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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12433>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.12433

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Rachele Dini, "Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 16 May 2018, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12433> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12433>

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2 Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2016. ISBN: 9781783742738

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4 The upheavals in UK higher education of the last two decades have recently generated a number of important critical works, from Stefan Collini's *What are Universities For?* (Penguin, 2012), Helen Small's *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford University Press, 2013) and Thomas Docherty's *Universities at War* (Sage, 2014), to articles such as Stephen Ball's "Living the Neoliberal University" (2015) and Michael Rustin's "The neoliberal university and its alternatives" (2016). While engaging with some of the same issues, Martin Paul Eve's *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* is a very different project to these. Rather than inveighing against the neoliberal paradigm or championing the merits of the academy (although these are implicit), Eve is concerned with how the erosion of academic authority—and specifically *literary studies'* authority—is reflected, expressed, or fuelled by contemporary literary fiction. This is a study of power relations not between markets and academic institutions or between academics and "commoners," then, but between university English and a contemporary literary fiction engaged in cannibalising it.

5 A natural result of the high-postmodern era's "turf wars" between critical and creative discourses (15), the "disciplining" of the academy that Eve identifies in the literary novels under discussion (be these through parody, critique, or metafictional games that anticipate and undermine the interpretative schema through which they will be read) serves as a means of self-legitimation "over and above their critical counterparts" (15), be it to "reclaim the increasingly scarce conventional authority of their form" (16), or to ensure a text's enshrinement within the canon. This interplay between academy, text and marketplace forms the basis of the book's first chapter, but recurs elsewhere—most notably, in Chapter 3, in the careful delineation, preceding Eve's close readings of Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2007) and *C* (2010), of the implicit meanings

behind the author's "sudden outpouring" of articles in the *London Review of Books* in the months prior to the publication of *Satin Island* (2014). Eve's assessment of the ways in which McCarthy has used his critical essays to sell books, position himself as a popular literary critic, and provide a template for reading his own work, is nothing short of brilliant. Neither a straightforward homage to the modernist and postmodernist canons nor a descendent of them, McCarthy's intertextual works, Eve shows, "nonetheless generat[e] an authorial presence with a pre-fabricated canon lineage behind [them]"—a "marketing technique" that results in his reception as an "author-critic; the figure who is not an academic but who can demonstrably play that game, while choosing to write fiction" (62) and that will of course secure his place on academic syllabi. Those who remain ambivalently caught between enthrallment and disgust with McCarthy's work will find much here that resonates. Eve reads McCarthy's work alongside Mark Z. Danielewski's equally if differently metafictional *House of Leaves* (2000), where the rampant use of footnotes, he argues, serves to "represent the structure of facticity that is knowingly only half true and that the reader knows is unverifiable"—resulting in a "postmodern theology in which the structure of belief remains even while it is devoid of content in which to believe" (70). Such a strategy, he argues, "deliberately fractur[es] an identity with the academic disciplinary form of history by yielding only empty referents, signposts to nowhere" (70).

- 6 The book's other chapters are equally arresting. Chapter 4 moves from the aesthetic critique expressed in McCarthy and Danielewski to the political critique manifest in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* (2004). Here Eve discusses the ways in which Bolaño's text "exhibits a strong ethical core even amid aesthetic structures that hark back to (supposedly amoral) postmodern metafiction" while achieving its "ethical payoff" by schooling, or disciplining, its readers (90). Eve explicitly calls into question symptomatic readings of Bolaño's work as a "crypto-didactic" text, noting that the list of "critical appraisals that draw attention to th[e] same factors [of patriarchy, transnational capital, and the state] continues to grow, as though in some kind of perpetual re-enactment" (95). Complicating this tradition, he proposes we instead read the text as simultaneously "remarking on formalism"—that is, branding the "canonisation process and the conferral of aesthetic value [as] the height of self-obsessed nihilism or narcissism"—and "pre-invalidat[ing] sociological approaches of the academy towards literature on the basis of the social position that the university occupies; twinned with the police" (107). The text, in other words, pre-emptively disarms its academic literary critics by exposing the shortcomings of the institutions from which they write. Such a strategy can be seen to both extend the metafictional practices of McCarthy and Danielewski and contest them as self-serving.
- 7 Chapter 5, "Sincerity and Truth," tackles two other great spectres of contemporary fiction, sincerity and authenticity, through a nuanced analysis of the forms that these two modes can take (Eve even provides a "sincerity and authenticity matrix" that charts possible permutations of their combination). Eve is concerned here with the ways in which sincerity serves as a means of self-legitimization and critique in Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001). The novel's greatest irony, he argues, is that it is read almost unanimously as being concerned with race: "the novel deploys quasi-deconstructionist techniques in which it is impossible to extricate an absence of race identity from thought about and speech on the subject of race identity" (129). In this way, Eve shows *Erasure* to both contest and re-inscribe racial identity in a way that pits the novel itself against the academy where it will be studied. The chapter's greatest strength, here, is

