A. SEVERAN. *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence*. Edited by Brendan Graham Dempsey. Palimpsest Press, 2021, 90 pp. ISBN: 979-8728412397.

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As one of the leading theoreticians of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon had the full right and authority to proclaim the end of the postmodern moment. This potentially controversial and provocative declaration was made matter-of-factly in the Epilogue to the 2002 re-edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, articulating what had been felt in the cultural bones of the Western world for more than a decade. Recalling her excitement at postmodernism "defining itself in front of my eyes" (165), Hutcheon finished the book with a challenge to the readers to label, and by labelling explicate, the newly emergent sensibility. A. Severan's *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence* is a significant contribution to the series of studies that appeared in response to Hutcheon's incentive. Although the proposal of the name for the new cultural paradigm is not originally his, Severan's observations are vital and his perspective is broad.

Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence fits into the line of research on contemporary culture initiated by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen. In 2010 they proposed "metamodernism" as a label and an explanatory framework for investigating the present-day context, and it soon became, as the author rightly notices, "the most widely applicable rubric for post-postmodern cultural analysis" (51). Their 2017 publication *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism* (with Alison Gibbons as the third editor) brought together the ideas of other scholars working in the field, including Raoul Eshelman, Lee Konstantinou, Josh Toth, and Irmtraud Huber, to name but a few. This began the process of unifying the still highly diverse area of research on the 21st-century culture. With his book Severan takes these efforts one step further by pointing out significant overlaps between some of the approaches. His central claim that the metamodern condition is dominated by "the fraught desire to re-engage *transcendence*" (14) provides a valuable insight into the new cultural moment. Apart from addressing current cultural processes, *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence* sheds some light on the origins of the ongoing transformation, especially with regard to postmodernism.

The first section of the book, "From the Editor," compels attention due to the intriguing question of authorship raised here. As implied in the text, "A. Severan" is a pen name of Brendan Graham Dempsey who serves as the editor of the book. The practice of using pen names or even inventing identities is not unusual among metamodernists. Dempsey took inspiration from Daniel Görtz and Emil Esper Friis who released the *Metamodern Guide to Politics* series as Hanzi Freinacht.[1] In keeping with Freinacht's

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[1] Henzi Freinacht has a Facebook account and can be contacted via Twitter.

ideas, Dempsey believes that the ironic distance created by the use of a pen name allows, quite paradoxically, for more sincerity and openness. Although such strategies are widespread in the artistic world, it is disputable whether they have any legitimate place in scholarly writing or if they are merely an example of metamodernist complexification (of which we shall see more later).

"When Are We?" is the title of the book's opening chapter which focuses on general issues of periodization and offers the reader a diachronic perspective on Severan's project. As the Author reminds us, the process of *dis*-engaging transcendence from the cultural frame began with the advent of modernity when "[t]he mythic mind that had earlier predominated—populated by spirits and forces, rituals and cycles, an inherent social and moral order, etc.—was … gradually supplanted by a materialistic framework" (3–4) and the "[r]ecourse to any metaphysical notions became increasingly unnecessary, as the understanding of purely physical phenomena was thought sufficient for explaining more and more about reality" (4). Thus, Severan's discussion in *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence* is part of a larger dynamic of how "society has gone from traditional thinking, to modern, postmodern, and, finally, metamodern thinking, advancing in depth and awareness along the way while continually integrating the crucial insights of all the previous stages that have gone before" (i).

