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Book Reviews

Wetwares: Experiments in Postvital Living, by Richard Doyle (2003). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

"Connecticut, Connect-I-cut!" (p. 4): This refrain, this slogan, sampled from Deleuze and Guattari (1983, p. 36), condenses the synthetic/analytic strategy of Richard Doyle's *Wetwares*, a tool kit, an armory, for enduring a world in which we are continually connected to and cut into new constellations of alienation from and addiction to a thing called "life"—an object that appears in scare quotes because it is so scary and so quotable, a phantom that, as *Wetwares* alerts us, haunts bodies in comas and cryonic suspension and catches its likeness in the eerie self-replicating computer programs of artificial life and the gut-busting trajectories of organ donation:

> "Life," as a scientific object, has been stealthed, rendered indiscernible by our installed systems of representation. No longer the attribute of a sovereign in battle with its evolutionary problem set, the organism its sign of ongoing but always temporary victory, life now resounds not so much within sturdy boundaries, but between them. (p. 21)

Wetwares is about the times and spaces between, the intervals, interstices, interzones where we humans, what William S. Burroughs nominated as "soft machines," make our living in the ever-mutating territories of Deleuze and Guattari's "machinic phylum." *Wetwares*, then, is a sort of bestiary of the soft machinic phylum. Better, it is an aviary, mapping the lines of flight from and to our panicked possession by this thing called vitality.

Doyle informs us that the Online Hacker Jargon File defines "wetware" as "human beings (programmers, operators, administrators) attached to a computer system, as opposed to the system's hardware or software"; Doyle's definition is more ambulatory: Wetwares are "encounter[s] with flesh as a refrain, a repetition of algorithms or recipes of sufficient complexity that only through instantiation can they be experienced" (p. 186). And "wetwares are inconceivable not because they sublimely exceed any reduction or representation but because they quite simply cannot be modeled in advance" (p. 186). In other words, you must read and reread *Wetwares*; you must run the program, sing the body eclectic, to find out how it turns out. All this reader can provide is a déjà view of *Wetwares* as a set of tools—agents of transformative repetition—and of *Wetwares* as a fleet of weapons—agents of reterritorialization. The book is nothing less than an attempt to reorder your neural networks as well as your gut. Yes: It is a cookbook, a set of recipes for "living" in a world in which "life" has been distributed beyond biology into a spectral haunting of networks of health care, interactive simulation games, and organ markets.

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Take small bowel transplants, apparitions in chapter 9, "Wetwares; or, Cutting Up a Few Aliens" (which, with its aleatory structure, is like the Beatles' "Revolution 9," an episode organized by a cutting up and reshuffling of its own textual routines): "More an ecology than a well-defined, autonomous organ, the small bowel teems with a zoology of fauna that carry out the intricate and thankless task of human digestion" (p. 181). The small bowel, in addition to being an echo of the talking anus of *Naked Lunch*, is an emblem of complexity, a swarm—an *autocatalytic network*, in the terms of theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman. It is an embodiment of the swirling uncertainties that make up this thankless thing called subjectivity. To borrow a phrase from England's pagan musical technicians, Coil, the "anal staircase" leads not in one direction only but toward a spiraling chorus of tangents, toward what Coil calls, in another one of their songs, panic, which, as Doyle explains, flipping in Burroughs's definition—"panic . . . the sudden intolerable knowing that everything is alive"—is the paranoid impulse at the heart (an off-center organ where "life" has often been sited) of the distribution of vitality into bodies frozen in cryonic suspension, into computer models of organisms, and into the kinship relations that suspend, sustain, and animate comatose relatives in plugged-in "insuranceworlds."

Paranoia, of course, often turns out to be true. *Wetwares* made me remember Margaret, the main character in Slava Tsukerman's (1982) film *Liquid Sky*. In this science fiction film, a flying saucer the size of a Frisbee takes up residence on this Connecticut junkie's New York penthouse. The Frisbee aliens are looking for heroin—liquid sky—but soon discover a more potent opiate released in the brains of Margaret's sexual partners when they arrive at orgasm. As the aliens siphon this substance out of the bodies of Margaret's spent lovers, these people disappear, abducted into the circuits of an alien energy source. Margaret, not surprisingly, becomes paranoid—and realizes, after a spell, that her apprehensions of being watched, outsourced, empowered, and duped all at once are correct.

Doyle meets aliens, too, in his chapter, "Sympathy for the Alien," in which he encounters creatures that use citationality as their method of propulsion (perhaps you know academic promotion committees that have been converted by these visitors?). The aliens, the paranoid reader soon discovers, are us, driving ourselves forward with the citationality of "life"—into hospitals, into artificial life fan clubs, into "pro-life" politics. Life remains an addiction, and many humans—theoretical biologists, organ recipients, antiabortionists—are junkies. We need it, like the subject of the 1929 quotation offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* for "junkie," an agent who will "get hold of it if he can." Doyle's argument puts a fresh spin on the notion of "junk DNA"—often described in molecular biology as genetic material with no known function. Insofar as DNA has been posited as the "secret of life" (a rhetoric brilliantly anatomized in Doyle's [1997] first book, *On Beyond Living*), "junk DNA" occupies an uneasy relation to the part of the genome considered "the code of life." *Wetwares*, I would argue, offers tools for rendering indiscernible—for connecting and cutting in twain—the difference between junk and life,[1] one reason I originally thought to give this review the rather excruciating title of "A Connecticut Junkie in Author Doyle's Court." Both junk and life are narcotics that can appeal to, capture, territorialize, and abduct organisms.

