

REVIEWS

James Wood, *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays*
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CAUTION, METAPHORS AT WORK

Serious noticing is fundamental to the work of significant writers; it is how they 'save life from itself', James Wood maintains, in the essay that gives his new collection its title and foremost emphasis. But the phrase has a dual reference, also denoting what Wood would say he does himself in much, perhaps most of his own writing: reviews, not of the ephemeral kind aptly called 'notices' but relatively long, considered critical pieces better designated 'essays'. His subtitle makes the claim without hesitation, and it is not irrelevant that it echoes one of the most distinguished examples of the genre, T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, from 1932. It is easy to make too much of this sign of affiliation, but equally to overlook it, in a writer for whom titles have always been important. Wood joined the *Guardian* in 1992—aged twenty-seven—in the role of lead literary reviewer with the grand public designation of Chief Literary Critic. A quarter-century later, after a spell as Senior Editor at the *New Republic*, during the reign of Leon Wieseltier, he divides his working time between the *New Yorker* and Harvard, where his academic style is Professor of the Practice of Literary Criticism. These assorted authority-claims are matched in the design of *Serious Noticing*, which is more than just his fifth collection of reviews and other occasional texts. In one light it is actually less than that: twenty-two of its twenty-nine pieces, more than two-thirds, have already been reprinted in earlier volumes. But in another light, this is not the short measure it might seem. Spanning the twenty years from his leaving the *Guardian* in 1995, with very few blank years on the calendar,

the book is in effect a super-selection: *The Best of . . .* perhaps, or *Wood on Wood*, complete with an introductory account of his formation and general understanding of the practice of criticism. The inclusion of two confessional texts, one meditating on the condition Wood calls 'homelooseness', the other on his 'becoming' his parents, relays a notable feature of the essays, amplifying the signs of critical personality as well as—or simply *as?*—a position.

In the practice itself, as evidenced here, what is immediately striking is its spread. The earliest work discussed comes from the early seventeenth century, the most recent from 2015 (Cervantes and Erpenbeck respectively). English-language originals, most of them from the US, make up the greater part of the reading, but there are also translations from seven other European languages (and eight countries: Albania, Austria, former Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Russia, Spain). The works discussed at length are joined by at least as many more, familiar or not, receiving anything from a passing mention to several paragraphs of commentary. The emphasis of Wood's critical treatment is variable too, ranging from stylistic analysis, as in a sustained argument concerning Melville's 'atheistic' (or 'polytheistic') pursuit of metaphor or Austen's innovation in the representation of inwardness, to the polemical genre study on 'hysterical realism', from 'reviews' in more common acceptations of the term to autonomous texts. Heading all this, in an unexpected token of his personal history and interests in music (he was a boy chorister, learned piano and trumpet at school, and taught himself rock drumming), is a homage to The Who's legendary drummer, Keith Moon.

The constant throughout these essays is Wood's insistence on judgement, the evaluations he regards as the defining work of the critic. He has a notable capacity for articulate enthusiasm and a withering tongue to balance it. Here he is in full affirmative flow, celebrating the comedy of a favourite novelist:

Saul Bellow is probably the greatest writer of American prose of the twentieth century—where greatest means most abundant, various, precise, rich, lyrical . . . The august raciness, the Melvillean enormities and cascades . . . the Joycean wit, the lancing similes with their sharp American nibs . . . the happy rolling freedom of the daring uninsured sentences, the prose absolutely ripe with inheritance, bursting with the memories of Shakespeare and Lawrence, yet prepared for modern emergencies, the Argus eye for detail, and controlling all this, the firm metaphysical intelligence—all this is now thought of as Bellow's, as 'Bellovian'.

And here he is, in 2009, on the 'cinema-speak' of 'America's best-known post-modern novelist': 'While Auster clearly shares some of [postmodernism's] interest in mediation and borrowedness—hence, his cinematic plots and rather bogus dialogue—he does nothing with cliché except use it.'

The ebullience of judgement is overwhelming in that eulogy to Bellow, no less so the high-trooping prose, and even Auster's literary death sentence is given a witty turn: Wood is an ostentatiously writerly critic, one who cultivates metaphor not as mere embellishment but as his essential procedure (he is a novelist as well as a critic). Elsewhere, in a book entitled with some finality *How Fiction Works*, he has set down his understanding of this commitment by way of a contrast with his 'two favourite twentieth-century critics of the novel'. Viktor Shklovsky and Roland Barthes were 'great', he maintains, 'because, being formalists, they thought like writers: they attended to style, to words, to form, to metaphor and imagery.' However, both 'thought like writers alienated from creative instinct, and were drawn, like larcenous bankers, to raid again and again the very source that sustained them—literary style.' Wood's reasoning at this juncture turns opaque—as it often does in such generalizing passages—but his point of arrival is unambiguous. Concerned with basic theoretical questions but without forgetting general audiences—Woolf's 'common reader'—he 'asks a critic's questions and offers a writer's answers'.