Severan's main discussion begins in chapter two, "What Was Postmodernism?" The chapter provides an extensive list of the dominant traits of the postmodern condition, which include, among others, hyper-commodification, the dominance of post-structuralism, the critique of metaphysics, deconstruction, metafiction, and ironic self-awareness. Their critical evaluation by the Author reveals the postmodern ethos or Zeitgeist as "*Cynical…*, relentlessly ironic. Exhausted by multiplicity. Taking few things (if any) very seriously. Glib, irreverent, world-weary.… Disillusioned with lofty ideals. Seeing all action as expressions of power through a singular 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Dealing in surfaces, images, simulations" (8). Against the backdrop of this general characterization of postmodernism, Severan weaves together the theories of Jean-François Lyotard, David Harvey and Fredric Jameson to argue that the postmodern period is defined by a loss. This loss, identified with "God," but understood in a secular sense as spirituality or transcendence, reduces the postmodern reality to a one-dimensional space of total immanence; "[i]n it, all notions of a 'higher' order, all spiritual notions such as 'truth', 'purpose', 'soul', 'self', were abrogated by jettisoning metaphysics entirely" (21). While truly engaging and consistent with the further development of the Author's thought, Severan's portrayal of postmodernism is deficient. At various points in the book, the Author expresses his concern about the artificiality, "clumsiness, and even pretentiousness" of periodization and labelling, and thus about the fact that both procedures are often deeply flawed. Severan's uncompromising treatment of postmodernism seems to validate these concerns. His study might benefit from a deeper examination of the theories of Linda Hutcheon, Brian MacHale and Kevin Hart, which draw attention to the social commitment of postmodernist literature (particularly feminist and

postcolonial literature), the tendency of postmodernist fiction to problematize the ontological (multi)dimensionality of reality, as well as the interest of postmodernist philosophers in establishing "religion without religion, namely a faith that can be developed without reference to religious transcendence" (Hart 123). If included in Severan's argumentation, these ideas would not only do justice to postmodern diversity, but they would also open up new paths for exploring the relationship between the present and the previous era.

In chapter three, "Something New in the Air," and four, "Preliminaries: Towards a Hermeneutics of Trust," Severan demonstrates how the initial impetus of postmodernism began to subside and discusses an early theoretical attempt to grasp the essence of the new cultural paradigm. While it is unsurprising that the moment when, as he puts it, "the wave … crested" is associated with David Foster Wallace's condemnation of postmodern irony, most clearly expressed in his seminal 1993 essay "*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*," it is fascinating to see how Wallace's impassioned critique of postmodern detachment and cynicism, and his emphasis on sincerity and earnest engagement instead, ties in with Ihab Hassan's theoretical insights from his 2003 essay "Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust."[2] Severan skilfully employs Hassan's argument to set the scene for the introduction of his concept of metamodern transcendence. He focuses specifically on Hassan's remark that ideas such as "truth," "trust," and "spirit" should reappear in scholarly discourse and be taken seriously. According to Severan, the academic community's suspicion of these concepts stems from "their supposedly inextricable link to metaphysical Absolutes, and the historical imperialism that such metaphysics helped rationalize" (18). Hassan's and Severan's interest, however, does not lie in traditional metaphysics, but in "soft universals, not Platonic but empirical" (18). This explains both Hassan's assertion that these "big" terms should remain "uncapitalized" and Severan's use of the term "immanent transcendence" before it transforms into "metamodern transcendence" at a later stage of his discussion.[3]

Linguistic complexity and foggy arguments characterize the final paragraphs of chapter four and several passages of chapter five ("The Many Returns of Dimentionality"). Severan's language becomes convoluted and impenetrable at this point, as opposed to the rest of the book, where it is accessible and the logic clear, occasionally enhanced with intriguing metaphors. Not only here but throughout the book, the Author displays a postmodern bent in his frequent resort to enigmatic phrasing. While the paradoxical pairing "immanent transcendence" is justified in light of Severan's argument, expressions such as "through nihilism nihilism is overcome" (20) and "the absolutizing of the

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[2] Another interesting study of trust is Gabriel Josipovici's *On Trust: Art and the Temptation of Suspicion* (1999).

[3] Regarding my criticism of Severan's hermetic handling of postmodernism, it is worth noting that in his essay Hassan did not see the need to rename postmodernism because he considered the ongoing cultural changes as another phase of the postmodern era (303).

anti-absolute" (54) appear less so. Following Hassan, Severan observes that there are two ways to approach the decline of postmodernism. The first is a straightforward reaction, "a conservative backlash against the entire postmodern paradigm and an eager re-positing of the old transcendentals" (23), while the second is "the progressive response," which seeks to incorporate the postmodern perspective into the new framework. Severan clearly chooses the latter option (and he is probably quite right to do so). If, however, metamodernism is viewed in the current theoretical debate in terms of "post-postmodern deconstruction of postmodernism itself" (53), the trust and hope it is supposed to restore will be hard won.

