

## ...IN DIFFERENT VOICES

Igor Webb. *Rereading the Nineteenth Century: Studies in the Old Criticism from Austen to Lawrence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

*James Walton*

Igor Webb might be alone among contemporary poets in having made the nineteenth-century British novel his principal field of study. A laconic poem called “Socialism (1989)”, published a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, provides a faint sketch of the arc of Webb the critic’s relation to revolutionary thought. The poem crosses Europe at a dizzy rate-- from a Russian Summer in which thoughts of Alexander Herzen and *his* itinerary (“Moscow/ Paris/ London”) mingle with the season’s refreshments (“tea with strawberry jam”) to a walk down London’s Primrose Hill where the poet sees a plaque marking Friedrich Engels’ house and stops at a Polish café to enjoy Schubert and strudel. He has submitted himself to the rhythm of a dominant culture that preceded two heroes of a revolutionary era and has survived to bury them. For two centuries, the poem declares, “all the intelligentsia of Europe/ have quarreled over the quality/ of the poppy seed harvest/ or the grapes from the village of Beaune.” An ambiguous conclusion either affirms the durability of the bourgeoisie or predicts the End of Days: “For two hundred years, eating and drinking/ like there’s no tomorrow.”

In *From Custom to Capital: The English Novel and the Industrial Revolution* (1981) prose fiction strains against conditions that mystify or hide authentic value and circumscribe the prospects for personal development. Webb does justice to the themes of class and gender relations in Austen, Dickens, Gaskell, and Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre* comes off best), but leaves the reader with familiar doubts about the capacity of a popular form to transcend limits imposed by the cultural text.

*From Custom to Capital* acknowledges the influence of Georg Lukács, Lucien Goldmann, and Raymond Williams. The list reflects the past century’s first important refinements of Marxist critical theory. In *Rereading* Webb’s method takes a conservative turn. The “Old Criticism” of his subtitle comes from George Steiner’s *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, whose case against the (old) New Criticism was that it neglected literature’s function of supplying “meaning for use” (Webb’s phrase) and against the canons of realism that excluded “the mythical and the preternatural” (Steiner’s). “Mythical” and “preternatural” are a secular humanist’s words for a religious or “spiritual” dimension in literature. Steiner cites, and Webb echoes, D. H. Lawrence’s

famous declaration that “One has to be so terribly religious, to be an artist.” It is religion in this “broad sense” that Webb seeks to restore to current discourse on nineteenth-century literature, the product of a past that for him was “religious in ways it seems today we can scarcely imagine.” He speaks of “the omnipresence of belief and the habits of belief in the nineteenth century.” Today’s reader might wish he had settled for *habits* of belief alone or for Lionel Trilling’s remark (after Allen Tate) that “religion in its decline leaves a detritus of pieties”—a residue that nevertheless “stimulate[s] the mind in a powerful way.”

Trilling’s observation might have served well enough to account for a power that Webb finds in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, where the bitterness of a lethal episode in the class struggle is overcome, on a narrowly personal level, by the injunction to “forgive them that trespass against us.” A measure of common ground, Webb suggests, between owner and worker, author and reader, was supplied by “the permeating Christianity of Gaskell’s age.” Like Benjamin Disraeli, Gaskell recognized the division in England between “Two Nations”—the rich and the poor. To heal the breach, she relied on “Christian fellow-feeling” and showed how a representative segment of her working class depended on their faith for consolation and moral guidance. But for much of her middle-class audience that faith had dwindled into a dilute solution in which the spirit of Christian fellowship needed heavy reinforcement. For Webb the critic’s task consists in recovering as far as possible the voice in which a novel spoke to this “intended” readership augmented by current knowledge of the author and milieu, by “close reading” informed by advanced critical technique, and by a distinctly personal (even “idiosyncratic”) response. A principal influence in his development of this approach is Wolfgang Iser (*The Implied Reader, The Act of Reading*), who recognized the plurality of meanings accessible to an interpreter who can integrate a text’s medley of voices. As a heuristic model of such multivalence (a word that *Rereading* avoids together with other current jargon) Webb cites Borges’s critical fable, “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” which proposes a version of the novel “verbally identical to the original but infinitely richer.” Webb invites the reader to join him in accepting the fable’s challenge to “reperform” the text, “word for word but as ourselves.”