Wood's ideal critic is 'a triple thinker' (a phrase borrowed from Edmund Wilson, who took it from Flaubert): a writer, talking about fiction 'as writers speak about their craft'; a journalist, writing 'with verve and appeal, for a common reader'; a 'scholar' open to two-way traffic in and out of the academy—and the most important of these identities, not fully captured in Wood's light reference to 'craft', is the first. For his culminating claim is that any critical practice is an attempt to encourage in the reader an experience of the object corresponding to the critic's prior experience of it, a 'sameness' of disposition in relation to the work in question. Thus, criticism is in its inmost constitution a practice of metaphor, and in the unique case of literary criticism, which shares the medium of its object, is itself always already writing. 'So we perform', Wood concludes.

And we perform in proximity, exulting in the fact that, dolphin-like, we are swimming in the element that nourishes us . . . We write as if we expect to be read; we write like the roses Eliot describes in 'Burnt Norton'—roses 'that had the look of flowers that are looked at'.

While the aestheticist suggestions of this passage are not altogether misleading, they scant Wood's interest in historical formations of sensibility. His 'Wounder and Wounded', on V. S. Naipaul, is a study in postcolonial ambivalence, the novelist's restless union of 'a conservative vision' with 'radical eyesight'. Returning to *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* to consider its idiosyncratic leftism, he places his central emphasis on Orwell's England, 'a place both real and fictional, with its own narrative conventions'. And in a fortuitous parallel essay, he explores Joseph Roth's

fascination with an Austro-Hungarian Empire both overweening and unreal, ‘magnificent and absurd’, and anyway now gone. Still, as he says about the author of *The Radetzky March*, ‘you begin—and end—with the prose’, and that priority is characteristic, though here again there is a qualification to notice, for with the priority comes a caution: everything has a way of turning into everything else. ‘When I talk about free indirect style’, he advises his readers in *How Fiction Works*,

I am really talking about point of view, and when I am talking about point of view I am really talking about the perception of detail, and when I am talking about detail I am really talking about character, and when I am talking about character I am really talking about *the real*, which is at the bottom of my enquiries.

So the prose—his own, this time—makes its looping metaphoric descent into the really real, or ‘life’.

‘What Chekhov meant by life’, how he signified it, is the subject of one of the earliest essays in *Serious Noticing*, about one of the story-tellers Wood most prizes. Its point of departure is the negative example of Ibsen. Ibsen, Wood charges, ‘is like a man who laughs at his own jokes . . . He is always . . . making everything neat, presentable, knowable. The secrets of his characters are knowable secrets . . . the bourgeois secrets: a former lover, a broken contract, a blackmailer, a debt, an unwanted relative.’ For Chekhov, on the other hand, life is ‘enigmatic’, ‘random’, and rendered in a correspondingly ‘accidental’ style. A detail, here, is ‘a reticent event’, with a miraculous capability that Wood captures in a hyperbolic turn from Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics*: ‘if the thought really yielded to the object, if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye’. In some similar way, as in Chekhov, characters can ‘forget to act as *purposeful*’ creations like Ibsen’s ‘envoys’, in a reverse identification such that ‘Chekhov’s very narration disappears’ into his character’s discourse.

There is life and then there are the hyperactive simulations of life that Wood a few years later denounced in a clutch of mainly US novels of the ‘big, ambitious’ kind, for which he created the rubric ‘hysterical realism’. (The works in question were Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, all published between 1996 and 2000.) With due discriminations made within and among these novels and their authors, Wood felt able to announce that ‘a genre is hardening’—a new genre characterized by its proliferation of story-telling, improbability, coincidence and parallelism, its displays of specialized information and attraction to ideas of universal inter-connectedness. In writing of this kind realism is being ‘overworked’, driven to a limit: ‘It seems to want

to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence.’ These novels evade reality even as they avail themselves of realist conventions, Wood believes. And what they evade is ‘an awkwardness about character and the representation of character in fiction’. The prevalence of caricature is one index of this unease and another is ‘an excess of story-telling’ that ‘has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack . . . That lack is the human’, and hysterical realism is the attempt at a ‘cover-up’.

