Emmett Stinson. *Satirizing Modernism: Aesthetic Autonomy, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. 217 (cloth).

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Emmett Stinson's new book, *Satirizing Modernism: Aesthetic Autonomy, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde* (2017), is a significant intervention into the field of modernist studies, not just in redefining some of modernism's central terms but also in testing the limits of its contested peripheries. The book's first manoeuvre in this vein structures an analysis of modernism's central claims to autonomy and to being an avant-garde not so much as a reaction, rupture, or break with previous periods of aesthetic production, but rather as a continuation of forms already germane to romanticism. In short, Stinson argues that modernist autonomy is the evolution of romantic satire, a distinct reimaging of traditional or neoclassical satire which shifts satire's emphasis away from ethical responsibility and toward aesthetic self-reflexivity. The major theoretical coordinates of this book are on display in its introductory chapter, which systemically unpacks the four key terms of analysis—autonomy, satire, romanticism, and avant-garde—using a critical paradigm indebted to the Frankfurt School and especially Theodor Adorno. This introduction is more than just a literary review, positioning the reader within the various debates surrounding and the literary histories of these terms—it also asks us to reimagine these terms and their relation to one another as mediated by the master-trope of satire. Modernism is the absent centre of this introductory catalogue, the one titular term without a dedicated section, but it is also the forcing ground upon which Stinson's theory of what he calls "avant-garde satires of the avant-garde" plays out in the subsequent chapters. If modernism is the critical ground upon which Stinson's investigations into aesthetic autonomy and modern avant-gardes are constituted, then satire—and specifically its romantic development—is the critical mechanism which generates the various movements and recursions between the broader architectonics of the subsequent chapters.

While the freight of these terms might at first appear uncontainable within the space of a single monograph—their quintuple structure is reminiscent of Matei Calinescu—Stinson has carefully crafted an engaging narrative which unfolds the story of a distinctly modern (and, importantly, aesthetic) satire that develops from within romanticism and which continues to evolve transformatively within

modernism. And the story is remarkably well-organized: one chapter for each period—romanticism, modernism, late modernism, postmodernism—and each chapter is focused on an exemplary text. These case studies centre on works of canonical literature that might be said to inhabit the outer peripheries of periodising movements. With Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), Wyndham Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930), William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* (1971). Each of these chapters considers the variform ways in which literature mobilizes satire in aid of an aesthetic self-consciousness or reflexivity: "I want to suggest," writes Stinson,

> that the modernist avant-gardes exerted a unique influence on postromantic, self-reflexive satires because of the complicated manner in which they reframed the aesthetic issues that, after romanticism, had become part of the fabric of satire—and the result was the creation of this new satiric subgenre of avant-garde satires of the avant-garde. (90)

In all of these chapters, satire operates as a mongrel form that threatens the other genres at play, but which simultaneously consolidates what we mean by modernism, particularly modernism's bid for aesthetic autonomy, its desire to separate from the economic exigencies of its moment in history.

After the introduction, we begin with romanticism, and a close reading of *Nightmare Abbey* as a sort of primal scene for this distinctive modern satire. Here Stinson lays the groundwork for satire's radical break with ethics, a neoclassical conception alive in the works of Dryden and Swift, and its inauguration within romanticism as a genre primarily concerned with the aesthetic. Here satire comes untethered from anything that might resemble an ethical or moral ground and instead takes its own aesthetic as the object, or even target, of wit. These romantic satires are situated as a precursor to what we consider the revolutionary avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. In other words, "what *appears* to be avant-garde is, in fact, only the exhausted, dead repetition of previous sources, inheritances, and antecedents" (40) at which romantic satire was directed. Here *Nightmare Abbey* is exemplary as it ironically cannibalizes an entire literary history, and presents a satiric persona that himself makes no recourse to a moral or ethical authority. "My

contention," Stinson clarifies, "is *not* that the avant-garde is identical to romanticism, but rather that romanticism both creates the conditions of possibility required for the emergence of the avant-garde and anticipates many of its key features" (38).

All of the above sets the foundation for modernism's avant-garde self-reflexivity, which is how Stinson conceives the mobilization of satire during the high-modernist period. Here Stinson turns to Lewis's *The Apes of God*, which is said to create a new subgenre of postromantic satire—in Stinson's phrase, "avant-garde satires of the avant-garde"—bound up in the novel's "mechanical and flat" characters (97). Instead of breaking with romantic precursors, Stinson views Lewis's dehumanizing project as a continuation of the romantic project, pulling out the carpet from beneath the feet of a mimetic tradition and of literary representation. This new category, "avant-garde satires of the avant-garde," is in many ways Stinson's central contribution—it could just as well be an alternative title for this book—and here it is formulated succinctly:

> Lewis thus transformed satire from a primarily ethical genre into a self-reflexive genre that offered a preeminent position for thinking through the contradictions of the aesthetics of the modernist avant-gardes, and, as such, satire, for Lewis, became nothing less than the modernist genre par excellence. (112)

While Lewis's antihumanism engages a sort of nihilism, it is central for Stinson that Lewis conceives of satire as an autonomous form freed from the liberal humanism of the period.

