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Review of *Infinite Fictions:*
Essays on Literature and Theory
by David Winters

Infinite Fictions: Essays on Literature and Theory, by David Winters.
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In one of the few interviews novelist Cormac McCarthy has granted, he states that he "doesn't understand" the novels of Marcel Proust and Henry James. "That's not literature," McCarthy says, because it doesn't "deal with issues of life and death." What exactly does McCarthy mean by this? I can't imagine that McCarthy is suggesting an imperative for literary narrative to traffic exclusively in the type of violence found in the bloodbath that is his own extraordinary work of literature, *Blood Meridian*. And while I remain a bit dubious about his selection of James and, even more so, of Proust among writers who would exemplify a type of writing to be placed on the other side of this line he's drawn in the sand, I still admire the impulse to define literature in terms of its willingness or failure to address "issues of life and death." Of course, McCarthy probably means something fairly prosaic by this, something like the importance of literature's depiction of situations in which the continuance of characters' lives has been placed in jeopardy. But I prefer to read his statement as suggestive of an obligation for literature to wrestle with our most angst-ridden questions: e.g., "How can life possess meaning or beauty when death is always inevitable?" To my reading, Cormac McCarthy confronts and attempts to answer this particular question, with varying degrees of positivity, in every last one of his novels. Maybe he says what he does because the issue of life and death is commonest among all pressing issues facing humans, and therefore the work of literature, going for democratic appeal, should tend toward that common denominator. Or maybe it's that literature, an instrument for the expression of human desire, is obliged to

engage with desire's parameters, with desire as such, and to work to demonstrate that love and life are coterminous. But what I've always been most eager to read into McCarthy's cryptic imperative is this: Literature—the work of “good writers,” as McCarthy would have it—can never pretend, as we all often pretend, that death doesn't exist; literature's fundamental quality would consist in the honesty and rigor with which it expresses the fact of life's finitude.

In *Infinite Fictions: Essays on Literature and Theory*, David Winters actively seeks out reading experiences through which a reader might encounter representations of both finitude, in relation to life or literary content, and infinitude, in relation to language or literary form; experiences by which a reader may be astonished by language's seemingly limitless representation of life. The book comprises 37 short essays that Winters, a prodigiously gifted young UK critic, has adapted from book reviews published over past years in venues such as *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Inquiry*, *The Rumpus*, and *3:AM Magazine*, where he serves as co-editor. Twenty-two of these essays concern works of fiction and make up the book's first section, “On Literature”; 15 concern works of theory and philosophy, making up its second section, “On Theory.” While Winters's interest may at first appear divided, both sections emphasize a life-centered approach to thinking and writing about books, and both discuss the work of authors who perhaps have not received the amount of critical attention they rightfully deserve. Throughout the book David Winters reveals himself as an enthusiastic critic bold enough to assume that his reader is implicitly curious about the horizons of literature and theory, but generous enough to provide context and even some welcomed handholding for those of us whose curiosity hasn't been piqued quite as often as his own.

In the book's introduction, Winters remarks that in his selection of writers for the first section—Micheline Aharonian Marcom, Sam Lipsyte, Lydia Davis, Dawn Raffel, Lars Iyer, Christine Schutt, Jason Schwartz, Dylan Nice, Gary Lutz, and other luminaries of formally inventive contemporary fiction—he is not “projecting a personal canon”:

I regard reading as an uncertain experience, and not one that lends itself to a normative stance. As a reviewer, all I can do is try to stay true to the texture of that experience. So, these aren't necessarily the “best books” around; they're simply the ones that satisfied me. Strange as it sounds, each of these books briefly allowed me to subtract myself from reality. In

this respect, when writing reviews, I'm less intent on making prescriptions than on exploring the space left by my subtraction.