Wood’s novelistically human—that is, ‘fully human’—has various avatars, including ‘strong feeling’ and ‘consciousness’ and ‘life’ itself, and their opposites include ‘information’, ‘spectacle’, ‘general messages’ and narrative relations that are ‘conceptual’ rather than vital. ‘Lifeness’ is Wood’s portmanteau coinage (*life* + *likeness*) for the representational qualities, principally those of characterization, that give access to the human. Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*—a novel that Wood holds in high but mixed regard—illustrates for him what happens when that value loses out to its contraries. Young Irie Jones (mixed-race parentage, Jamaican and white English) is pregnant, and has no idea which of the Iqbal twins (South Asian parentage) is the father, but then has a vision in which before long ‘roots won’t matter any more because they can’t because they mustn’t because they’re too long and they’re too tortuous and they’re just buried too damn deep. She looks forward to it.’

This construction is a non sequitur, as it happens; since the boys are siblings, the child’s ‘roots’ will be the same whichever one is the parent. But Wood’s objection to Smith’s words is of a different order: it is that—in a move antithetical to Chekhov’s—she has here taken over Irie’s inner speech, and this as the last act in a tendentious sub-plot:

it is Smith who made Irie, most improbably, have sex with both brothers, and it is Smith who decided that Irie, most improbably, has stopped caring who is the father. It is quite clear that a general message about the need to escape roots is more important than Irie’s reality, what she might actually think. A character has been sacrificed for what Smith called, in [an] interview, ‘ideas and themes that I can tie together—problem-solving from other places and worlds’. This is problem-solving all right. But at what cost?

It is difficult to read passages such as this without taking note of a special kind of metaphor, one instanced in the seemingly redundant phrasing ‘character and the representation of character’ and the equivocal verb *make*, meaning both *create* and *compel*. This is the family of metaphors in which literary constructions and their authors begin to act and interact like real people. Smith as writer ‘made’ Irie, as she made everything else in the text of her novel, but the note of compulsion involves a category mistake. And while the status of his word-choice as pun may be urged in mitigation of this

apparent confusion, as it might, there can't be much doubt about the references to 'Irie's reality', 'what she might actually think', and her 'sacrifice' on the altar of problem-solving. Smith is taken to betray this quasi-existent person, in the same reordering of being that has Chekhov's narrative 'disappear' into the discourse of one of its own characters. Wood may not actually believe that characters are people, but in passages such as these the thought persists, like one of Freud's 'unsurmounted' cultural traces. He builds his arguments on a slope that leads down to what his favourite critic of the novel, Shklovsky, dismissed over a century ago as 'ontological naivety'.

The emergence of hysterical realism marks a crux in literary representation: 'Which way will the ambitious contemporary novel go?' Wood asks. 'Will it dare a picture of life, or just shout a spectacle?' The form of the question recalls Lukács's, in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957), no less insistently for all the difference in its substantive terms of engagement. (In the earlier case the relevant life was capitalism and the 'reasonable question' of socialism as an alternative to it, while the 'spectacle' was the modernism typified by Kafka.) The form of the response is divergent, within a common allegiance to figuring the real—and a shared admiration for Thomas Mann. Lukács's preferred 'critical realism' came with a set of formal canons, the what and the how of a valid practice of the novel in his time. There is no strict equivalent in Wood. The list of his positives is various and open, surprisingly so in a critic better known for his 'takedowns', as etiquette has it, than for his enthusiasms. Comedy and secularism are prevailing values: he pairs and praises Cervantes and Proust as 'comic writers, properly snagged in the mundane, whose fiction has too often been etherialized out of existence'. Hrabal is singled out in the same spirit. Wood commends Krasznahorkai's avant-gardist work in the long, seemingly interminable sentence, 'reality examined to the point of "madness"', but also the 'usefully prosaic . . . almost managerial present tense', of Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, an instalment in her novelistic investigation of 'the domestic interiority of [German] history'. This is the archive of the novel as resource rather than backdrop to a canon.

