



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2018) Review of The Craft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention by David Letzler. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature* 6 (1), ISSN 2398-6786.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/22700/>

Usage Guidelines:

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

or alternatively



Open Library of Humanities



Reviews

How to Cite: Sandberg, E, Lackey, R, Eve, M P, Hoffman, T and Rongrui, L
2018 Orbit Book Reviews May 2018. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*,
6(1): 5, pp. 1–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.499>

Published: 05 June 2018

Peer Review:

This article was peer-reviewed internally by the review editors and by a member of the Orbit editorial team.

Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.



REVIEWS

Orbit Book Reviews May 2018

Lanzendörfer, Tim (Ed.). *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 310pp and Martin, Theodore. *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 264pp

Eric Sandberg

City University of Hong Kong, HK
esandber@cityu.edu.hk

Thomas Pynchon's two most recent novels, *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013) went beyond his normal, post-modern engagement with genre fiction to openly proclaim their affiliation with the traditions of hard-boiled detective fiction. In 2017, Colson Whitehead won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Underground Railway*, a novel that blends a traditional, realistic slavery narrative with elements of science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history. In the same year, the Nobel Prize in Literature went to Kazuo Ishiguro, an author whose two most recent publications can be categorized as dystopian science fiction (*Never Let Me Go*, 2005) and fantasy (*The Buried Giant*, 2015). These facts are all symptomatic of one of the clearest changes in contemporary fiction: the effacement of the once clear demarcation between literary and genre fiction.

There are many candidates for criteria to separate contemporary literature from its modern and post-modern predecessors. James English's description of contemporary British writing as both acknowledging and being situated within a "global literary geography" is persuasive and broadly applicable; Richard Lane, Rod Mengham, and Philip Tew's identification of contemporary fiction's obsession with the past (again in a British context) is equally perceptive and resonant; Jago Morrison's claim that contemporary Anglophone fiction is interstitial, concerned with "the spaces between national cultures, genders and histories" (7) certainly identifies a prominent and widespread pattern in fictional production. None of these ways of describing

contemporary writing exclude the others: the “house of fiction,” as Henry James claimed at the start of the twentieth-century in his preface to *The Portrait of the Lady*, has “not one window but a million,” and this is even more true at the start of the twenty-first century (8). Yet if we were forced to choose a single trait to associate with contemporary fiction, we could do worse than to look to its tendency to cross genre boundaries, to intertwine ‘high’ literature and ‘low’ genre fiction. Indeed, so pronounced is this characteristic that it is probably the strongest contender for a descriptive periodization of early twenty-first century fiction. Both of the books reviewed here address this phenomenon.

Lanzendörfer describes the focus of the essays collected in *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary* as “‘détente’ fiction” (3). This is a type of writing that short-circuits the familiar debate over the relative merits of literary and genre fiction recently rehearsed (or rehashed) by Arthur Krystal and Lev Grossman in the pages of *The New Yorker* and *Time*. For Krystal, genre fiction is a guilty pleasure, a venial literary sin for which we can do penance by reading challenging works of high literary and cultural value (his example of penitential fiction, Herman Broch’s *The Death of Virgil*, a fantastically good yet fantastically demanding novel, is well chosen). For Grossman on the other hand twenty-first century literary culture is defined by a “revolution from below” comparable to other forms of contemporary cultural disruption. Genre fiction is storming out of the supermarket aisles onto the sacred heights of Mount Helicon. Lanzendörfer and his contributors seek to avoid this rather sterile, if enjoyable, polarity by taking as given the important role of genre poetics in contemporary literary production and asking instead “what the extent of the new role is, and what potential it has for literary analysis” (2).

The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel views genre as the place where social and historical forces intersect with the text, the place where a given time’s attitudes, anxieties, and approaches register on the page. This is applied in three different ways in the three different sections of the book. The first part looks at genre in relation to periodization, asking whether the rise of genre, and the fact that it no longer necessarily responds to post-modern reading strategies or reflects post-modern socio-economic realities, indicates that post-modernism, as “a periodization

of the present, is no longer viable" (7). Unsurprisingly, the collection offers no conclusive answer to this question. The second section looks more directly at the question of 'détente' fiction by examining some of the uses contemporary authors have found for genre poetics, while the third examines the ways in which a number of traditional genres, such as the bildungsroman, have transformed as they have entered the twenty-first century. Lanzendörfer's introduction to the collection is a yeomanlike attempt, and a generally successful one, to harness a number of very different horses to a single cart, and to get them all moving in the same direction.

Lanzendörfer's task has not always been an easy one. The essays in the first section, for example, are, despite their ostensible focus on questions of periodization, rather mixed. Phillip Löffler's comparison of Toni Morrison and Steven Spielberg reads *Beloved* and *Saving Private Ryan* in relation to a "moment of utopian speculation that defines a good deal of traditional science fiction literature," but I am not sure that this does, as Löffler claims, "resonate strongly with the turn to genre" in contemporary cultural production (24,30). Similarly, Lai-Tze Fan's examination of the relationship of the "digitally informed novel" to genre as a form of "postmodern intensification" is convincing, but it generally sheers away from any explicit discussion of how the novels she reads (Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* and Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*) engage with genre poetics, unless we take an intensified digital postmodernism to be a genre in its own right (35). *Orbit's* readers will be drawn to Salwa Karoui-Elounelli's interpretation of *Inherent Vice* as a self-parodic text built around not just subversion of the mystery genre, but around an "ironic echoing" of Pynchon's previous subversive parody of the genre in *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is a fine addition to the emerging body of criticism dealing with Pynchon's recent genre turn, although I would argue with Karoui-Elounelli's reading of Doc Sportello's drug use and its effect on the reliability of the narrative. Pynchon may be many things, but he is never puritanical about recreational substance abuse, and he is certainly open to mind-altering substances' potential to enhance perception rather than cloud it. Stephen Hock's chapter is central to the collection's exploration of the complexities of periodizing contemporary literature in relation to genre (and also rewardingly postmodern in its approach: he takes his working definition

of post-modernism from a 2001 Miss America contestant). Like many of the other contributors to this section, Hock is uncertain that we have moved completely past the post-modern era in terms of our engagement with genre. He argues, for example, that we are being wilfully blind when we talk about the 'rise' of genre: this is not a "recent generic turn" but a continuation of a "long-recognized postmodern engagement with genre" (58). His reading of Colson Whitehead and Charles Yu's debut novels *The Intuitionist* and *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* leads him to conclude that postmodernism's "mode of ironic engagement with genre" persists in contemporary literary production (69).

