

Book Reviews

Criticism as Evocation, a review of The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West. By Jan Whitt. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$29.

In her introduction to *The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West*, Jan Whitt says that Williams's writing is "born in the red-hot fires of contradiction" (1). Perhaps this is the reason why Whitt's response to Williams's work is an evocative synthesis rather than a mere analysis. How should one pin down a salamander whose writing is built on paradox and constantly changes form? Williams uses the vehicles of autobiography, memoir, critical analysis, literary or immersion journalism, lyric essay, mosaic, editorial, manifesto, poetry, sermon, and others, often blending several of these in the same work. As Whitt suggests, "The paradoxes inherent in Williams's life and work defy the readers, editors, and librarians who struggle to catalogue her" (10). Also, Williams's reason for not writing in strict subgenres of creative nonfiction may be that her objectives are also multivarious: "I cannot separate the writing life from a spiritual life, from a life as a teacher or activist or my life intertwined with family and the responsibilities we carry within our own homes" (233).

A reading of several of Williams's works points to the value of Whitt's approach, which is both analytical and subjective. But what did not make sense at first is Whitt's comparison of Williams to T. S. Eliot, because they are very different writers. However, Whitt's evidence is convincing. In the interview at the end of the book, Williams says, "T. S. Eliot speaks to the beauty and brokenness of the world as well as any writer I know. *Four Quartets* remains a seminal text for me. I read it frequently—not so much as a poem but a catalogue of sentences, beautiful, poignant, provocative, and true" (226). Eliot's influence is manifested most obviously in her *Desert Quartet*, but the emotional force and the spiritual and political aims of her work are illuminated by Whitt's loose comparison to an Anglican who never wrote about the West: "Connecting Eliot and Williams are the evolution of their intricate personal belief systems and their longing to find order and stability through the act of writing" (234). In addition, these writers are connected by their interest in the sacredness of the earth, the belief that narrative can redeem, the richness of allegory, and the bond of community.

Whitt reads Williams with constant reference to Eliot but does not compare them exhaustively or routinely. Her introduction contains two very curious sentences. First: "*The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West* does not rely on a comparison of the philosophies of Thomas Stearns Eliot and Terry Tempest Williams; however, Eliot and Williams are connected even in their respect for paradox and their desire both to advocate and write" (16). This implies that Whitt's comparison evokes understanding but should not be read as complete or sufficient. Rational exhaustion of their similarities is not the goal; evocation of themes, issues, and concerns is. The other sentence is similar:

The Redemption of Narrative does not depend upon what inspires Williams and Eliot to produce vastly different texts, nor is it an assessment of their respective spiritual journeys or their reliance upon Christian images and a belief in a savior for humankind: however, poems by Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins serve to illuminate Williams's theories about creation, her love of nature, and her religious convictions. (17–18)

This is not merely apophysis. Though Whitt does analyze well, her goal is to evoke Williams's work, often with a clearly admiring tone: "Williams . . . unites these themes with prophetic fire and an unsettling vision. Responding to Williams's writing requires not literary criticism but action, conviction, and commitment. Hers is a religious vision" (4). It is certainly true that most readers love or hate Williams's writing; Whitt is clearly an acolyte, but one who claims that without understanding Williams's deepest aims, readers cannot understand her methods. In aid of understanding, *The Redemption of Narrative* illuminates Williams's dual roles as artist and activist, offers biography, synthesizes previously published criticism, describes the spiritual and literary traditions Williams inhabits, and joins Whitt's voice to Williams's in a few social justice campaigns.

The book falls naturally into an introduction, two parts, and a brief conclusion. The Introduction explores Williams's paradoxical or oppositional nature: she is Mormon but flirts with paganism; she believes in individual discovery of God and accepts the consequent diversity of definitions of divinity but celebrates her own Mormon tradition; she is an environmental activist and speaks out publicly but is also a private, contemplative artist. Whitt claims that Williams writes along the borderland "between the religious and the secular, between the restorative beauty of night and the sunrise that breaks open the sky, between the mind and the heart, and between euphoria and eviscerating loss" (140). Affinity for dialectical tension determines how Williams thinks about the issues she treasures—the power of narrative to negotiate between opposites, her celebration of the feminine, her search for truth, and her life of public activism, which Whitt typifies as hurling flowers at evil, an image Williams borrows from the Yaqui Easter Ceremony. As Williams says, "I do believe in the transformative power of art—the power of art to change our lives" (qtd. in Whitt 142).

