

Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). 978-1-6235-6291-5.

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The battle for the terminological territory of postmodernism and its progeny continues to rage and, at present, looks tediously perpetual. Thus far we have been given altermodernism, metamodernism, neomodernism, hypermodernism, remodelism and transmodernism, among others, some of which refer to supposed developmental phases of late capitalism, while others are more applicable to aesthetics. Yet, it is still fittingly impossible to offer a singular definition of postmodernism that encapsulates everything aesthetic or political that might fall under the label. As Justice Potter Stewart wrote of hardcore pornography in a US Supreme Court opinion, definitions may remain elusive, but “I know it when I see it”.

In an ambitious new book, appearing in Italian as *Il Romanzo Massimalista* and in its English translation by Albert Sbragia as *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, Stefano Ercolino explicitly tackles the aesthetics of massiveness that run through much, but by no means all, postmodern fiction in an “interconnected and ambiguous relationship” (27). While noting the problem of “cutting into a *continuum*” and “arbitrarily selecting the objects to focus on” (xii), Ercolino settles on a range of canonical fictions, expanding the titular list to also include Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, DeLillo's *Underworld*, Smith's *White Teeth*, Franzen's *The Corrections* and Factory's *2005 dopo Cristo*. This leads to a worthwhile if contentious study that will, no doubt, inform critical discussion of not only these texts but others that might be characterised as “maximalist” for a while to come.

In his work, Ercolino identifies ten features of the “maximalist novel” that appear with varying intensity but, it is claimed, are always “systematically co-present” in such texts and that here structure the study: length; encyclopaedic mode, dissonant chorality, completeness, narratorial omniscience, paranoid imagination, intersemioticity, ethical commitment and hybrid realism (xii-xiv). The book is somewhat imbalanced between two “parts”, with the second being substantially shorter and the chapters feeling, to my mind, somewhat less substantial as the book progressed. Nonetheless, Ercolino adeptly lays out a framework for considering “big” books in terms that go beyond their simple magnitude. Of course, it is curious that “ethical commitment” and, say, “hybrid realism”, should be considered tropes that contribute towards a description of a novel as “maximalist”, while it is clear why “length”, “encyclopaedic mode” and others obviously should. This leads me to wonder whether, perhaps, the author selected texts based on the earlier components and, then, with such a subset, identified the subsequent traits. While this potentially leads to a tautological mode of classification, it doesn't diminish the power of Ercolino's observations, which are mostly strong.

The explicit critical touchstones for this incremental discussion are also clearly set out at the beginning of the work in a summary mode that, although a little forced, should prove extremely helpful to the reader new to such discussions: Tom LeClair (*The Art of Excess*), Franco Moretti (*Modern Epic*) and Frederick R. Karl (*American Fictions*). While this is a convincing field, as Ercolino points out, any list of this kind can be inflated *ad infinitum* (and the book contains an extensive justification for Gaddis's exclusion on the fictional side). That said, it was a little surprising to see so little prominence given to and such criticism directed at Edward Mendelson's well-known theorisation of the encyclopaedic novel (later followed by Stephen J. Burn), which is instead relegated to a sub-section.¹ Indeed, *The Maximalist Novel* tends towards the intense

1 I also queried the quantification of exegesis of *Gravity's Rainbow* that Ercolino sets out here. Ercolino argues that it is difficult to argue for the centrality of Pynchon's novel to a postmodernist or maximalist canon because it has not received as much attention as *Commedia*, *Faust* or *Ulysses* (38). Yet, by my count, Pynchon is the second-most

privileging and canonisation of a relatively small number of critical voices. This is not necessarily a problem, but it is a particular approach of which the reader should be aware.

Although its schematics of the maximalist novel will, I suspect, prove controversial with readers of all stripes (after all, applying terminological labels is an attempt at discourse manipulation), Ercolino's book is interesting for the approach to an international, comparative dimension that it brings. Going beyond the "American postmodern narrative", particularly with respect to paranoia, the book attempts to demonstrate that it is instead a "transversal cultural phenomenon" (105), which is a welcome move. However, while this is explicitly voiced as a concern, I wondered what this new transversal mode meant for political specificities. For one, the Anglo-American texts receive substantially more attention in the work than do Bolaño and Factory (the author clearly particularly relishes writing about Pynchon). For another, if "ethical commitment" is to be a central feature of a theoretical account of the maximalist novel, must this not be tied to specific historical and political contexts?

All of which brings me back to a critical point, with which I began in respect to postmodernism and which is further stimulated by the discussion within *The Maximalist Novel*: to what extent do such groupings, taxonomies and classifications help us to understand the ethics and aesthetics of literary production? We all invariably use such classifications as terminological shorthands, but often with modification and critique. The first question, then, that I would have liked Ercolino to have more thoroughly pre-empted is: what are the benefits of this classification of "maximalist"? The second core challenge that I would have liked to have seen addressed is the explicit methodology of how we schematise texts and how we justify the parameters of exclusion. Interestingly for a work that makes such heavy use of Moretti, questions of how such systematisation might work in the era of digital corpus analysis are not here broached. What is clear is that attempts to cluster works by shared conceptual characteristics seem, by definition, to always fall short of their aims. This does

covered American novelist of the later twentieth century, only coming in behind Toni Morrison.

not mean that there is no merit in so doing, only rather to point out that discourse tends to proliferate, in such spheres, at the abstract, rather than specific, levels. Ercolino's book, therefore, left this reviewer caught between two states: one of feeling under-fulfilled with respect to an answer to my two questions and another of feeling excited at the prospect of a new way to conceive of these novels. And of course, being caught between two poles, never resting at one or the other, is a very postmodern sensation.

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