

would have inevitably been taken by some as self-aggrandizement and might have impeded rather than accelerated the maturation of the series. In the end perhaps the wisest course is to let *European Joyce Studies* stand on its own merits. It demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses common to any new publishing project, but Senn and van Boheemen have shown the discerning ability to offer a variety of responses to Joyce's work that many readers, new to Joyce, will find insightful. They have also demonstrated the capacity to attract more sophisticated work from a range of scholars, both well known and relatively unknown. As volumes continue to appear, the focus of the series will doubtless sharpen and the consistency of its offerings will improve, and it will continue to make useful interpretive contributions to examinations of Joyce's canon.

Jerry A. Varsava

*CONTINGENT MEANINGS: POSTMODERN FICTION, MIMESIS,  
AND THE READER*

Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990. Pp. 233

Lance Olsen

*CIRCUS OF THE MIND IN MOTION: POSTMODERNISM  
AND THE COMIC VISION*

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990. Pp. 171

Reviewed by Ben Stoltzfus

Jean-François Lyotard speaks of postmodernism as a state of mind rather than a historical period and, insofar as self-conscious, reflexive art has not been limited to any one historical period, there is an element of truth in such a view. Because writers from earlier centuries such as Rabelais, Cervantes, Diderot, Sterne, and others have foregrounded language and the creative process (an enterprise that postmodernism has taken on with a vengeance), it is tempting, as Lyotard does, to think of metafiction—the process of exploring the theory of fiction through the practice of writing it—as a generalized endeavor spanning the centuries.

However, as the term so strongly implies, postmodernism is a sequel to modernism, and modernism, although not all agree on what it is or when it began, does cover a historical period of approximately 100 years, let us say, roughly speaking, from 1850 to 1950. In the twentieth century there is bound to be a good deal of overlapping between modernism and postmodernism whenever, for example, we try to situate the works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Raymond Roussel, André Gide, or Vladimir Nabokov. Certain aspects of their fiction are recuperable because they are mimetic whereas others are not and, in this connection, the "state of mind" approach makes sense. Nonetheless, because postmodernism has become a catchall term for so many disparate aspects of the twentieth century, from architecture to the zone, it seems to me

that this proliferation and preoccupation bespeaks of a historical period, whereas metafiction is a term that, more appropriately, defines literature as an attitude toward reality and the creative process. Since the 1980s some 100 books and monographs have been published chronicling the avatars of postmodernism. The works of Ihab Hassan, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson are basic, and they all share the desire to explain the phenomenon that is making itself felt throughout all aspects of Western culture.

What was once a trickle of books about postmodernism has now become a flood that threatens to engulf us in debates concerning its origins and its meaning. In fiction, the terms postmodernism, metafiction, and self-reflexive writing tend to be used interchangeably and they correspond roughly to a certain kind of writing published within the last fifty years in Europe, North and South America. (In Latin America a very different postmodernism refers to a historical period of the 1920s.) The practitioners of the *nouveau roman* in France, of innovative fiction in the United States, and to a much lesser degree of "magical realism" in Latin America have been accused of dehumanizing the novel, when not killing it outright. The now familiar litany of grievances concerns the lack of plot, flat characters, disruptions in chronology, a preoccupation with things, a lack of verisimilitude, plurivocity, indeterminacy, and so on and so forth. Many studies have been written enumerating metafiction's alleged failures, the most egregious of which is its refusal to reflect the real world. Critics of metafiction such as Jameson dismiss its alleged self-centeredness, its lack of historical context, its decadence, and its polysemy, all of which, they say, reveal a preoccupation with form that remains indifferent to world problems.

*Contingent Meanings* is thus a timely book because Jerry A. Varsava argues the case for a mimetic function in postmodern fiction. He evaluates the American reception of metafiction, challenging both the critics who condemn postmodernism as morally pointless and those who value postmodern fiction solely for its aesthetic concerns. In order to make his case Varsava advances a contingent, reader-centered view of mimesis that is based, in part, on reader-response theory, and rejects the authorial intent of E.D. Hirsh. Using "the death of the author" proposed by Roland Barthes and "the death of man" to which Michel Foucault refers, Varsava makes a strong referential case for postmodern writing. He maintains that works by Walter Abish, Robert Coover, Peter Handke, and Gilbert Sorrentino provide links between formal innovation and contemporary issues such as anti-Semitism, consumerism, industry, the reification of high culture, the narrativity of experience, and revisionist historiography.