The second section of the book addresses itself to many of the core issues concerning the way genre appears in (or disappears from) twenty-first century fiction. Roger Bellin's essay on the inclusion of science fiction tropes in mass-market literature as a marker of cultural sophistication is a superb reading of the tendency of literary fiction to appropriate genre elements without any real understanding of the forms that are thus despoiled. His conclusion, that "science fictionalizing is a new form of middlebrow" is both trenchant and convincing (123). Yonatan Englender and Elana Gomel raise a similar point, taking issue with the way a 'literary' author who writes a work with clear generic antecedents will nonetheless be treated by the critical establishment as *sui generis*. Their reading of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as a specifically post-apocalyptic work of science fiction aims to address this failing. Gavin F. Hurley makes a similar point in his discussion of Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park*, a novel presented, marketed, and criticized as literary fiction, but which uses "the hackneyed nature of horror genre-fiction" to fulfill a central "literary and rhetorical function" (181–182). Clemens Spahr's chapter on Stephen King, and Annette Schimmelpfennig and Tim Lanzendörfer's chapter on Matt Ruff are both atypical insofar as they approach (or attack) the genre-literature divide from the other direction, looking not at the way literary authors use genre, but at the way genre authors use self-consciously generic material to achieve literary effects (the reader may distribute scare quotes through this sentence as they see fit). According to Spahr, King's *Joyland* "employs the poetics of genre [...] to create a self-consciously nostalgic vision that comments on the lack of community and agency in a commodified postmodern

society,” while Schimmelpfennig and Lanzendörfer see Ruff’s work as “deliberately engaging with and expanding the limitations of genre itself” (158, 162).

The final section of *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel* offers a reminder of an obvious fact that may at times be forgotten: while the notion of genre fiction is strongly linked to twentieth and twenty-first century literary culture, genres, or “complexes of schemata that facilitate cognitive world construction” as Martina Allen describes them, have been around as long as the novel itself, and indeed longer (203). Historical genres have not simply disappeared, replaced by the horror novels, romances, and forensic thrillers of our supermarket aisles. Instead, traditional genres continue to play an important role in contemporary writing. Allen’s chapter, for example, explores how the Quixotic genre has survived and developed as a “powerful metageneric trope” in recent novels and films including Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, and (again) Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts*. Katie Daily-Bruckner does something similar in her study of the way contemporary American writers are “self-consciously re-adapting [...] traditional immigrant narratives” to deal with the country’s inability to come to terms with modern patterns of immigration (219). Tim DeJong’s chapter on Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* raises an important point by looking at lyrical realism as a genre in its own right. This is a type of writing that has often been seen by traditional criticism as exceeding genre in some way, functioning as one half of a top-level, taxonomic distinction between, on the one hand, texts that do not traffic in the predictable patterning of genre, and, on the other, all those that do. DeJong argues that not only does this bifurcation do an injustice to the legion of work classified as genre fiction, but it also ignores the way the genre of lyrical realism itself has an important contribution to make to the way a novel like *Netherland* constructs meaning, in this case in relation to “the screen between self and world” (250).

Lanzendörfer’s collection is thus concerned with delineating the multiple roles genre plays today, and the essays it contains make a valuable contribution to our understanding of a central feature of much contemporary fiction. It is also an attempt to think through the relationship between current uses of genre and the traditions of postmodernism, and is thus concerned with defining our present literary moment.

This is also very much the case with Theodore Martin's monograph *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*, which, as its subtitle indicates, is interested not just in genre, but in the notion of the contemporary itself, and the way the two interact. Rather than trying to define directly what the contemporary is, Martin focuses on the ramifications of the fact that it is so difficult to do so. He points out the difficulties in using contemporary as a periodic term indicating a moment in history, and argues that it does not indicate mere presentness: instead he sees the notion of the contemporary as a "strategy of mediation" between present and past, proximity and distance (5). The master metaphor he brings to his analysis is a striking one, contrasting the gradual drift of the contemporary with the inertial drag of genre. Genre, Martin believes, can help us historicize the present. He agrees with Lanzendörfer that genre is a defining element of contemporary culture, and usefully identifies a number of ways in which contemporary writing breaks away from the traditions of modernism and post-modernism in relation to genre: it neither rejects nor pastiches, instead working within the genre to earnestly contribute to the history and development of, say, SF or hardboiled or zombie narratives (7–8). But for Martin the most important thing about contemporary genre is the way it can help us make sense, by contrasting tradition and innovation, the drag and the drift, "of what is emergent and unfamiliar about our contemporary moment" (7). Due to its inherent link to the past, genre is, in other words, an effective tool for reading the present.

After having deftly and thoroughly laid his foundations – and his work here is impressive indeed, offering a very useful orientation towards the whole question of genre fiction's relationship with literary production and scholarship – Martin moves through five chapters each dealing with a particular question raised by contemporary manifestations of genre: these are "the arbitrary period of the decade" as it appears in the novel of manners, "the questionable context of revival" in film noir, "the indeterminate temporality of waiting" in detective fiction, "the ephemeral atmosphere of the weather" in Westerns, and "the economic compromise of survival" in post-apocalyptic fictions (195). Martin thus sets out an ambitiously wide-ranging

program, moving across not just genres, but also media, to examine how each offers a “complex cultural record of our determinate—though still in the process of being determined—historical condition” (197). This breadth is at once a strength and weakness. The broad scope allows Martin to examine how a range of socio-historical factors, from the late twentieth and early twenty-first century rise of the white-collar precariat to the emergence of the material reality and cultural concept of the Anthropocene, are reflected in diverse forms of cultural production. But at the same time, it means that Martin’s readings within particular generic traditions, and of particular texts, can feel insufficiently rooted in the critical tradition.

The first chapter of *Contemporary Drift* deals directly with the issue of the periodization of the present through the literary (and social) convention which takes the decade as the primary unit of history. Martin’s case studies, focusing on Bret Easton Ellis and Zadie Smith, are fascinating, and his idea that in their work “the period is defined less by a specific set of names than by the relentless practice of naming” will resonate with readers of, for example, *Bleeding Edge* and *Vineland*, both of which adopt at times a similar technique, investigating how “superficial details come to stand for entire decades” (34, 37). Martin concludes that though “thinking through decades” is a fundamentally flawed approach to historicizing the present, it – and our reliance on it as a periodizing concept – “expresses the eternally impermanent conditions of the contemporary” (55). A similar ambiguity is apparent in the second chapter, which deals with film noir as a contradictory genre, at once “historically rooted” and “historically mobile” (57). Although Martin’s discussion of the contemporary noir focuses on Robert Rodriguez’s *Sin City* (2005) and Steven Soderbergh’s *The Good German* (2006), it will nonetheless be of interest to viewers of Paul Thomas Anderson’s adaptation of *Inherent Vice*, particularly in relation to the role of the voice-over within the genre as part of its “fixation on where its speakers are speaking from” (think of the cryptic vocal presence of Joanna Newsome’s *Sortilège* in the film) (77).

Similarly, the third chapter, dealing with contemporary crime fiction, is directly relevant to Pynchon’s most recent novels, although – sadly – Martin does not address

them, instead dealing largely with Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. Martin insightfully situates detective fiction as a way to understand the "dynamics of certainty and uncertainty" and the "tensions of knowing and unknowing" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and offers a valuable corrective to teleological readings of the genre (95, 99). "What," he asks, "if the solution isn't what we are reading for," a question so sensible it is surprising that so few critics have asked it (99). Martin's answer is that instead of a solution, we are reading for the suspended moments of waiting "embedded in every detective novel but made manifest only in the contemporary detective novel" (101). These moments of suspension point towards a new development in the epistemology of the genre: rather than uncovering truth, or uncovering the absence of truth, the detective novel now uncovers "the hazardous, irreducible mystery" of a "present that is constantly yet invisibly at risk" (101, 96). Martin concludes the chapter with a discussion of China Miéville's *The City & The City*, and this is one place where his superficial engagement with specific critical traditions becomes apparent. There is nothing wrong with Martin's reading of the novel, or the way he uses it in the broader context of his argument. But he makes absolutely no reference to previous work on the novel – there is a small but high-quality body of criticism – nor to the many interviews in which Miéville has discussed it, nor indeed to any work on *any* of Miéville's texts. Instead, Martin moves directly to the work of Giorgio Agamben (of *Homo Sacer* fame). Nor is this an isolated case: Martin consistently refers 'upwards', as it were, to overarching works of theory, but never, or only very rarely, 'sideways' to the work of scholars and critics dealing with specific texts (and their textual specifics). While this is obviously a reflection of Martin's broader theoretical interests, it also reflects an occasionally scanty engagement with the texts themselves.

