Book Reviews

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Abstract
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Leaving the Highway owes its remarkable qualities as a piece of criticism to the twofold focus of interest that is sustained throughout the text. By way of presenting a state-of-the-art account of fiction-writing in New Zealand in the late 1980s, Mark Williams consistently pursues the argument into the spheres of a probing reflection on both the limits and the enabling possibilities of what he tries to define as a specific tradition in the literature written in his own country. Thus, although the book ostensibly concentrates on the latest fiction produced by major figures like Janet Frame, C.K. Stead, Keri Hulme, Witi Ihimaera, Ian Wedde and Maurice Gee, the author’s steadfast concern with the depths of tradition, and with the pull it exerts even on such achieved novelists as these, gives the work an impressive scope in terms of both historical investigation and aesthetic speculation.

In particular, one is struck by Williams’s inclusive and dynamic conception of tradition. He does not hesitate for example to look back to Sargeson from the vantage-point afforded by post-modern rupturings of the real, as they occur in Frame or the later Stead; these enable him to foreground the subversive in Sargeson, hitherto eclipsed in large part as an effect of perspective, and to point to continuity where other critics have hailed a break from the ‘masculine realist’ line in New Zealand fiction. Undoubtedly, Leaving the Highway will leave its mark on the critical imagination in New Zealand for this convincing attempt to found a national literary tradition upon the social-critical vein of fiction established by Sargeson and continued in the work of Frame, Stead or Gee. Most of the fiction tackled in the book is considered in terms of its relative departure from realism and cultural criticism as the dominant modes of writing in New Zealand. Even the work of Hulme and Ihimaera, grounded as it is in their feeling for the culture of the Maori, is approached largely for what it offers in the way of criticism of Pakeha society.

Williams’s flexible sense of tradition also accounts for the moderateness of his politics. It is certainly remarkable, considering his nagging preoccupation with the national forms of literature in New Zealand, that he manages to eschew the rhetorics of rejection often associated with radical nationalism. Taking his cue from Wole Soyinka, Williams makes his position explicit from the start, by asserting that any source of knowledge is relevant to the making of fiction in the post-colonial vortex of inheritance. The upshot can be found in the analyses themselves, where Williams points to foreign influences with the ease of erudition. Another consequence is that Leaving the Highway emerges as a meeting ground for the two constituents of New Zealand’s sense of cleft identity. The book accommodates an awareness of the lasting influence of the European literary ‘high tradition’ (as Stead would have it) on the forms and themes of New Zealand fiction; but it also allows for the validity of Maori claims to centrality in the task of defining identity through literature (as expressed by Hulme and Ihimaera). By and large, the unfailing clarity of exposition evinced by Williams when dealing with the cultural background to fiction-writing, involved and tension-ridden as it is bound to be in the context of the sesquicentennial celebrations, definitely contributes to make the book the success that it is.
Yet it could be argued that Williams's dedication to continuity and reconciliation results in a further, paradoxical decoupage in the stuff of tradition. This is noticeable in the chapter on Frame where the material seems to have been selected to fit the theme of cultural identity. Such choosy criticism derives from the methodological decision to view fiction and culture as mirror images of each other, and may not be objectionable in itself. But some problems arise when Williams engages with those writers whose political and aesthetic assumptions he does not share. One gets a sense that his impatience with Hulme and Ihimaera's respective brands of radicalism was instrumental in his too swift dismissal of their work as structurally incoherent. If anything, this impression is reinforced by the contrasting ease with which the critic empathizes with the work of Wedde, whose voice is allowed a greater presence in the text (by way of quotations), perhaps because it affirms a vision of cross-culturalism similar to his own. The chapter on Wedde is brilliant throughout. Therefore, however much one may fear that fiction by Maori writers is being misrepresented here, such reticence must efface itself and make way for the recognition that this is a book strongly shaped by the author's original understanding of tradition and culture in a post-colonial context. Nobody will want to frown upon the illuminating insights it offers, whether these are received as the harvest of high-standard criticism, or as the stimulus of vivid polemics.

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