
The Blackwell Manifesto series started with a bang, with Terry Eagleton’s dazzling *The Idea of Culture*. Authors who have published in the series include Marjorie Perloff, Wayne Booth and Dominic Head, and distinguished British Shakespearean Catherine Belsey has provided the thirty-first title in the series with *A Future for Criticism*.

Concise, cogent and witty, *A Future for Criticism* argues for a broadening of critical practice to encompass an analysis and appreciation of the pleasures of fiction, (which is broadly defined to include poetry and plays as well as prose narratives). Seven chapters step us through the argument, and Belsey’s polemical intention is clearly signaled on the Contents page: ‘Pleasure: Have we neglected it?’; ‘Piety: Haven’t we overdone it?’; ‘Biography: Friend or foe?’; ‘Realism: Do we overrate it?’; ‘Culture: What do we mean by it?’; ‘History: Do we do it justice?’; and ‘Desire: A force to reckon with.’ Within each chapter are sub-sections, making this an easy book to navigate – though I would recommend at least a preliminary reading beginning to end to appreciate the full force of the argument.

One of the most impressive features of this book is its easy, comprehensive and critical grasp of the history of literary and cultural theory. The demigods of late twentieth century literary orthodoxy are engaged with, without either being dismissed out of hand or deferred to. Finding that English-language critics have neglected the question of ‘what draws us to fictionality in the first place’ (11), she looks across the channel:

The French, who are conventionally less inhibited than Anglo-Saxons, have tackled the question of pleasure directly, and most notably in Roland Barthes’ book *The Pleasure of the Text*. At first glance, this looks more like it. (12)

Belsey, however, finds this somewhat disappointing, as

In the difference between *plaisir* and *jouissance* Barthes rewrites the distinction between the positive delight of the beautiful, which contents and fills, and the experience of the sublime, which begins in negativity, unsettles, and leads to crisis. … The vocabulary of his distinction makes it very clear which mode carries greater weight. … Barthes comes close, however inadvertently, to reinstating the strong, noble values he set out to challenge in the name of pleasure itself. (13)

I will not rehearse the whole burden of Belsey’s argument here. Suffice to say that it is full of pleasures itself: a humorous undercurrent running through its insights and exhortations.

We should never forget that interpretation – and the cultivation of better interpretation – is our speciality. It is also the first way to understand cultures, our own and others. … The work of the critic in interpreting … meanings, gauging their effects, and relaxing their hold contributes to the sanity and self-
knowledge of society. (89-90)

The nature of polemic is to provoke a response. However, I found myself agreeing with Belsey at almost every turn. Her overriding mantra is to start with the text and read outwards, using history and theory to illuminate:

To historicize is not in the first instance to read the text according to determinations outside it … This renders fiction itself lifeless, a mere reflector of imperatives that precede its composition. Fiction reflects nothing. (105)

She points out that yesterday’s ‘lonely outlaws’, postcolonial and gender critics, are today ‘in perfect compliance with the law,’ ‘thoroughly conformist’ (27). Not that history and gender should be ignored, but ‘we shall need to read closely and astutely, with due attention to the places where meanings reside, conflict, and clash. … But that shouldn’t give us any trouble; it’s what we’re good at’ (106).

I looked hard, like a good critic, and found two or three small points to take issue with. Firstly, when discussing the meaning of ‘culture’, it seems a little odd that Belsey does not mention Terry Eagleton’s book The Idea of Culture, the first in this series, in which he canvasses the ambiguities of the term at length. Secondly, in her chapter on Realism, she discusses prehistoric art in Europe, Africa and Asia and wonders whether the narratives which related to representational art of pre-literature cultures were similarly realistic: ‘The visual survives, while the oral does not’, she writes (56). However, there are places in the world where the oral culture does survive along with the ancient pictures, including parts of Australia, where Aboriginal stories are still very much a part of living cultures and knowledge of the meaning of the traditional art is still passed down the generations.

And lastly, in deprecating the genre of critical biography, she points out that Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author’ does not condemn the writer him or herself, but ‘any critical institution that persisted in closing down interpretation by invoking an Author as guarantor of the true reading’ (40). But I think perhaps she undermines her own argument when she uses Philip Roth’s Exit Ghost to support it: Roth’s hero Nathan ‘is appalled by the biographical project’ to be perpetrated on his ‘literary progenitor,’ E.I. Lonoff. ‘Roth’s novel does nothing to challenge its hero’s view,’ she writes (42). This seems an unexceptionable statement, but in this context is it not an example of conflating author and character in exactly the way which she is engaged in decrying?

A Future for Criticism issues a challenge to critics that really amounts to having the courage of our convictions and sticking to what we’re good at, resisting the encroachments of history and psychology, and having ‘confidence in the independent capabilities of criticism’ (76). ‘A criticism that does justice to the textuality of fiction pays explicit attention to the work’s questing mode of address. And its practice will be pleasurable’ (127). So the book begins and ends with pleasure: the pleasure of reading and the pleasure of criticism are Belsey’s subjects but, like fiction that represents desire in both its form and its content, Belsey’s book is a positive pleasure to read.

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