapter is perhaps the most interesting one insofar as it engages with an ongoing discussion that has significant implications in terms of avenues for future work. It recurs to the first chapter by posing a salient question, namely the future of literature after postmodernism. One of the book's best features is that it provides a thorough outlook on debates regarding various understandings and definitions of both postmodernism and postpostmodernism. The implication of Stephan's literature review in the first chapter, taken up in the last, is to question whether we can conceive of what has been identified as postpostmodernism as a genuinely distinct successive phase to postmodernism. He argues that "the very structure of consciousness that I identify as postmodern does not seem to allow for anything beyond or after" (186). Nevertheless, he mentions that several putative or self-labelled new movements, such as the post-ironic, postpostmodernism, and New Sincerity, consider the possibility of a postpostmodern era. For instance, he explains how the New Sincerity movement questions the efficacy of the ironic stance in evoking the desire for an authentic position beyond postmodernism. Yet, he identifies a basic problem with the post-ironic mode: "how does one find, or identify, the sincere in post-ironic literature" (191)? Since in postmodernism there is no "common ground on which irony is based" (191), he observes that any definition of sincerity in opposition to a prior irony is equally relative. Therefore, the solution is not "an imposed grand narrative, with its implications of fixity and authority (or sincerity)" (198). Instead, he observes, we can think of a postmodern structure of consciousness which focuses attention on the lack of answers to various philosophical questions rather than the questions themselves. He brings the book to an end more concretely by suggesting that such a reading of postmodernism allows for the construction of a temporary framework of "change that does not require rejection of a previous paradigm as an error" (199). However hard to define reductively, postmodernism is worth understanding, and studying, as more than just the thing the present improved upon.

Paul Crosthwaite, *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 2019): 306pp

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Over the past few decades the market for literary fiction has clearly diminished, as economic uncertainties and technological advances have increasingly favored genre fiction and stereotype-laden “good reads.” A 2019 study of contemporary fiction, Paul Crosthwaite’s *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*, shows how recent North American and British authors have developed a form of metafiction to hold a mirror up to the constraints of the fiction market. Works in this form, unlike the metafictions of Barth or Calvino, reflect less on their own making than on their own marketing. They are not about “the fictionality of the texts as such, but the ways in which that fictionality solicits or spurns the approval of the literary marketplace” (Crosthwaite 3). Crosthwaite conceptualizes these works as *market* metafiction: “a mode in which authors reflect upon or allegorize contradictory impulses towards the market in the very process of enacting them” (37): impulses to both give the market what sells and preserve artistic autonomy.

The notion of market metafiction illuminates novels about the book trade that refer to their own place therein, like Martin Amis’s *The Information*. However, Crosthwaite problematically extends the notion beyond the *literary* market, arguing that literary fiction today reflects its place in a vaguely defined *financial* market (sometimes, more vaguely, “markets”). He claims that many novelists, faced with the decline in the literary fiction market “exacerbated by the global financial crisis” of 2008 and its aftermath (24), have realized the importance of finance to their livelihoods and have made financial matters their principal fictional subjects. Crosthwaite’s evidence for this claim consists of swathes of economic theory and energetic cherry-picking of marginal financial aspects of novels where other subjects prevail. He takes passing mention of financial institutions in novels by Iain Sinclair about London and by Richard Powers about technology, for instance, to betoken a preoccupation with finance. This evidence might be more plausible if Crosthwaite were trying to argue that finance is a deliberately understated hidden mover in the texts he thus “financializes,” but actually he seems to insist that finance is a clearly dominant surface preoccupation. This is belied by how sporadic and occasional the texts’ mentions of financial subjects are, and

how clearly subordinated finance is to other concerns even in the context from which he draws those mentions.

