

## Book Reviews

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Alice Bennett, *Afterlife and Narrative in Contemporary Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), vi + 228 pp. £50.00 (hb).

Life after death, Alice Bennett states in her provocative new study, is a fiction. But fiction, from a narrative point of view, is also a form of life after death. Imagined worlds that lie beyond death are a feature of most of the world's cultures, as well as some of the signal works of the world's fictions, not least in the journeys to the underworld that figure in classical epic. Bennett also emphasizes that narrative form itself implies the ability to look back over a closed system of time from outside the boundaries of that time. One only knows how a novel has resolved once one has finished reading it, and only then can one fully understand its structure – an ability that no one is granted in real life. Narrative carries thus within it the metafictional ability both to mirror life and to mirror its own thematic concerns with world creation, closure, and consciousness. Contemporary novelists have become particularly attuned to these aspects of recursive philosophic form, Bennett claims, and contemporary narrative fiction has found itself with an affinity for the afterlife, for '[t]he things that the times currently demand from our afterlives are things that narrative fiction best supplies' (1). Bennett thus splits her focus in a number of nominally complementary directions. She provides a taxonomy of mainly late twentieth-century novels that either imagine fully-(un)fleshed versions of the afterlife as social structures, or present narratives in which dead first-person protagonists look back upon lives on earth. She provides a social and aesthetic history of narratives of the afterlife. She examines major works of narratology for their eschatological and temporal insights into the features of her chosen texts. Finally, she claims that the features of these texts simply provide in more overt form salient aspects of narrative fiction that have always been present in the novel but seldom seen as such. The novel of the afterlife, in short, is the novel of life: and life as a form

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of narrative can never be wholly grasped except from outside of its own philosophic terms. Bennett suggests throughout that narrative strategies in fantasy fiction are extreme reifications of philosophical problems involved in all narratology: 'Writing about the afterlife means writing about the metaphysical, but also involves the metafictional, because it leads to a consideration of the fit between the tools for representing the world and the world itself' (197).

These are bold claims, and, particularly towards the beginning of the book, Bennett raises an abundance of critical issues. The reading experience, for instance, is a metaphor of life and temporality, for '[w]hen reading a novel, we can see the number of pages left ahead with much more reliability than our own life expectancy' (24). Both reading and life depend on 'the anticipation of retrospection, a projection into the future that imagines the present as past' (41). Bennett's introduction focuses on both theological and what she calls 'post-theological' versions of the afterlife, and raises the interesting claim that in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fiction the afterlife is as often as not a version of hell, configured by the effects of the deracinations of twentieth-century politics: as the refugee or displaced person camp, the concentration camp, or the hotel (5). The Scottish novelist Alasdair Gray has noted the prevalence of infernos over paradisos in modern thinking, but Bennett claims that ideas of purgatory, despite its various imaginative instantiations in her chosen novels, provide the best fit for narrative, because purgatory presents a space of possibility rather than resolution. Overall, modern – and particularly experimental – fiction, by veering into fantasy worlds, can take particularly temporal 'concepts from modern physics that are not intuitively graspable' and 'translate them into human, thinkable terms' (47).

Bennett, however, only makes good on these claims intermittently. Her range of narrative and philosophical reference is wide, her readings of individual texts are often original, and she offers many fascinating bits of information along the way – for instance, that the historical idea of purgatory emerged at about the same time as double-entry book-keeping (76). But there are many flaws in this otherwise interesting book. The range of references, appealing at first, leads to a kind of argumentative fragmentation. Bennett tries to cover so many different fictional texts – and provides a useful annotated bibliography to these at the end – that she seldom allows space for detailed exegesis. Her argument also tends to get derailed by a proliferation of theorists.