its desistance from categorising the text as fundamentally and conclusively sincere or strategic, parodic or critical, and to insist, instead, on exploring its traffic between these modalities. The following chapter on Jennifer Egan, “Labour and Theory,” builds on these ideas to chart the role of disgruntled (and failed) PhD students, precarious academics, and critical theory (most notably, structural anthropology) in her texts, which Eve shows to problematize the academy and demonstrate her work’s “superior ability” above and beyond the academy “to weave plausible cause and effect—and affect—into theory” (155).

- 8 The book’s strongest chapter however is “Genre and Class,” which examines Sarah Waters’ deployment of Foucauldian ideas in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002), arguing that this process results in the production of a “critical historiography” (173, emphasis in the original). In these texts, Waters encourages specific reading practices “heavily inflected” by “high-Theory”—she is, he notes, writing for an audience with an academic background and interest in the Victorian—in order to “play some elaborate generic games” (174). In *Affinity*, Foucauldian themes serve as red herrings that obscure the class politics with which Waters is *actually* concerned: the text “reflects back, not just on itself—the constant accusation levelled by detractors of [metafiction]—but on the academy, on commercial processes of genre, on conditions of production, and, through these socio-cultural contexts, on class, it what may be described as a new ethical act that attempts to systematise the academy and its discourses through a mutual shaping process” (183). In this way, it asks its academic readers to reconsider class in a *détournement* that uses theory to undermine it.
- 9 The arguments Eve weaves here are very compelling indeed, and they bleed outwards, ultimately relating to the questions addressed by Collini, Docherty, and other investigators into the so-called crisis in the humanities. The book’s last chapter thus shifts from discussing self-reflective fiction to the lack of self-reflexivity in academic publishing, and an academic marketplace that produces prohibitively expensive books and journals whose contributions are written by scholars who receive no financial remuneration. “It is usually easier not to consider the economic consequences and to ignore the ways in which we continually, communally fuel the bizarre economic cycles that constitute the serials crisis,” he remarks (200). That Eve has chosen to publish this book through Open Books Press—a publishing house that makes online versions of its publications freely available, and whose print editions cost a fraction of the price of most monographs—is thus worth noting. The text at the heart of this chapter is Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001), and specifically its famous (and very funny) representation of *Critical Inquiry*. Here as elsewhere however Eve is careful not to draw hasty conclusions: the merit of this text is its multifacetedness: that it at once “discipline[s], legitimate[s], critique[s]” (203).
- 10 This willing ambivalence regarding the merits, drawbacks, and limits of the narrative practices under discussion is perhaps the book’s greatest asset. Eve makes clear his awareness at several points that the potentially disruptive paradigm he is proposing here will in all likelihood become par for the course—a “set of normal critical practices”—and that some will find his analyses to be as “navel-gazing” as the texts he is (both implicitly and explicitly) defending against charges of apolitical remoteness. It is to his credit then that he returns, in each chapter, to the ethical and political underpinnings of certain—if not all—of the novels in question, to the significance of

their engagement with the academy, and to the importance of going beyond symptomatic readings. Even McCarthy's placing of his own work in the canon, he is careful to note in the final remarks, is "not just about marketing and sales, but about working in the same labour spaces as formalist, aesthetic critique" (208). There is a politics, in other words, to the metafictional practices of contemporary literary fiction, even at its seemingly most ludic—and often that politics is not what it first appears. Such a politics is something literary scholars would do well to examine at a time when the very worth of what they do is being called into question.