

Texts, Theories, and Lives

Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004)

A partisan stance usually makes for vulnerable but enjoyable literary histories: taking strong stands and voicing strong opinions is riskier than the kind of critical equanimity and inclusivity that characterizes most similar ventures, but the risks taken and the inevitable losses are usually compensated for by the drive of the argument. Philip Tew's new book is no exception to this rule. As in his earlier monograph on B. S. Johnson – who remains an important forerunner and background presence in this survey – Tew is not content merely to introduce the work of a group of writers, but makes his survey of the contemporary British novel scene into a critical/theoretical manifesto. Thus, readers who expect a bland, inclusive overview of the contemporary novel, with the usual token gestures towards the usual beneficiaries of such political correctness (separate chapters on women writers, ethnic minorities) are in for a surprise. In his "Epilogue," Tew expounds his doubts concerning such categorizations: reading texts in terms of gender or ethnicity, he claims, ends up as "ghettoizing or marginalizing such creative efforts in thematic studies" (183). Accordingly, he is careful throughout to avoid the pitfalls of what he sees as critical

ghettoizing, and gender, for instance, is practically absent as a key organizing notion.

Philip Tew's principal objective is to "disturb critical shibboleths" (which refers to a polemically but vaguely defined postmodern, poststructuralist or deconstructive strategy) and contribute to the "debate over what constitutes the contemporary, the cultural and the fictional" (xiv). Thus, a polemic against poststructuralist theory, the propagation of a marked critical stance and the introduction of a group of writers coalesce throughout the book. Tew clearly has a vested interest in identifying a tendency in contemporary fiction that that would not so much "support" his views as call forth the critical procedures propagated by him; that is, he needs to be able to diagnose a situation where, as he says, "in part recent movements in criticism ... mirror contemporary practice in the novel that reasserts the real world aspects of fiction" (13). Seeing a radical caesura in literary and cultural processes in the late seventies, Tew identifies a new group of writers who have learnt from the lessons of metafictional experiment and, without discarding the heightened linguistic awareness of postmodern fiction, represent a shift "from heterogeneity and a deconstructive decentering toward apprehensible meaning" (4) and a greater emphasis on experiential reality and the life-world.

So far, Tew's book would seem to be simply yet another manifestation of the British disgruntlement over the hold continental theory appears to have over vast numbers of academics, a disgruntlement that sometimes reaches a hysterical pitch, as for instance in D. J. Taylor's otherwise informative book on postwar British Fiction called *After the War*. Yet, Tew's book is distinguished from Taylor's effort not only because its tone is much too theoretically informed to indulge in such gratuitous militancy (unlike Taylor, Tew knows what he condemns), but also because – and this is its real novelty – here, unlike in Taylor and many others, discarding poststructuralist, deconstructionist etc. theory does not entail a dismissal of *theory* as such. Unlike most British accounts of postwar fiction, this one is at pains throughout to theorize its critical position, to identify this position as theoretically defensible, and to describe the critical shift it propagates not as a shift away from theory as such, articulating the return to reality and meaning in sophisticated theoretical terms.

It is largely the result of this innovative strategy that Tew's critical project is fraught with several difficulties – although they are all difficulties the author is very much aware of. The first such difficulty is the direct offshoot of the polemical tone and concerns the identification and definition of what he sees as adversarial critical views.

To be able to define his position more clearly, Tew at times mystifies and demonizes the “adversary”, or rather adversaries. Postmodern or poststructuralist critics are very rarely identified or quoted at length: they remain in the anonymous vagueness of the plural, always as a vaguely threatening crowd, a multitude of critics all smugly installed in the prisonhouse of language, receiving with a collective condescending sneer any attempt to reconnect texts to experiential, social or political reality. “Assertive tone” and “plangent certainty” (181), however, are surely not the prerogative of postmodern or poststructuralist critics, and postmodernism or poststructuralism do not strike me as particularly “monolithic intellectual structures” (7). All this, of course, is mainly a question of rhetoric, and given the polemical nature of the book, Tew was probably right to exaggerate a little in order to clarify his own position.

