Reviews

Humus . . . Human . . . Humus

MARK C. TAYLOR, *Rewiring the Real: In Conversation with William Gaddis, Richard Powers, Mark Danielewski, and Don DeLillo* (New York: Columbia UP, 2013), pp. 344, cloth, $27.50.

In approaching *Rewiring the Real*, I find myself unusually sensitive to a number of very different contexts within which I might provide a critical reading of the book. The consequent self-consciousness and discursive uncertainty is prompted by the book itself. The address of Mark C. Taylor's essay is unclear. Is it, chiefly, literary criticism? secular theology? philosophy? a critical history of communication technologies? a manifesto of artistic practice? For the immediately present context—here in *Novel*—I am concerned to address Taylor's book as his reading of four important prose works by four important, well-established writers. *Rewiring the Real* does, clearly, support my concern. Four of five more or less equally substantial chapters are devoted to four novels: Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, Powers's *Ploughing the Dark*, Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, and DeLillo's *Underworld*. But I am given to understand, crucially, that these readings have been undertaken by a postmodern secular theologian, and I am promised that these important books—all, it should be noted, by somewhat stereotypical white Western male overachievers—will have been read as influential commentaries on or even significant instantiations of "emergent" reconfigurations, "rewirings" of art—including but not only the art of the novel—as well as of the aspect of experience that some of us call spiritual, where the interrelation of these two human concerns—art and religion—are, for Taylor, the "real" of his title.

    Rewiring's introductory "nexus" provides a hasty philosophical and secular-theological orientation so as to launch us, first, into a reading of *The Recognitions*. Taylor's interpretations, generally, are driven by fairly standard plot summary, paraphrase, and quotation. Gaddis's obsessions with Christian theology and its wider and deeper relations with classical and preclassical religious and philosophical culture easily serve Taylor's interpretative purposes. No question: the main characters of *The Recognitions* are personally and explicitly invested in working through their fictional destinies—and their recognitions of (in)authenticity—in significant and affective relation with important concepts and certain consequential beliefs of Christian theology. But somehow Gaddis manages fully to acknowledge the historical evolution and, arguably, the fading or degradation of his characters' and the great American novel's relationship to Christendom without sacrificing whatever is at stake for his own novel or for ourselves and without overburdening or overdetermining it with a necessity to read *The Recognitions* as a religious novel per se. This is partly, I believe, a function of his extensive attention to the lives and loves of his minor characters, no less implicated in the underlying thematics but nonetheless providing something of a "real" world—engaging, comic, satyrical, humorous—that is missing, literally, from Taylor's account. Taylor gives a heroic hermeneutic reading that does little more than reiterate Gaddis's own statements about the book. The problem is not whether this is a good or accurate reading; the problem is more that this reading largely ignores what I would characterize as the actual technologies of fiction. It is difficult even to see *The Recognitions* as *about* technology, or about technological change in any significant manner, but Taylor makes this claim—that it shares "a recognition of the

ways in which new media, communications, and information technologies transformed life during the latter half of the twentieth century" (5)—in order to bolster his general claim to technology as a central concern across all these texts. As Taylor's book progresses, technology remains something that is evoked and commented on as a function of interpretable content or, at most and especially in the case of Danielewski, of the design and mediation of the works that Taylor has chosen to read. He does not allow his argument to reach down so far as to engage with more granular technologies of writing itself.

Perhaps I can clarify with reference to Taylor's treatment of Richard Powers's *Ploughing the Dark*. Taylor quotes a passage from the book as epigraph for his chapter and returns to the same passage as he concludes his reading. "You turn in the entranceway of illusion, gaping down the airplane aisle, and you make it out. For God's sake, call it God. That's what we've called it forever, and it's so cheap, so self-promoting, to invent new vocabulary for every goddamned thing, at this late date. The place where you've been unfolds inside you. A space in your heart so large it will surely kill you, by never giving you the chance to earn it" (63, 107–8). The passage is typical of Powers for its mash-up of demotic registers and its witty, faux low-brow tenor, enforcing our identification with a central character—and collapsing this same identification with the author—through the prescriptive imperative of a highly mannered third-person historical present. All the elements of Taylor's argument are present. The voice is that of the novel's most *authentic* character—his suffering transcultural humanity misapprehended and tried by terror, then arbitrarily released, à la Terry Waite, to grant us revelation. He, that is "you," unfold(s) the dark space within "your heart" and names it— "[f]or God's sake," "for every goddamned thing," because it is "cheap" to be unconventional, because you are not given "the chance to earn it"—God. "You" come to this highly conservative and ultimately reassuring revelation as "you" turn in an "airplane aisle," at "the entranceway of illusion." This latter threshold is the novel's and Taylor's apotheosis of technology, technology that is always nonetheless reducible to allegorical narrative, to, at best, the harrowing tale of an all-but-unrepresentable spiritual nothingness. My point is that the technology of the prose, particularly its representation in Taylor's reading, is not commensurate with the experiences it pretends.