Moreover, Crosthwaite's claim on finance's centrality is based on some questionable assumptions. For example, because money, like fiction, derives its power from a certain kind of *belief*, novels that belong to genres foregrounding the *unbelievability* of characters and events (literary horror, magical realism) and that happen to feature rich people (like the lycanthropic media heirs in Marche's *The Hunger of the Wolf*) must necessarily be underscoring the fictionality—the belief-dependency—of money and the financial system that sustains wealth. Perhaps this could be viably argued for as an interpretation of a particular text, but Crosthwaite does not justify its use as an imputed axiom for a whole genre. Another key load-bearing assumption, less outlandish but just as problematic, is that contemporary fiction reflects the controversial Efficient Market Hypothesis (which holds that “prices always fully reflect all available information” [134], so that through monetary value the money economy's institutions know and control all information). Crosthwaite explains at length why the hypothesis has been contested as an explanation of actual market behavior. However, he considers “faith in the information-processing power” of an efficient market to be a salient feature of important novels of the past few decades (138), during which financial markets have had an increased influence on contemporary society. Impressed by this influence, novelists supposedly try to “emulate and outdo the prodigious information-gathering capacities of the financial markets” (140). Though information does fascinate contemporary novelists, and in some cases this information concerns markets (for instance, the sports and drug markets in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*), that this is motivated by emulation of financial markets *per se* seems unlikely. Important novels centrally about finance, like Gaddis's *J R*, are rare. In Crosthwaite's survey of current fiction, therefore, one finds a drastic contrast in plausibility between readings proposing that novels reflect efficient financial markets generally and readings proposing more modestly that these novels reflect (and reflect on) the conditions of their own markets. Two representative examples of each type of reading demonstrate this contrast.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the *industrial* markets that control Slothrop play a central role. Yet Crosthwaite focuses instead on peripheral discussions of *financial* markets. To support his claim that foreign exchange is a “central preoccupation” of the novel (142), Crosthwaite summarizes an excursus in which the minor character Semyavin shares with Slothrop his take on Weimar Germany's black market in currency, which has become a market in information. Semyavin thinks “the world's gone insane,

with information come to be the only real medium of exchange” in the black market, perhaps someday to become a general currency (Pynchon 258). Indeed, in this section of the novel, Slothrop is after information, trying to find out who is after him and how to escape them. With Semyavin, Slothrop exchanges little but words, and virtually gratis the black marketeer gives Slothrop information about a few cafés where the latter might find further information. Information, not currency, is the subject here, and is what Slothrop seeks throughout the novel in his quest for the secret of Imipolex G. Currency or financial exchange are mentioned only as often as other minor but memorable subjects, from songs to spies, and Crosthwaite makes no explicit case for seeing them as any more central. In a more direct misreading, Crosthwaite assumes that Pynchon’s much-discussed pronouncement about war’s economic basis—“true war is a celebration of markets” (Pynchon 105)—comments on efficient financial markets. This overlooks the fact that the markets referred to here are explicitly black markets of goods, unconnected to finance, as he proposes that the novel “betrays a certain affinity with market systems—with their awesome scale and with their capacity to weave together (as Pynchon’s narrative itself also attempts to) a vast social totality” (141–142). Yet Pynchon’s narrator, in the very same paragraph Crosthwaite relies on for this claim, dismisses *financial* markets as irrelevant. As various currencies “continue to move, severe as classical ballet, inside their antiseptic marble chambers,” outside those finance-chambers, “among the people, the truer currencies come into being. So, Jews are negotiable. Every bit as negotiable as cigarettes, cunt, or Hershey bars” (105). It is these *nonmonetary* exchanges, whatever their scale—the scale of Holocaust or of Hershey bars—that interest Pynchon throughout the novel. Insofar as *Gravity’s Rainbow* says anything about market systems, it remains an open question whether they weave society together with sweets or destroy it with hate.

DeLillo’s *Players* seems to offer more evidence that contemporary novels reflect financial markets. The protagonist is a Wall Street stockbroker, Wynant, who sees in stock prices a power like that of the efficient market, “an ungainsayable authority ... emanating both from the trading floor itself and from ‘the world’ beyond” (Crosthwaite 155). This authority appears in Wynant’s sense that the stock market—the market on which the Efficient Market Hypothesis is based—reads his mind, that the “greenish cipher that moved across the board [of stock prices] represented the readouts of Lyle Wynant” (DeLillo 22). As Crosthwaite interprets these readouts, the efficient market’s authority seems alluring to Wynant, offering the comforts of understanding and order, and the New York Stock Exchange floor offers the protagonist a zone of “rules, standards

and customs” (DeLillo 28). But this interpretation makes sense only if one ignores the disturbing context in which Wynant admires the market’s comforts. The idea that the market reads his mind reminds him that his inner life is “all the unwordable rubble, the glass, rags and paper of his tiny indefinable manias” (22). And on the same morning that Wynant admires the customs of the floor, a colleague is quite uncustomarily murdered. “Total confusion” suddenly holds sway on the floor (29), though the supposedly all-knowing stock prices on the board don’t reflect that information. The market’s authority proves gainsayable, and when the murder happens to draw Wynant into the circle of terrorists responsible for the act, he allies himself with them and with their plan to bomb the exchange. Through this alliance he attempts to escape and resist the unreliability of authority, of rule-bound, governed existence represented by the market, and more importantly escape and resist the disarray of his personal life, which the novel painstakingly depicts. *Players* puts a financial market onstage for a while, but most of the novel takes place off Wall Street as Wynant tries decipher his own aimless mind. *Players* primarily concerns not efficient and orderly events but inefficient and chaotic ones (Wynant’s turn to terrorism, his deteriorating marriage). Markets function as a foil for the novel’s core concerns, which extend beyond mere market mimesis. Seeing well enough this problem with his attempt to read the novel as a demonstration of efficient market theory, Crosthwaite admits the “arbitrary, aleatory effect” (164) of the novel’s plot. But clinging to the idea that *Players* does concern the efficient market—which the paucity of content about the stock market, let alone about its authority and efficiency, past page 29 renders untenable—he concludes that the novel finally “exceeds the market’s logic of epistemological enclosure” (167). The enclosure exists not in the novel but in his limiting assumption that the work reflects the stock market logic of Wall Street. On the contrary, DeLillo like Pynchon seems to stress the market’s separateness. *Players* focuses on the logic of contemporary anomie that dominates the streets of the world beyond, where people like Wynant play out tiny manias of no worth on the stock exchange.

Unlike these strained attempts to argue that financial matters predominate in novels about other things, Crosthwaite’s readings of metafictional works about novelists’ own markets illuminate the works’ central subjects. Percival Everett’s many-faceted gem, *erasure*, creatively exaggerates the author’s own predicament to illustrate the challenges Black writers face in today’s narrow-minded fiction market. The authorial stand-in, named Thelonious “Monk” Ellison, after two artists who resisted racial stereotypes, has race-based market woes: his work is neither “commercial enough to

make any real money” (42) nor “black enough” (Everett 42–43). Angrily responding to a Black-enough bestseller that exploits stereotypes about Black urban life called *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto* (a send-up of Sapphire’s *Push*), Monk writes a parody of the bestseller called *My Pafology*. Everett includes this fiction in *erasure*, parodying a parody to attack the fiction market’s racist assumptions. In the novel, the attack fails: *My Pafology*, a congeries of stereotypes about Black men, draws a huge advance from Random House, becomes a bestseller, and wins a prestigious book award. The market profits from its racism, which Monk cannot afford to reject. Attacking on another front, Everett juxtaposes a touching narrative of his narrator’s family with the satire of Monk’s success. Everett offers the market a choice between depth and superficiality, challenging if not expecting it to value the former over the latter. The novelist thus inscribes within the novel its own difficulty in being taken seriously by a market that perceives Black life as caricature. Crosthwaite doesn’t quite delineate this subtler metafiction, but to his credit, he leads the reader to it by underscoring that Everett’s “aesthetic sympathies” lie with his “sensitively depicted, affecting, and broadly realist portrait of family crisis and upheaval” (53), not with market-pandering satire.

Joshua Cohen’s *Book of Numbers* is just as concerned with emphasizing metafictionally the market difficulties facing novelists. Crosthwaite stresses that Cohen’s novel is a difficult read conceding nothing to the market: the book “actively rejects the conventional hallmarks of mass-market appeal,” wagering that “this very departure from market-sanctified forms will prove revelatory and compelling enough” to establish a market for such unconventional works (234). The novel depicts the travails in the book business of one Josh, a portrait of the author as schlemiel. Cohen limns his alter ego’s failures in writing and bookselling in an unconventional yet darkly humorous style. Josh exploits his mother’s life to contribute a book to the “Holocaust Industry,” and after the book’s failure becomes, as Crosthwaite nails it, “the very embodiment of the jobbing writer” (237), taking on tasks like posting “fake consumer reviews of New England B&Bs I wasn’t able to afford” (Cohen 1.32). Josh’s nadir, ghostwriting the memoir of a tech guru who speaks only the jargon of Silicon Valley, is Cohen’s pinnacle, allowing him to skewer the contemporary privileging of numbers over letters that is as inimical to fiction as any market. The guru sums up the situation thus: “by trying to think words all we were thinking were numbers” (Cohen 0.232). And since numbers are the source of wealth and power today, those who think in words must serve those who think in numbers. This story