Winters emphasizes that this subtraction process cannot be reduced to the simple desire to achieve "a passive escape from reality," because there always exists a "dual movement" in a reader's proximity to reality: while reading, we may retreat from the world, and yet, concurrently, we are pulled back toward it. And this "space left by [his] subtraction" would seem to involve another "dual movement," the same one with which the first section of *Infinite Fictions* primarily concerns itself: the concurrent movements of the finite and the infinite, or what writer Gordon Lish, in conversation with Winters, has called fiction's "bounded infinity." Lish's vision of fiction is one by which it is perceived to be "circumscribed on all sides," Winters writes, while still containing "a limitless internal world." For many readers, such a description might call to mind the Escheresque meta-fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, but this is not exactly, or not primarily, what Lish and Winters have in mind. A better progenitor of Lish's "bounded infinity" might be the late fictions of Samuel Beckett, whose *Ill Said Ill Seen's* method of linguistic atomization and recursion Winters describes in his essay on Lish's novel *Peru*:

A deliberately limited lexical pool provides the "atoms" of a textual world—as it were, the grains of sand in the sandbox. These are then combined and recombined, raked over and over, in a recursive process whereby an artwork *emerges* from chaos into composition. In this way, the work is revealed as a world of its own; one whose language is its limit.

As Winters notes, Lish has famously dubbed his recursive, self-generating compositional method *consecution*, and many of Lish's former students employ a similar process in their own writing. Encountering such writing, the reader may sense that a sentence or word follows from whatever came before it not so much due to an authorial choice that has been made but to a necessary and often disarming stylistic movement following from the text's self-generating immanence. A former student of Lish's, Christine Schutt, whose novel *Prosperous Friends* receives its own careful reading in *Infinite Fictions*, describes the method as something akin to an algorithm, by which the writer seeks to "query the preceding sentence for what might most profitably

be used in composing the next sentence." Another of Lish's students, Gary Lutz, whose recent collection *Divorcer* is discussed by Winters, describes it mystically, as a "procedure by which one word pursues itself into its successor by discharging something from deep within itself into what follows." In his essay on Sam Lipsyte, yet another of Lish's former students, Winters quotes the following passage from Lipsyte's story collection *The Fun Parts*—in which a narrator speaks of his father—illustrating the method of consecution:

You had to hand it to him. I generally want to hand it to him, and then, while he's absorbed in admiring whatever I've handed to him, kick away at his balls. That's my basic strategy. Except he has no balls. Testicular cancer.

Winters unpacks the comedic effect of Lipsyte's prose, noting that "Lipsyte's writing runs not from A to B to C, but from A¹ to A² to A³ . . . increasing the energy in the system, bringing it to a boil . . . setting off unexpected explosions." Lipsyte's is an "escalatory logic," Winters writes, which "reflects the cruel yet comic complexity of real life." The trick here, as with the writing of many of Lish's students, is to employ literary form as an engine that might fuel and generate the motion of content, of story. Winters suggests that the infinite trajectories made possible by literary form—by the "torque" and "swerve" and "refactoring" (all Lishian rhetorical figures) of Lipsyte's prose style—would seem to underline the finitude of life and story while at the same time transcending it. When the reader encounters such disconcerting literary logic, she feels herself pulled in the directions of the immanent world of content and the transcendent movements of form at one and the same time. Among *Infinite Fictions's* many astute insights into the nuts and bolts of our most daring recent fictions, this is, to my reading, one of the most astute: the method of consecution can be read as redeeming infinite possibility from mere life. Whereas Borges describes infinities primarily at the level of the writing's content, Beckett, Lish, and fellow consecutionists describe them through a recursion of literary form, imbuing their very sentences with an intensity of infinite potential.