When Taylor turns toward *House of Leaves*, he suggests that new technologies are truly at work in the world. *Ploughing the Dark* provided us with fantastic tales of hard science and "virtual reality," playing out their final collapse in the face of true art, bellicose and terrorist expediencies, and humankind's need to know God by whatever means necessary. When it comes to Danielewski's metafictions, Taylor asks us to consider the possibility that younger generations of human readers may be reading in new ways. The complex text(s) of *House of Leaves*—in its multiply warped typographic space-time—punctuates and programs practices of reading far beyond the usual conventions of the codex's paratextual framing, interlinking with all those once novel and now all-too-familiar practices of web-serviced, web-enhanced, web-distracted reading: the reading of hyperattention, as N. Katherine Hayles would have it.

There is no possible future world in which such practices—and many others—will not be, in every conceivable and inconceivable manner, effectively operative in the domain of literature and, indeed, constitutive of literary culture as a whole. It does not follow that Taylor's readings of *House of Leaves*, along with the anecdotal accounts of readings by his students, provide any kind of authoritative model for reconfigured practices of writing and interpretation or for a promised "rewiring of the real." The secular theology that emerges from an indeterminable encounter with unnameable postmodern horror—sub-Borges, sub-Bolaño,

sub-Nabokov—revolves around a formal play that depends, in fact, much less on form itself than on puzzle solving, narrative progression as gaming, and a resolution to interpretable content and hidden meanings that are embedded in cultural and intellectual prejudice. Such processes run pointedly counter, for example, to those of Gaddis—or Borges, or Bolaño, or Nabokov. The writing of these authors exceed cultural predeterminations through formal, conceptual, and compositional literary artistry—because of the way that they write, sentence to sentence.

If the point of Taylor's book is to reveal and explore a migration of those processes of signification and affect that characterize our engagement with the spiritual, and if his argument turns on evidence that these processes are now caught up in the kinds of formalities of mediation and dissemination that are enacted by *House of Leaves*, then he contributes to a reading of contemporary culture that is already familiar and that demands more of us in the way of critical attention as opposed, that is, to providing an opportunity for celebration. Hypertext is already everywhere. Intertextuality is immediately, literally, and mechanistically engaged with every act of contemporary inscription and reading. We have successfully associated these circumstances—strong challenges to integrity and attribution—with poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodern philosophy since well before the publication of Danielewski's magnum opus. If we read, from this and the other texts discussed, no more than a recasting of timeless horror, timeless wisdom, timeless beauty, and a final return to the father (and his family), then we are, indeed, caught within mysteriously growing extensions of the labyrinth of darkness, exulting as its spaces unfold within our hearts. Meanwhile, the technologies on which we now constantly rely to read and write capture, for example, every recordable transaction that we make—all of us, including Taylor and his students. How does this affect our spiritual lives, our secular theologies, our day-to-day existences? I would suggest that the real business of being human or posthuman has eluded our attention and Taylor's. We have become captivated by processes that have been evacuated of precisely the significant and affective relations that are Taylor's chief study: the real has not been rewired, it has been removed from our interpretative engagement. History, theology, and their real politics are subject to newer technologies, but these are not addressed in this book.

With Taylor's self-consciously innovative, exploratory, and practically engaged essay on DeLillo's *Underworld*, we return nonetheless to a familiar register of critical reading—picking up "where Gaddis leaves off" (8)—a reading now substantially interlaced with autobiography. We are given the story of a personal reading and a family history, resonating with the themes of the novel. Postwar technologies refashion our understanding of how the world and our lives are interconnected, and our messy, excessive, wasteful persistence is reiteratively buried and revealed between "the real and the virtual, the material and the immaterial" (244). "Afterthought" and "Earth Works" sections conclude this essay with, respectively, speculations on the origin of thought and the story of the author's attempt to make the earth itself work with him to create a piece of visual art from a painting-like structure actually buried in the ground and allowed to decay. The process coincided and rhymed—figuratively but also literally and temporally for Taylor—with his processes of reading, interpreting, and then writing on *Underworld*. He discovers a nexus of "Religion . . . literature . . . technology. Waste . . . Art. Humus . . . Human . . . Humus." This works, perhaps, as earth work, but I am radically unsure as to what to do with it in terms of critical or even spiritual understanding, and I remain concerned, as before, that the "real" is playing itself

out and investing elsewhere. Neither am I helped in my understanding by the all but entirely autonomous final essay of the book, which is a separate, learned elaboration of "two styles of the philosophy of religion" (250) emanating, in Taylor's account, from Paul Tillich's 1946 essay "The Two Types of the Philosophy of Religion," in which this distinction is characterized in relation to the two classical arguments for the existence of God, ontological and cosmological. Being, stylishly, prevails.

JOHN CAYLEY, *Brown University*

*   *   *

JOHN CAYLEY is professor of literary arts at Brown University. He both makes and writes on digital art, particularly in the domain of poetry and poetics. Recent and ongoing projects include *How It Is in Common Tongues*, a part of *The Readers Project* with Daniel C. Howe, *imposition* with Giles Perring, *riverIsland*, and *what we will . . .*

Work Cited

Hayles, N. Katherine. "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes." *Profession* 2007. New York: Modern Language Association, 2007. 187–99.