

Dazzling Complexes

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Eden Liddelw

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

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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 analysts, 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 Liddelw'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 psychopathology 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), Liddelw explores how each one offers a path beyond the identification and assimilation of child to mother — self to other — which, in her analysis, dominates intersubjective relations in the twentieth century.

Modernity produces subjects that suffer both a surfeit and an absence of the other. The excessive intimacy of the nuclear family is matched by the alienation of the modern workplace; the daily representation of global suffering in the media by the disintegration of community structures capable of mediating suffering 'at home'. Too much of one; not enough of the other. The loss of belonging, homeland, nation, family and community that has defined modernity has its counterpart, Liddelw suggests, in an 'epidemic of emotional illness in the west'. In lieu of belonging, the twentieth century gives us advertising, with its invitation to identification and

assimilation. Advertising, the 'pure ethos' of the twentieth century, clouds the opposition between together and apart. Identification prevails while fears of emptiness and insecurity gather in the shadows. Most interestingly, Liddelw connects this psychopathology of the twentieth century with the collapse of grammatical structures in twentieth-century literature:

The very identity of the twentieth-century sentence collapses early, in advertising as much as literature, into ellipses 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 Liddelw's text is as breathless and condensed as a dream. In lieu of analysis, one enters a dense web of commentary without pause. Liddelw writes beautifully and thinks brilliantly — at times — but crowds the reader with a rush of thought that is rarely given its 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 Liddelw 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 unanswered. 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 Liddelw'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, Liddelw 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, Liddelw still manages to impress with her intellectual audacity, sheer erudition and the courage with which she tackles a complicated and uncomfortable terrain.