Gordon Lish's influence looms large over the first section of *Infinite Fictions*—as Senior Editor at Knopf, Lish edited about half of the writers discussed in it—and what may be the section's standout essay, among an array of superlative ones, concerns Lish's own novel *Peru*. For me, part of the pleasure associated with reading Winters—who has emerged in recent years as one of the preeminent non-US critics

of formally innovative contemporary US fiction—is viewing US fiction from a non-US perspective. Winters's emphasis on and enthusiastic commitment to the so-called "Lish strain" of contemporary US fiction feels at once perfectly appropriate and totally novel. He's right to set his sights on Lish, surely, as a significant fraction of the most intelligent and daring recent US fiction has proceeded in direct consequence of Lish's teaching and influence, and yet how many US critics have devoted themselves, as Winters has—from all the way across the pond, no less—to a rigorous study of this consequence? In *Infinite Fictions's* essay on Hob Broun, a Lishian well-nigh forgotten by US readers, Winters writes of a common complaint regarding Lish and his followers:

Observing my interest in what could crudely be called the "Lish line" of fiction, an antagonist of mine once claimed that he couldn't see any "angst" beneath the pyrotechnics; any "existential" pressure. Broun's prose provides powerful proof for why this is wrong. Without doubt, here was a writer, as Lipsyte has said of him, for whom "every word was hard won."

Winters and Lipsyte are explicitly referring to Broun having been left paralyzed after a surgery and forced to write via mechanical prosthesis. Every word was hard won for Broun, sure enough—just as every word seems hard won for all writers in the so-called Lish line. "The bewilderment we experience when reading [Dawn] Raffel's spoken exchanges," Winters writes of another notable Lish student, "is that of encountering an alien language—only to realize it is our own." This is, as it were, the Lishian imperative: the writer must estrange and torque her syntax and diction so to create an isomorphic ("equal shape"), rather than a homomorphic ("same shape"), relation between language and life; the writer is charged with founding a "form of life," per Wittgenstein, exposing her reader's presuppositions about the commensurability of life, which is more often than not strange, and language, which is more often than not inadequately familiar. Dawn Raffel's sonorous sentences, writes Winters in his essay on Raffel's recently republished *In the Year of Long Division*, "sing of things that speech alone can't express":

For instance, a Raffelian phrase like "the ice, I see, is swept, wet, white" seems to achieve, in its fluid assonance, the physical *form* of a frozen lake; in its frictionless flow from one vowel to the next, the sentence itself skates across the surface it so tactilely describes.

Winters goes on to invoke Yeats, quoting the former's famous "There is another world, but it is in this one." And indeed, Raffel's reader is left feeling astonished by the estrangement or defamiliarization of life after its having passed through her prism of language; the reader is invigorated by an encounter with "an ineffable reality that exists everywhere around us . . . ," as Winters writes, "beyond reach of our words; beyond sense."

In nearly every essay in *Infinite Fictions*'s first section, there comes a point when Winters briefly turns away from close readings to try out a bit of theory, philosophy, or poetics on the text or author under consideration. In the essay on Raffel, he tries out some Yeats; in the essay on Lipsyte, he tries out some Bakhtin; in the essay on Schutt, a little Kristeva; in the essay on Dylan Nice, some Heidegger and Badiou; and in the essays on Gabriel Josipovici, a little Adorno and a little Baudelaire. After looking to fiction or art for clues about life, Winters then looks to theory for clues about fiction and art. The following passage, from Winters's essay on Dylan Nice's story collection *Other Kinds*, illustrates his method:

Writing about Plato's *Sophist*, Alain Badiou analyses life in terms of five axioms: "being, motion, sameness, stillness and the Other." For me at least, the core elements of *Other Kinds* are comparable: a boy, a girl, a place, another place, all separated by space. Close and far, light and dark, wind and sun, warmth and cold: a world. This is why Nice's depictions of movement through space mean much more than they say. Each is, in its way, an epiphany: one of those movements of world-disclosure we know only once or twice in our lives.

What's most exciting about Winters's method here and throughout is his determination never to merely apply theory to art, but instead to foster a kind of exchange or praxis among them: we eagerly read along as the critic susses out correspondences between seemingly disparate disciplines, employing analogy as a means to arrive at a fuller and more vital understanding of both. He shows us how the fictions of Lydia Davis can bring to life Franco Moretti's concept of "filler" (idle time in narrative when characters sit or eat or walk around between important narrative events); how Kjersti Skomsvold's first novel, *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am*, can hypostatize and illuminate Deleuze's abstract and obscure "univocity of being"; and how Gabriel Josipovici's *Infinity: The Story of a Moment* exemplifies Baudelaire's dictum that "modern art must combine 'the transient,

the fleeting' with 'the eternal and the immutable.'" Winters's deftness at summary, analysis, and synthesis results in a lively conversation between theory and fiction over the course of *Infinite Fictions's* 22 "On Literature" essays, which is then taken up anew in the book's 15 essays of its second section, "On Theory," as Winters turns his gaze toward the horizons of contemporary literary theory.