Abduction is an operation—of logic as it turns out—given a careful reading in *Wetwares*. Doyle draws it from 19th-century semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, who con-

trasted abduction with induction and deduction. If induction is reasoning by inference from particulars toward general conclusions or laws, and deduction is the drawing of a conclusion from already known general principles or theories, abduction is reasoning from premises that are possible. Abduction is the argument from the future—"a method of forming a general prediction without any positive assurance that it will succeed either in the special case or usually, its justification being that it is the only possible hope of regulating our future conduct rationally" (Peirce, as cited on p. 25). Abductive reasoning appears on NASA's Mars Program Web site, in which the authors optimistically tell us that they will know "life" when they see it, even if they have not seen it yet: "Life detection technologies under development will help us define life in non-Earth-centric terms so that we are able to detect in all the forms it might take" (see http://marsprogram.jpl.nasa.gov/science/life/index.html, accessed February 12, 2004). Abductive reasoning appears on "pro-life" bumper stickers, which claim, with an eye on one ideologically favored outcome, "it's not a choice, it's a child." Abductive reasoning appears in the charter of artificial life science to use computer simulation to understand "life-as-it-could-be." Doyle tags abduction as imbued with hope, anticipation, desperation: the stuff of life, these days.

Wetwares is a book of time and space travel, and it alerts us to the contingent substances of the cultures in which we make sense of life. Culture, of course, is both a realm of signification and, as any microbiologist can tell you, a potent growth medium conditioned by its constituents, which can include such stuff as agar, a substance derived from seaweed. Insofar as *Wetwares* is about culture, then, it is about the aquaculture in which we flying fish find the nourishments that orient us to our times. Like the title hero of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, we have been abducted into the stream of history. Twain's Yankee, an addict of scientific enlightenment yanked back to medieval days, discovers, after some trials, the fissures in his own era's faith in reason. In Doyle's book, we, subjects and objects of scientific worries about "life," are abducted into a future prepared by the bizarre science fictions of our days, where we are presented with novel zones in which what Doyle calls "bodies that splatter"[2] upend easy designations of vitality. Wetwares share with cyborgs a futural orientation; abduction and feedback both face forward. Abduction, however, not being oriented toward either the self or its correction—that is, toward "adaptation"—steers "life" outside the boundaries of a cybernetic system and draws our attention to the unexpected dispersal of life, the distribution of vitality into the spaces between transmissions of information, substance, materiality.

In the wake of the distribution of "life" and of the "death" of the author, *Wetwares* maps out a kind of afterlife, a postvitality—although one where judgment and accountability remain in the mix: "The author sought to cultivate in his interrogators a massive responsibility, a response for this and a response for that" (p. 2). Author Doyle, like Arthur Conan Doyle (a man who also dug Burroughs, although in his earlier Edgar Rice incarnation), holds audience with spirit mediums and demands that you do a reading. Reader response "for this" and "for that" in author Doyle's court requires that you keep your eye on the ball—"it is difficult to avoid thinking here of Chevy Chase's *Caddyshack* command to 'be' the golf ball" (p. 6)—that you make the judgment calls proper to the sports of "life": fault! guilty! instant replay! What will happen when you encounter *Wetwares*? Do the experiment.

Notes

1. For an entanglement of drugs and life rather different from junk DNA, see Doyle (2002).
2. See Halberstam (1995) and Nelson (1999) for other coinages of this phrase.

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Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value, edited by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (2003). New York: Rowman and Littlefield. 143 pp. Paperback: $22.96, ISBN 0742519821. Cloth: $65.00, ISBN 0742519813.

A little more than a century after Thorstein Veblen (1899/1953) analyzed the upper reaches of a consumer class in terms of its carefully orchestrated practices of waste, the cultural study of waste, garbage, trash, and other unpleasant things is finally gaining a head of steam. Although the anthropology of garbage is a couple decades old now (see Rathje & Murphy, 1992), as is Michael Thompson's (1979) *Rubbish Theory*, waste in all its myriad forms is beginning to get more interdisciplinary interest from cultural scholars. We might note the resurgence in Georges Bataille's popularity among young American scholars, the appearance of Susan Strasser's (1999) *Waste and Want*, the translation of Guy Laporte's (2000) *History of Shit* into English, and now, most recently, Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke's edited collection *Culture and Waste.*

In whatever form it takes, waste is an inherently spatial problem. Waste is a problem of distribution. Among the high points in the collection is Gay Hawkins's analysis of drainage at beaches in Sydney, Australia, where bad engineering led to a sewer system that lets out into an ocean—but not quite far enough. "The hint of shit in a public space doesn't just call the self into question, but technologies of governance, *faith in infrastructure*" (p. 40). Hawkins is interested in the connection between shit and the political possibilities of disturbance—and by "disturbance" he means the