In his fourth chapter Martin crosses media boundaries again, returning to film to discuss the ways in which the contemporary Western, in its strange marginal cultural persistence, can be understood in ecological rather than political terms as an "aesthetic strategy for reimagining the relation between the imperceptible slow motion of the climate crisis and the immediacy of contemporary life" (133). Fans of the

genre will best be able to assess his claim that recent Westerns can be distinguished from their predecessors by their interest in “*unseasonable* weather,” and are thus best classified as “*climate change Westerns*” (143, 142). In his fifth and final chapter, Martin changes direction in a seemingly dramatic fashion, moving from Westerns to post-Apocalyptic narratives, from weather to work. But if the breakdown of the cycle of the seasons, our most persistent, long-term and stable form of periodization, is a powerful indication of our contemporary crisis, so too is the breakdown of stable patterns of employment and leisure. Here Martin examines two versions of the post-Apocalyptic narrative. The first of these seems to indicate that “the end of the world affords the possibility of a return to something like *real* work,” that is to say unalienated labour in which the worker is intimately connected with every aspect of her work, and the work with every aspect of her life (166). This is a persuasive and exciting reading of the genre (although it is unclear how novel it is, as Martin’s references to previous work in the area are again limited). But Martin goes on from here to illuminate another strand of post-Apocalyptic fiction exemplified by Ben Marcus’ *The Flame Alphabet* and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, which figure the end of the world not as an imagined escape from the stultifying conditions of contemporary, late-capitalist labour—an end to endless routines—but as a *continuation* of them, as the fantasy of the “end of work comes to an end in an age of mass unemployment” (193). The survivor of the apocalypse here is one of the ‘lucky’ few clinging to jobs under the neo-liberal dispensation, the zombies the hordes of the unemployed. This chapter is a fine conclusion to a book which – despite my reservations about the depth of Martin’s engagement with ‘local’ critical traditions – is a fascinating and important contribution to the study of genre in contemporary culture.

Read together, then, Martin and Lanzendörfer’s books offer a compelling picture of a cultural world in which genre is coming to play an ever more significant role, a cultural world which may well be remembered, for good and ill, as an age of genre. Martin writes that “the best way to understand the repetitions of late capitalism may be through the mechanisms of genre” (182). It would be difficult to make a stronger claim than this for the importance of these two books.

“Whose Gospel Is It, Anyway?”

Miller, Adam S. *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 136pp

Ryan Lackey

Oregon State University, US
lackeyry@oregonstate.edu

As Adam Kelly points out in a recent essay, the community and corpus of David Foster Wallace scholarship is remarkable for its rapid proliferation, the “rush to canonize” (Kelly, 2017: 2). In a relatively short time, this critical body has expanded to include investigations as wide-ranging as Timothy Jacobs’s examination of the influence of *The Brothers Karamazov* on *Infinite Jest* and Jeffrey Severs’s numismatic analysis of *The Pale King*. But despite this vigor there remain underpopulated disciplines within Wallace scholarship, including religious studies—a fact Adam Miller’s *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace* helps to correct. This lacuna seems rather glaring, given the unmistakable attention Wallace’s work gives to the religious and spiritual. In his introduction to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Jest*, Tom Bissell claims that “it is a mistake to view [Wallace] as anything other than a religious writer,” and indeed some critics have made forays in this direction (Bissel, 2016: xii). In Lee Konstantinou’s essay on postironic belief, he suggests that the “antirebel” for whom Wallace famously advocates in “E Unibus Pluram” is “a type of believer” (Konstantinou, 2012: 93), and David Evans, through the application of William James, finds in Wallace a pragmatist notion of belief, arguing for *Jest* as “a kind of Purgatory” (Evans, 2013: 181). Similarly, Allard Den Dulk has noticed parallels between Wallace and Kierkegaard’s religiously inflected existentialism (Den Dulk, 2014).

Still, relatively few critics have attempted the sort of theologically grounded analysis John McClure and (ironically enough, given the vehemence of her essay “On Not Reading DFW”) Amy Hungerford have begun in their establishment of postsecularism as the dominant form of spirituality in American postmodernism. Upon first glance, Miller seems primed to open exactly that conversation with *Gospel*; the title alone implies, if not an explicitly Judeo-Christian framework, a move towards conversation between Wallace’s work and theological thinkers like Mircea Eliade, Karl

Barth, or Emmanuel Levinas. Miller's book, after all, is included in Bloomsbury's *New Directions in Religion and Literature* series. At times, though, *Gospel* feels slightly disjointed; it is not a straightforward work of literary criticism. In his preface, Miller advances his own clever model of spirituality based on a reading of Wallace's patterns of recursivity and paradox. But many of the subsequent chapters employ spiritual terminology shaded with Miller's brand of humanism as they move away from mainstream criticism and towards a concern with the reader's day-to-day life. In the absence of a specific critical strategy, Miller tends to read this humanistic spirituality into Wallace's work, rather than explicating the texts directly or fitting them into a theoretical framework. In this way, *Gospel* is ultimately a critical text meant for non-critics, designed as an intervention into a reader's life, not a scholarly conversation. Still, scholars will find *Gospel* worthwhile for the preface alone, and its creative, personal approach produces some intriguing, accessible commentary.

As part of its appeal to everyday relevance, *Gospel* is structured like a devotional rather than a work of criticism. Its 30 short chapters, each bearing a concept or image like "Addiction" or "Beauty" for a title, fit the month-long, chapter-a-day reading plan familiar to readers of Christian devotionals or step-by-step self-help manuals. Some of these chapters feature stranger headings—"Assassins," for example, or "Sewage"—but each offers a summary of how a particular phenomenon appears in Wallace's work; Miller devotes much space to both *Jest* and *Pale King*. Miller also adopts the intimate tone of the devotional, the comfortable second-person, and many of the pithier lines assume the inclusive second-person, suggesting a sense of community, even congregation. Though sometimes gnomic and punchy, these lines can be nonsensical or tautological: "No matter when we are, there's no place to be but now" (53). Miller begins the chapter "Size" by reminding the reader, "These are adult truths. They're too big to fit just in your head. To absorb them, you'll need your body too" (63).

In one sense, these aphorisms suggest a distillation of Wallace's own spiritual position; some of the lines would not look especially out of place in "This is Water." But the spirituality *Gospel* presents is heavily mediated by Miller's reading, his application of Wallace's texts to mundane living. In his essay on Kafka, Wallace writes admiringly of the "harrowing spirituality" Kafka's work embodies, and the complex, self-limiting spirituality in Wallace's own texts is similarly harrowing. It is also

impossible to simplify, and so the spirituality in *Gospel* is not Wallace's but rather Miller's as read through Wallace. Summarized, Miller's spirituality encourages a movement from the head, where recursive thought-spirals and solipsistic self-consciousness reside, into the body. Anything "redemptive," says Miller, "will have to start in the body rather than the head" (38).

