What are critics for?

15/06/2011

1936 words

Books & Arts

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14 June 2011

Brian McFarlane reviews a new collection of critical essays about contemporary novels

Tessa Hadley (above) scrupulously analyses Coetzee’s disturbing, scalpel-sharp novel, Disgrace, in The Good of the Novel. Random House

The Good of the Novel

Edited by Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan | Faber and Faber | $32.99

“The novel is the one bright book of life.” wrote D.H. Lawrence. “Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book-tremulation can do. The novel is the book of life.”

Now, Lawrence wrote his fair share of high-flown claptrap about the novel: he was in fact much better at writing novels than at writing about them. There is, though, a wonderfully alert sense of how the novel might make its meaning that distinguishes him from many of those who set themselves to the task of literary criticism. He also says, “man alive” that he is, with perhaps less modesty than is wise, “For this reason I am a novelist. And being a novelist, I consider myself superior to the saint, the scientist, the philosopher, and the poet, who are all great masters of different bits of man alive but never get the whole hog.”

That may sound like a large if not wholly clear claim for the novel’s supremacy, but it can lead us to ponder whether novels are the only books we can fully trust. When we read biography or history, for instance, we are always aware of the processes of selection, of omission, of compression, of shaping in the interests of an overall thematic intention. These writers are dealing with the “true” – like those films that are always claiming to be “inspired by a true story” – but the flow and coherence of their work may or will lead to its suppression or distortion, however conscientious the author. On the other hand, anything the novelist includes in the work is there because he or she wants it to be, because it belongs in a consciously contrived imaginative scheme, not because it owes allegiance to existential realities.

It is just possible that the novel is enjoying a golden age, each new work by the likes of J.M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan and Philip Roth anticipated with such pleasure that one is forced – to financial ruin – to buy them in hardback. Seeing these three names on the cover of The Good of the Novel whetted my appetite, but I can’t say unequivocally that the book slaked it. An exciting period for the novel is, I guess, no guarantee of the equivalent for novel criticism. Has any modern critic, I wonder, acquired the status that F.R. Leavis had a few decades back? His view of the great tradition of the English novel as essentially a moral enterprise may now seem hopelessly constraining. Though I don’t want to go back to him, I’d have to add in fairness that none of the critics on show in the new Faber volume has influenced my thinking about a novel in the way that Leavis did in his accounts of, say, The Mill on the Floss or Women in Love.

“Evaluation” was Leavis’s concern, and as the editors of the present volume state firmly in the opening paragraph of their introduction, The Good of the Novel “starts from the conviction that the job of the critic is evaluation, and that what needs to be evaluated is primarily the technique of the writer. The essays in this volume are avowedly evaluative; that is, they attempt to consider the novels as novels.” I’m not sure that all the
contributors are marching to this drum: evaluation sometimes seems to be taking a back seat to convoluted explication and authorial grandstanding. The editors want to restore “the authority of the literary critic” — authority in relation to whom or what? — and follow this aim with a predictable serve to the internet and to “the academy’s retreat into theoretical obscurantism.” How exactly the internet has “dissipated” this authority needs clarifying, and so does the way in which it was “sabotaged” by theory.

I am concerned that the introduction begs questions that need answering, such as those regarding theory and the internet, and that it indulges in some pretty wild opinionatedness. For instance, the documentary ambition of the first two novels of Jonathan Franzen (not one of the authors represented here) “overwhelmed their ability to communicate the lives of believable human beings.” And there are plenty of large generalisations about what the novel is and does: “the truth of fiction cannot be rendered in any other form… Novelistic truth is dramatic, which means above all that it is to do with character…” Readers looking for a more attractive account of how “the novel does character” might find Sebastian Faulks’s Faulks on Fiction (BBC Books, 2011) more rewarding.

So, how do the thirteen essays of the Faber volume measure up? How far do they persuade us of “the authority of the literary critic”? Unsurprisingly, they show considerable variety in style, readability and usefulness in opening up their respective texts. To come clean, I’d read only eight of the thirteen novels, and though the essays offered some new perceptions I couldn’t say any of them radically altered my perception of the novel in question. On those I hadn’t read, only Ray Ryan’s account of John McGahern’s That They May Face the Rising Sun evoked the novel in such a way as to urge me to get hold of the book. Ryan seemed to have opened himself utterly to what this strange- and minimalist-sounding work has to offer. On the other hand, not having read Don DeLillo (please don’t tell anyone this), I felt that Andrew O’Hagan’s over-worked prose as he tries to show how the author “makes newly explicit the ties that bind art and ruin” and “command[s]… sentences to live a life both pretty and profound” told me more about O’Hagan than DeLillo. Could we have some gloss on the mysterious notion of “the ties that bind art and ruin”?

