

منعطف القلم

The twist of the pen

Description

The application of a new force during the process of writing is usually accompanied by a twisting of the tip of the pen and a deviation from the already-established path into a new twist (165). That's a quote about calligraphic writing from Reza Negarestani, author of *Cyclonopedia*. The [twist](#) of the pen serves as leitmotif for this work of philo-fiction.

منعطف القلم

Philo-fiction is also called *theory-fiction*. Ostensibly, it explores philosophical themes through mystery, fantasy, science fiction, and other literary treatments. Writers of philo-fiction might approach their philosophical subject matter in ways counter to systematic philosophical discourses.

Philo-fiction, such as Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* (see [previous post](#)), requires a more active mode of reading. Nothing is stitched up neatly. The reader has to do more than absorb and learn from the wisdom delivered by the author.

Books about everything and nothing

There's a long tradition whereby philosophers deliver their arguments and insights within fictional stories. Plato did that. For example, in the *Symposium* he has his characters reclining on couches at a banquet, entering and leaving the room, falling asleep, drinking too much, and engaged in animated conversation. In the course of their conversation, each presents various opinions on beauty, love, and virtue.

Nietzsche wrote this way. So did Kierkegaard, and from a different standpoint, [Ayn Rand](#). I'm reminded also of *Sophie's World*, a popular book from the 1990s about philosophy written in the

form of a novel, though I don't recall the author claimed to advance new philosophical ideas.

Philosophers will call on fiction and pop-culture references (e.g. Slavoj Žižek in *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*), and there was a book series spring-boarding philosophical themes from classic pop culture fictions such as *The Simpsons (The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! Of Homer)*, and *Seinfeld (Seinfeld and Philosophy: A Book about Everything and Nothing)*.

Theory-fiction

But according to my reading at least, texts under the philo-fiction (or theory-fiction) heading follow the style of philosophers such as Giles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Michel Serres. At first reading, such writings present as metaphorical, figurative, dense, ambiguous, wide ranging, loosely structured or without apparent structure, sometimes contradictory, strident (like a manifesto), provocative and full of suggestive detail. The reader has to do some heavy lifting.

The reader must also trust the writer. Will I learn something by labouring through what may at first blush appear incoherent, however provocative? The credentials of the writers matter, as does the community that promotes such writers. (I'm wary of difficult texts since reading Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's controversial *Intellectual Impostures*.)

Philo-fiction is also an exercise in combination. Working through useful combinations and permutations in pairs or other groupings of nouns like dust, oil, hole, cave, crypt, vault, war, machine, scorpion, worm, monotheism, number, twist, writing, plot, desert, Hermes, death, devil cold.



Dada-fiction

In keeping with certain art traditions (Dada, Surrealism) also originating in France, ideas in philo-fiction are organised as if *assemblages* of bricolage and montage. As well as argumentation, meaning emerges from strange connections and the unusual placement of objects and ideas relative to one another.

Derrida describes and practices this writing under the heading [intertextuality](#), the way one word invokes another, in a chain of associations, sometimes introducing unlikely connections.

Here philosophical writing approaches poetry: listen to the flow of the words, enjoy, be disturbed. The narrative thread is more an effect on the reader listener, rather than a detailed set of arguments subject to easy synopsis and analysis.

Perhaps there are layers through which the reader can appreciate such writing: the story, the detailed descriptions, the erudition, the arguments, critique and criticism.

Philo-imaginaries

Part of the appeal (to some) of philo-fiction is that it is quotable (and misquotable) as small chunks. Any reader can mine the text for phrases and clauses. That's easiest if the reader has access to a searchable PDF of the text.

There's colour and nuance, insight and the potential for wisdom in an exercise of co-production between writer and reader.

Philo-fiction and similar genres impact the creative worlds of art, architecture and design, at least in colleges and universities, not least as such creative practices too participate in ambiguity, unresolved conundrums, nuance and deviant combinatorics.

