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Benjamin Hoffmann, *Posthumous America: Literary Reinventions of America at the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Translated by Alan J. Singerman. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. 244 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-271-08007-9; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-08008-6.

Review by Stamos Metzidakis, Washington University in Saint Louis.

For years now, historians and literary scholars have noted the ways in which the textual materials they scrutinize in their respective fields overlap with the methods and discourses they use to articulate their findings. Since the publication of Hayden White's pathbreaking 1973 book, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Anglo-American readers have understood that the objectivity of historical works is always already accompanied by and expressed through various intertextual stylistic tropes, modes, generic conventions, and the like. Critical writing involves the power of the imagination, and frequently requires the use of devices associated more commonly with creative works of fiction or poetry than with so-called scientific or journalistic prose. This is why whenever one sets out to write good *history*, one is inevitably bound also to write a good *story*.

For these reasons, Benjamin Hoffmann's fine new study (which somewhat surprisingly does not mention *Metahistory*) is a welcome reexamination of major texts—*Lettres d'un cultivateur américain* (1784); *Lettres écrites des rives de l'Ohio* (1792); *Voyage en Amérique* (1827); and *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (1850)—composed by the French authors J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, Claude-François de Lezay-Marnésia, and François-René de Chateaubriand, respectively. Translated more or less seamlessly by Alan Singerman, this book will interest all specialists of early America, as well as students of early modern French literature. The former have of course long relied on the observations made about that young country and its people by Crèvecoeur. Hoffman praises the Franco-American author: "That a Frenchman was able to write what is often described as the first masterpiece of American literature is a veritable tour de force of linguistic adaptation of which there are few examples in the history of world literature" (p. 20). Unsurprisingly, his characterization of Crèvecoeur's contribution is less sociological or anthropological than aesthetic/artistic. By this I mean that Hoffmann proceeds as if what mattered most to his project was the *way* his chosen authors said or wrote about things in America, not *what*. And it is in this manner that he justifies picking these specific works for his principal textual corpus, one that turns out to be of significant value to specialists of literature, too.

Hoffmann stresses how universal this phenomenon of stylistic overlapping turns out to be. He

implies this early on when he identifies what he calls a “circularity of representations” (p. 11). What Hoffmann means by this is something created by an on-going replication by many different authors of “a similar discourse on America whose power of persuasion increases along with its successive reconfirmations” (p. 11). Seeing how his enterprise need not be exclusive to this limited textual sample, he underscores how “it would have been possible to increase the number of its objects, since America is obviously not the only country that might be represented posthumously” (pp. 11-12). A literary work is posthumous, writes Hoffmann, when it is “published after the decease [sic] of its author” (p. 5). Ultimately, then, most any such representation is flawed, since whenever someone claims to have given a more truthful account of something noted earlier, that person frequently turns out to have embellished it in her/his own turn. An author’s breaches of historical truth are thus in fact “an integral aspect of the notion of posthumous America” (p. 5). Lezay-Marnésia’s critique of Crèvecoeur for his gross exaggeration of the weight of catfish compares him, for example, to “those painters who, not being capable of capturing the beauty of Helen represented her as rich and heavily made up” (p. 78). Hoffmann is spot on, however, when he notes the further irony—or rather, fundamental contradiction—in Lezay-Marnésia’s own writings: “While it is in the name of the rigorous accuracy of Crèvecoeur’s ichthyologic approximations, Lezay-Marnésia is far from producing a *completely objective description* [my italics] of the region of Ohio where he wanted to emigrate: he depicts it as he imagined it before traveling and not as he discovered it to be” (p. 78).

In these and other pages, Hoffmann drives home a crucial critical point, one which, in uncanny fashion, recalls the anxiety of influence arguments and overall theory of creativity spelled out by Harold Bloom regarding the Western canon as a whole. No matter how much Lezay-Marnésia tried to distance himself from Crèvecoeur, or later Chateaubriand from both of them, “posterity has reserved for them the same condemnation...[and] reproached them for exhibiting what Volney called a ‘banal rhetorical talent,’ whose consequences were disastrous for those who put their faith in the idyllic depiction of the future state of Ohio” (p. 78). Such consequences could be “disastrous” because contemporary readers usually trusted accounts, relations, and other reports obtained from those who made the actual trips to these new places. So any such false advertising about the Scioto river region in Ohio can legitimately be said to have contributed to the financial ruin of investors and potential settlers, there and elsewhere in the New World.

This type of semi-historical, semi-autobiographical account is coolly described by Volney due to its minimal rhetorical talent, then, not for its economic, social, or political prescience. Like many other boondoggles in the New World, e.g., John Law’s Mississippi Bubble, this one was evidently conceived and set into motion without the benefit of fully accurate information. Over the years this seems to have happened a lot, though. One thinks here, for example, of Simone de Beauvoir’s *America: Day to Day* (1948) and its evocation of jazz and nightlife in Manhattan after World War II, or of Roland Barthes’s semiotic reading in *Empire of Signs* (1970), not of Tokyo or even of the country of Japan, but of a “system of signs” he chooses to call “Japan.” Neither Barthes nor de Beauvoir were professionally recognized scholars of Japan or America, in other words. Yet both made multiple observations about these two countries of considerable pragmatic use still to readers who travel there today. So one could do much worse in looking for solid cultural facts about those two different places than to trust those other non-native, non-specialist accounts. If a story is lively, compelling, attention-grabbing, and probing, perhaps we should not expect or always demand that it be completely accurate or objective.