This emphasis on embodied performance over analysis informs the concept of worship Miller elucidates in his preface, which contains both his most lucid critical writing and his strongest confrontation of thorny theological questions. Miller endorses a centrist position, a "third reading" occupying the vast space between the cold dogmatism of a religion whose object is "the one true God" and the unconscious, pleasure-seeking worshipping Wallace warns against in *This is Water* and likens to addiction in *Jest* (xi). For Miller, this third reading reclaims the profundity of thwarted and interrupted attempts at transcendence, positioning "the moment of disappointment as pivotal to the character of worship," recalling the postmodern "partial faith" described by McClure and Hungerford's postsecularism (xi). In order to "save God you must lose God," Miller argues, and he goes on to describe "a moment of inversion at the heart of worship, a twist in the loop of transcendence that renders it, Möbius-like, continuous with immanence"—one of Miller's very best turns of phrase (xii). In this way Miller's conditional treatment of spirituality evokes Ben Lerner's recent argument in *The Hatred of Poetry*: like poetry, the pursuit of the spiritual or transcendent absolute necessarily fails, but in that failure exists something like substance, or beauty.

Following the preface, Miller shifts towards a less academic register, and many of the subsequent chapters have less of the preface's elegance. He also diverges farther from Wallace. Miller's straightforward reference to "stuff that's really real" (41) without much context bears little resemblance to the "harrowing spirituality" Wallace ascribes to Kafka, or even to Flannery O'Connor's "bloody grace," which Wallace considered "a little bit easy" against Kafka's tough spiritual tendons (Wallace, 2007a: 64). That is, Miller seems reluctant to run too deeply into the questions Wallace attempts to re-familiarize in "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky": "What exactly does 'faith' mean?," and "How can somebody have faith before he's presented with sufficient reason to have faith?" (Wallace, 2007b: 259–260). No chapter, tellingly, addresses

faith—or belief, worship, or grace. Rather than Wallace's harrows, Miller presents a modified humanism, positing that the "'gospel' according to David Foster Wallace ... teeters on this line between the *fact* of our already being human and the possibility that, despite everything, we still could be" (2), and that original sin "simultaneously defines and compromises our being human" (6).

It's this abstract humanism that illuminates the sense of the spiritual in the rest of Miller's text. Hence exhortations like the one beginning the "Revelations" chapter, as Miller invokes *The Pale King* to rally all the cubicle-ensconced: "Life hides behind a sheen of dullness," he says, a quotidian but true line Wallace would likely defend against charges of cliché, and which undoubtedly encourages an affective response in many readers—particularly those familiar with the interminability of boredom (87). But as an extension of the denser theological reflection of the preface, or as a more formal analysis of how Wallace's work might itself attempt to force a changed experience of dullness, such lines leave unanswered questions. More engaging are the moments Miller redirects his energies and eloquence towards more taxing spiritual concepts—like, for example, the difference between theology and praxis. Miller prefers the latter; on prayer he writes, echoing Wallace, "for now the crucial thing is just to do it. Get on your knees" (100).

Although reluctant to engage directly with religious theory, Miller's text has scholarly relevance insofar as it points towards the possibilities of future criticism at the intersection of religion and contemporary texts, including Wallace's. For example, we might consider *Gospel* an exercise in the post-suspicion modes of criticism Eve Sedgwick and Rita Felski have described. But *Gospel* proves most useful as an introduction to Wallace for lay readers with spiritual inclinations or curiosities. Similarly, for those about to leap into *Jest* or *Pale King*, or who want an elucidation of thematic overlaps between Wallace's texts, Miller offers a friendly, nonjudgmental, clarifying voice. Thus, the ideal readers for *Gospel* are not critics but rather those who find that, as Kelly describes, Wallace's fiction "inspires," oftentimes "simply through the feeling one gets from the voice of Wallace's prose in one's own head" (Kelly, 2010: 131). For them, Miller's bridge between Wallace's work and day-to-day life will prove helpful—and, at times, inspiring.

David Letzler, *The Craft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. 310pp

Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck, University of London, UK
martin.eve@bbk.ac.uk

What is it about “big books” that pulls in their readers? Such texts certainly claim a particular hold over the circles of academic literary criticism. Authors clearly realise this, with James Joyce remarking of *Ulysses* (1922) that he had “put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what [he] meant”. Most crucially, he believed that this was, as a writer, “the only way of insuring one’s immortality” (Ellman 521).

Over the past forty years, many classificatory attempts have been made to define enormous tomes and to find taxonomies that can make sense of their contained multitudes. Most famously, Edward Mendelson wrote of “encyclopaedic narrative”, spanning Dante to Thomas Pynchon. This form, for Mendelson, grew out of epic but is relocated to the present; it possesses a prophetic quality while branching down a plurality of plots and structures; it attends to the “complexities of statecraft”; it overloads its reader with multiple generic moods; it represents polyglot works that strain towards the history of language itself. Many contemporary large novels have been immediately placed in this tradition, even when the categorizing is nuanced, as in Stephen J. Burn’s treatment of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) (20–21). One might also turn to Tom LeClair’s formulation of the novel of excess. Critics have recently come back to the ways in which we understand this form and attempted to re-appraise Mendelson’s canonical view. For instance, Stefan Ercolino uses the term “maximalist novel” to refer to works that contain “ethical commitment” and a “hybrid realism” while operating at substantial “length” within an “encyclopaedic mode”.¹ I have myself written of how such overloading works exhibit a crypto-didacticism.²

¹ See also Eve 2018.

² See Eve 2015.

David Letzler is the most recent figure to approach this subject: this time through the lenses of the “mega-novel” and the probably less familiar term, “cruft”, that enables his punning title. It is no exaggeration to say that Letzler’s book is brilliant. In turning to a subject that I thought was exhausted, Letzler makes fresh a known debate through an analysis of reading as an information-gathering technique that is about *attention* and filtering. In so doing, Letzler’s book de-familiarizes an otherwise well-rehearsed discussion.

It is worth unpacking Letzler’s term, “cruft”. The word comes from computer programming, where it refers to poorly designed, overly complicated, or unneeded code. Cruft refers to the surplus, the remainder, the bits that are “unnecessary” in some sense, even while they remain. For Letzler, many of the list-forming urges to totalisation within texts that we call “encyclopaedic” make those texts crufty. They overflow with elements that contribute little to narrative flow. These elements enhance our understanding of neither plot nor character. Yet they do have a structural effect on the work: through their proliferation of information, such novels require readers to extract the pertinent information from the cruft, the wheat from the chaff, and thus condition them to the kinds of attention necessary for that extraction. What this then boils down to is that in fact, the “real problems of encyclopedism” are “limited resources” such as a “mortal lifespan”. We cannot possibly filter through everything in such dense texts; hence Joyce’s centennial claims. Encyclopedism then becomes, for Letzler, concerned less with questions of “epistemology or mastery” than with “organizing, searching, and filtering an unmanageably vast amount of data into a form wherein it can be used” (70–71).

