

Book Review

Funk, Wolfgang. *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium.* London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2015. Hb. Viii, 218pp. \$ 98.99. ISBN 978-1-5013-0616-7.

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Over the past three decades, American literature has developed a renewed interest in ‘capital-T Truth,’ as David Foster Wallace would call it. Concepts such as authenticity, sincerity, reliability and trust have made their way back into the critical jargon. It is no small feat, however, to avoid simple revisionism and deal with the erasure postmodernism has placed on these terms. Wolfgang Funk’s study *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* attempts just that. The object of his research is the renegotiation of “the relationship between experience and its representation” (1) in contemporary literature. Funk claims that the enactment of authentic experience finds its formal expression through varied forms of metareference. It aims at a reconstruction of meaning in the act of literary communication. Hence Funk’s designation of “reconstruction” for this new literary period, which according to him is “founded on an attitude of confidence in the power of sign systems to actually convey experience rather than reflect the workings of the sign systems themselves” (5). Rather than the era following the American Civil War, “Reconstruction” addresses the move beyond postmodern deconstruction and is a terminological alternative to post-postmodernism, metamodernism, New Sincerity, and other attempts to theorize contemporaneous Anglophone literature. Funk is not the first scholar to use it this way, as Irmtraud Huber’s 2014 study *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* attests.

The first 100 pages of Funk’s book are devoted to defining authenticity and metareference and to outlining their correlation. Over the following 80 pages he applies his observations in brief but succinct chapters to Julian Barnes’ *England, England* and *The Sense of an Ending*, Dave Eggers’ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Jasper Fforde’s *Thursday Next* – Series and Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.

Funk’s discussion begins with a definition of authenticity. Consisting of eight interconnected theses, his argument combines a variety of ideas, spanning from classical antiquity to the digital age. The book’s theoretical alignment has a decidedly post-structural inflection and incorporates thinkers like Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault and Jameson, but also such existentialist philosophers

as Levinas and Heidegger. Building on their observations, Funk argues that authenticity functions like a reversible figure. It promises essential truth while simultaneously eluding all attempts at representation. Paradoxically, however, authentic experience can only be conveyed through mediation. That is why Funk defines authenticity with Zeller as “mediated immediacy” (17). This contradiction addresses the texture of existence: we are present in the world, yet our sign systems lack the ability to represent this presence without a filter. The contemporary novels Funk analyzes embrace this epistemological problem. By dwelling on and in paradoxicality, they create a link between text and extra-textual experience, or, as Funk puts it: “experience (life) and representation (art) touch in the infinitude of paradox” (17).

In different permutations, Funk traces how the paradoxical, ambiguous and oscillatory quality of authenticity shakes up cultural hierarchies. He illustrates this by offering the metaphor of the black box, an inscrutable system whose makeup can only be inferred by analyzing its imprint. Borrowing from Derrida’s notion of undecidability, Funk argues that the black box of authenticity manifests the “paradoxical simultaneity” (56) and interdependence of binary oppositions like fake and original, reality and fiction, authorship and reception, as well as aesthetics and ethics.

This leveling of differences links authenticity and metareference. Metareferential texts “pose an irresolvable epistemological or ontological challenge which cannot be resolved on the textual level and which therefore necessitates the imaginative reconstruction of the act of literary communication” (79). By tangling the constituents of literary communication, self-referential texts offer readers the experience of the “paradoxical and circular logic of their own epistemological condition by proxy” (92). This particular view of metareference is largely based in Douglas Hofstadter’s work on tangled hierarchies.

Funk’s discussion of Dave Egger’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is probably the best illustration of this idea. The novel inextricably tangles the “hierarchy between its three constitutive components, the authoring self, the narrating self and the narrated self” (136). In doing so, it displays a heightened self-awareness of its status as aesthetic representation. A few decades ago, the novel would likely have been considered just another retreat into the free play of the signifier. Now, however, Funk argues, it can be understood as an “honest” (137) act of literary communication. It yearns for reciprocity and the “materiality of real events” while simultaneously evoking the “radical solipsism” of the “formal structure of representation” (137). This, according to Funk, is the enactment of authenticity’s paradoxical nature by way of metareference.

While Funk’s discussion is riveting on a philosophical scale, it is at times vague when it comes to the actual implementation of the “imaginative

reconstruction” required by the reader. This results in potentially contradictory statements. Funk’s otherwise brilliant discussion of Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shall serve as an example. Funk observes that, on a formal level, the novel enacts the authentic experience of time and memory by narrating its different vignettes of recurring characters without a readily available chronology or even causal links (see 170). On the level of content, “moments of unstructured revelation, where the formless abyss of experience and memory encroaches on the fabricated narrative of the self, present instances of an intrusion of the authentic” (174). Yet at the end of the section, he states that the “assemblage of random events [...] needs to be reconstructed into a coherent narrative in the very act of reading” (180). This understanding of reconstruction seems to be at odds with Funk’s earlier argument. It asks for reestablishing ordered hierarchies, rather than challenging the reader to be open towards the inconclusive paradoxicality of authentic experience. While the term reconstruction is fitting for the larger intellectual environment Funk has in mind, its simultaneous application to the process of interpretation could have been more thorough.

Argumentative hitches such as this do little to weaken the overall impact of the book, however. Funk’s ability to synthesize diverse ideas into a coherent and complex theoretical framework is astounding, as are his erudition and focused style. His study is useful for anyone seeking a novel theorization of post-postmodern literature and/or a state of the art definition of authenticity and metareference. It offers an answer to the ever-present question what reading and writing beyond postmodernism might entail.