Apart from the perhaps inevitable distortions in the presentation of the adversary, there is a further problem which occasionally weakens the force of Tew's argument. Deconstructive or poststructuralist criticism does not strike me as having dominated the critical evaluation of postwar or contemporary fiction; on the contrary, apart from Alison Lee's not entirely successful effort (*Realism and Power*), most surveys represent an untheoretical, blandly historical perspective, often implicitly or explicitly hostile

to the unhistorical, counterintuitive, clever vagaries of continental theory (e.g. Randall Stevenson, D. J. Taylor, Andrzej Gasiorek, Neil McEwan, even Malcolm Bradbury or Dominic Head), or a radically politicised version of post-structuralist thought (Steven Connor or, most prominently, Alan Sinfield's 1989 *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, which, I believe could have been one of this book's allies, even though it is absent even from the bibliography). Thus, Tew's account of the "critical consensus" which he challenges is bound to be brief and vague (36). One reason for this is that, until very recently, serious critical interest in Britain in contemporary British fiction was largely non-existent; Philip Tew's role in altering this situation can hardly be exaggerated.

Partly in consequence of the vague definition of postmodernism, Tew's book is characterised by an ambiguous attitude towards postmodern fiction. He seems to dismiss the first, sixties-seventies canon partly as a version of late modernism and partly as a kind of literature entangled in the pointless and ultimately facile textualizing of reality, but he is careful not to jettison postmodernism as such: many of his preferred writers (Martin Amis, Jeanette Winter-son, Salman Rushdie) are also key figures in the second postmodern canon largely defined and codified in the wake of Linda Hutcheon's surveys. In fact,

Tew presents his preferred group of writers as in many ways not refuting but radicalizing the insights of postmodernism, exemplifying, for instance, "not only the instability of the self, but of the self's very dependence upon the framing of others that makes the self always-already vulnerable" (29). In establishing the place of the post-seventies writers, Tew makes no attempt to suggest a revision of the postwar canon. He does not read the canonical writers against the grain, as sites for potential subversion, nor does he try to recuperate forgotten voices from the fifties or the sixties (although novelists as diverse as Henry Green, Colin McInnes, David Storey, Christine Brooke-Rose, David Caute, Alan Burns, John Berger or Robert Nye might have been relevant in a genealogy for the kind of fiction he champions). In Chapter Two, there is a diverse and suggestive "genealogy" of the kind of fiction he prefers, including Woolf, Mansfield, Evelyn Waugh, Wilson Harris, B. S. Johnson and Muriel Spark (55), but what is most evident from this book is that the revaluation of J. G. Ballard's work is in full swing (the admiration for him of writers like Martin Amis and Will Self is well known), and Ballard's fiction continues to emerge with increasing clarity as one that has engaged with postwar reality with the most consistency and artistic originality.

The other edge of Tew's critique is directed against the British literary estab-

ishment, which he sees as continually pervaded by middle-class predilections and limitations. In order to present his preferred group of writers as radical, he clearly needs to read the pre-1979 novel monolithically, all its apparently subversive stylistic or thematic initiatives (including the 1960s counterculture) successfully recontained by middle-class liberal culture. Middle-class literary culture is guilty of what Tew calls “the sin of inclusion” and “the sin of exclusion” (61). The latter is clearly the suppression of different kinds of social, political, and generally human experience from the genteel world of British fiction and realism, but it is the former that brings us closer to understanding the direction of Tew’s powerful critique: because middle-class liberal writers see their own class as the quintessence of social experience, the crisis of middle-class values and certainties is automatically experienced by them as the breakdown of all certainties (70); thus, for instance, liberal doubts concerning identity and subjectivity are extrapolated as the crisis of subjectivity in general, without acknowledging the class-based limitations of the basis of extrapolation (or the preconditions of such extrapolations: the political and cultural privileges and hegemony of the middle classes). Thus, as his reading of Esther Freud’s excellent *Hideous Kinky* testifies, middle-class radicalism is seen by Tew as necessarily undermined and

discredited by its blindness to its own political stakes (47), claiming to be “above politics” when, jealously guarding its cultural and political hegemony, it simply fails to acknowledge its own political situatedness, desperately clinging to a degraded and tarnished Arnoldian and Leavisite elitism (47).

This is a coherent and solid argument in general terms, but when individual writers are mentioned, it invariably loses some of its force, simply because, in order to see Angus Wilson, William Golding, Iris Murdoch or Margaret Drabble as purveyors for the middle-class liberal conspiracy, Tew is forced to simplify. His criticism of Drabble’s fiction is perceptive and relevant, but William Golding’s name looks rather awkward on Tew’s list of writers entangled in middle-class pettiness. The treatment of Angus Wilson raises further problems. To criticize *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* for its uncritical and unreflected acceptance of Arnoldian elitism, for its limited social range and for the caricaturistic treatment of the working-class family (50–1) is perfectly justified, but to use this 1956 novel as representative of Wilson’s entire oeuvre and dismiss him on the strength of this is not fair. Breaking new ground both aesthetically and socially in his later novels like *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot*, *No Laughing Matter*, and *As If by Magic*, Wilson was involved in an ongoing a critique of the liberal humanist conception of subjectivity, of