Assuming that literary theory is dead, a voguish claim in recent years, "speaks not to the failure of some theoretical 'project,'" Winters writes, "but only of critics' failures to reflect on their ongoing theoreticism." Several of *Infinite Fictions's* essays concerning recent works in literary theory will take up just this task, locating the moment of contemporary theory not in relation to its afterlife but, rather, its forms of life thus far, its morphology.

The book's second sequence of essays begins with a discussion of Terry Eagleton's *The Event of Literature* by way of a quote from Gerald Graff: "Literary theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature . . . ceases to be a given and becomes a question to be argued in a more generalized way." Graff's is a vision of theory that may hearken back to Wittgenstein's "forms of life": understanding is regularly dependent on assumptions made given a presupposed mode of living. A goal of Winters's project here consists of returning literary theory to a condition of vitality and feeling, in opposition to its oft-perceived academic stasis and obscurity, let alone its death. Winters advocates for the possibility of "feeling our way around theory," acquiring an "affective investment in its ideas," and, invoking Francois Cusset's use of the term *Bildungstheorie* to describe theory's visceral power when young readers first encounter it, he imagines a "psychic life" for theory, "less a technical instrument than a totem or talisman; a charm that we clasp to our hearts." Although never explicitly advocating for political intervention as we might associate it with certain bereted and goateed icons of theory's heyday, Winters would call for theory's assimilation into our lived and shared experience of the world, a condition of everyday perception and interaction by which life is illuminated by an awareness of structure and concept and the potentially redemptive power of interpretation and analysis.

In Eagleton, Winters finds a necessary retrieval of literary criticism from the dumping ground of cultural studies, the return of literature's "strangeness and singularity" as its own unique field of study accompanied by a renewed interrogation of its first principles and a re-assertion of the centrality of close reading. The section's next essay, in contrast, concerning a pair of Franco Moretti's recent books, suggests

Winters's steadied enthusiasm for the quantitative literary analysis Moretti has pursued in recent years at The Stanford Literary Lab—a type of “distant reading,” to cite the title of Moretti’s latest collection of essays. Winters describes Moretti’s recent work with insight, eloquence, and caution, noting the possibility that such quantifications may be doomed to always “drift . . . to the qualitative,” asking whether “literature is this drift, these errors and excesses that are ingrained in our reading experiences,” and intimating the possibility of an “observer effect” associated with Moretti’s now infamous big data-fication of literary analysis. In his essay on D.N. Rodowick’s *Elegy for Theory*, Winters looks farther afield, stating that “a new strand of scholarship appears to be emerging: one which treats theory less as an instrument than an object of study in its own right,” pointing to recent “reflexive” writing on literary theory by critics like Mark Currie and Judith Ryan. While discussing Rodowick’s reading of French film theorist Christian Metz’s “invention of modern film theory”—Metz’s creative rehistoricization or “retrospective rewrit[ing]” of the work of his theoretical precursors—Winters writes that:

this strongly recursive, self-reflexive standpoint—which Rodowick dubs “the metatheoretical attitude”—is arguably the driving dynamic of theory “as we have lived and still live it.” Perhaps it could even be said that theory creates and renews itself precisely by thus folding back on its previous forms, so as to “project new epistemological spaces,” redefining its history and thereby redrawing its future horizons.

Throughout the several forward-looking essays in *Infinite Fictions*’s second section, the “future horizons” of literary theory do indeed look bright. In his readings of theorists who are seeking methods by which to reevaluate or reinvigorate theory’s assumed or uninspired forms, Winters imagines a future project for theory in opposition to the mere autopsy its naysayers would perform: theory “should go on living,” Winters writes, “in unflinching fidelity to how it feels to be human.”