Letzler is aware that his terminology is contentious. He himself rhetorically asks what it might mean “to suggest part of a narrative is pointless”. How, Letzler queries, can this be synthesized with a “classic structuralist perspective” under which all textual components have some narrative function and in which there can hence be “no such thing as pointless narrative” (155)? Across a wide-ranging set of chapters that moves from the formal conceits of “dictionary” and the more-familiar “encyclopaedia” through to life writing, Mennippean satire, episodic narrative, and the intersections of epic and allegory, Letzler explores this question through reference

to attention. Each form of encyclopedism offers training in a different modulation of the kind of extractive attention that the genre as a whole demands. The parts of an encyclopedic novel that *aren't* "cruft" are the parts that must be extracted by the reader in order to grasp the work's progression, although these moments of necessary attention are hardly signalled in advance by the authors to whom Letzler turns: Gaddis, Stein, Perec, Pynchon, Barthes, Coover, Lessing, Wallace, Bolaño.

Letzler's argument is not uncontentious but it is in its provocation that I enjoyed it most. That said, there is a tendency to a dry, dripping sarcasm that some may find too much. For instance, the aside that Letzler "is reminded of Foucauldians discussing 'power,' wherein a critic's acknowledged inability to define a term does not limit the confidence with which it is wielded" could cut a little too deep (220). On the other hand, some may not like that Letzler shies from the politics of the mega-novel: the books to which he turns are, for the most part, written by white men for the category of reader now known as white male "DFW-bros". This is acknowledged upfront, when Letzler remarks that he wishes "he had something rigorous and interesting to say on this subject" of gender, but it still feels under-addressed (26). Finally, I felt a minor sense of structural lack in the work. While the initial chapters gelled decisively, the final two on episodic narrative and epic/allegory seemed, to me, all too episodic themselves. The decision also to defer detailed discussion of *Gravity's Rainbow* until the closing moments of the work at once elevated that text to the paradigmatic position that Letzler clearly feels it deserves but also left me wondering where it was throughout the rest of the book.

But these are my smaller criticisms. All in all, Letzler's book framed for me a problem that has been under consideration in digital humanities circles for some time: the challenge of information filtering at scales beyond those humanly possible. Indeed, for many years now, more contemporary fiction has been published every year than it is possible for a single person to read in a lifetime.³ It is problems such as these that have led both to Amy Hungerford's feminist take on "not reading David Foster Wallace" and to Franco Moretti's "distant reading". Letzler's approach is dif-

³ For more on this, see Fredner.

ferent to both of these figures, his argument being that these mega-novels are post-modern exercises in reading-efficiency training, to some extent; by foregrounding the problem of unprocessable information-scales, they help readers to learn better how to filter information.

The Craft of Fiction, then, is brilliant for what it manages to reframe: a problem of labour, reading, lifespans, and attention – all staged within the mega-novels that proliferated in predominantly American fiction since the 1960s. Some might argue that this is no different to the paradigm of encyclopedism – that mode of organizing knowledge too vast for individual comprehension – that we have had for some time. But Letzler does something different than arguing either that we should avoid reading specific figures or that we could use digital methods to alleviate our labour requirements. He admits, though, that there may be problems with this solution in the future, which leads me to wonder how efficacious the techniques in which Letzler claims these novels school us really are. For these are the questions with which *The Craft of Fiction* concludes: “what kinds of filtering, recoding, and sorting, then, will be done with the unthinkable amount of data our society will produce in the near future? What beneficial and pernicious effects might result? And what kinds of minds will we have to produce to adequately handle it?” (238).

Poststructuralist and Materialist Readings of William Burroughs and Postmodern Literature

Michael Sean Bolton, *Mosaic of Juxtaposition, William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014 (199 pp) and Christopher Breu, *Insistence of the Material, Literature in the Age of Biopolitics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014 (x + 264 pp)

Todd Hoffman

Augusta University, US
thoffma1@augusta.edu

Two recent books exemplify through their differences the continued resurgence of scholarly interest in William S. Burroughs. While Michael Sean Bolton primarily concerns himself with Burroughs experimental writings (and mostly the so-called *Nova Trilogy*) in his *Mosaic of Juxtaposition, William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*, Christopher Breu's *Insistence of the Material, Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* devotes one chapter to Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* as part of a much broader theoretical investigation highlighting recent literary interest in materiality: the chapter on Burroughs sets the agenda for Breu's reading of works by Thomas Pynchon (*V.*), J.G. Ballard (*Crash*), Dodie Bellamy (*The Letters of Mina Harker*) and Leslie Marmon Silko (*Almanac of the Dead*). Reading the two books side-by-side is a little like glancing backwards and forwards simultaneously. Bolton reads Burroughs chiefly through a poststructuralist lens: mostly early Derrida, but with significant use of Baudrillard, Bakhtin, Lacan and Kristeva as well. Breu, on the other hand, seeks a literature that moves past the virtual or hyperreal façade of linguistic play, and wishes to discover an insistent materiality that everywhere undergirds, motivates, intrudes and informs the Symbolic and Imaginary registers of recent literature and late capitalist culture more broadly.

The two are also mirror-images of each other: the one embraces the preeminence of culture and language over the material to show how political positioning

is fraught with ideological indeterminacy; the other investigates the literary expression of the Real which undergirds culture and language to inform a neo-material critique of late capitalism. Bolton's aim is to show that Burroughs constructs a textual universe that is a Heraclitean flux: one can never enter the textual waters of Burroughs' unstable novels in the same way twice because not only does the text change through its experimental fostering of indeterminacy and decenteredness, but so too does the reader upon entering these textual waters. The result, Bolton argues, is to generate a radically interactive and productive textual experience, a unique and new event with each reading. Breu's book is as interested in redacting the panoply of recent investigations into materialism—materialism in the sense of biopolitics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Marxist oriented critiques of neoliberalism, and object oriented ontology—as it is in specific readings of literary texts, and is therefore much grander in scope and goal. For Breu, the literary texts he examines serve to advance some loose theoretical recommendations about how to bridge the divide between current studies of materiality and the thorny problems of language as elucidated by post-structuralism. Burroughs becomes particularly exemplary for Breu of a writing that is insightfully aware of the material conditions that underpin a globally expansive capitalism, which mobilizes bodies, labor and the environment with increasingly deadly effect. Burroughs, for Breu, inaugurates this budding awareness of the convergence of materiality (in the variety of senses listed above) with global capitalism and sets in motion, as it were, the writers that follow him. Where Bolton's scholarly sources tend to be thirty to fifty years old, Breu concentrates on recent scholarship that advances on such figures as Foucault or Lacan. Reading the two side-by-side, then, highlights the sense of freshness the latter brings to studies of postmodern literature while at the same time making one feel of the former that we are watching a syndicated rerun—a good show, but we've seen it before.