middle-class liberal pieties as well as of “Englishness” in general. In fact, Wilson – like so many British middle-class novelists who were trying to come to terms with the limitations of their vision, including Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Taylor, Iris Murdoch and Barbara Pym – was worried about and repeatedly dramatized in his fiction the consequences of what Tew calls the sin of inclusion. Also, Wilson – like Murdoch, Golding and Spark, for instance – was trying to extend the experiential world of middle-class fiction, realizing that the critique and breakdown of the liberal concept of human subjectivity had its historical and metaphysical background in twentieth-century European history – which could be said to justify the extrapolation of the crisis of the liberal notion of the self as a metaphysical problem.

Ultimately, for a non-English reader, who is perhaps more prone to “class-blindness” in his or her appreciation of British fiction, it is puzzling to see some extremely different writers brought together and summarily dismissed as inauthentic under the sole rubric of “middle-class fiction” (51). The class obsession here seems to override and overwrite all other distinctions, many of them much more conspicuous for the reader who has no stakes in the resuming class war. Also, to dismiss fine writers *tout court* for their unfair treatment of the working classes – or, in many

cases, for their failure to include working-class characters in their work – seems like a waste. Iris Murdoch’s view of the human personality may well have been limited by “a series of middle-class co-ordinates” (52), and she may have been “unable to transcend the snobbery of her own position in the social hierarchy” (53), but this is to dismiss the entire philosophical and ethical underpinning of her fiction on a class basis, and to reduce the reading of her imaginatively and intellectually rich and demanding world of the novels to her undeniable class limitations. For a Polish, a Bulgarian or a Russian reader (I mention countries where Murdoch has considerable following) the dismissal of a philosophical novelist on the basis of the paucity or treatment of working-class characters might seem to be a legitimate strategy, but they will probably have their own equally legitimate queries concerning its relevance. To see a writer entirely in terms of his/her class provenance is dangerously close to the kind of critical parochialism that is otherwise so alien to Philip Tew’s critical stance and that has in the past decades efficiently put so many foreign readers off large chunks of British fiction, including, for instance, the metaphysical writer Anthony Powell.

The ambiguity of Tew’s relationship towards postmodernism is duplicated by his equally ambiguous attitude towards some aspects of the middle-class sensi-

bility he criticizes. This is obvious from his many, mainly positive scattered remarks about Woolf, who remains a surprisingly active presence and a constant point of reference in his version of twentieth-century fiction, but especially – and more problematically – from his flat dismissal of popular fiction (for instance, his remark on Welsh’s “populism” [113], his dismissal of chick-lit and lad-lit [100], or his decision not to discuss kinds of working-class fiction like the “football fiction” of John King, Kevin Sampson and others). Interestingly, for all his objections to the genteel tradition, Tew remains at least in one sense committed to the elitism he elsewhere criticizes: he believes in the primacy and superiority of high art, “literary fiction.” No *Bridget Jones*, no *High Fidelity*, no *Chocolat*, no Ben Elton here.

The vagueness in the definition of his “adversaries,” however, remains a minor blemish, clearly resulting from his polemical tone, and the only reason one wishes we had less of criticizing Murdoch and Wilson is that in that case Tew would have more space to talk about his preferred group of post-seventies writers, for he is at his best – which is very good indeed – when he is talking about the writers and novels he likes. Tew anticipates the inevitable question of “who’s in and who’s out” by explicitly stating that his selection of writers is admittedly partisan and reflects his critical agenda and set of predilections

instead of going for completeness. Not surprisingly, and very justifiably, the sharp caesura he detects in the late seventies coincides with Mrs. Thatcher’s election victory; this shift, he insists, is not simply a generational change, but a “change in the novel’s focus and cultural emphasis” (32). Rejecting the “critical crisis, the death of the author syndrome of the mid-1970s” (18), the new novelists accept the novel as politics, and display a “ludic and yet an extrinsic sense of multiple, intersubjective realities” (55), relating insistently to the intersections of fiction with a broader culture and upon its own cultural influence (30).