However, despite the excellence of his theoretical strategies for reading metafiction advocated in chapters one, two, and three, in the remaining four chapters Varsava explicates Abish's *How German Is It*, Coover's *Spanking the Maid*, Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, and Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew* reverting to authorial intent by applying an authorial purpose against which he argues so vigorously and so well. The limitations of authorial intent are now well established and there will always be a part of the work that escapes from the writer's control. This is both inevitable and culturally determined and Varsava's insistence (in chapters one, two, and three) that the reader, and not just the au-

thor, produce meaning, is a point well taken. Although the reader is free to bring extrinsic knowledge to his/her interaction with the text, metafiction, insofar as it devalues and undermines the canon of classical realism, has to be understood as a subversive genre. Because most readers of novels do not have access to interviews with writers, such as the ones quoted by Varsava, it seems to me important that the reader and the critic focus primarily on what is going on in the text and less on what the author says about his purpose.

Because language shapes our perception of the world, foregrounding the play of language is not necessarily gratuitous. Indeed, metafiction, like a number of Picasso's paintings of Dora Maar, distorts reality in order to reshape our awareness of the possible. Such artistic license allows the writer and the reader to escape the death-grip of the ready-made and the cultural straitjackets of convention. These notions are both stated or implied in Varsava's excellent study, but in striving to establish a mimetic function for metafiction he tends to recuperate both characters and settings. One difficulty that uninformed readers (not Varsava) of metafiction have is that old habits and expectations die slowly, among them the notion of character. A more fruitful way of reading metafiction, it seems to me, is to accept the idea that neither the characters nor the setting are real, and that language is. If characters and setting are only artificial props for the play of language, as for example in *Spanking the Maid* (this is the alleged formalism that many critics object to), then by contorting language and bending the conventions of realistic fiction, the author establishes language as the central concern. Insofar as the reader also uses language, there is an inevitable link with the world outside the text. In forcing this awareness metafiction affirms its mimetic function. Some works do it better than others, but I think it is a mistake to try to recuperate meaning through the old conventions instead of deconstructing mimesis. Nonetheless, despite our differences, *Contingent Meanings* is an important book and it is a step forward in reclaiming the relevance of metafiction when so many critics continue to proclaim its irrelevance.

Whereas *Contingent Meanings* strives to recuperate meaning within metafiction by attributing mimetic value to it, Lance Olsen's *Circus of the Mind in Motion* explores the two extremes, the recuperable and the nonrecuperable. Olsen believes that "the radicalism of the postmodern has given way to the conservatism of neorealism" (149-50), and it is this return to mimetic forms that he sees as a subversion of postmodernism. He believes that the dominance of postmodernism is now on the wane and he, like Varsava, analyzes Walter Abish's *How German Is It* as an example of this trend. I am not sure, however, that metafiction has run its course, or that it was ever a dominant genre. Although it has recently attracted a lot of attention, the best-seller mentality in fiction was never seriously challenged despite the fact that Samuel Beckett and Claude Simon won the Nobel Prize for literature. Mainstream America does not know or even care what postmodernism is even as the academic debate rages on, a tempest in a teacup. To say that *How German Is It* "subverts the postmodern via its traditional concerns" (145) assumes that the postmodern had, somehow, become the dominant aesthetic, and that it needed subverting, whereas I see mimetic writing (traditional concerns), past

or present, as nothing more than a manifestation of the age-old dictum that art should imitate nature.

Metafiction as a self-conscious artifact sets itself up in opposition to nature and it is this opposition that is subversive. It is difficult to see how the reverse (the reassertion of traditional concerns) could be true, i.e., subversive. The radical nature of metafiction is that it redirects perception. In calling attention to itself as a signifying system it foregrounds the contingency of reality—the fact that the meaning of reality does not exist outside the signifying chain. The language we use to describe what we experience, whatever we may think about its inadequacies to do so, is, for others, the reality of that experience. Realism strives to replicate experience without challenging the codes that determine our perception of reality, whereas metafiction foregrounds language as a sign-system thereby revealing the values that are encoded in it. To emphasize the fact that language is a prison is an invitation to escape from its confines. Mimetic fiction gives us the illusion that the prison is freedom, whereas metafiction imprisons us in its form(s) in order to demonstrate how arbitrary form is (any form, including mimesis).