Part 1 loosely compares each of Eliot's *Four Quartets* to various of Williams's works. The following chart shows the structure of this comparison:

Title from <i>Four Quartets</i>	Theme	Phrase from the Poem	Titles of Williams's work
"Burnt Norton"	Time and place	Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future.	<i>Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place</i>
"East Coker"	Allegory	In my beginning is my end.	<i>An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field</i> and <i>When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice</i>
"The Dry Salvages"	Phenomenology	I do not know much about gods.	<i>Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape, Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland, and Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert</i>
"Little Gidding"	Apocalypse, revelation, and hope	Midwinter spring is its own season.	<i>Leap and Finding Beauty in a Broken World</i>

Though the chart implies strict divisions, Whitt's explorations in the four chapters of the book's first part bleed into each other. This section also raises other issues important to Williams—faith, loss, memory, feminism, redemption, freedom of expression, political action, sacred knowledge, search for meaning, reconciliation, and restoration.

Part 2 contains a two-chapter comparison of Williams's work with that of other American writers. In the fifth chapter Whitt describes Williams's place in the tradition of literary journalism, of writers who enabled Williams to exchange the false objectivity of corporate journalism for the subjectivity of personal vision, which then manifests itself in a multiplicity of forms. Whitt

places her firmly in the tradition of Sara Davidson, Joan Didion, Truman Capote, Susan Orlean, Tom Wolfe, John Steinbeck, and others. Chapter 6 discusses writers who use descriptions of violence against animals to illuminate violence between humans—Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Roger Rosenblatt, and others. Whitt also discusses Jane Tompkins, who like Williams, writes to reveal violence against animals but also against the land. Whitt clearly believes that Williams belongs not only to the tradition of American nature writing but to these two broader literary traditions. This section also includes a valuable interview with Williams, one that seals the meaning of the rest of the book. Following the interview the Conclusion summarizes Whitt's analyses and gives suggestions for future studies.

Often in the book, Whitt takes up Williams's causes—her resistance to the hierarchical nature of the LDS Church, her support of Kate Kelly of Ordain Women, her efforts to protect prairie dog communities, and other campaigns. Whitt clearly identifies with these causes in a subjective manner foreign to much literary criticism. However, this is entirely consistent with her claim that Williams is best understood through participating in her passion. Distracting are Whitt's frequent references to her own book, as in "*The Redemption of Narrative* explores" (19), or "*The Redemption of Narrative* . . . addresses" (233). Also, through adopting Williams's evocative and lyrical methods, Whitt often revisits ideas and analyses in a manner that seems less lyrical than repetitive.

However, these distractions are minor. Whitt successfully demonstrates that Williams is—like Coyote—a figure and an animal she clearly admires—a shape shifter. In an interview, Williams says, "I don't know where I am going until the last sentence delivers me to a place I have never been before" (225). Form is negotiable and objectivity is an illusion. What is most valuable is passion. Says Whitt, "Writing is daring to feel what nurtures and breaks our hearts. Bearing witness is its own form of advocacy. It is a dance with pain and beauty" (233–34). A more compartmentalized and distant analysis would not get at the heart of Williams's work the way Whitt does.

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Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought. By Colby Dickinson. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 267 pp. \$37.95.