In addition, Hoffmann shows how, a little before his death, Chateaubriand confesses to having “mixed many fictions with real things, and, unfortunately, in time the fictions take on reality that transforms them” (p. 131). Reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s reflections on works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, as well as certain ideological battles and political debates in the USA, this obliges us to remember also that etymologically speaking, the noun “fiction” comes from the Latin verb *figere*, to form or shape, which is metonymically linked also to the verb *faire*, to do, in French. So it signifies more or less what the etymon *poiesis* for the noun “poetry” does in Greek, to wit, *to make or bring into existence*. Any critical reading or approach to historical and literary texts must therefore never ignore the propinquity of their form (or style) and content. Hoffmann certainly has not. Indeed, he admits that “it is the exceptional aesthetic value of these texts belonging to a genre whose principal interest is ordinarily related to history and not literature that justified their inclusion in this study” (p. 10). Later on, he adds: “Not only does Chateaubriand describe America several decades after traveling there...but among the fictions mixed in with ‘real things’ was the dream of a journey that would have taken place not at the end of the eighteenth century but at the end of the Renaissance, a dream of meeting a state of nature that the Europeans had not yet degraded and an Amerindian population still unchanged” (p. 131). Clearly, then, old myths die hard. Yet Hoffmann insists that truth is here “not opposed to falsehood, and the author does not knowingly deceive his reader, since fiction has become truth at the end of a process that precludes identifying it as the fiction it formerly was” (p. 131). This appears to mean, nevertheless, that unsuspecting readers are still often deceived when something false or misleading is properly conceived and well-written.

As a serious student of literature, Hoffmann teaches us, too, how presumed empirical data gathered by visitors comes to be manipulated to satisfy or fit their individual recollections and desires. His painstaking analysis of works by these three men, who spent widely varied amounts of time on this side of the Atlantic, seems to set at least part of the historical/literary stage for Hayden White’s insights mentioned above. After all, Hoffmann’s subtitle ends more or less where White’s appears to begin. But Hoffmann’s precise aim is to ascertain when, where, and how these three men stopped noting simply what they observed during their sojourns in America and instead started letting their own imaginations get the better of them and of their socio-political *reportages*. This can be explained mainly by the “temporal distance and the nostalgia that the writer feels at the loss of *his* America” (p. 5). Again, though, these are not the only works that function like this. In a recent documentary about Robert Bolaño, the writer Juan Villoro suggested that the recently deceased novelist never returned to the place that had formed him as a child and young adult, because Bolaño “did not want to alter the phantasmagoric Mexico that he had marvelously constructed in his literature.”[1]

We might infer something similar about Hoffmann’s three French authors: that they were reluctant to alter their vision of America. This was probably due to their not having any need to return to those places, nor to their own imaginary representations of them. They had already taken those complex entities with them. In doing so, moreover, they created what Chateaubriand called a “truth of the imagination,” diametrically opposed to a “geometric truth.” That puts him squarely in line however with the seventeenth-century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who proposed a well-known neoclassical dichotomy between two types of minds: an “esprit de finesse” versus an “esprit de géométrie.”

Hoffmann drives home one other point to justify focusing his study on the language of these

texts. Acknowledging the “scientific insignificance of his journey [into America], its relative banality,” he maintains that Chateaubriand turns this “apparent weakness into a poetic force that allowed him to embrace those old narratives, in which the spaces were blurred and the places unnamed, in which the traveler had no idea exactly where he was in the vastness of the New World” (p. 145). In the end, Hoffmann believes that the relative paucity of historical fact, along with the imprecision of the itinerary taken by the great French Romantic, was “an aesthetic choice rather than a ruse employed to fantasize about his journey” (p. 145). Our critic, a professor of French literature and a novelist in his own right, appears likewise to prefer concentrating less on any historical truths revealed by the “old narratives” than on the descriptive modifications and new perspectives they often generate. The posthumous representation of America thus never serves solely “to preserve the memory of a past period in order to embalm it in a book” (p. 152). This commemoration, as Chateaubriand practiced it in his writings, also stands as a specular warning back to metropolitan French society about where it, too, was heading, after the Revolution and especially the Napoleonic Era. It accomplishes this first by re-invoking the so-called historical affinity between the French colonizers and Amerindians. The nineteenth-century writer then reverses the positive meaning traditionally lent to the good relations enjoyed by these two peoples and instead suggests for his contemporary readers the existence of an irresistible historical process, one that had already affected the Amerindian tribes and which could well do the same in France. In this manner he turns it into “the theater of a narrative in which a young traveler would describe the ruins of the Louvre and the demolished towers of Notre-Dame and would meditate on the progressive decline of French civilization”(p. 153). The specter of Baudelaire’s swan waxing nostalgic in his 1857 poem “Le Cygne,” who sadly recalls an even older empire represented by Andromache, is not far behind as a result.

NOTES

[1] Quoted in Liesl Schillinger, “A Bolaño Novel About Young Poets in Mexico City, Hungry for Fame, Sex and Adventure. No, Not That One,” *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 28, 2019, 15.

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