The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction by Diane Dufva Quantic (review)

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There are two surprises in the presentation, one pleasing, one not. A preliminary chronology, separate from the biographical chapter, covers Valéry's personal and professional life without being dull. Putnam reports the scandal provoked by Valéry's acceptance speech to the *Académie française* and wryly recapitulates Nazi refusal to provide paper, in 1942, for the poet's *Mauvaises pensées (Bad Thoughts)*, on the grounds that they would rather publish good ones. The index, however, is cumbersome, divided into three parts—proper names and subjects, poetic titles, prose titles—which are not easily identified.

Professor Putnam's painstaking guidance, relating parts of Valéry's work to the whole and linking his preoccupations with those of other influential figures, from predecessors to contemporaries to later critics, renders this volume useful not only for the daunted, but for the sophisticated reader as well. This unpretentious yet highly sophisticated introduction to Valéry's life and works is clear, cogent, and elegant. This revisiting of a major literary figure will certainly benefit its target audience, but it will provide great pleasure for more seasoned readers as well.

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DIANE DUFVA QUANTIC. *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 203 p.

Though the Great Plains have often been viewed pejoratively as the "Great American Desert," or seen through the Depression lens as the "Dust Bowl," the region has produced a rich and enduring literature, one that reflects back the true abundance and complexity of the place while it also transcends locale to speak to the experiential heart of America. Diane Quantic has already done much to argue the density and durability of the region's literary heritage; in this new book, she presents that case in its full dimension.

As the author shows, mythical renditions of the heartland have long governed the popular and critical discourse about it. Awed and discomfited by the vast open spaces and arid flatlands of the plains, and shaped by a cultural credo that valued domestication and cultivation of the land into ordered farmsteads, early comers to the region set about filling the geographical vacancy that they saw before them, managing space in 160 acre parcels, and striving to convert the terrain to a fruitful garden. The disparity between their preconceptions and the world they found, the clash between their romantic ideals of yeomanry and the natural conditions that constrained their efforts—these tensions become the consistent focus of the region's writings.

Quantic's study is meant to probe Great Plains literature at the intersection of fable, history, and individual experience, addressing the ways key

writers of fiction and autobiographical narrative come to terms with the impact of settlement experience on persistent westering myths. Chapters are organized around the defining myths (such as the West as Desert, Garden, Virgin Land, Safety Valve, or Manifest Destiny) that constructed the region in the popular imagination, beguiled homesteaders there, and evolved to accommodate the realities of life and community. In this context, Quantic surveys a sizable number of texts, ranging from the stories of well-known authors like Cooper, Garland, Sandoz, Cather, Rolvaag, and Stegner to the less familiar narratives of worthy writers like Larry Woiwode, Mildred Walker, Margaret Laurence, Bess Streeter Aldrich, and others. Some authors whose work has been underappreciated or critically ignored—such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, Wright Morris, and Lois Hudson—are approached freshly and given substantive attention and astute readings that are long overdue.

Quantic's discussion is persuasive and engaging. Her exploration of the prevailing conceptual paradigms of the Western plains is articulate and incisive, and her own personal history as a daughter of and dweller in the region lends the authenticity of lived experience to her accounts of the landscape, weather, social mores, linguistic habits, and psychic predilections of its people. She captures both the grand sweep and the small intricacies of diurnal life that regional writers convey, and underlines the centrality of the land to the worlds they replicate and imagine. At the same time, she rightfully acknowledges the multiplicity of imaginative responses to a place that is itself diverse and unpredictable. Hence, for example, *The Great Gatsby* in her discussion can be a regional novel because it reflects the "optimistic westernizing myth of Manifest Destiny and the...pastoral ideal" and treats the Great Plains—where such myths have become residual—as an idea rather than a location. She also understands how the romance of the West was gradually transformed into ironic, even bitter revisitations as the promise of a "verdant utopia" dissipated under the pressures of actual experience. Her discussion of fictions like Robert Kroetsch's *Badlands* or Larry Woiwode's *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* treat the dystopian aftermath of such myths with acuity.

The Nature of the Place is an important work of contemporary scholarship. While the book is not a visionary re-imagining of literary regionalism (as are, for example, Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*), nor is it theoretically innovative, it does serve as compendium of much insightful commentary in Western studies from recent years. Quantic brings to her analysis an informed understanding of the regional sensibility and environmental ethos of the Great Plains, as well as an empathetic reading of the region's literary voices. She complements and expands upon the recent contributions of scholars of Western regionalism such as Elizabeth Hampsten, Carl Bredahl, R. Donald Francis, James Shortridge, Donald Worster, and Ronald Weber; too, Quantic provides conceptual undergirding for important narratives of place like Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*, Kathleen Norris's *Dakota,* and Richard Rhodes's *Inland Ground*. For those interested in understanding how the literature of a region both enacts and

undermines its mythical past, Diane Quantic's new book is the place to begin.

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WILLIAM C. REEVE. *The Federfuchser / Penpusher from Lessing to Grillparzer: A Study Focused on Grillparzer's* Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg. Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. 167 p.

In this book, William C. Reeve proposes that Klesel, the Catholic cleric in Grillparzer's drama of the shift in Habsburg leadership that was followed shortly by the Thirty Years War, is the culmination of a line of "pen-pushing secretaries who plot and conspire as agent of a less gifted patron" (15). Reeve organizes his 167-page contribution in eight chapters, three of which—"Introduction," "Summation," and "Conclusion"—are very brief. His most interesting thrust is a careful analysis of Klesel's manipulative magic and malice and a conclusion revealing Rudolf as a disaster at politics, Mathias a malleable weakling, and Klesel with Machiavellian standards of the "cunning of the fox and strength of the lion" (82).

Reeve begins with a review of the literature, which has concentrated on Rudolf and his supposed antagonist, Don Cesar, neglecting Klesel. He justifies his interest by declaring Klesel to be an expression of nineteenth-century anticlericalism, revealing trends from the Enlightenment, and even hinting of Grillparzer's hostility towards the Catholic Church. He compares the historical Klesel with the poetic Klesel, who he contends represents an ideological shift of the master/slave dialectic which has moved from the social contract of Hobbes and Locke and even Rousseau to a Hegelian realism where the servant ultimately becomes the master.

Chapter 2, which Reeve captions "In His Servant's Footsteps," reveals Klesel as the *Realpolitiker*, the unscrupulous politician who exploits Mathias and the propensity for vacillation in the Habsburg ruling fabric. The whole plan is about power, and Klesel is in control. Chapter 3, "The Pen Triumphs," reveals Klesel as a consummate maneuverer, presiding where he should be clerking. He first gathers the archdukes, then through circuitous psychological tactics concludes peace with the Turks against the wishes of the Emperor, and even achieves the empowerment of Mathias to act in the Emperor's name. Reeve builds on the role of the "pen-pusher" and the significance of the written word as the new power base in the age of politics, deceit, and distrust.

Reeve follows Klesel through the third and fourth acts of the drama and gives Klesel credit for most major decisions made by both Rudolf and the archdukes. Klesel is now at the height of his power, a reversal of the earlier "Diener/Herr" roles. Reeve helps us see the real person behind the mask, and to see Klesel's position of strength in relation to that of the weaker