

Book Reviews

Pieter Vermeulen. *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form*. London: Palgrave, 2015. Pp. x, 182. US\$90.

Pieter Vermeulen's *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* takes up a favorite trope of lit mags and opinion pages: Are we watching the death of the novel as a literary form? Vermeulen is quick to point out that this question is nothing new. Even in the days of Miguel de Cervantes and Laurence Sterne, critics were already asking if the novel had worn out its usefulness. In this sensible and significant work, Vermeulen does not seek to answer the question; instead, he argues that perpetual anxiety over the novel's imminent demise is artistically productive. For Vermeulen, those who would kill or eulogize the novel are always by the same gesture reviving and reanimating it, and thus forcing it to adapt to contemporary concerns and investments instead of drifting, as he observes of the epic form before it, into irrelevance and obsolescence.

To make his point, Vermeulen focuses on a small collection of recent novels and critiques that take up the paradoxical task of memorializing and reanimating the novel. In the first chapter, he looks at Tom McCarthy's 2005 novel *Remainder*. Vermeulen suggests that it aims to reimagine the traditional "realist" novel's trauma narrative, which McCarthy has criticized as inadequate in the wake of 9/11. *Remainder* "challenges this tradition's reliance on psychological depth and significant feeling" by offering a protagonist who is essentially depthless: the nameless narrator is all surface, while the traumatic event that launches the text's action remains elusive and, in fact, irrelevant to the story (Vermeulen 24). The narrator's actions in the wake of his trauma are repetitive and circular, never leading him toward any catharsis or sustained resolution, and "the strong emotions that we tend to associate with the human subject" are replaced with "diffuse and non-subjective affects" (30, 31).

Vermeulen connects McCarthy's formal subversions with the work of David Shields, whose *Reality Hunger* attempts to escape the conventions of the novel by substituting those of other genres such as the memoir and the manifesto. According to Vermeulen, however, the novel "is the corpse that *Reality Hunger* insistently declares dead but does not manage to bury once and for all" (42). He suggests that *Reality Hunger*'s many novelistic elements ultimately recapitulate the form the text tries to dismantle.

In the second chapter, Vermeulen focuses on J. M. Coetzee's later works as examples of what he terms "creatural life"—"a form of life that is inextricably linked up with, while not reducible to, animal life" (Vermeulen 49). Desire has long been considered an organizing principle of the traditional novel in that the text's action is driven forward by the protagonist wanting something and seeking to satisfy this desire. Vermeulen contends that Coetzee's late work offers narratives in which desire is replaced by animalistic suffering. His protagonists are physically pathetic and repellent, rendering their longings impossible to satisfy and therefore pointless. Even the author's desires and intentions lack the power to drive the narrative forward, as represented in Coetzee's novel *Slow Man*, which is about the relationship between a novelist, Elizabeth, and her protagonist, Paul. Paul's "descent from subject to creature also drags the author away from her site of sovereignty" (64). In this way, Coetzee replaces the traditional narrative driven by desire and love with one more concerned with care and dependence. The protagonists are no longer independent subjects interacting with/acting on their social environment but are "abandoned creatures" who inhabit a "post-novelistic space" (49).

In chapter three, Vermeulen uses Teju Cole's *Open City* to examine the "cosmopolitan conviction that the cultivation of curiosity and attentiveness is an appropriate tool for fostering connections beyond ethnic, cultural, or national borders" (Vermeulen 83). *Open City*, Vermeulen argues, seems to embody that conviction but undermines it by making apparent the lie of novelistic cosmopolitanism. Vermeulen observes that the novel's protagonist is an aesthete and an intellectual, but for all his worldly experience remains cut off, self-absorbed, and alienated from his environment. In contrast to traditional cosmopolitan novels, "*Open City* insistently denies its readers the illusion that imaginative transports can stand in for real global change" (85). Vermeulen also intriguingly views *Open City* through Ian Hacking's concept of the "*fugueur*" (a compulsive wanderer driven by the dissociative amnesia of a fugue state) as a dark counterpart to the "*flâneur*" of traditional novels: "[U]nlike the urban mobility of the *flâneur*, the unwanted restlessness of the *fugueur* is not an attitude that literary cosmopolitanism can celebrate" (Vermeulen 102–03).

Chapter four explores novels by three different authors, all of which feature 1960s radicals forced underground to avoid the repercussions of their revolutionary activities. Each of these recent books, Vermeulen suggests, engages in "experiments in untimeliness" (109). They disassociate themselves from the present by referencing the radicalism of a previous era rather than commenting directly on the more recent trauma of 9/11. These novels use this "inactive afterlife of activism" (111) to question the adequacy of the novel

Book Reviews

as a form for ethically/politically examining the contemporary and each gestures toward alternative forms of media as potential successors to the novel's cultural role. Vermeulen argues that the novels contain a longing for the immediacy of analog media such as tape recorders and phonographs, which "can directly inscribe reality without first deciding what parts of reality will count as significant" (121). Yet for all the power they ascribe to these analog forms, these authors continue to rely on the novel form, if only as a tool to advocate for its successors.

In his final chapter, Vermeulen turns to James Meek's *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* to illustrate one possible path for the novel's latest posthumous incarnation. Whereas traditional novels have limited themselves to narratives built on a human scale, *Descent* strives to evoke the Anthropocene—a radically nonhuman otherness that nonetheless "inserts the human into geological deep time as a responsible agent" (139). Vermeulen sees Meek as appropriating the dregs of the novel form while expanding its function, the better to render contemporary concerns legible to readers to come. Ultimately, this is also Vermeulen's greatest accomplishment: his book is a necessary corrective to hand-wringing elegies for the novel and a levelheaded resource for scholars, critics, and writers currently preparing for what might be termed the novel's Second Coming.

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