The figureheads of the new sensibility are, among others, Jonathan Coe, Will Self, Martin Amis, A. L. Kennedy, James Kelman, Jeanette Winterson, Jenny Diski, Angela Carter, Esther Freud, Jim Crace, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi. What Tew has to say about these and other authors is invariably interesting – that is why one wishes that we had more authors, more novels, especially as several of the authors who seem to be crucial in Tew’s new canon are treated only cursorily or not at all – as, for instance, Angela Carter, Esther Freud, or A. L. Kennedy. In recompense, Tew discusses the work of many lesser known writers like Lucy Ellman, Michael Bracewell, Rosalind Brackenbury, Toby Litt and Tim Lott (and his recuperation of the excellent Jack Trevor Story is a gesture by which

at least this particular reviewer is mightily pleased). One would have liked to read more about Scottish writing: Janice Galloway and Iain Banks are two absences (let alone other Scottish writers like Alan Warner, Ali Smith, Duncan Maclean or Ian Rankin), but Alasdair Gray's fiction is also left largely undiscussed, and one feels that Kelman would have deserved a more detailed treatment, especially as what Tew has to say about him is spot on.

Another potential problem besetting Tew's text is caused by his double allegiance: while he makes it clear that for him the ultimate stake of reading and analyzing contemporary fiction is the living of our lives (24), and that he considers the novel as a genre that still offers a symbolic, narrative, and ideological vocabulary by which many people either understand or engage in cultural shifts (7), he is careful not to join the slugging of theory so fashionable in Britain. In short, the problem is that he has to find sophisticated theoretical terms to describe what might easily seem like yet another "return to realism" in the pendulum-like history of postwar British fiction. To avoid this, Tew finds himself compelled to "theorize" the return to realism, to see it as something theoretically innovative: the shift beyond the "irrealist textualized universe" (71) of poststructuralism and the excesses of postmodern theory (xiv) cannot simply be seen as a return to an earlier para-

digm. Tew is at pains to distance himself from a simplistic sociological reading or a naïve belief in referentiality, and is careful not to dismiss "theory" as such. This causes certain tensions in his text, for, at least in the first half of his book, the driving force of his argument is unabashedly social and political, and despite his emphasis on aesthetic matters and the considerable density of the language, thematic treatment prevails in the opening chapters.

This, however, is not intended as a criticism against Tew's book. On the contrary, I would suggest that it is precisely these half-acknowledged tensions that make this book theoretically much more demanding and exciting than apparently similar surveys of contemporary fiction. In general terms one could say that, instead of the restitution of referentiality, Tew insists on the multitude of connections between the living of our lives and the reading of fiction. Therefore, throughout these opening chapters, he endeavours theoretically to complicate the shift towards the real. This is, for instance, what happens in the chapter on "Urban identities", where Tew is careful to point out that the new fictional mappings of the city are far from a return to straightforward pedestrian realism, invoking Henri Lefebvre and phenomenological thought in order to account for the imaginary, visionary aspect of the new fictional mappings of urban identities. For instance, three key

urban writers identified by him (Amis, Self and McEwan) are, as he suggests, all more concerned with reworking the patterns of myth and parable than with a sociological or realist pattern (98), and, in the work of Will Self, “the placement of the geographic or spatial provides a psychic-phenomenological grounding and not an expression of a realist paradigm (or ambition) (105). Especially in his readings of Self, Coe, Kureishi and Kelman, Tew argues convincingly for a new type of fictional exploration of urban identities, which makes one interested to see what he might have to say in the theoretical-critical context carefully established in the chapter about such crucial contemporary fictions of urban cartography as *Lanark*, *Other People*, *Arcadia*, *Sour Sweet* or *Mother London* (as well as some of the writers, like Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair, whom Tew discusses in subsequent chapters, and some others, like Iain Banks and Maggie Gee, whom he does not). But this would supply material for a separate book.

The remark quoted above concerning the interplay between the social-geographical and the mythical-parabolic highlights the third kind of “creative tension” in the book: that which follows from the difficulties of connecting the two tendencies Tew discovers in recent fiction: the return to realism (or at least to the real, the experiential), and a parallel return to myth (a tentative suggestion concerning the common denomina-

tor could be that both tendencies could be read as moving toward a restitution of univocal meaning). Although the Neo-Kantian philosopher Cassirer is a constant point of reference, it is in the chapter devoted to history and myth – to my mind the finest section of the book – that Cassirer’s (post-)Romantic concept of myth becomes dominant. Offering a clearly argued and well-documented critique of the tired clichés connected with “historiographic metafiction”, Tew argues that we are witnessing “a new phase of mythopoeia rather than a new form of historicism” (120). Although he is not the first to suggest that the post-modern implies a return to the premodern, to a counter-rationalist, intuitive mode of relating to the world that thinks “beyond irony”, in terms of the symbolic and the numinous, his examples are carefully chosen, and it is in this chapter that his short analyses of the fictional texts seem most powerful: the opening passages on Adam Thorpe’s excellent novel *Ulverton* are original and illuminating, as well as his remarks on Winterson’s *Passion*, Lawrence Norfolk’s *In the Shape of a Boar* and Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*. To me, however, the high point of the book is Tew’s discussion of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, a text that has by now been made the object of dozens of predictable and tedious readings through its inclusion and key role in the canon of “historiographic metafiction.” Starting out from Sarah’s intuitive