James Wood on Atonement, which I admire extravagantly, intermittently evokes the novel and its author, Ian McEwan, with some subtlety, but for every sharp insight (“So McEwan’s book pampers our old-fashioned readerly expectations and then dashes them”) comes an over-ornate locution that leads me to feel he is writing not so much about McEwan as about his own work, as when he writes that the novel “never stops being about its own writing.” With not a few of these essays, I have this feeling of the critics overworking their own writing as if it mattered more to them than the books they are meant to be evoking. Maybe there is such a sense of occasion about the anthology that it encourages this kind of writing.

Aware of sounding somewhat curmudgeonly, I should make plain that there is also a good deal to admire in some of the essays. Among these is Tessa Hadley’s scrupulous analysis of Coetzee’s very disturbing, scalpel-sharp approach to sexual misdemeanour and worse, Disgrace (1999). Hadley picks her way with remarkable subtlety and precision through this tonally complex work and rightly draws attention to the paradox at the heart of the Coetzee phenomenon: “it’s a curiosity for this vogueishness to befall a novelist so determinedly difficult, so uncompromising in not courting the popular kind of success.” Her analysis goes some distance to accounting for why so many of us persist in reading a novelist who never seems to woo us and can in fact give us an excoriatingly bad time. She is astute in drawing attention to the problem of how to deal with the third-person narrator in Disgrace and to assess the distance between his attitudes and those of his protagonist.

A very different kettle of subtle fish is offered by Anita Brookner, and her famous Hotel du Lac attracts a comparably subtle response from New Yorker journalist Mary Hawthorne. (Are journalists as a race more likely to be enjoyable to read than academics? As one who has written under both banners, I plead objectivity in asking this rhetorical question.) I want critics to evoke the text they are addressing: I’m aware of having used the term several times but it strikes me as one of the cardinal functions of critical writing, preceding the “evaluation” that this volume insists is at the heart of the enterprise. Hawthorne brilliantly conjures up the confined world of Brookner’s protagonists and helps us admirers to understand why we go on reading about it in quiet book after book. “The dilemma of what to make of one’s life, of how to become oneself, of how to reconcile the conflicting obligations towards oneself and others, especially toward one’s parents, and, most essentially, of how to live in a world in the absence of having achieved one’s heart’s desire is eternal…” It is not often a critic so adroitly catches the feel of a novelist’s work — and in cadences the novelist herself might have envied.
When I was complaining above about the element of showing off that I felt in some of the essays, I didn’t mean to suggest that critics need to be self-effacing to the point of invisibility, but only that their personalities (insofar as they are reflected in their writing) should not be allowed to overwhelm our sense of the author in question. Having said that, I’d have to add that two of the most entertaining (that’s a plus with me) pieces seem almost to match their subjects in terms of “personality” infiltrating their critical writing. These are journalist Jason Cowley’s very shrewd assessment of Martin Amis’s strengths and weaknesses, nailing Amis from the beginning as “unusually interested in style, in what it means to write fiction in a style that is ostentatiously your own.” The other is the novelist Ian Sansom’s sharp and funny dealings with the question “What Is the Point of the Novel?” by way of Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral*. His tone is self-deprecating and this tends to distinguish him from several other critics represented here.

Finally, this volume raises two important questions, neither of which is susceptible to very neat answers. First, what is the job of the novelist? “Novels are not wholly about consolation and escape,” says Kevin Jackson writing on Paul Auster. No, but they have surely a duty to grip the attention of readers finding their way into an imagined world – and “imagined” is the word, however closely it draws on the “real” world. Second, what is the job of the literary critic? Is he or she our chief guide to what we want to read? Along with “guide,” do we not also want in varying degrees the critic to inform, reveal, unravel, provoke – and entertain? Sometimes, and this Faber collection intensifies this nasty perception, they seem to be writing for themselves without the necessary clear sense of an audience. I’d like them to work on that.