While Lewis himself is already a central harbinger of what Tyrus Miller canonically describes as "late modernism," Stinson firmly places us within this historical moment with William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*. Here Gaddis's avant-garde satire directs itself towards an increasingly wearied avant-garde. Drawing on the work of Jeremy Braddock, Peter Burger, and others, Stinson considers avant-garde exhaustion in this period: "the avant-gardes' institutional triumph effectively led to their exhaustion, because they had absorbed into the aesthetic traditions they had sought to overturn." (122) But while late modernism imbibes the exhaustion of modernist avant-gardes, importantly this exhaustion

does not induce complete resignation, which might push Gaddis more firmly into postmodernism. Indeed, it is here that Stinson provides one of his most impressive periodising manoeuvres, clearing a passage through the often-muddied terrain between modernism and postmodernism: "While both respond critically to the modernist avant-gardes," he argues, "late modernism reaffirms elements of this earlier project, but postmodernism rejects most (if not quite all) of the modernist principles of the avant-gardes—especially their assertion of aesthetic autonomy." (125) It is in this chapter that aesthetic autonomy surfaces most clearly as the defining function of the sort of avant-garde satires that Stinson interrogates. With *The Recognitions*, Stinson grounds this perseverance of a modernist fidelity to aesthetic autonomy in apophaticism, or negative theology, "a method for ambivalently acknowledging and overcoming exhaustion" (133).

With the final case study after Love, Lewis, and Gaddis, we are presented with Gilbert Sorrentino's *Imaginative Qualities of Actual Things* and so with another author precariously situated on the cusp between late modernism and postmodernism. In Stinson's own acknowledgement, Sorrentino's novel constitutes "a very different kind of satire than the other self-reflexive satires I have examined." (157) With this book, there is no undermining of ethics as in both Lewis's and Gaddis's satires, but rather a much more playful recognition that there is no ethical ground to contend with in the first place. At first appearance, one wonders whether we have indeed pushed out the other side of the late modernism of Gaddis and into postmodernism proper, for we certainly had, or were about to, historically. However, the various forms and figures of aporia in the novel which together resist any stable hold on intention or purpose establish the sort of aesthetic autonomy underpinning Sorrentino's purchase on modernism. "This assertion of uselessness paradoxically forms the grounds for claiming a special status for literature that is indebted to modernist notions of autonomy" (166). And it is here that we are taken full circle, back to romanticism, insofar as imagination forms the central quilting point for shaping the artwork and self-consciously asserting an artistic autonomy.

One of the many pleasures to be had in reading this book is the accumulative force of Stinson's readings—that the case studies, while discrete readings unto themselves, logically build upon one another so that the dynamic form of satire

can be seen in process, moving through the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and adapting, responding, and changing in response to the march of historical events. While the book's broad methodological gestures are impressive and the close formal readings perfectly salient, the book's greatest strength is the manner in which it brings the two into a dynamic exchange with one another in order to concretely extend the parameters of what we call modernism in literature. And while modernism, as we said earlier, is the central forcing ground of an argument about satire and aesthetic modernity more generally, this book has much to offer scholars of romantic literature, modernism and postmodernism, as well those concerned with generic histories more broadly.

Certainly, while this book appears within the field of modernist studies, it may well be most valuable for those engaged in the generic history of satire as an ancient form which has been treated to a necessary revision. To be sure, the book's major intervention is to examine how we are to think of satire as a specifically modernist form. Early on, Stinson defines satire according to its dynamic function, enabling it to undo other genres:

> satire is not so much a genre or mode, to borrow Alastair Fowler's terminology, but a sort of anti-genre that inhabits other genres only to destabilize them, making satire a parasitic and degenerative means of literary expression, rather than a durable form whose structures can be illuminated by careful analysis. (15)

This is not just valuable for thinking through satire's rich generic history; it also operates as a critical metaphor for its function within Stinson's own methodology. That is to say, satire here works to undo any clear-cut or simple delineations between romanticism and modernism on the one hand and between modernism and postmodernism on the other. Moreover, satire is shown to breathe new life into how we think about aesthetic autonomy and the avant-garde as concepts that might otherwise reify into ideology. In Stinson's analysis, satire becomes an energetic force, conjoining these architectonic and generic terms but also reanimating them in new ways. What is produced as a result is a nuanced reading of several works of literature, then, as exemplary of satirical reflexivity.

This approach is not without its difficulties. At times, it feels as though some of the terms that Stinson mobilizes risk collapsing into one another. In particular, there is some concern early on that the ethical and political dimensions of satire are folded together, and that aesthetic autonomy is presented as a potentially apolitical escapism. Here, I was surprised not to see Keston Sutherland's recent writings on satire and its political dimensions. Part of the problem with reducing satire to a mode of pure aesthetic reflexivity is that it becomes at times detached from historical materiality; autonomy is, at least in its Marxist formulation, a materialist concept, but one that speaks of aristocratic contemplation as opposed to real commitment. Much of this resolves in Stinson's conclusion, which takes a properly Adornian turn in its conception of autonomy. In so doing Stinson reiterates that satire, a traditionally conservative literary genre that succeeds only in its appeal to a set of rules, underwent a mutation in romanticism whereby it became self-reflexive. This self-reflexivity is what we would eventually come to call autonomy and in perhaps Stinson's most exhilarating configuration within the book this aesthetic autonomy is shown, by way of satire, to not only predate modernism but also postdate it. If modernism resides in its avant-gardes and their autonomy, the lesson of Stinson's book is that modernism is much older *and much newer* than we thought.