Bolton's primary interest lies not in interpreting the meaning or position of Burroughs' enigmatic novels, but in showing how the works function precisely to erode ideological positions or stable meanings. He "seeks to provide detailed discussions of the ways in which Burroughs' narrative experiments subvert conventional readings and offer an alternative strategy for engaging with and making meaning

from the novels" (11). He analyzes the aleatory chaos of the experimental works through three categories of linguistic or narrative incoherence: through an examination of Burroughs famous formulation of the "word virus" by applying Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon*; in the indeterminacy of the narrative subject in Burroughs' fictions; and in the way the novels dissociate material contexts of time and place to undermine any allegiance to a particular ideological position. The result is to generate "an associative reading strategy," where "the repetitions of materials in different contexts allows for their resignification as juxtapositions and associations continually regenerate" (37). At the level of the signifier, Bolton closely examines the dual function with which the word virus operates: a destructive, parasitic function of replication which reduces difference to absolute uniformity and a positive form which erases binaries, proliferating meanings by exposing difference within sameness. The word virus, like the *pharmakon*, engenders both the poison and the cure, demanding an associative methodology which "encourages a linear juxtaposition rather than linear development" (72). Similarly, the indeterminacy of time and place acts as a Baudrillardian hyperreality, "destabiliz[ing] and diffus[ing] any correspondence to real world locations...creating a simulation that abnegates its original" (80). Given this instability of the material contexts that allude to historical or physical realities, Bolton argues, ideological approaches to reading Burroughs become confounded. The novels' contexts internally generate the hyperreal world of their own artifice, thereby "subvert[ing] the hierarchical structure of particular, localized ideologies" (83). Finally, the simultaneous fragmentation of narrative subjects and blurring together of characters and/or narrators incorporates the reader into a vertiginous decentralization of narrative time and space and once again forces the abandonment of all limiting binary distinctions. Meaning then becomes a "unique creation of reader along with author enacted during the singular event of a specific reading" (112). The revolutionary quality of Burroughs' books, Bolton thus concludes, is in its resistance to any positionality—whether one implied in the structure of the novels, the hidden dimension of its characters, settings or narrators, or in the ideological position of the reader who wishes to bring to bear upon the novels some political or interpretive framework to govern meaning.

Where Bolton points to the erosion of material contexts in favor of the endless play of an unstable signifying machine, Breu dismisses the postmodern penchant for surfaces, the virtual, or the overdetermination of cultural and linguistic play, to seek a counterpoint in what he calls the late capitalist literature of materiality. He distinguishes this latter classification from postmodern literature—or, rather, sees late capitalist literature of materiality as a “counterpractice of writing in the postmodern era”—in that the former uncovers the steady and insistent presence of the material that everywhere lurks as a steering force beneath the aforementioned postmodern façades (23). “I not only work to theorize the material,” Breu avers, “and its refusal to regularly conform to our cultural, linguistic, and indeed theoretical scripts. Instead, I posit the material as it refuses full symbolic recuperation—in its contingency, obduracy, and recalcitrance yet also its vulnerability and fragility” (ix). For Breu, language cannot fully account for the materiality of the body, the environment, or the object-world of late capitalist life.

Breu’s book works on two fronts, then: on the one hand, he strives to unite a variety of theoretical positions on materiality for the purposes of disclosing how the world of objects is taken for granted as background in post-structuralist and postmodern scholarship and is too often ignored in the metafiction of postmodern narratives; but, in doing so, he also shows how a more serious engagement with the non-human world of objects requires us to rethink our presumed sense of mastery over the material and the fantasy of material transcendence. In recognizing the limitations of theory when confronted with the Real (the material), Breu feels that a materialist account of biopolitics, which recognizes the body as more than a site of inscription, will provide a better means for critical engagement with the late capitalist modes of subjectification. It will also provide a more authentic examination of the material production of the object world, rooted as it is in the neoliberal capitalist economy and which everywhere organizes the reduction of human life to a bare minimum of animal existence. Thus, Breu explores how the Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) of Graham Harman, Ian Bogost and Bill Brown, which aims to philosophically examine the material world utterly stripped of anthropocentric projection, can be merged with Giorgio Agamben’s or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s examinations

of the mechanisms by which life is reduced to bare life and how the multitude may act as a counter-force to the horrors of globalization. Breu argues that the glue that can best hold these theories together is Lacanian psychoanalysis, which admits to the inscrutability of the Real in the formation of subjects even as it formulates theories of subjectivity, thereby offering a bridge between the unavoidability of language and the unsymbolizability of the material as an utterly other, utterly autonomous ground of human activity.

On the other hand, Breu uses the late-capitalist literature of materiality as a vehicle to explore the ways in which these authors express zones of interpenetration between bodies, material structures and linguistic systems. Here, Burroughs becomes central in that he writes at an historical moment when globalization is beginning in the colonial sectors of the 1950's and 60's and the mobilization of bodies and labor is moving in the neoliberal direction of deregulated marketplaces. In other words, Burroughs and the others capture the way in which the virtual begins to obfuscate the material even as post-structuralism begins to reconstitute fantasies of transcending the material by demoting its status to a trace or a site of inscription. Freed from the presumption of human projection, the subjective embodiment of the material can be explained better through Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. Breu takes this approach not only to provide a new interpretive strategy of postmodern texts that avoids the reinforcement of a preoccupation with semiotics, but also to challenge what he calls avatar fetishism, where, "in our era of 'immaterial production,' the commodities themselves have become resolutely secondary—so much degraded and messy materiality—to the fetishized self-image (i.e., a virtual self or avatar, to which they provide access)" (22). The result of this second order fetishism is not only the masking of the social labor of production to which Marx devoted so much of his critical attention, but to "material processes, objects, and embodiments that structure and enable everyday life in our ostensibly postindustrial era" (22). In reading late capitalist literature of materiality, Breu locates within postmodern literature a countervailing literary force which, "in contradistinction to metafictional forms of postmodernism... engages with the material underpinnings of our globalizing world" (27).

The five novels that Breu examines become exemplary of the figuration of materiality on various levels, all pointing to the implications of ignoring the continued material mobilization of bodies into modes of biopolitics. Each novel points to different facets of the efforts to control life through the tactical deployment of the material or to the way in which the material unconsciously structures human activity. But all of the works Breu analyzes point to the neoliberal undergirding of these mechanisms of material manipulation. The novels of late capitalist materiality, in other words, offer unique insights into both the subjection of life to the material and its possible liberation from such subjection. Burroughs, for instance, develops fictional spaces akin to the free-enterprise zones of transnational deregulation and highlights the biopolitics of bodies that fall outside citizenry and become, in Agamben's words, bare life. While language, Breu argues, necessarily seeks to recoup the hidden Real—particularly as a function of Burroughs' radical experimentation—this neo-symbolic discourse “would be attentive to the disjunctions as well as the intersections between linguistic materiality and other forms of materiality” (59). Similarly, and in stark contrast to Bolton's reading of Burroughs, he reads *V.* as Pynchon's “ethical injunction...to side with bare life and the object world against the fantasies of a solipsistic subjectivity that writes the world in its own image (Stencil) or refuses any kind of historical or political understanding beyond the most immediate and thoroughly contingent (Profane)” (91). In *Crash*, Breu sees Ballard as constructing a late-modern object world, whose concreteness and fetishization specifically operates counter to “postmodern fantasies of material transcendence” (93). And so, with each reading, Breu offers examples of a literary criticism that seeks to expose the hidden, recalcitrant yet ever-present materiality of late-capitalist life and its tendency toward a biopolitics. The examination of these texts affords Breu the means by which he can offer “a series of propositions” about the nature of current critical studies of late capitalism as they take on new iterations of materiality (183); in addition, he urges a renegotiation of literary practices to look past the humanist centering of our readings toward a posthuman, materially oriented reading, which can allow us to attend to what falls outside the purview of language, culture and the human.

