

Matthew Wickman, *Literature After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enlightenment*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 304. £45.50. ISBN 9780812247954.

Matthew Wickman's monograph is undoubtedly an ambitious work of literary and intellectual history. It explores how mathematics (primarily geometry) influenced the Scottish cultural imagination during the 'long, looping' eighteenth century (14). Yet Wickman is clear from the outset that his book focuses on what Arkady Plotnitsky refers to (somewhat vaguely) as 'mathematical thinking' (2), rather than mathematics *per se*. Geometry therefore is viewed quite broadly as a cultural medium 'through which literati reasoned across disciplines' (13) – and this provides Wickman with his most dominant theme. Nonetheless, several other critical preoccupations return with insistent regularity. Franco Moretti's notion of 'distant reading' is thoughtfully assessed, and if you like your intellectual history liberally interlarded with sizeable chunks of Continental philosophy, then there is much here to delight you. Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Badiou – the usual names recur often enough to form a familiar, if now rather outmoded, litany.

Unfortunately, while the magnitude of Wickman's undertaking can only be admired, his execution is sometimes underwhelming. Indeterminate *possible* similarities are too swiftly enshrined as irrefragable self-evident connections, and this creates the need for occasional apologies: 'it is unlikely [...] that Burns knew anything about the puzzle of the bridges at Königsberg' (154); 'Thomson's concerns were not expressly geometric' (180). The problem is that Wickman can rarely resist the urge to over-generalise, over-interpret, and over-theorise even the most minute particulars. His discussion of Walter Scott in Chapter 2 is greatly weakened by this. The chapter argues that Scott revisited 'an earlier, mathematical version of literary romance' (59), yet this startling assertion is founded predominantly upon one brief passage from *Guy Mannering* in which a coast is described 'with all its varied curves, indentures, and embayments' (57). There are, of course, many descriptions of coasts in the Scottish literature of the long (and even looping) eighteenth century, so queries arise naturally. How or why is Scott doing something unusual in these particular 12 lines? Can the presence of similar mathematical subtexts be identified elsewhere in Scott's work? Alas, such questions remain unaddressed; we are just cheerfully assured that 'the fluxional line' is 'axial to Scott's fictive and therefore cognitive literature' (89). Maybe; maybe not – the evidence presented is far too flimsy to permit a judgement to be formed one way or the other.

The same problem destabilises the discussion of Robert Burns in Chapter 4. Burns is simultaneously both the 'one' (i.e. he speaks for the people) and part of the 'mass' (i.e., he speaks as one of the people); a paradox which apparently uncovers 'a fold between the metaphysics of unified form and the modern hegemony of number' (133). This analysis (we are told) constitutes 'a mathematical matrix' (133) – a grand Badiouan phrase which, in this context, is surely as unwieldy as it is unnecessary. By contrast, the analysis of Thomson's tortive response to Newton(ianism) in Chapter 5 is far more compelling. His finely-wrought encomiums on Newton certainly are riven by an awareness of 'the stifling effects of Newtonian thought' (177), and Wickman expounds this perspective persuasively, with well-attested interpretative claims. Yet even here there are niggles. Thomson's frequent references to uncountable entities (discussed on p.190) may possibly manifest the covert influence of mathematical thinking (as Wickman claims), but surely it is more likely that they are primarily echoes of Milton's distinctive rhetoric of uncountable infinities in *Paradise Lost* – or perhaps these two options are deeply convolved in some way? Ultimately, it is intriguing that the finest sustained literary analysis in the book is prompted by Hugh MacDiarmid's magnificent poem 'On a Raised Beach' (pub. 1934). This highlight places Wickman in the curious position of writing more efficaciously about the subsequent *influence* of the Scottish

Enlightenment, than he does about that complex historical period itself.

Stylistically there are a few ticks that irk. Wickman has a tendency to terminate important paragraphs with a colon followed by a (sometimes quasi-mystical) sound-bite summary: '[...]: our humanity attests to our inhumanity, and vice versa' (142). Winsome at first, these epigrams soon cloy and grate. This is a pity, since Wickman's text merits attentive reading. He unquestionably examines many themes that richly deserve focused consideration – e.g., the poetics of late Euclidianism (Chapter 1), the idea that geometry became an 'arcane, mysterious [...] *romantic* enterprise' (70) during the long eighteenth century. A humbler, more cautious, monograph might have probed such topics even more deeply, and might thereby have provided more lasting insights into the curious geometrical imagination of the Scottish Enlightenment.

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