

Review of Stefano Ercolino. *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolãno's 2666*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014

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Abstract

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In *The Maximalist Novel*, Stefano Ercolino attempts to identify the crucial features of a new genre in prose based on seven novels: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004), and *2005 dopo Cristo* (2005), an untranslated novel by the Italian collective Babette Factory. Ercolino defines this genre, the maximalist novel, in the following way; each novel is an agglutination of these ten features: length, encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, diegetic exuberance, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment and hybrid realism. Drawing on the work of Franco Moretti, Tom LeClair and Frederick R. Karl, who are utilized heavily to outline the theoretical parameters of the study, Ercolino proceeds to investigate 'long, superabundant, hypertrophic narratives, both in form and content' (1). Ercolino's investigation of form is more successful than his exploration of content.

In the early chapters, Ercolino leans heavily on the work of Franco Moretti, particularly *Modern Epic: The World-system from Goethe to García Márquez* (1996), to align the novel with the epic: 'a lofty and prestigious genre' (13). What is absent from Ercolino's account is the historical link between the novel and the epic. Nowhere in *The Maximalist Novel* does he connect the authors he has selected with the tradition of authors who seriously (Henry Fielding) or humorously (Cervantes or Laurence Sterne) connect the novel to the epic. This is not to say that Ercolino's study is without use. He sensibly proposes 'the idea of a system of narrative genres constantly traversed by polyphonic and monologic tensions that cluster, in different historical moments, around either the epic or the novel' (15). However, he then proceeds to largely ignore the epic (or other genres that inform the novel) and concentrate only on the novels he has chosen. While there are useful asides to the modernist precursors of Pynchon and company, they are sketchy and underdeveloped. What *The Maximalist Novel* does well is identify common features that characterize (but hardly define) a genre. For example, note the varying lengths of the novel he defines as long: compare Pynchon's 700+ page *Gravity's Rainbow* to Zadie Smith's <500 page *White Teeth*.

The upside to Ercolino's approach is that the reader gets a very

useful synopsis of the emergence of generic features that feed into what he calls the maximalist novel. For example, in the chapter on the 'Encyclopaedic Mode', Ercolino links the emergence of the long, postmodern novel to the collapse of the apparatus of modernism in post-WWII America and Europe, which undermined the universalizing dramas that underpinned such works (28). However, too often, this chapter – like others in Part One – reads like a summary of other theorists' opinions on the matter. This has the unenviable consequence of holding each reference to his chosen novel to ransom. Each novel is looked at with proscriptive reference to the programme the critic outlined in the introduction.

An example of this occurs when Ercolino discusses paranoia in postmodern fiction in chapter seven – something that is often connected to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Ercolino asserts the following: those 'aspects of the sublime linked to mystery and ambiguity' inflect it 'in a postmodern key in association with the conspiratory imagination' (107). So far, so plausible: the sublime of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant is linked to the profusion of data in novels such as *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest*. However, what are the sources of this paranoia? How are they linked to the subject matter of the novels? We need a little more than a cursory reference to a page or two of these novels to see paranoia in evidence. More troubling though, is the fact that the medium is divorced from the message, that is, the maximalist novel (a genre) is imposed on an author's prose (a style) in a general way. Surely, Zadie Smith aimed for more than a simulacrum of the generic features that characterized *Gravity's Rainbow* when she wrote her own novel, *White Teeth*. Moreover, because there are no chapters that offer specific readings of Ercolino's chosen novels, there is perhaps a danger that this study offers ammunition to conservative opponents of maximalist (i.e. experimental, exuberant) novels. Could they not claim, based on *The Maximalist Novel*, that the novels of Pynchon and Wallace are simply a conglomeration of generic features, cobbled together with ingenuity bereft of feeling, and find their way into university courses because of the theoretical apparatus literary critics use to justify their gnomic claims about seemingly unreadable books?

I do not sympathize with this view but one can see how a reader – frustrated with one of the novels Ercolino chooses to assess – might distort his methodology in this manner. A simple remedy might ward off this objection to Ercolino's study: the historical and the theoretical need

to achieve some kind of synthesis. Even Moretti, to whom Ercolino defers, has now moved toward a technological/statistical solution to some of the problems he sets (see *Distant Reading*, 2013). I do not agree with Moretti's conclusion in *Distant Reading* but respect his attempt to read literary history in a new way.

Ercolino has pointed to many fascinating things within the genre he defines as the maximalist novel. However, the emphasis on genre – and the theoretical apparatus that defines it – detracts from the engagement with an author's style. Yes, to understand the stylistic features of an author, one must understand its generic roots, but surely a great novel such as *Gravity's Rainbow* defies a simple catalogue of its formal elements? Nonetheless, I would recommend Ercolino's study as a starting point that provokes the reader. He is, to his credit, unafraid of the bold statement. What I would like him to do is ally his clear gifts as a practitioner of literary theory to his instincts as a reader, thereby bringing questions like quality, style, characterization and meaning back to the centre of an essentially fascinating question: why have so many interesting novelists chosen to write books in the mode of Pynchon, Wallace, DeLillo, Smith, Franzen, Bolaño, and the Babette Factory since the end of WWII?

References

- Ercolino, Stefano, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (Sbragia, Albert, Trans.) (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014)
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- Moretti, Franco, *Distant Reading* (New York: Verso, 2013)