Misreading philo-fiction

Philo-fiction sometimes draws on *deixis*, which I understand as a style of speech that requires the listener to know the context, the language, the code, before they can comprehend and act on what is said. See post: [Trash talk](#). Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia* dips in and out of such esoteric codes, languages of which no single reader could claim to be in complete command.

As it is fiction, the reader also has anyway to wrestle with truth and falsity. The author puts the most challenging or original ideas into the mouths and from the pen of story characters. As with Plato's dialogues we are entitled to wonder which if any of the opinions expressed is in the author's voice.

Is it true that the ancient Assyrians cleared the last underground cities of their human dwellers by releasing and sending vermin (diseased rats, polluted water, rotten bodies and snakes) down into the complex (59)? It conjures some potent imagery, and furthers the book's tellurian, terrestrial and subterranean poetics. It's about the earth after all.

In the case of Earth's magnetosphere,

while solar winds constrict its sunward side to a distance of only six to ten times the radius of the Earth (in the form of a faceless prow facing towards the Sun), they expand the night-side magnetosphere to approximately one thousand times the Earth's radius (148).

If an assertion can service the poetry of the Earth as a faceless prow facing towards the Sun then that's all the justification it needs. Facts abound, but for theory-fiction, their place in the narrative matters more than [verification](#).

Plotless stories

If there's no plot as understood conventionally, the text at least secretes an examination of plot under its plotless story under the guise of hidden writing.

More than a mere interdisciplinary [sic] investigation, Hidden Writing suggests a politics of contribution to, or participation with, perforated structures and degenerate formations. Reading through the plot holes of a story is possible only by devising a line capable of twisting in and out of them (60).

Indeed, *Cyclonopedia* has an apparent story. It's ostensibly about someone who finds a manuscript by a fictional archaeologist-author, and much of the book is quotes from him I think.

By most conventions, our engagement with a story relies substantially on our ability to identify characters and identify with them. The main characters of *Cyclonopedia* are Middle Eastern oil, monotheism and the earth's geology.

In spite of references to humanoid mythic surrogates (Moloch, Hermes, Gog, Magog, Nergal, Ereshkigal), these entities are deliberately de-anthropomorphised. For this reader at least, in spite of the figurative riches, and to draw on the desert metaphor, the narrative content is a bit dry.

Consuming philo-fiction

How do you read this kind of material? You can buy or borrow the book in paper or electronic format and read it like a book. You can have it read to you by a metallic artificial voice in a smartphone app like GoodReader while walking to work, training, washing the dishes or shopping.

There are always helpful precursors, commentaries, artworks and designs that respond to, supplement, engage with, and refute the text. If you have the text electronically then you can search for key words, like *twist*.

human openness has a strategic and twisted spirit for which every communication is a tactic and every openness is a strategy to be unfolded (196).



Bibliography

- Blake, Terrence. 2015. Philo-fiction. *Agent Swarm*, 21 November. Available online: <https://terenceblake.wordpress.com/2015/11/21/philo-fiction-2/> (accessed 9 June 2019).
- Derrida, Jacques. 1981. Plato's Pharmacy. *Dissemination*: 61-171. London: Athlone.
- Fest, Bradley J. 2016. Geologies of finitude: The deep time of twenty-first-century catastrophe in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* and Reza Negarestani's *Cyclonopedia*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, (57) 5, 565-578.

- Gaarder, Jostein. 1994. *Sophie's World A Novel About the History of Philosophy*. New York, NY: Berkley Books
- Negarestani, Reza. 2008. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne: re.press.
- Serres, Michel. 2007. *The Parasite*. Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Sokal, Alan D., and Jean Bricmont. 2003. *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science*. London: Profile Books

Note

- The first image is what Google Translate returns for "the turn of the pen" in Arabic; the second image is from The Western Desert, Egypt; the third image is of the eroded old town of Siwa Oasis in the Western Desert.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. ciphercity
2. crypt
3. Negarestani
4. philo-fiction

Date Created

June 22, 2019

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark