

dust and dog hairs are removed from it, and its lineaments can be seen with clarity, its pegs fit snugly within our existing puzzle.

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Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, £27.95). Pp. 480. ISBN 978 0 6740 3319 1.

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* is a study of American literature of the twentieth century in relation to the institution of the university, and particularly in relation to the creative-writing programs that have been steadily amassing since the mid-1900s. McGurl's thesis is an interesting literary–sociological study, bringing together empirical evidence and critical reading in order to proffer an alternative account of modern and contemporary American fiction: an account that locates core themes and styles of American literature within the structures of the classroom, workshop and academic institutions more generally. In *The Program Era* McGurl also offers an exercise in that “original point of view,” taking the presence of creative-writing programs in the field of American literature as something seen but not studied, pervasive but only recognized so as to be derided, and readdressing this sublimation through insightful and detailed historical account.

*The Program Era* asserts the premise that

at least insofar as we remain interested in literature per se, the rise of mass higher education in the postwar period [is] in the literal sense . . . something we should account for first if we are to understand postwar American literature in genuinely historical materialist terms. (283–84)

McGurl's central thesis, then, is that the *Program Era* is a definitive frame for American literature produced after the development of mass higher and further education in the United States – and on reading this book it strikes a reader that this indeed is a neglected premise, something usually taken for granted. *The Program Era* is divided into three core sections and these follow chronological order: “‘Write What You Know’/‘Show Don't Tell’ (1890–1960),” “‘Find Your Voice’ (1960–1975),” and “‘Creative Writing at Large’ (1975–2008).” McGurl's study is delineated in a positivist fashion, only considering those texts and figures which support his theory; this enables a book that is both wide-ranging and thorough, but perhaps limited in its reflexive debate.

To a large extent the chronological narrative that structures *The Program Era* is overwritten by continuities across the theoretical concerns. McGurl offers three critical frames within which he positions the various texts and authors he considers: “technomodernism” (postmodernism plus information theory) – for example, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth; “high cultural pluralism” (ethnicity and difference plus modernist representational tropes) – Philip Roth, Sandra Cisneros; and “lower-middle-class modernism” (minimalism/maximalism plus “cultural anomie”) – Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates. McGurl's reconfiguring of better-known literary theory works well in the context of *The Program Era*, embedding further still his broader notion that the mark of the academy is all but inescapable in American literature of the twentieth century. The structure of McGurl's thesis is well thought through and his argument flows at a good, accessible pace. Perhaps the only

diversions are the Venn diagrams that McGurl uses throughout *The Program Era*. Whilst the Venn diagrams do not present any particular negative impact they seemed a little superfluous, undermining the nuances of the text and not proferring much in the way of expansive visual interpretation. I include this point because it seemed the only clear anomaly in an otherwise incredibly coherent and impressive text.

It is difficult to cover the whole of *The Program Era* in a review format. Worth noting briefly are a few of the many stand-out arguments. His reading of Nabokov early on in the text functions well as a precursor to his later assumptions of the influence of education on twentieth-century authors; McGurl represents Nabokov's career in the US as exemplifying the various tensions between what it is to be creative and what it is to have that creativity supported and validated by a prescribed system, the institution of higher education. Also worth noting is his excellent discussion of Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates's work through their relationships with the creative-writing program. Comparing their minimalist and maximalist forms through the unifying fact of education brings out much for the critical appreciation of both. Another central illumination McGurl provides is his turn to the context of the "small group." McGurl's premise here is that the size of a classroom at university level, usually around twelve students, is something institutionalized throughout the education system. He suggests that as most authors of the twentieth century have either studied or taught within a classroom, the "small group" may exist as a reminder of that education in their fictions: "Let's face it: whatever else it is, the creative-writing program is also a medium of influence, a place where teachers exert themselves on students" (321) – and, in addition, McGurl implies, a place where the group asserts its influence on the individual.