of Josh's descent from artistic autonomy to "writing wholly directed by others," to "something like a state of pure heteronomy" is comic (Crosthwaite 237), but Cohen's intent in chronicling Josh's career failures is serious. Crosthwaite puts it well: Cohen wants "to install what he calls 'the story behind the story' as a core part of the story: to incorporate an account of the economic pressures that shape literary production into the end product itself" (235–236). Cohen's success at this incorporation epitomizes market metafiction's ability to show the stakes for writers in today's fiction market.

In sum, though Crosthwaite's attempts to find finance at the heart of today's novels fail, he usefully calls attention to a particular metafictional approach that affords ambitious authors new ways both to resist commercial pressure and attract readers. Unlike the works Crosthwaite misreads as financial, those whose market implications he does help us clearly discern are autobiographical. Crosthwaite holds that market metafiction is a product of our "present phase of intense financialization" (3), whose unique pressures have caused the "twenty-first century efflorescence" of this fictional mode of "self-consciousness about the text's market positioning" (4), a positioning that is clear only when the text concerns its author. Comparison of the reading of *Players*, which establishes no market position whatsoever for the novel, with the reading of *erasure*, which establishes its market position by fictionalizing Everett's experience and attitudes, shows that such self-consciousness works best, if not exclusively, through autobiography. It may be that the jaundiced, market-savvy attitudes towards the fiction market characteristic of Crosthwaite's convincing examples of market metafiction are unique to this financialized era. Yet ours is not the first period in which market pressures have led novelists to write their own economic difficulties into their work in much the same way as Everett and Cohen write theirs. Though Crosthwaite might disagree, his notion of "contemporary" market metafiction suggests a path to increased understanding of *earlier* autobiographical fiction by, say, Dickens or Proust, works influenced by the conflict-ridden circumstances of their publication but rarely understood to be *about* those circumstances. *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*, then, may have value not only for the study and understanding of contemporary and future fiction constrained by markets, but of fiction of the past whose reflections on its own marketing has been hitherto unexplored. To see inscribed in *David Copperfield* or *In Search for Lost Time* not just their authors but their authors soliciting while resisting the market for their works, is to see these novels anew, to see them as contemporary.

Robin Silbergleid and Kristina Quynn (eds), *Reading & Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 301pp

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Reading & Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations is the sort of book that makes you question what you read and write, and more importantly, how you read and write, particularly within an academic context. It makes you question how to write reviews, too, and makes you more (probably self-) conscious about your audience and the reception your work will receive. Considering that's the main project of this collection of essays that investigate the intersection of critical and creative work, it's easy to judge the book overall as successful. Each chapter deviates from what one might consider the standard critical essay, often employing narrative, collage, dialogue, and experimentation to explore the impact of literary artifacts. Whether or not the essays can inspire a movement that makes academia more accepting of work that doesn't fit in the classic categories of critical scholarship remains to be seen, but one can hope.

The divide between critical and creative work exists because academic advancement relies upon the scaffolding of evaluation and enumeration. It's a divide that forces value judgements. It's a divide that's baked into the very nature of awarding degrees, the specialization required to claim the expertise that the academy requires. The process doesn't allow much space for creative work where critical work is demanded, nor vice versa. *Reading & Writing Experimental Texts* cumulatively asks for a different method of evaluation and enumeration, though an explicit outline for a new institutional scaffolding is still as hard to identify in this book as in the average tenure review portfolio.

If you tried to pin it down, perhaps this new method would involve more patience than evaluation teams are used to employing. As a result of that patience, the academy would begin acknowledging the value of critical work that crosses genres beyond the critical essay, the dissertation, the monograph, the review. Smart work takes many shapes. So, too, would the academy make room for the critical work that *describes* a scholar's personal engagement with his or her subject. This isn't a call for a return to reader-response, not in its pure form, but rather the opportunity for critics to understand their own identities as readers/scholars/writers, and the ways those at times competing identities sometimes flavor how we grapple with the big ideas revealed through the

materials we choose to investigate. If our scholars are a diverse lot, and their modes of scholarship are a diverse lot, then why should we expect critics' responses to be any different?

