Dazzling Complexes

Jennifer Rutherford

Eden Liddelow

AFTER ELECTRA: RAGE, GRIEF AND HOPE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

Australian Scholarly Publishing, $49.95 pb, 211pp, 1 74097 005 5

The relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism has always been marked by uneasiness on both sides. For psychoanalysts, the fear is that psychoanalytic concepts will lose their clinical specificity. Unlike analyses, texts do not speak back, and, in the absence of this lynchpin of the ‘talking-cure’, the critic as analyst is in the position that Lacan taught analysts to avoid — that of the ‘subject supposed to know’. The interpretative ‘free for all’ that characterised much early psychoanalytic literary criticism has given psychoanalysis as bad a name amongst literary critics as literary criticism has amongst psychoanalysts. But the conversation between the two fields — instigated by Freud’s numerous excursions into literary analysis — continues more carefully in the writing produced out of the hybrid training of analyst–literary critics such as Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Wright.

Eden Liddelow’s After Electra: Rage, Grief and Hope in Twentieth-Century Fiction continues this conversation, drawing on Klein, Kristeva, Deleuze and Guattari to frame the work of twentieth-century women writers in the psycho-pathology of their time. The book’s argument rests on mapping the Kleinian traumatic scenario — ‘[the child’s] violent feelings of anxiety, splitting and rage towards the mother on withdrawal of the breast, and later the grief that goes with fear of being left abandoned and alone if that rage is expressed’ — onto twentieth-century social and textual relations. In essays on nine writers (Marguerite Duras, Eva Figes, Janet Frame, Helen Garner, Nadine Gordimer, Elizabeth Jolley, Jean Rhys, Susan Sontag and Ania Walwicz), Liddelow explores how each one offers a path beyond the same pathology it describes. Elliptical sentences and repetitions — among other changing patterns — signs of lack and surfeit, doorways to fantasy.

An argument as encompassing as this one requires sustained analysis, but Liddelow’s text is as breathless and condensed as a dream. In lieu of analysis, one enters a dense web of commentary without pause. Liddelow writes beautifully and thinks brilliantly — at times — but crowds the reader with a rush of thought that is rarely given due moment of exposition. Perhaps the problem lies in this being a collection of previously published essays held together with an introduction and conclusion that both say too much and too little. The assertion, for example, that ‘the twentieth century gave all its attention to addiction and dream’ is barely entered into at the level of argument, and yet it’s a statement that is left to do much work in sustaining the text’s thesis. Similarly, the opposition Liddelow draws between melancholy and the saturnine lacks exposition, and yet the crux of her argument rests on seeing these writers as offering a way forward, ‘beyond Electra’, from melancholia to the saturnine. As stand-alone pieces, the nine essays are often brilliant, occasionally even dazzling, but together they invite questions that remain unanswerable. The vexed relationship, for example, between individual psychopathology and creative production is hardly broached, and yet all the essays rely on a conceptual merging of drive and creative output. Are they the same thing? Nor am I convinced that the lives of writers, their individual psychopathology, and the psychopathology of their society and their work are simply to be located in a continuum. These are interrelations that have to be taken carefully, recognising both their interconnectedness and their separation.

Too much and too little — these are Liddelow’s themes, and she lodges them so affectively in the reader that she provokes the question of whether literary criticism can suffer the same pathology it describes. Elliptical sentences and embedded asides break up the ideational thread of her text. Ideas jump, gathering disparate images together in a manner that truncates the argument and disarms the reader. And yet, Liddelow is best at those moments when she describes with utmost linguistic precision the ellipses, repetitions and grammatical disintegrations that articulate the disconnections and hyperconnections of twentieth-century writing. Despite problems, Liddelow still manages to impress with her intellectual audacity, sheer erudition and the courage with which she tackles a complicated and uncomfortable terrain.