In reading Bolton's book, I am reminded of an interview I watched somewhere of screenwriter and director Paul Schrader acknowledging the enduring appeal of existentialism while at the same time rueing the fact that it also felt quite old. Bolton's analysis is adroit and certainly adds another layer of competent post-structural analysis to Burroughs, but it also has the feel of an Ecclesiastical "there is nothing new under the sun." Even if Bolton outlines nuanced differences in his critical goals to others who have sought Derrida and post-structuralism as a vehicle for approaching the daunting chaos of Burroughs experimental novels, we find ourselves once again in the crippling realm of indeterminacy and avatar fetishism. Perhaps Breu himself offers the best counter to Bolton's retro reading: "One of the risks of the present moment, then, is to blindly repeat the ideology of the postmodern...in our very fantasy of overcoming it" (25). Another way of characterizing the difference between the two approaches to postmodern literature is how both Bolton and Breu point to the posthuman content of their respective critical frameworks; for Bolton the posthuman is the unmoored signifying system that makes language organize life at its root but ultimately lapses into a kind of neo-idealism. Breu, on the other hand, witnesses the enduring force of the material that so disrupts life activity and so easily reduces life to something outside of symbolic structures for the purposes of indefinite detentions or to confound the organization of refugee crises, and, of course, in pointing to an increasingly precarious relationship with vast environmental changes that defy any politics or economics of control. It would seem that these contesting views of posthumanism are the new instantiation of the old philosophical conundrum of resolving the subject/object, appearance/reality, mind/body dualisms—in a word, the great battle between empiricism and idealism. Breu's brand of posthumanism strikes me as far more relevant and pressing and ought now to be the focus of criticism going forward, despite Bolton's undoubtedly intriguing and skillful criticism.

James Phelan, *Reading the American Novel 1920–2010*. MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 278pp

Li Rongrui

Beijing Foreign Studies University, CN

lirongrui@bfsu.edu.cn

Despite its title, James Phelan's book is not dedicated to offering new perspectives on American literary history or on the features of modernism and postmodernism. There is no such overarching thesis that the analysis of the chosen individual fictions intends to prove. At the outset, Phelan lists 4 intentions, namely: explanation of the relation between American history and literary history; examination of the novel as a genre across the periods of modernism and postmodernism; providing a critical approach to reading the novel; giving substantial analyses of individual texts. Only in the introduction does Phelan pursue the first two issues. The main body of his book is devoted to the third and fourth. The introduction's dealings with such questions as what it means to be a 20th-century American novel, how to define the periodization of the American literary history, and what are the dominants of modernism and postmodernism follow the already-established ideas of such scholars as Roman Jakobson, Brian McHale, Fredric Jameson, Linda Hutcheon, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. Therefore, the book is best read for Phelan's practical application of his distinctive rhetorical reading strategy—based on a theory he has developed over the course of his career⁴—to 10 American novels.

The key principles of Phelan's theory include narrative as a dynamic progression, three component-model of character and narrative, and narrative as a multiple-dimensional purposive communication which involves the examination of narrative techniques like the narrator's reliability and of the readerly judgements. This new book covers aspects of rhetoric Phelan has previously not, and applies the ideas more smoothly and skilfully than ever. It's at its most interesting, however, when it most struggles with individual texts, as it does with the postmodernism of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

⁴ See Phelan 1989 and 1996.

Phelan's approach in this book emphasizes his idea of narrative as "dynamic progression": a system that requires artistic choices to be understood in relation to the plot development and the reader's response to it. Each chapter's argument is structured according to the introduction, complication and resolution of the plot's central conflicts. This helps to provide nuanced and revealing arguments about the texts and avoids reductive interpretations. Phelan applies it particularly well to the analysis of unresolved open questions, like the ethical choices in *The Age of Innocence* or the characterization of Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, and is especially enlightening when it's used to identify flaws and limitations in a work's rhetoric, as in the analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's choice to render Janie's speech in a summary in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Phelan's attention to rhetoric as a relationship between author and reader, meanwhile, lets him make especially complex and intricate analysis of how the construction of narrators leads to uneasy moral situations. His analysis of the first-person narrator in *Invisible Man* reveals how Ellison constructs Invisible Man as an African American with artful rhetoric to bond with a multiracial audience and make it easier for white Americans of the Cold War era to celebrate the novel. In the analysis of the unreliability of *Lolita's* first-person narrator, Phelan originally shows the novel's ethical dark side. All these analyses demonstrate the intricate and complex communications between the author and the reader. As always, Phelan's theoretical argument and precise textual discussions will be welcomed by both critics and students.

Yet if his sticking so closely to a theory allows him to make robust arguments, it also brings him up against that theory's limits. Since Phelan initiated the rhetorical reading approach in *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989), there have been problems with its three-component model of character and narrative. And they remain unresolved in this newest book. Firstly, Phelan's definition of the mimetic component implies two contradictory views of the fictional world. According to his explanation, the criterion by which we judge the characters or the narrative to be mimetic is the "reader's interests in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own, that is, hypothetically or conceptually possible and still compatible with the laws and limitations that govern the extratextual world" (2013: 29). This

definition actually treats the fictional world as the representation of the real world. But in his classification of 4 types of audiences, Phelan also thinks that to participate in the mimetic illusion is to take the position of the narrative audience who “regards the characters and events as real rather than invented” and “accepts the basic facts of the storyworld regardless of whether they conform to the actual world” (2013: 28). This means the fictional world is an autonomous ontological entity with its own horizon of possibilities. This view suitably applies to fictions that don’t rely on traditional realist conventions, such as Gothic fictions, science fictions, novels of fantasy, etc. The reader can still have an immersive reading experience in the storyworld they create as an alternative world, even though they know those paranormal phenomena, mystical things and figures, and scientific imaginations do not exist in our reality. And this is especially true with the transmedia storyworlds enhanced by digital innovations, VR technology and the fan culture. But this surely separates us from the “laws and limitations of the extratextual world” that Phelan says all mimetic audiences remain guided by.

Of course, Phelan must be aware of this situation. In *Reading People, Reading Plot*, he acknowledged that it is really a messy thing to determine what it means to be a plausible or possible person. To answer this question, we have to grapple with various fields of learning: psychology, ontology, and so on. In addition, the “representation of a character is a matter of conventions and the conventions change over time as both ideas about persons and fictional techniques for representing persons change” (1989: 12). At last he dismisses this branch of discussion by saying it is not a necessary preliminary for his approach. But in the newest book, we can see why he might need to answer the question, when he deals with consciously less mimetic fictions. At least we can see Phelan does not want to propose a naïve-realism point of view. But why does he still use such a mimetic criterion? From his discussion of the specific works, we can see that Phelan’s approach to rhetoric relates to his interest in ethical interpretation: again and again he addresses problems of how to judge a certain character’s characterization in terms of ethics, and *then* of plausibility: is the character’s role in conveying a moral worldview convincing or not. However, from the narrative audience’s perspective, the quality of the characterization will

not affect whether or not the storyworld is experienced as *real*. Phelan has also said in *Reading People, Reading Plots* that we ought not to question a character's plausibility by abstracting the character's behavior from the situation which influence it. Instead, "the dividends that might accrue to our remaining open to the idea that such and such a person could exist and behave in such and such a way in such and such a situation are more rewarding than the satisfaction we might get by initially questioning the plausibility of such a creation" (1989: 12). This is certainly an insightful judgement. But it also again creates conceptual confusion by drawing our attention to the storyworld's being an independent system at the same time as it requires interpretation in relation to criteria inseparable from the extratextual world.