grasp of the world and other characters, Tew attempts to salvage the novel from the pieties of the ludic-metatextual kind of reading, treating it as an early example of the “new mythopoeia” (123–4). The point is not whether Tew’s reading is objectionable or not; the point is that it is a coherent and thoughtful reading which could have been performed *only* in this particular context. Such moments are precisely what “partisan” literary history is for: by placing well-known texts in new contexts, it is capable of showing up how certain readings have become “deadening” and unproductive, and of exploring these “dead” texts for new critical potential. With Tew’s analysis in mind, it is indeed possible to see Fowles’s novel as an important precursor of the mythopoeic turn. While other readings are naturally not invalidated, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* has changed as a result of Tew’s analysis. After reading Tew’s mini-analyses of Iain Sinclair, Graham Swift and especially Jim Crace, one is inclined to give serious consideration to his suggestion that recent “fiction retrieves in history and in metaphor the residue of another symbolic mode, a mythic consciousness, that works toward what might be described as ‘historiographic mythopoeia’” (127).

In the final chapter on hybridity, the creative tension or contradiction between a realist pull and a mythopoeic pull is in full swing, the treatments of

individual texts moving now towards a new engagement with the experiential world, while at other times towards a mythical-parabolic textuality. In Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (on which he is very good), Tew acknowledges the role of vast allegorical and mythical structures, but stresses the “elements of life world” (162) that situate the abstractions of good and evil which “without this backdrop would be devoid of human meaning” (162). Tew is also interesting on the temporal layering of Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (167), and in this particular case the introduction of the category of class is indeed illuminating. In general terms, Tew’s discussion of multiplicity and hybridity gradually leads him back to the importance of class (discussing, for instance, the way class tensions undermine the illusory cohesion of imperial unity in texts like *Regeneration* and McEwan’s *Atonement*), and towards concluding that new writers “edge British narrative away from the centre of traditional literary concerns and create a centrifugal space reaching outwards both in geographic and class terms” (163). In a sense, the final chapter is surprising since, instead of the expected staple postcolonial authors like Rushdie, Ishiguro, Mo, Okri or Gurnah, Tew extends the relevance of hybridity and the “postcolonial metaphor”: “What was once perceived as the basis of chiefly a postcolonial consciousness has become a more general one

both in ethnic and other 'communities' or modes of identification of the self" (170). Also, perhaps more predictably, but with good results, Tew extends the meaning of hybridity to discuss "generic, formal and thematic hybridity" (169) in texts like Winterson's *Passion* (176–7).

Although I have mentioned the blending of literary historical and theoretical arguments in *The Contemporary British Novel*, the final stake of Tew's book is pedagogical: one of the most attractive features of his book is the almost personal appeal to his student readers in the "Epilogue," in which his polemical tone and theoretical agenda is seen for what it is: the outcome of "lived experience," years and decades of attempts to discuss contemporary fiction in classrooms in Britain and, incidentally, in Hungary. The critical turn urged by Tew is revealed as a methodological and pedagogical necessity, the inevitable corollary of an attempt to regain the interest of students, to make them see the relevance of fiction to their lives, to "return to the sphere where all fiction is bound to have its ultimate relevance" (181). What he identifies is a very real difficulty of teaching counterintuitive, hypercritical theoretical and critical strategies in the contemporary classroom. He insists already in the opening chapter – and in light of recent changes in the student population it would be difficult to argue with him – that "a return to material referents may be re-

quired if students of literature wish to extend their critique beyond textuality" (24). Well, if this return is achieved with the theoretical sophistication of a Philip Tew, it is certainly a welcome phenomenon that ought to be celebrated. Tew's book, which will probably become a key text in the definition of the canon of post-seventies fiction, might also turn out to be important as initiating a new kind of "pedagogical" discourse: not one that pretends to students that theory is easy but a more honest discourse which, through insisting on the relevance of literature to the lived lives of students, propagates a new critical engagement with texts, theories and lives.

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