Whole Worlds Panel I Abstracts

Tyler Easterbrook, Conceptual Worlds and the Problem of Truth in Literary Form

Traditionally, literary texts—and artistic objects in general— have been perceived as standing in an oppositional relationship to formal truth-claims: either the "truths" of literature are of a different sort than those of science or mathematics, or literature lacks truth-value altogether, instead existing in human thought and culture as a form wholly devoted to the false or imaginary. Indeed, nineteenth-century logician Gottlob Frege, founder of modern first-order logic, remarks in his seminal lecture "On Sinn and Bedeutung" that "[t]he question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation." This ontology of literature fits with our commonplace conceptualization of literary objects, represented in our binaristic classification of written works as being either "fiction" or "non-fiction."

Rectifying the relative paucity of literary research that takes logic and mathematics seriously, my paper problematizes the supposed dichotomy between literary form and formal truth-claims, examining classic and contemporary research in logic, philosophy, and literary studies that bears on the question of truth and arguing that literature and formal truth do not exist in diametrically opposed conceptual worlds: instead, literary texts exist in a more complex framework that necessitates a reevaluation both of the nature of truth and falsity and of the way critics think about literary objects. In the process of its analysis, my argument considers the relationship between natural language and logical structure; part/whole differentiation in aesthetics and formalisms; why fiction is thought to differ from the factual; and how literary studies interacts with puzzles in the philosophies of language, logic, and mathematics. I end my paper by discussing the ontological and epistemological problems that arise when one begins to take seriously literary objects as imbricated with truth-claims and by sketching some possible means of solution to these issues.

Thomas Johnson, Modality of Collapse: *The Oppositional Constant*

Over the last four decades, capitalism has negotiated its structural oppositions through a series of booms and busts. To read the affective field upon which these events emerge as a kind of phenomenological distension of the spiraling contradiction of labor and capital is to activate, we might say, at least two figures of thought—finitude and disclosure; both rich in terrifying avatars—global financial meltdown and protracted war, to name a couple. Reflecting upon these figures as they relate to capital's current historical sequence permits at least one entry point for considering literature's engagement with crisis. Poetry's recent commitment to exploring the concepts of debt and finance presents a compelling domain for inquiry. Within that space, we may consider why representations of spectral horror recur throughout poetic discourse that emerged both during and after the 2008 credit crisis. Drawing from modal logic to engage possible world semantics, I work to derive poetry's contemporary relation to *the gothic* from some specific cultural entailments that fall out of affirming Marx's following claim: "It is a *logical necessity* that, in its development, the general average rate of surplus-value must express itself in a falling general rate of profit." Jena Osman's poetic text, *The Network*, offers a generative space for conducting this analysis, insofar as it depicts a structure through which a progressive increase in the proportion of dead to living labor produces an internal limit to accumulation. Following a trail of murder and slavery in a mesh of disparate spaces and disparate times, Osman's text explicitly confronts the possibility that either capitalism continues and the profit rate declines, or capitalism is destroyed and profits fall to zero: annihilation, then rebirth.

Rebecca Ariel Porte, Wallace Stevens & His Worlds of Logic

In "Esthétique du Mal," a miscellaneous poem drafted by Wallace Stevens during the penultimate year of World War II, the poet relies to a puzzling degree on deployments of the word "logic." This paper argues that the key to reading this much-misunderstood "aesthetics of evil" or "bad aesthetics" is to see in "Esthétique's" variousness an exploration of different modes of aesthetic logic rather than a coherent program for how to solve the problems of pain and evil. In "Esthétique," the treatment of logic as a term of art allows Stevens to work out conflicting attitudes about an ideal theory of everything, a sort of total aesthetic program. For Stevens, a theory of everything proves both an impossible reality and an utterly necessary fiction, evidence of modernist yearning after the seemingly stable poetic forms and ideologies of the past, the "worlds of logic in their great tombs" to which my title refers. Homologies between the Fregean conception of a "third realm" of logical objects (as developed and altered by Husserl) and "Esthétique's" appeals to categorical realism encourage a mode of reading that privileges experiential lacunae, feelings of subjective partiality in the face of an overwhelming totality that cannot be accessed unmediated. My analysis of "Esthétique" describes a way of using the field of the poem to stage an encounter between aesthetic experience and the shadow of a total, conceptual knowledge that it seems, for a moment, to promise. It is this encounter, I contend, that we might call twentieth century poetic logic—and it is the recurrence of this variety of poetic logic in twentieth century texts that points the way to a kind of logical modernism.