McGurl discusses his undertaking as a materialist approach and perhaps one of the most coherent and engaging aspects of this study is his skill in aligning a sociohistorical account (the education of the author) with neat and insightful close reading. In the later stages of the book McGurl conducts a rereading of Toni Morrison's seminal *Beloved* through the "influence" of the university system. This turned out to be, for this reader, a pivotal encounter; McGurl exemplifying the validity of his approach through his useful and engaging addition to *Beloved* scholarship. In particular he focusses on the character "schoolteacher," as seen through the frame of Morrison's own teaching and her involvement with academic institutions. McGurl pursues a line of enquiry which has had the tendency to get lost in the myriad other discursive accounts of *Beloved*. McGurl asks,

What does it mean . . . that in this novel the roles of *author* and *teacher* and *slave-master* blend into one another? What it means, for starters, is that to the long list of potentially relevant interpretative contexts for the novel *Beloved* . . . we must add another: education. (347, original emphasis)

I would like to end with a note about the reception of *The Program Era*. Whilst generally this book has been received very well, particularly for its contribution to scholarship on specific texts, and for its unerring commitment to an issue that has lain "hidden, as it were, in plain sight,"<sup>1</sup> there has been some criticism levelled at the book's general positivist scope – that is, criticism that the book is not decisive enough on the

<sup>1</sup> Brian Lennon, "Gaming the System", *Electronic Book Review*, 31 July 2009, Web, accessed 19 Aug. 2011.

question of the “impact” of the MFA on the current literary landscape. In the *London Review of Books*, Elif Batuman

had high hopes that McGurl . . . might explain to me the value of contemporary American fiction in a way I could understand, but was disappointed to find in *The Programme Era* traces of the quality I find most exasperating about programme writing itself: [an] author who has been tragically and systematically deprived of access to the masterpieces of Western literature, or any other sustained literary tradition.<sup>2</sup>

This argument seems to accuse the book simply of not being what it did not intend to be – that is, a defence of program literature to contradict those who see it as a limited model. This contention pre-dates McGurl’s book; he is perhaps now unwittingly posed as a response to an assertion typified by Anis Shivani in his polemical 2004 article, “The Shrinking of American Fiction.” In that essay Shivani suggested that contemporary American fiction was involuted and alienated from public life; he blamed this on the MFA program: “The engine of growth in the publishing industry has for some time been the scores of MFA programs – more precisely, the handful of them that disproportionately generate the vast number of new writers.”<sup>3</sup> If McGurl’s book is indeed being read as a kind of retort, it has been found (by some) to be lacking. I would like to quote him here in defence of his own study, which has conversely been made even more timely and valuable by the demands of his critics. Here is McGurl responding in the *LRB* letters page to Batuman’s review:

That there are many postwar writers who have suppressed knowingness in search of a more immediate or “innocent” purchase on contemporary experience only supports one of my broader claims, which is that the familiar revulsion at writing programmes so energetically reprised by Batuman is a weak foundation on which to build a scholarly account of the programme era.

It is a good thing for scholars of American literature that McGurl’s survey moves beyond this contention.

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Colin Dueck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, \$26.95/£18.95). Pp. 400. ISBN 978 0 691 14182 4.

Since the early twentieth century, the United States has actively participated in world affairs. However, American leaders on opposing sides of the political spectrum have provided different justifications for such involvement. In *Hard Line*, Colin Dueck sketches the foreign-policy stances of several notable Republicans – including Robert Taft, Dwight Eisenhower, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and George W. Bush. Moreover, he covers how foreign policy has contributed to the rightward trajectory of the Republican Party since the 1940s. Ultimately, Dueck hopes his primer will provide some direction for the GOP in the future, as it looks to

<sup>2</sup> Elif Batuman, “Get a Real Degree,” *London Review of Books*, 32, 18 (23 Sept. 2010), 3–8.

<sup>3</sup> Anis Shivani, “The Shrinking of American Fiction,” *Antioch Review*, 62, 4 (Autumn 2004), 680–90.