The overall aim of Colby Dickinson's *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought* (2013) is to present an alternative hermeneutic to the "totalitarian" representational practices of both Christian and secular "fundamentalis[ts]" (205). Building on the theories of such continental thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Paul Ricoeur, Dickinson takes what is perhaps best described as a poststructural, or even deconstructivist, stance, though he never actually uses these terms to describe his position. The reason for this, one suspects, is that Dickinson does not want readers to misconstrue the relationship between "canonical representations and their messianic undoing" as the mere application of contemporary continental philosophy to longstanding theological ideas (20). In fact, the hermeneutical stance Dickinson puts forth predates the thinkers mentioned above, finding its roots, Dickinson argues, in Pauline Christianity and the heretical seventeenth-century Jewish movement of Sabbatianism. Thus, a large part of Dickinson's project is to underscore the theological foundations of contemporary continental thought, which, in turn, highlights the theopolitical nature of his "radical" hermeneutic (210). For Dickinson, such a position is mindful of history's outcasts and the violences committed against them by canonical representations. Dickinson's argument is radical because, with representational forms, conceptions of morality are subject to deconstruction—something Dickinson does not address directly, though he certainly implies as much throughout his text. As he states in the final paragraph of the book, his hermeneutical stance "is radical only insofar as it does not subscribe to a predetermined set of ontological forms, leaving such matters to be played out on the fluctuating field of historical-canonical forms, whether these be religious, cultural, or political" (210). For this reason, Dickinson's book might be poorly received by Christian scholars of a dominant, fundamentalist persuasion, but such readers are among those whom Dickinson wishes to address. By locating a deconstructive (or, in his language, a *messianic*) force within the representational canons of Judaism, Dickinson champions a hermeneutic that is forever seeking more just forms

of political representation—a point that is certainly deserving of further scholarly attention, however controversial its outcomes.

At the risk of papering over the subtle nuances of Dickinson's analysis, one can describe the first chapter of his book as framing a critical distinction between dialectical thinking and antinomianism that will later mark, in the second chapter, a similar distinction between canonical representations and their messianic undoing. Though these distinctions are not entirely parallel, readers will find that the corresponding concepts are similar in their basic contours. In the first chapter, for example, Dickinson positions dialectical thinking as an adherence to the law, or the differential boundaries structuring human thought. By contrast, antinomianism (a term originally coined by Martin Luther) is deployed somewhat loosely by contemporary continental philosophers like Alain Badiou and Gunther Bornkamm to refer to the teachings of the apostle Paul, who, Dickinson writes, "adhere[s] to the truth of a grace instead of returning to the inscriptions of law" (17). Dickinson uses most of the chapter to outline the work of Jacob Taubes, a Jewish scholar who terms the conflict between Christianity and Judaism as a conflict "between *representation*—to which, in his eyes, Judaism must remain faithful—and *presentation*, which Christianity, or any other messianic movement sprung from its Judaic origins, has tried to elicit through its apparent jettisoning of the law" (20). One such movement, Taubes explains, was Sabbatianism, which sought an unmediated presentation of the divine apart from its canonical representations. Thus, one can already see how multiple terms are employed throughout the chapter to refer to overlapping (though not entirely identical) concepts—antinomianism, presentation, messianicity, and grace pinned against dialectical thinking, representation, canonicity, and law, respectively. Though these multiple, overlapping terms make the first chapter somewhat difficult to navigate (especially for readers unfamiliar with antinomianism or Benjamin's rendering of messianicity), Dickinson offers a valuable insight that frames the discussion for the second chapter and provides the basis for his radical hermeneutic, locating within the "legacies" of Judaism "the very fabric of contemporary philosophical reasoning" (41). Judaic law, for Dickinson, embodies the totalitarian propensity of canonical representations, while Christianity and other antinomian movements embody what Benjamin will describe as a weak messianic force, the fracturing, or deconstruction, of canonical representations from within.