In *Circus of the Mind in Motion*, a title he derives from Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, Olsen writes eloquently about the subversion of realism by metafiction. He sees both comic and postmodern forces subverting logocentrism, deriding univocal vision, short-circuiting ideology, mocking the serious, and foregrounding the profane. After charting the confluence of postmodernism and the comic vision Olsen analyzes the works of seven British and American fiction writers, and he examines various aspects of the rise and fall of postmodern humor in contemporary culture. In part one he looks at Guy Davenport's collection of short stories, *Da Vinci's Bicycle*, arguing that the distinction between modernity and postmodernity is defined by a renaissance of the archaic, and that postmodernism is a failure of that renaissance. In part two Olsen shows how Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* deconstructs certain modern assumptions while displaying postmodern elements of the fantastic. Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* subverts its moral intentions, says Olsen, because it is such a highly unstable text. Part three examines Beckett's *How It Is* and Barthelme's *The Dead Father*. Olsen defines their wedding of postmodernism and the comic vision as a "mindcircus with an infinite number of rings all astir, all swirling with wild hoopla, all gorgeous and astonishing" (32). In part four he looks at D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* and Abish's *How German Is It*, and he discusses how these works move away from postmodern humor.

In one way or another these authors illustrate George Steiner's point that with postmodernism "the house of classic humanism, the dream of reason which animated Western society, have largely broken down" (40). But some of their novels are more radical than others. Thus, Olsen defines *Lolita* as a Janus-text because it is part modern and part postmodern, dramatizing the opposition between mimesis and the fantastic through parody and destabilization, an illustration of Foucault's heterotopia—the clash of mutually exclusive worlds that turns the text into a joke. Barthelme refines this process by foregrounding the linguistic game in the text and the lexical play on the page. In such texts discursive slapstick undermines the stability of language as the power of words

to mean falls under erasure. These are also the signs of Jacques Derrida's radical subversion of logocentrism and Western metaphysics.

Despite the decentering of language and the self that marks the comic vision (its signs are parody and subversion), Olsen believes that the decline of postmodernism is the beginning of a new set of assumptions about language and experience. To confront death and finitude, he says, is to affirm the primacy of the self. Thus, *The White Hotel* and *How German Is It* illustrate a recent more conservative ontological turn because "one cannot live forever in the apolitical white hotel of postmodernity" (134). Although ultimately Olsen rejects "the odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall, the trope, the surface of signifiers that have no absolute signifieds—language doing its tricks" (111), his book is an elegant and informed analysis of postmodern fiction and the forms that are shaping its comic vision within the labyrinths of language and experience.

Olsen reminds us that our planet has shrunk to a global village and much of his concern (like Varsava's) about the relevance of postmodernism comes from television, "watching teenagers die in Vietnamese rice paddies" (102). I assume the word should be "paddies," and I sense an unconscious authorial and/or editorial slippage transforming death into gastronomy. It is surely this grotesque comedy of language that changes fact into fantasy and metafiction.

Victor Terras

*THE IDIOT: AN INTERPRETATION*

Boston: Twayne, 1990

Reviewed by Gary Cox

This "reader's companion" to Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, like Terras's recent volume on *The Brothers Karamazov*, is clearly the product of many years spent teaching the novel. It could be a useful teaching tool on virtually any level at which the novel is read, from honors high-school classes to graduate programs, from comparative literature courses, in which students and professor alike are working with translations, to courses taught by experienced Slavists. Indeed, the "companion" is self-explanatory enough to be useful to the general public, reading outside a course structure.

Twayne's format for this useful series contains several preliminary sections, designed to give the reader the necessary background information. Terras does not make as much of these sections as he might. The biographical chronology is good, and contains only one glaring mistake: the hiring of Dostoevsky's future wife Anna Grigorievna as a stenographer and the dictation of *The Gambler* took place not in 1865 but 1866, interrupting, not preceding, *Crime and Punishment*. The chapter on historical context is narrow in scope, covering only intellectual issues directly related to Terras's interpretation of *The Idiot*. A chapter on "The Importance of the Work" is included, presumably for the unconvinced.