



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2012) Review of American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past by Theophilus Savvas. *Literature and History* 21 (2), pp. 106-108. ISSN 0306-1973.

Downloaded from: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/12241/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

Theophilus Savvas, *American Postmodern Fiction and the Past*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. Ix + 213, £50

One of the hazards that any writer on the postmodernism of Coover, DeLillo, Pynchon, Vollman and Doctorow must circumnavigate is the wrecking of his or her scholarship on the iceberg of existing meta-fictional historiographic commentary, of which there is a vast body. It is to this challenge that Theophilus Savvas rises in *American Postmodernist Fiction and The Past*, a work that sets out to undo the epistemic confusion between an autotelic, formalist postmodern art and those works that present determined historical targets while treading the tightrope between plurality and moral relativism. Savvas undertakes this feat through five serial close readings of these authors in an attempt to rethink Jameson's critique of a generalised vague "sense of 'pastness'" (p. 2).

Savvas' initial excursion, to Coover's *The Public Burning*, sets in motion the first of several cyclical structures in his work in which the Rosenbergs' echo will be heard again later, rebounding off the back wall of Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*. Focusing upon Coover's conflation of novelistic and performance modes, Savvas foregrounds these as synchronic and diachronic representations of the past respectively, without resorting to a crude objective/subjective split. This is achieved, Savvas argues, through a satirical undermining of the chronicler's impartiality, revealing this speaker not as "a surrogate for the voice of a writer in the 1970s, but as a carefully crafted voice of 1950s America" (p. 19), a polyphonic melting pot that is, none the less, constructed. Against this critique of the synchronic relation Savvas juxtaposes the alternating, diachronic, emplotted Nixon narrative. Through the Nixonian subjective reconstruction of the back-story, Savvas argues that the relation between synchronic and diachronic narrative is actually bi-directional and symbiotic (p. 25). In illustrating this reconstruction, Savvas elegantly weaves the historical and theoretical contexts into the fictional, eschewing the dangerous stylistic separation that such interdisciplinary work so often entails.

Amid his closing remarks on Coover's mythopoesis and performance excess, in which he begins his later-revived Pynchonian thematic work on subjunctivity, Savvas remarks on the ways in which “a myth may be distended into history” (p. 31), a crossover that seems pertinent to DeLillo's *Libra* and the Warren Report. This is, however, a route approached obliquely by Savvas who opts instead to root this analysis of a “latent history” in DeLillo's earlier *Great Jones Street* and *Ratner's Star*. In light of this backdrop, the emergence here of a paranoid “they” system against which historical counternarratives can emerge seems a trifle too predictable (pp. 43–46). Perhaps, though, this is a necessary setup for a reading of *Libra* that foregoes easy-win rebuttals, exploring head on the interplay, enrichment and redemption of the Report and providing a novel take on an otherwise tired subject. The only critique worth mentioning here is that this convincing unpicking of the “monological view of history” (p. 49) is supported by a sometimes overwhelming whirlwind of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Whitehead, Deleuze, von Bertalanffy, Kant, Lévi-Strauss, Butler, Burke, Spivak, Jung, Freud, White, Sontag and Adorno in a utilitarian Theory tornado.

Further critique could extend into Savvas' treatment of Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, where the assessment of Pynchon's novel as “wresting the narrative away from those in power” seems old hat, especially when metaphorically mediated through quantum mechanics. Consider, for instance, that Shawn Smith has pointed out that it is “no longer new or revolutionary” to state that “history is a field of competing rhetorical or narrative strategies”.<sup>1</sup> However, despite a move away from such areas in much critical discourse, Savvas brings these themes up to speed with contemporary thinking; indeed, Simon de Bourcier's forthcoming Continuum volume on Pynchon and relativity is indicative of renewed interest in this schema. Furthermore, the reading against James Wood of a dialectical enlightenment, of a Line of both positive and negative liberties that spreads rhizomically, will be of interest to all Pynchon scholars. Finally of note as a refreshing rethinking, is the re-situation of Pynchon's hidden pockets of subjunctive hope not, as is usually the case with *Mason*

& *Dixon*, in conspiracy – that is left to DeLillo – but rather in a heretical gnostic history, a strain that has lain critically dormant, or at least under-appreciated, since Dwight Eddin's work on *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Moving towards the next generation of American novelists, parallel to Franzen, DFW and Powers, and Savvas considers marginalization in the novels of William T. Vollman. In situating this author as not-quite post-postmodern, Savvas magnifies those aspects shared in the postmodern lineage in order to excavate a “symbolic history” of the deeper, sincere truth of untrue origins (pp. 98–99); a syncretic truth (p. 101). The evaluation of Vollman here is not wholly positive as, in Savvas' consideration, the author fails to achieve the moment of determined collapse that would present the synthesis of artistic and historical truth. That is not to say that the lead up to this failure is not enlightening, revealing as it does that alterity can be seen as the central tenet of Vollman's canon, often through temporal collapse, unveiling a transformative between-ness, a metaxis or third way.

It is to the final, tripartite section on E.L. Doctorow that Savvas' volume finally turns, investigating the affiliation between postmodern historiographic emplotment and autocritical discourse on that very phenomenon. In this cycle, Savvas begins by exploring the dilemma of the American Left in *The Book of Daniel*, thereby cycling back to the Rosenbergs. It is interesting to note the political implications of this choice; as civil liberties are eroded from US law, can America claim to be so very far from its Cold War witch hunts? This aside, Savvas also uses this chapter to conclude a long-brewing refutation of Jameson's “didactic Marxis[t]” (p. 146) response to *Ragtime* through an assertion of an “organic use of history and fiction conducive of a greater unity of form” (p. 145). Finally, Savvas ends with *The March* and remarks upon the end of the postmodernist era, claiming that as the works of this genre become “less 'transgressive’” (p. 155), it reaches its own, natural conclusion and closure.

Reading *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past*, one does not get the overwhelming sense of a theoretical revolution but, rather, a carefully-charted, precise evaluation of concrete texts from which a solid and thoughtful analysis emerges. As Savvas remarks, the benefit of hindsight here produces a reading that seems more nuanced than earlier appraisals as it is distanced from the object of its study. Although aspects of interpretation in this volume are questionable, the intricacies of the squabble illustrate, more than flaws in Savvas' book, the nature of engagement in ongoing debate.

Martin Paul Eve

Department of English

University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

[m.eve@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:m.eve@sussex.ac.uk)

<sup>i</sup> Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.