This chapter traces the conflict between dialectical reasoning and antinomianism into the philosophical debate between Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, but, as before, the distinction between dialectical thinking and antinomianism, canonical representations and their messianic undoing becomes somewhat muddled in this section. On the one hand, Dickinson rightly portrays Derrida as a dialectical thinker, operating under models of difference and the repressed, or antinomic, relations of thought, but, on the other hand, he portrays Agamben as Derrida's antinomian opponent who seeks a pure presentation beyond the failures of representation, "a return to our animal being beyond the constructed fabrications of the human subject" (68). Presenting these two thinkers as oppositional becomes slightly confusing because Derrida crosses the antinomian/dialectical divide, adhering to representational canons and their messianic undoing, which, readers will recall, was aligned earlier with antinomianism, presentation, and grace. Thus, antinomianism, for Agamben, is an attempt to uncover, apart from representational canons, the prelinguistic animals that people are, while, for Derrida, antinomianism refers to Benjamin's weak messianic force, or the deconstruction of representational canons from within. Dickinson presents both Agamben and Derrida as antinomian, though they clearly disagree on key points. While the debate between Agamben and Derrida is fascinating and will, no doubt, interest many of Dickinson's readers, I'm left wondering whether the inclusion of Agamben was really necessary. Dickinson claims to formulate a radical hermeneutic that "takes seriously" Agamben's antinomian challenges, but he more or less aligns himself with Derrida, claiming that there will "always be an oscillation in language between its *canonical* and *messianic* elements—a truth that Judaism firmly seized upon shortly after its conception (and which philosophers such as Derrida have detected)" (106). As before, Agamben's antinomian stance complicates how readers understand the relationship between the first and second chapters, since Dickinson's reading of Pauline Christianity, Sabbatianism, and the work of Jacob Taubes could have led smoothly into a discussion of Derrida without any references to Agamben, whose work here only serves to obfuscate Dickinson's development of a radical hermeneutic.

The third chapter of Dickinson's book underscores the politics of canonical representations, which tend to portray history as an objective reality in line with a single, authoritative narrative. But, as Dickinson's project seeks

to uncover, there are embedded within any historical narrative alternative histories, or antinomic accounts, that threaten to disrupt the authority of canonized history from within—what Benjamin (and Derrida after him) calls a weak messianic force. These alternative histories are usually articulated by minority voices who are marginalized and sometimes excluded from the historical narrative by those in power. Like Derrida, Dickinson proposes a *just* hermeneutic that accounts for both the canonical and the messianic—a recognition, first of all, that canons are necessary for cultural intelligibility, and, second, that canonical representations, be they historical, political, or theological, are not transcendent categories, exempt from the deconstructive forces that lead, inevitably, to their messianic undoing. Such a recognition, Dickinson argues, lessens the exclusionary violence of canons while working toward more just forms of representation. In light of this, Dickinson proposes a *just* form of canonicity that “strives to become conscious of its relationship to violence, something the Judaic canon, with its focus on the victims and the marginalized figures of history, can be said to accomplish in some fashion” (146). He argues that “the more the canonical element exposes its own proximity and propensity to violence . . . the quieter may the messianic forces grow” (147). This concept more or less forms the basis of Dickinson’s hermeneutic, which he articulates in the fourth chapter. Entering into conversation with Paul Ricoeur, who reframes the canonical/messianic relation as a tension between the Pharisaic and the Prophetic, Dickinson argues that one’s hermeneutical practices should always be “hospitable to the other, the foreigner,” because such practices will “*lead, more dramatically, toward a transformation of the world we live in*” (189). In other words, one should be cognizant of the violence and the instability of canonical representations, embracing the weak messianic force embedded within all canons that leads, inevitably, to more just forms of political representation.

Dickinson’s book is philosophically sophisticated and noble in its loving concern for the marginalized figures of history, but it also presents, if tacitly, provocative questions to its Christian readership, namely, how does one enact Christ’s command to love the marginalized figures of history—the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the impoverished, the lepers, the queer—in the context of Dickinson’s radical hermeneutic without falling into the trap of moral relativism? Stated more generally, should Christians adopt

deconstructive reading practices if they lead to the messianic undoing of moral principles, the canonical representation of God's commandments? These questions are perplexing and even troubling, and Dickinson does not provide any answers to them. In fact, his project demands further commentary and debate. The book will therefore be of great interest to theologians and philosophers of religion engaged in similar questions. It should also be of interest to secular continental philosophers, who will no doubt be intrigued by Dickinson's unearthing of continental philosophy's religious origins. Finally, given the sophistication of Dickinson's philosophical analyses, it is surprisingly accessible, despite some confusion over Agamben's contributions to the discussion, so it may also be helpful to novice scholars who wish to further their knowledge of continental thought and postmodern theology.

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