This is fair enough for a work that promises not only to describe a hitherto unrecognized genre of writing, but also provide an intervention into narratology. But when in her second chapter ‘Dead Endings: Making Means from the Afterlife’ Bennett layers Kermode upon Derrida upon Bakhtin upon Ricoeur, and then Benjamin upon Lukács upon Blanchot upon Barthes (33-40), the trees get truly lost within the *selva oscura* of High Theory. Even Bennett’s fictional taxonomy is frustratingly multiple. Her chosen authors – from the nineteenth-century novelists Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Machado de Assis, through twentieth-century authors such as William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, and Alasdair Gray, to twenty-first-century texts by Amy Tan and Chuck Palahniuk – are neither all contemporary, nor all experimental in any meaningfully similar way. Nor does she ever succeed in weaving together her two major strands of afterlife fictions: those that emphasize utopian or dystopian social formations in the afterlife, versus those that focus on individual, usually retrospective, consciousnesses after death. And while a chapter that focuses on genre fiction and portrayals of the dead narrator raises the interesting narrative question of how ‘repetitions and returns’ are involved in genre fiction, it’s hard to imagine a theory of fiction, however original and capacious, that can embrace and illuminate such diverse works as Gray’s *Lanark* (1981) and the ephemeral works of Mitch Albom, not to mention Alice Sebold’s execrable *The Lovely Bones* (2002).

Of most interest to the reader of Lewis will be Bennett’s treatment of *The Human Age*. In her third chapter, ‘Killing Time: Narrating Eternity’, Bennett puts Lewis’s phantasmagoric trilogy in the narrative company of such novels as William Golding’s *Pincher Martin* (1956), Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991), and Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* (1967), characterizing all as narratives that attempt to portray time from a vantage-point outside of time (51). Under the heading ‘Bureaucratic Time’ (57), Bennett notes well how the three novels of *The Human Age* each treat time differently, as Lewis’s novel makes the idea of subjective time absurd by ‘making temporality the responsibility of the rulers of each part of the afterlife’ (57). Accepted ideas of temporality thus become parallel to accepted ideas of the state and of bureaucracy. Bennett notes how Lewis faces the same dilemma he confronted earlier in *Enemy of the Stars* (1914): how to use narrative to describe a state of timelessness, for in *Monstre Gai* (1955), for example, ‘[i]n the Third City, time does not exist, yet time seems to pass for the

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characters and the narrative unfolds rather conventionally' (58). Such narrative strategies and engagement with temporality, Bennett notes, reflect the origin of the later volumes of *The Human Age* as radio drama, which like *The Human Age* itself can involve 'arbitrary quickening, slowing and stopping of time' (60). Bennett further notes the traces that *The Human Age* left on later novelists. These include J. G. Ballard, who wrote a review on the trilogy, 'Visions of Hell' (1966, reprinted in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* [New York: Picador, 1996]: 140-44); Alasdair Grey – whose description of the 'intercalendrical zone' in Book 4 of *Lanark* owes a strong debt to the first half of *The Childermass* (1928), as his highly bureaucratized Unthank owes a great deal to Third City in *Monstre Gai*; and, most surprisingly, J. M. Coetzee, whose *Elizabeth Costello* contains an afterlife with its own bureaucracy and its own bailiff.

It is good to see *The Human Age* treated not as an idiosyncratic bypath to the twentieth-century novel, but as a part of a tradition of fantastical literature with antecedents and influences on other creative artists. Yet it also must be said that many of Bennett's best observations are borrowed from Fredric Jameson, and the association of *The Human Age* with both *Pincher Martin* and *The Third Policeman* comes directly from *Lanark* itself, which lists Lewis's trilogy among the many sources from which it has 'plagiarized' (see Gray, *Lanark* [Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1981], 489). It is also painful to note that Bennett erroneously lists *The Apes of God* (1930) in her Appendix (see 199) as the fourth (presumably completed) part of the 'tetralogy' of *The Human Age* – although the correct name of the uncompleted planned volume, *The Trial of Man*, appears later in the endnotes (207).

Readers will have to decide for themselves if Bennett's originality of framework and proliferating kinds of narrative analysis support her main claims enough to convince that 'the interrogation of cause and effect, applied to life and the afterlife, can lead to a powerful reconsideration of how to live, but also the purpose of reading and writing' (96). Many readers will conclude that the book shows a disproportion of claims to evidence, of ambition to structure. At its best, *Afterlife and Narrative* offers provocations to further analysis and consideration of a curious subset of fantastic literature. More often, however, it offers a reading experience closer to wandering through the landscape of the first half of *The Childermass*: provocative but untrustworthy, filled

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with local fascinations and novel shifts of perception, but falling short of providing a fully satisfactory final destination.

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