Chapter six, "Art After Postmodernism," is the most compelling section of Severan's book which compensates for the occasional linguistic and theoretical intricacies. The Author's central claim about the return of transcendence in contemporary culture is amply supported by a thorough discussion of the postulates of such art groups as remodernism, the Kitsch and the "visionary art" movement, as well as reproductions (sadly in black and white) of some contemporary artworks. The ideas of remodernists (Severan quotes their manifesto in its entirety), who claim, for example, that "Remodernism embodies spiritual depth and meaning and brings to an end an age of scientific materialism, nihilism and spiritual bunkruptcy" (27), plainly coincide with the concept of metamodern transcendence, though Severan's severance (!) from postmodernism, and postmodern immanence in particular, seems less radical. Severan draws clear parallels between his own beliefs and those of "painters of Kitsch" whose interests centre on "unfashionable human concerns—birth, death, wonder, enchantment" (36). The reader's curiosity about the intriguing image on the book's cover is finally satisfied here. An impressive piece of art in itself, Alex Grey's painting "Praying" is a fitting portrayal of Severan's concept of immanent transcendence, or "the neuro-sublime" (33), as it is referred to in the context of "visionary art." Severan's overview of contemporary artistic trends ends with a bold statement (the Author is not afraid to make them). If he is right about the magnitude of changes in contemporary culture, his claim that we are currently experiencing "a transcendent turn" may soon prove relevant not only for post-postmodern art.

Severan's goal in chapter seven, "Cultural Theory After Postmodernism," is to show how his concept of metamodern transcendence can serve as a platform for bringing together various interpretations of contemporary culture. His primary focus is on the idea of performatism proposed by Raoul Eshelman in his 2008 book *Performatism, Or, The End of Postmodernism*, as well as the theory of metamodernism put forward by Vermeulen and van den Akker, and then refined in collaboration with Alison Gibbons. When it comes to performatism, Severan is particularly interested in the concept of "aesthetically mediated belief" which he sees as operating according to the logic of metamodern transcendence. His re-consideration of Eshelman's analysis of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* yields promising results. Severan continues the chapter by discussing the relevance of the notion of metamodern transcendence for the theory of metamodernism.

While his combination of Vermeulen's and van den Akker's idea of oscillation with Hassan's famous table of opposites defining modernism and postmodernism is unimpressive, his discussion of Vermeulen's notion of "depthiness," understood as "a performative act as opposed to an epistemological quality" (49), appears to have the potential to bind together performatism, metamodernism, and metamodern transcendence. Not mentioned by Severan, the "as if" component of Vermeulen's and van den Akker's early discussion on metamodernism might serve to foreground the fact that metamodern transcendence seeks "[s]pirituality … within the domain of what is *felt*—that is aesthetics, art: the new locus of spirit 'reinvented'" (31).

Severan synthesises his views in the last chapter, "Reflections on the Metamodern Period," by identifying the key elements of the metamodern moment. These include: The Spectre of Identity, The Return of Dimensionality and Aesthetically-Mediated Belief. The transition dynamics that each of those labels denotes—from commodification to craft, from transcendent/immanent binary to post-metaphysical model of transcendence, from objective metaphysics to subjectively experienced transcendence—bespeaks an Author who is well aware of where he has come from and where he is headed in his debate.

All in all, *Metamodernism and the Return of Transcendence* is an ambitious study of the current state of culture, accomplished with passion and confidence. It provides a deeper understanding of the ongoing processes as well as hope for a more homogenous discourse on the complex and vibrant cultural phenomena. Although small in size, it broaches significant topics and indicates potential avenues of development for the studies of metamodernism. Included in the Appendix, the Author's earlier essay, "[Re]Construction: Metamodern 'Transcendence' and the Return of Myth," demonstrates how his ideas have evolved over time. Knowing this, we may expect his future publications to be at least as pleasant and inspiring to read as this one.

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