Other essays in the book’s second section run the gamut of recent work in literary theory and continental philosophy, ranging from a reading of Daniel Levin Becker’s recent *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature*, in which Winters weighs his appreciation for Becker’s project against his own skepticism for Oulipian language constraints; to a concise, enthusiastic reading of Ben Kafka’s *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, locating Kafka’s project within a “technical turn” in recent theory; to a reading of Peter

Sloterdijk's *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom in Practice*, in which Winters finds a response to the "reflexive deficit" of philosophy insofar as philosophical ideas always follow from the "self-understandings" and "self-fashioning" of the philosopher herself; to a discussion of the rise of trauma studies and its implications for literary analysis by way of Cathy Caruth's *Literature in the Ashes of History*.

Winters may be at his best in *Infinite Fiction's* "On Theory" section when explicating a new theoretical framework for literary modernism in his essay on Martin Hägglund's *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Beginning with a quick refresher on Derrida and deconstruction's so-called "religious turn," the essay turns its focus to Hägglund's renunciation, in his previous book *Radical Atheism*, of deconstruction's appropriation by theologians. Winters discusses Hägglund's repositioning of Derrida in his natural light—reasserting the latter's unflagging, life-affirming atheism—by which a religious desire for "ungraspable transcendence" should be regarded as nothing more than a "'dissimulation'" of a "'desire for survival.'" He next reads Derrida by way of political theorist Ernest Laclau reading Hägglund:

Laclau remarked that Hägglund's argument had approached "the zero degree of deconstruction," a bottom line that could not be "assimilated" to theology or any other supervening discourse. Indeed, in Hägglund's hands deconstruction isn't reductively "discursive" at all. Instead, it's aligned with the most essential level of human experience: that of living and dying, and of the desires to which they give rise.

The essay segues to *Dying for Time*, Hägglund's most recent book, by presenting it as a product of the latter's rescue of deconstruction from transcendence-crazy hands, its return and renewed application to the immanent work of literary criticism, a practice whereby "literature can be considered 'concrete and exemplary' insofar as it enacts and illuminates lived experience," writes Winters, "tracking the texture of our everyday desires and dilemmas." Winters reads literary modernism through Hägglund with a focus on the immanent quality of Joyce's epiphanies, Proust's involuntary memory, Woolf's moments of being and Nabokov's metafiction, placing special emphasis on Hägglund's concept of "chronolibido"—the combination of our love for temporal existence ("chronophilia") and our fear of losing it ("chronophobia")—which underlies humans' "onvestment in survival" or, per theology, our desire for temporal transcendence. As Winters and Hägglund convincingly demonstrate, the writing of Proust, Woolf, and

Nabokov does not attempt to escape the temporal bounds of life, as many commentators would have it, but rather to expose them, revealing life as transient and, thus, precious. This short essay is virtuosic, magisterial, even lyrical—and yet it remains, as does every essay in the book, accessible, always generous toward its reader, toward its subject, and toward its valuation of writing's most important task: confronting the beauty of life and all the problems such confrontation entails.

In nearly every essay in the second section of *Infinite Fictions*, as in nearly every essay in the first, there exists a pointed emphasis on reading's relation to life, to the reader's lived experience. Cumulatively, these essays inspire their reader—this reader, anyway—to recommit to a practice of reading literary theory with a regard for theory's felt, practical application to life as we live it. The facility and artistry with which Winters analyzes and synthesizes the work of these many writers leaves the reader feeling, on the one hand, that she's now very eager to read these books that David Winters has discussed, and on the other, that perhaps now she doesn't have to, because David Winters has already done the work for her. In any case, it will behoove the enthusiastic reader to create a new wish list entitled "Infinite Fictions" as she reads *Infinite Fictions*, this veritable treasure trove of the most exciting work being done in recent fiction and theory.