

BOOK REVIEWS

John Kuehl

ALTERNATE WORLDS: A STUDY OF POSTMODERN ANTIREALIST AMERICAN FICTION

New York: New York UP, 1989. Pp. 373. \$50.00

Reviewed by Ben Stoltzfus

This full-length study of antirealist American fiction is a welcome addition to earlier studies of self-reflexive writing, metafiction, and innovative fiction, such as Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* (1975), which traced the world of self-conscious writing from Miguel de Cervantes to the present, Raymond Federman's *Surfiction* (1975), a compilation of essays by writers and critics, Charles Caramello's *Silverless Mirrors* (1983), which analyzes the roots, the problematics, and the practice of postmodern American fiction, Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984), perhaps the most influential book in this series because her definition of metafiction is constantly quoted, Allen Thiher's *Words in Reflection* (1984), which discusses modern language theory and critical strategies rooted in modern and postmodern philosophical thinking as they relate to metafiction, Ben Stoltzfus's *Postmodern Poetics* (1987), a study of French and American reflexive writing, Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), which also discusses the phenomenon of postmodern fiction and theory from an international perspective, and Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), which, as her subtitle indicates, focuses on the historical context of metafiction.

Unlike his predecessors, and except for Caramello's study, Kuehl's book deals exclusively with postmodern American writing. Whereas the other studies discuss metafiction in a context of modern language theory, history, and postmodern theories of deconstruction and play, Kuehl's book is primarily, although not exclusively, descriptive. The other studies (again, except for Caramello's) analyze metafictional writers in Europe, the USA, and South America, thus emphasizing the international scope of the phenomenon, whereas Kuehl focuses entirely on American writers. Which is fine. He is entitled to pursue his interests and vision of alternate worlds as they apply to American practitioners of metafiction.

However, Kuehl's disclaimer that the books I mention above exist already may not be enough to absolve him of the need to produce a more sophisticated critical context with which to guide his readers through the maze of reflexive writings which, as he points out, are by no means identical. He contrasts the long exhaustive novels of the "putter-inners," such as John Barth, with the "leaver-outers," such as Donald Barthelme, both of whom exemplify the opposition between maximalists and minimalists. Kuehl also explores the formal constructions of Raymond Federman's "concrete" fiction and the "diabolical" novels of Flannery O'Connor. But a more complete explanation of the importance of metafiction as a postmodern literary phenomenon, in addition to de-

scribing the works that illustrate it, would have offset the uneasy feeling produced by the printed interview at the end of the book between James W. Tuttleton, whose interesting "Introduction" on "The American Roots of Contemporary Antirealism," is not enough to offset his preference for realism and his dislike of antirealism which, he says, is "self-indulgent" and "must inevitably perish." Kuehl's feeble rebuttal lacks conviction thus undermining the premises of his study. The purpose of the interview seems designed to shore up a limited critical context, but it is repetitive and, as the French say, it leaves you hungry for more.

I would have liked to see a more informed discussion of the ludic, parodic, subversive, and fantastic structures that underpin self-reflexive writing so that we might understand some of the reasons for its extraordinary resurgence in the last forty or fifty years. Admittedly, the theories of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Ferdinand de Saussure come from and are thus, perhaps, viewed as beyond the purview of the book, but Kuehl could have stayed on the North-American continent and produced a similar and broader critical/philosophical context using the ideas of Charles Peirce, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Jane Gallop, and others. Some of these names do appear in the text but their relevance is circumscribed. Nowhere does Kuehl explore language as a sign-system designed to foreground what Roman Jakobson calls its "literariness." Although Kuehl borrows Jean Ricardou's influential statement that metafiction is not "the telling of a story but the story of telling," we are not told that this exploration of the creative process calls attention to ontological and epistemological problems relating to language, perception, and reality. We need to know that the signifying chain, which always contains varying levels of ideology embedded in it, also structures our perception of the world. Because metafiction deconstructs mimesis and the myth of natural correspondences—Aristotle's dictum that art must imitate nature—it subverts realism by calling attention to the arbitrariness of language, the slippage of meaning, the limits to free expression, and the pleasures of invention. The ring of language, the indeterminacy, achronology, discontinuity, and circularity in post-modern texts signal a profound change in our way of apprehending reality—changes already manifest in science, cubism, and serial music more than seventy years ago, and with which fiction is at last catching up. At the opposite pole from such lofty expectations is the consistent misspelling of Robert Pinget's name as Pinguet.

Despite its weaknesses, *Alternate Worlds* provides the most complete guide so far to American metafiction. Kuehl divides his book into three parts, each of which has up to three or four subheadings. Thus Part I, "The Author as God," perhaps the best section, quotes Waugh on the definition of metafiction, and then proceeds to illustrate "reflexivity," "the ludic impulse," and "maximalism versus minimalism." Part II, "The Universe as Madhouse," discusses the fantastic and the grotesque as alternate worlds to realism, and Part III, "The Future as Death," discusses "Fictitious History," "Conspiracy and Paranoia," "Entropy," and "Nightmare and Apocalypse." In addition to the writers mentioned above, Kuehl situates John Hawkes, William Gaddis, Coleman Dowell, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Robert Coover, E.L. Doctorow, Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, Alexander Theroux, Gilbert Sorrentino, and many others within the configura-

tions of innovative fiction. *Alternate Worlds* is an excellent map of the geography of antirealist American writing.

Stella McNichol

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE POETRY OF FICTION

London: Routledge, 1990. Pp. 180

Reviewed by Annis Pratt

While reading this latest book from England about Virginia Woolf, having previously reviewed Jane Marcus's *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant* and Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* for the *International Fiction Review*, I felt a certain dizziness, as if I were falling down a well. Stella McNichol provides lucidly written readings helpful to someone puzzling through Woolf's fiction for the first time. I have no problem with her premise that "Virginia Woolf is a poet who used prose fiction as her medium," or with her explications of Woolf's novels in terms of poetic structures and rhythms. I encourage my own students to follow Woolf's advice to the common reader to read imaginatively and experientially, so I ought not object to still another one-chapter one-novel personal reading.

As much as I sympathize with McNichol's desire not to interrupt the flow of her analysis by excessive footnoting, I can hardly agree with the book-jacket's assertion that this "will be of value to the serious Woolf scholar." In North-American literary criticism one takes into account all previous work on an author. English literary studies insist on this less strongly, which may explain why McNichol's bibliography contains very few books written since the 1970s, and far more articles from the sixties and even the fifties than examples of more recent scholarship.

I am disturbed by McNichol's book because, like several British authors I have recently reviewed, she prides herself on avoiding "topics outside the immediate scope of my study" to produce a strictly formalist reading. This deliberate overlooking of the historical and personal context of the novels arises from her preference for a purely aesthetic Woolf, and results in readings disturbingly like those of the forties and fifties in their lack of reference to her gender or politics. In McNichol's readings, Woolf's experimental innovations are elements in her poetic style, without mention even as contrast to the many recent analyses of the intersection between her linguistic explorations and her radical commentaries. To provide but one example of the dated results of positing a purely aesthetic Woolf in the 1980s, McNichol's citations from Woolf's diaries in her treatment of *To the Lighthouse* are all from *A Writer's Diary*, which Leonard Woolf selectively abridged to make it less personal than aesthetic, rather than from the unabridged diaries which so richly illustrate the intersection of the personal, political, and formal elements of Woolf's work.

But shouldn't I accept the book on its merits? Does everything written about Woolf have to deal with her gender and politics? I am worried about the