Andrew Franta, *Systems Failure: The Uses of Disorder in English Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. Pp. 215. $57. ISBN 9781421427515.

Andrew Franta's *Systems Failure* is a captivating book about the breakdown of order and organisation in writing and thinking across the long eighteenth century. In the spirit of its own topic, the book does not make one fixed argument but instead spins together a series of related threads. First, there is an argument of intellectual history: 'While we tend to regard skepticism about systems as postmodern', Franta writes, 'stories about the drive to order the world and its inevitable unravelling like those told by [Jorge Luis] Borges and [Lewis] Carroll have their roots in the eighteenth century' (2). The book locates a critique of modern systems thinking in a literary tradition (Franta's term) composed of prose—mainly narrative prose—running from Johnson and Sterne through to Godwin, Austen, and De Quincey. Second, there is a literary-critical argument to the effect that we tend to overstate the systematic nature of literary works themselves, often because we rush to locate 'the novelistic representation of social reality' and, blinkered by the logic of realism, overlook 'the literary analysis of the idea that society *has* a structure' (13, my emphasis). Third, and most abstract, is an intriguing argument about the difficulty of thinking about disorder at all. This argument emerges, often implicitly, in Franta's careful and sustained treatment of recent criticism, as when he notes how, in Jonathan Lamb's and James Chandler's analyses of Sterne, 'the pressure of critical scrutiny resolves contingency into complexity', as if the very work of literary analysis can't help but find order in disorder and logic in chance events, even as Sterne sends up precisely those tendencies in his narrative (63). When Franta observes, with reference to De Quincey's capacious analytic style, that 'Systems are fictions, but they are necessary—or at least unavoidable', he might also be speaking of literary analysis at large (16).

But what is a system? The examples are diverse: there is the 'closed system' of biography (20) into which Johnson wrestles his *Life of Savage* in chapter one, until the *Life* starts to look like 'a concerted effort to test the limits of the genre, and Savage himself becomes a kind of experimental subject designed to challenge the reader's ability to sympathise' (36). There is the concrete infrastructure of the postal system, which structures Franta's compelling reading of Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* and reappears in the superb chapter on De Quincey, where the mail in 'The English Mail Coach' 'comes to serve as a figure for social systems in general' (136). At times, systems thinking reveals 'the desire to apply principles derived from the natural sciences to the social world' (167); elsewhere it stands for the systematisation of the social world in opposition to the contingencies of fiction (133). What unites these various systems is a general claim that 'system-building requires a closed frame of reference', as opposed to the open-ended theorising about life and lives, embedded in literary forms, that the book celebrates (154).

These readings are incisive, concentrated affairs. Where a more sentimental critique of systems might focus on individuals and their inner lives, Franta prioritises social arrangement over psychological reflection and spatial arrangement over temporal patterning. The effect is to subordinate plot and character to more impersonal questions of social and formal organisation. His defence of Smollett's 'notoriously flat' characters finds that flatness to be compatible with Bruno Latour's flat ontology of Actor Network Theory, observing that 'in *Humphry Clinker* individuals are often treated as abstractions, as if they were data points or connecting notes rather than real people' (68). Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, a gothic tale of excessive curiosity, is read not as psychological thriller but as an epistemological warning. Even Austen is read not for the inner lives of her characters but the formal arrangement of scenes and relationships. Indeed, the book offers some surprising and lovely formal readings; the discussion of chiasmus in Johnson and the schematic, algebraic analysis of a scene in

Mansfield Park stand out in particular.

Franta shows how literary works can play with, and resist, the totalising systems that might seek to explain or order society, but his own methods are far from dilettante or unsystematic. Latour, the most prominent theorist in the book, has a similarly ambivalent relationship to systematic thought in recent work (see the note 'Is AIME a system?' on Latour's *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* website). The book's title hints at the complexity of the conceptual territory: disorder is not the opposite of system, and not all systems are stable. As Franta observes, 'ambivalence is an intrinsic feature of the emergence of systems' (3). Even as the book traces a literary history of opposition to emergent systematic knowledge, it points the way towards fruitful, critical engagement between literary criticism and social theory in the present.

Alexander Freer
University of Edinburgh