None of the book's twelve chapters are solely dedicated to argumentative advocacy of this overall project. Instead, the editors wisely have chosen to let their authors explore the project by putting it into practice. This is a book about writing experimental criticism that legitimizes experimental criticism by doing experimental criticism. It offers, then, a series of roadmaps to follow in order to arrive at the destination of critical work that bleeds into the creative, and it's stronger for this approach. That strength comes at a price, however, that gets at the heart of the project's limitations: readers may find the chapters too idiosyncratically focused on each author's particular personal projects to allow for uptake or overlap with the reader's own concerns.

If there's a weakness to the book's overall argument, it's that the book never fully comes to terms with the inherent dangers of breaking new critical ground in a pre-tenure career. Those dangers, of course, as some of the writers explain, involve the promotion and hiring process, the closed-room evaluations that determine so much of the tangible lives of writers and scholars. At one point, the book does make explicit its appeal to a broader practice of critical work that makes space for the creative, and readers might find this useful for their own scholarship. In the chapter "Carole Maso's *AVA* and the Practice of Reading: Selves in Dialogue" from Halli Beauprey and Robin Silbergleid, the authors write, "[p]erhaps sometimes the best work—the work most deserving of those A grades—is the work that documents the struggle and process rather than the work that pretends there is a single right answer that came easily" (59). Readers will find in this chapter the most easily available ammunition to advocate for critical work that includes the creative.

Structurally, the book contains two fairly equal parts. The first the editors have named "Critical Contexts." These chapters are more likely to focus on the advocacy for interdisciplinary work, though they each generally approach that message through critical work directed at a text or a group of texts. The second part, named "Critical Readings," contains essays that are more performative of that type of scholarship, and through their action generate their advocacy. As with everything presented here, however, those boundaries are very porous.

For readers looking to include chapters of this book in their own classes, or looking for places to expand the conversation into their own work, the chapters are usefully clear from the outset about what materials they'll be taking up. Chapters from Kristen

Renzi and Kate Ridinger Smorul each deal with the materiality of artifacts that scholars may find useful. Three chapters in a row, from Stephanie Glazier, Amy Nolan, and Teresa Carmody, focus on how an understanding of the human body influences our reading and writing and responding. The chapter “Blah Blah Bleh: Bulimic Writing as Resistance,” by Megan Milks, also contends with how we write about and understand the body, but more powerfully unpacks how writing contributes to the metaphors we use to understand our place in the world, and vice versa. In all cases, the chapters could serve as a jumping-off point for developing scholars to explore their own brand of creative-critical work. The book is eye-opening for the possibilities it presents: critical work can look like a lot of things, here are some options.

Melissa Mora Hidalgo’s chapter, “Expert Witness: Living in the Dirt,” perhaps presents the most explicit pathway for doing critical-creative writing, while the final chapter, “Take 12: A Critical Performance,” is perhaps the most unusual, taking the form of a script for a live-action rendering for the process of language’s role in meaning-making. All the chapters foreground the personal of both creative and critical work to some degree, however, and each chapter is an invitation to understand not just the writer’s reaction to an artifact but also the process taken in arriving at that reaction. The chapters are akin to watching a magician saw an assistant in half, but the box in which the assistant is placed is made transparent. Even so, the magic happens.

Each chapter has its own specific project to complete, but the common through line is the call for more interdisciplinary work, the power of such work, and the potential scholarly rigor of such work. Because of the personalizing approach the book advocates, many of the writers position their chapters within their own institutional contexts of tenure and promotion, or hiring processes, and the fear of how their contribution should count toward those efforts, if it would count at all. It’s a familiar story to anyone who’s been in academia and made an argument for the value of the work that didn’t quite fit with university-wide tenure track guidelines or a rubric used by an evaluation team. And it’s especially pertinent for literary scholars: as Diane P. Freedman writes in her chapter, “Ecological Echoing: Following the Footsteps,” “we in English are ever going to be deemed dabblers and eccentrics by someone” (33).