A similar unclarity also occurs in the definition of the "synthetic" component. It refers to the feature of the characters' and the novel's being artificial constructs. And to be aware of the synthetic is to take the position of the authorial audience. At the first glance, the synthetic seems to categorize the fictionality of the storyworld and an opposite position or attitude to that of the mimetic when the reader approaches a fictional text. Nevertheless, we will find that in practice Phelan also uses it to refer to any novel's narrative techniques or artistic devices since they are the elements for the construction of the fictional world. As we know, what a metafiction's self-reflexivity foregrounds is the narrative's fictionality or artificiality. Such texts intend to break the reader's illusion of the storyworld's being real. Without such conscious breaking, a novel's narrative techniques will not necessarily lead to this kind of foregrounding. As Phelan stresses in *Reading People, Reading Plots*, the synthetic component is an "ineradicable presence" (3), an inherent feature of any novel independent of its particular artistic devices.

I spend so much time on these issues because they lead to Phelan's problems in conducting an effective rhetorical reading of Thomas Pynchon's postmodernist novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. It is right for Phelan to disagree with Brian McHale and think that the novel goes beyond epistemological concerns to ontological ones. Oedipa's problem—whether she is uncovering a conspiracy or losing her grip on reality—lies

in her ways of thinking. It is true that the third-person narrator uses Oedipa's point view as the focalization most of the time. Yet unlike what Phelan thinks, it does not necessarily mean that the narrator or even the implied reader will identify with Oedipa's thoughts.

Oedipa's uncertainty in drawing a decisive conclusion is due to her inability to see Tristero as another reality in another world. And this has much to do with the city crisis caused by suburbanization and spatial segregation divided by race and class in the post-war American society. Phelan mistakenly identifies the novel's uncertainty as the ambiguity of Tristero's real existence. He argues that this uncertainty is manifested in the novel's handling of the mimetic, thematic and synthetic components. It privileges the thematic and synthetic over the mimetic, giving "Oedipa a more substantial mimetic component than that of the other characters, since that mimesis provides the basis for much of our affective responses to her experiences" (2013: 197). And the evidence Phelan uses to support his point is the characters' names that have thematic significances and are understood by him as a foregrounding of the synthetic dimension. Therefore, Phelan not only confuses two different meanings of the synthetic, but also further mistakes the intratextual character's point of view as the criterion of the validity of the novel's fictional world. The mimetic and the synthetic, which are qualities of the text, become in this reading entirely dependent on an intratextual character's belief or disbelief of her world.

But on the whole, these defects do not cancel out Phelan's achievements. They show us the difficulty of the abstract theoretical construction in face of the vast and rich textual phenomena. And Phelan's misreading may also allow us to rethink such questions as whether the metafictional factor should be considered as the key feature of the postmodern fiction, whether it can be the main criterion by which a fiction be judged as a postmodern text, or whether the ontological issue in postmodern fiction should be just thought as the same with the metafictional self-reflexivity. The book is worth reading for anyone interested in developing ontologically and rhetorically acceptable answers to those questions.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bissel, T** 2016 "Everything About Everything: *Infinite Jest*, Twenty Years Later." *Infinite Jest*, Wallace, D F (ed.), xi–xv, 1996, 20th Anniversary ed. Back Bay Books.
- Bolton, M S** 2014 *Mosaic of Juxtaposition, William S. Burroughs' Narrative Revolution*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Breu, C** 2014 *Insistence of the Material, Literature in the Age of Biopolitics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816688913.001.0001>
- Burn, S** 2003 *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Continuum.
- Den Dulk, A** 2014 "Boredom, Irony, and Anxiety: Wallace and the Kierkegaardian View of the Self." *David Foster Wallace and the "Long Thing,"* Boswell, M (ed.), 43–61. Bloomsbury.
- Ellman, R** 1982 *James Joyce*. Revised, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- English, J F** 2005 "Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame." *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, English, J F (ed.), Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. *Blackwell Reference Online*. Accessed 19 December 2017.
- Ercolino, S** 2014 *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*, trans. by Albert Sbragia. London: Bloomsbury.
- Evans, D H** 2013 "'The Chains of Not Choosing': Free Will and Faith in William James and David Foster Wallace." *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, Boswell, M and Burn, S (eds.), 171–189. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Eve, M P** 2015 'Keep Writing: The Critique of the University in Roberto Bolaño's 2666'. *Textual Practice*, 30(5): 949–64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2015.1084363>
- Eve, M P** 2018 "Review of Ercolino." *Comparative Critical Studies*. forthcoming.
- Fredner, E** 2017 "How Many Novels Have Been Published in English? (An Attempt)." *Stanford Literary Lab*. <https://litlab.stanford.edu/how-many-novels-have-been-published-in-english-an-attempt>.
- Hungerford, A** 2016 *Making Literature Now*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- James, H** 1998 Preface. *The Portrait of a Lady*, 3–18. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kelly, A** 2010 “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction.” *Consider David Foster Wallace*, Hering, D (ed.), 131–146. SSMG Press.
- Kelly, A** 2017 “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics: A Reply to Edward Jackson and Joel Nicholson-Roberts.” *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 5(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.224>
- Konstantinou, L** 2012 “No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief.” *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, Cohen, S and Konstantinou, L (eds.), 83–113. Iowa UP. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20q1v7f.11>
- Lane, R, Mengham, R and Tew, P** 2003 *Contemporary British Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lanzendörfer, T** (ed.) 2016 *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- LeClair, T** 1989 *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Letzler, D** 2017 *The Craft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pc5fzd>
- Martin, T** 2017 *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/mart18192>
- Mendelson, E** 1976 “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon.” *MLN*, 91(6): 1267–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2907136>
- Mendelson, E** 1976 “Gravity’s Encyclopedia.” *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, Levine, G and Leverenz, D (eds.), 161–96. Boston: Little Brown.
- Miller, A S** 2016 *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Moretti, F** 2013 *Distant Reading*. London: Verso.
- Morrison, J** 2003 *Contemporary Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Phelan, J** 1989 *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Phelan, J** 1996 *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Phelan, J 2013 *Reading the American Novel 1920–2010*. MA: Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118512876>

Wallace, D F 2007 "Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky." *Consider the Lobster*, 255–274. Back Bay Books.

Wallace, D F 2007 "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness From Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed." *Consider the Lobster*, 60–65. Back Bay Books.

How to cite this article: Sandberg, E, Lackey, R, Eve, M P, Hoffman, T and Rongrui, L 2018 Orbit Book Reviews May 2018. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 6(1): 5, pp. 1–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/orbit.499>

Published: 05 June 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Orbit: A Journal of American Literature is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized 'O' with a person inside, representing open access.