Wood is nonetheless as judgemental as Lukács, more so if anything because more detailed in his discriminations (at times his close readings, in which he excels, take on the manner of comments in a creative writing workshop). But whereas Lukács's evaluations were grounded in an explicit and ordered understanding of historical actuality and possibility, Wood's have no comparable sanction, be it ethico-political or for that matter aesthetic. His relationship to the theorists he cites—Shklovsky, Barthes, Bakhtin, Adorno, Benjamin, Genette—seems 'accidental', not to say opportunist. Psychoanalysis is a steadier reference-point (and indeed there is more of Freud than Derrida in his summary of deconstruction, to which

he allows a fluctuating inclination), but hardly an anchorage. The appeal to 'life' and the really real can hardly fail to summon the spirit of a critic who goes unmentioned: F. R. Leavis. Yet even he, the 'anti-philosopher', rooted his Lawrentian vitalism in a romantic theory of modernity. His conviction of self-evidence in judgement was not self-enclosed. Wood, contrastingly, has seemed bent on a course like that enjoined by Remy de Gourmont and relayed by Eliot in his essay 'The Perfect Critic', turning his intuitions into laws (*ériger en lois ses impressions personnelles . . .*), and it may be, then, that these observations are beside the point, too much taken with critics' questions to notice a writer's answer. In this school of thought, the warrant of good judgement is charismatic.

Criticism, in Wood's understanding, is not 'writing about'; it is what he calls 'writing through', and its aim is not best thought of as suasion, 'producing a *raison* in support' of a judgement. The process is one in which the critic is 'describing an experience and trying to stimulate in the reader an experience of that experience'; the goal is 'sameness of vision' and that, in the special case of literary criticism, which shares with its object 'the language of metaphor', is 'in some ways a sameness of writing'. What is being suggested here, it appears, is a conception of criticism as paraliterature, enabling and maybe consisting in a procedural merging of critic and text, 'an act of figurative identification'. And completing the scene of critical judgement, then, is a figure fit to accompany Wood's teeming metaphors: the protean character known as *we/us*, *one* or *the reader*.

The so-called 'authorial we', its equivalents included, is a familiar device of reader management, formally presumptuous or manipulative, even if more often than not a dead letter. But readers coming to *Serious Noticing* will find themselves pre-empted—spoken for—at every turn by a subject as ontologically slippery as Wood's 'lifeness'. This pronominal character doesn't only 'think' and 'believe' and 'feel' in the ordinary way. It 'laughs', sometimes coming close to weeping; it has 'the urge to blow a Flann O'Brien-size raspberry', or 'realizes, with a shock, that Bellow has taught one how to see and hear, has opened the senses'. It sometimes appeals for confirmation ('don't we?'), which at other times can be taken as read ('All of us want . . .'). There is an intermittent narrative of reading experience in these little episodes, which may or may not in fact be 'ours', that is yours or mine. They are instances of 'unverifiable self-projection'—which is the charge laid against George Orwell, as it happens, by one James Wood. 'How can he really know this?' he asks, and now the question is returned to himself. He can't, except in so far as he 'makes' us, much as he says Smith has 'made' Irie Jones, the self-effacing tendentious subject of the writing recruiting the heterogeneous us who are reading into an imaginary concerted *we* for whom the desiderated 'experience' has already occurred.

This one-sided bonding completes a literary-critical process whose master-tendency is identification: of critic and literary text; of critic and readers; and thus, ideally, of reader and text in a new critical appropriation. The tendency is no more than that, however strong, and this may be just as well, for its general consummation would be a scarcely imaginable post-linguistic condition, of which Wood leaves his readers with a foretaste. One is Virginia Woolf's account of a moment towards the close of a public lecture in central London in which her friend the art critic Roger Fry had been talking about a long slide sequence ranging from Poussin to Cézanne. 'And finally', Woolf reports,

the lecturer, after looking long through his spectacles, came to a pause. He was pointing to a late work by Cézanne, and he was baffled. It went, he said, far beyond any analysis of which he was capable. And so instead of saying, 'Next slide', he bowed, and the audience emptied itself into Langham Place

—beginning, Wood continues, 'to experience what Fry saw'.

The lecturer's 'wordless humility' and the audience's suppositious response are outward signs of an 'abeyance' of 'understanding'. This is an affirmative meaning of silence in Wood's lexicon, and it is striking, moreover, how often his essays move towards closing ideas of silence or stillness as though towards a default state of rest. Silence as wonder or as acknowledgement, as the experience of sublimity or of emptiness: in that recurring word and its clustered meanings the trace of a childhood formation in a devout Evangelical family—to which Wood the unbelieving writer has returned so often—is still visible. The contraries, varying from one occasion to the next, are familiar; they include adventitious 'themes', 'problem-solving', compulsive activity and stasis alike, the stock impediments to life's creative flow. The paradox of criticism in the Woodsian manner is, then, that for all its rhetorical energy and analytic skill, the end-state it inscribes in its charter is post-verbal silence. The closing sentence of a review of Marilynne Robinson's *Home* enacts the process at an advanced stage: 'So luminous are this book's final scenes, so affecting, that it is all the critic can do not to catch from it . . . the contagion of ceaseless quotation, a fond mumbling.'