Freedman’s essay alludes to the book’s overall argument that criticism—and scholarship as a whole, one could say—has long had a tradition of letting personal experience inform that work. There has always been hybridity; we just lacked the labels. Several chapters highlight the intertextuality of their subjects and projects and place criticism alongside the transactionality of the academic process. While describing the

concept of bulimic writing, Milks calls it “intertextual and hybrid, combining personal narrative, criticism, philosophy, and theory, always foregrounding the personal” (83). The same could be said about each of the essays in the book. Kristen Renzi’s chapter about *The WunderCabinet* describes its subject, but also the argument of the book as a whole:

What I do think it offers, though, is a way of reframing scholarly endeavor—via curiosity—to focus less on mastery alone and more on the complicated, toggling, ever-unsteady ways in which knowledge breeds unknowing and unknowing breeds knowledge. (125)

Renzi is invoking again the transactions that occur during the process of creating scholarship, taking it to mean that within the context of the academic the process should be privileged as much as the end result, thus making room for new acceptance among the academic gatekeepers. Renzi is also problematizing the identities of critic and artist, producer and consumer, familiar moves in the fields of literary criticism and “rhet/comp.”

What Renzi fails to take-up—and this is a criticism for the collection as a whole—is how to argue against the status quo of grant awards, promotion, and tenure track lines that don’t reward this kind of investment in work that straddles lines between the creative and the critical. Several times, the writers in this book lament literary academia’s lack of flexibility or extoll the power of critical-creative writing, but they never explicitly plot a path through the thicket of the current system. Future scholars inspired by this book would have room here to be more concrete in their calls and proposals, though the irony is that even such work is itself usually done in forms that resemble the traditional critical essay far more than the work our authors here ask the academy to value.

As readers might expect, Roland Barthes makes an appearance a few times, most powerfully in “Reading and Writing in Kristina Gunnar’s *Rose Garden*” by Kristina Quynn. Quynn introduces the consumer/producer dichotomy through Barthes, and argues for the importance of the dance these identities perform during creative critical work. Much of this book is concerned with the unwritability of experience and identity, and how we struggle to put it into words, anyway. That struggle, the contributors argue, is worthy academic labor, even if it doesn’t fit neatly into pre-defined boxes. The essays weave paths between reader response and personal essay, but thick with research and reportage. In this way, the pieces slip into the realm of the lyric essay, the subject of one of the book’s most-powerful chapters.

For Smorul, the lyric essay genre provides the basis for understanding and then responding to both life experience and textual experience. One bleeds into another. It's a foundation for all creative critical work. Smorul writes:

The lyric essay is a perfect medium to explore these personal objects and to merge them with emotional realities and memories, focusing on craft and form. However, it is equally important to remember that this writing is not merely decorative or confessional. In the absence of a linear narrative and the conventions of academic criticism, it involves discomfort, lack of closure, and imprecision. It does not hide the struggle; it invites the reader into it. (241)

The lyric essay, one of the slipperiest of genres, hard to define even by practitioners, is the apt metaphor for creative critical work. Here's the book's largest weakness, however. If the writers seek to gain acceptance for the work they do here within the halls of academia, they'd be best served providing more tangible language with which to describe it. Sadly, those efforts could result in making this sort of labor no different from the "accepted" scholarship that came before it, but since the writers never propose a complete obliteration of the tenure and promotion system, some bridges would be helpful.

The chapters in *Reading & Writing Experimental Texts: Critical Innovations* feel as though they are banging on the walls of an older academia, a secure academia. A method of evaluation that has worked for those now responsible for doing the evaluating. *Reading & Writing Experimental Texts* requests—not demands, because the book, although arguing for revolution, never loses its respect for the old ways—an appeal for a fresh variety of scholarly work that "counts." It never loses sight that the battleground for its war is the evaluation meeting and the third-year review, making it an important volume in a very practical sense to every scholar who is trying to decide between existing genres to work in, when they really should be focusing on texts, saying something new, and saying something better.

Competing Interests

Martin Paul Eve, the author of *Pynchon and Philosophy* (reviewed here) is an editor of *Orbit*. The review was handled independently by reviews editor Ali Chetwynd, and Martin Paul Eve was not involved in the process.

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@mervatim. "Re-reading all of Austen & one rationale for close reading we don't debate enough is how useful it is for figuring out if a dude is lying to you, or when a letter's true writer is a jealous fiancé, or demonstrating to your new gf that she's a better writer than your old one." *Twitter*, 9 Feb. 2021, 11:29 a.m., <https://twitter.com/mervatim/status/1359177489084473348>

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