“He do the police in different voices,” an innocuous line from Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, was revealed in 1968 as the original title of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Since then it has served as a way of referring to the “cultural hegemony” (after Gramsci) or the invisible *surveillance* (Foucault) that restricts the novel form’s vaunted freedom. (An application of the Dickens-Eliot line is implicit in D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*.) Always alert

to culture-bound versions of authority, Webb investigates the search for that article-- not "Spiritual" as in a famous essay by Northrop Frye, but moral, epistemological and, above all, experimental-- in works by Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, Charles Dickens and Henry James. For the artist's elusive object, "truth," he borrows from Harriet Martineau the image of a goldfish—readily seen but hard to grasp.

The chapter on "Charles Dickens in America" seems at first a way of stepping around the large body of criticism stemming from Walter Benjamin's argument that experience of the modern city required an adaptation of literary form to "a series of shocks and collisions." Webb chooses his shocks and collisions from travel narratives. Dickens's strenuous account of disenchantment with the United States figures as a "lens that brings into focus the wider experience of the writer in the Victorian period." For comparison Webb cites the response of other travelers to "strangeness, otherness, to unfamiliar space," in pursuit of "the goldfish 'truth'." Among these the mildest example is William Cullen Bryant in Algiers—self-possessed, somewhat disconcerted, "exud[ing] universals." For an exposure of the provincial narrowness of Bryant's "universals" Webb skips over a hundred years to Elias Canetti's Marrakesh. Both travelers, of course, encounter beggars. Bryant passes one by, noting her strangely reddened nails, regretting afterward that he left her empty-handed. Canetti's seems a lifeless bundle of rags but emits a long inarticulate cry whose meaning lies "beyond words, deeper and more equivocal than words." (This conversion of object into symbol will recall King Lear's "Thou art the thing itself.") For Webb the moment brings us as close as language can come to capturing the goldfish. We recognize Canetti's symbol as "the irreducible instance of the thing we most value—life!" We cannot "say" its meaning but will retain a "powerful, albeit inarticulate sense" of it, "just the sort of ambiguous precision that symbolism engenders."

Scarcely less "other" than Algiers and Marrakesh was the United States to which Henry James returned in 1904 after a twenty-one year absence. As the "restless analyst" of *The American Scene* he found a society caught up for the most part in "perpetual change, constant redefinition, eternal impermanence, daily reinvention." For the rest he found only "vacancy," and upon this chaos or void he imposed his voice, relying on "the objective reality of impressions" in the absence of other authority.

The same churning rootlessness that James saw in the American city was there sixty years earlier for Bryant and Dickens. James called it a "refusal of history," Bryant "progress." Dickens in *American Notes* saw it as the "Deluge," providing a glimpse at once of the primordial past and the apocalyptic

future. The eschatological figure, in turn, would unite the lurid strangeness of the New World with the bleak familiarity of the Old: Civilization-as-Wilderness.

The fiction with which the novelist opposed the fiction of “progress” also opposed that of “tradition.” (Dickens’s library contained a collection of empty volumes entitled “The Wisdom of Our Ancestors.”) The novel that emerged from his American journey opens with a withered relic of tradition in the form of a genealogy of the Chuzzlewits, a metonymic *family* history lacking any principle of authority apart from the Self. Webb’s Dickens fills the vacuum with *style*—not the supposed “transparency” of the realist or the “devout earnestness” that conferred authority on *Mary Barton* but a carnivalesque extravagance that makes us “more aware of ourselves reading and more aware of the writer as a presence.” As for the fiction of omniscience, or the “totalistic authority of the narrator,” *Martin Chuzzlewit* “repeatedly undermines, or displaces [it].” In a prodigy of the promised close reading, Webb assembles the shadows of the hidden author in the text, his splintered omnipresence as professional spy, a vertiginous rooftop panorama of London, “angry” wind, vigilant darkness. The unresolved “search for authority” in *Chuzzlewit* proves more impressive than Henry James’s attitude as authority’s “privileged agent.”

The same search in Jane Austen and Mary Shelley takes Webb into the field of “political theology.” *Rereading* turns ponderous here owing to its use of Paul W. Kahn’s *Out of Eden*, an ethical/ political treatise under thin cover as a commentary on *Genesis*. Kahn’s reasoning (accurately summarized by Webb) is hard to follow, its application to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Frankenstein* seems forced, and the argument of the chapter on “Evil” and “Mortality” comes strangely short of answering its opening question: “How might we enter the religious world of the nineteenth-century writer?”

In Kahn’s account Evil and its true antithesis Love arise from the perception of oneself as object of another’s consciousness, therefore finite and mortal. The two states of the will co-exist in human relations like alternating figures on a Möbius strip. (The strained analogy is neither Kahn’s nor Webb’s, but one’s own.) Love “recognizes ultimate meaning outside the self” in what Paul Tillich called the “symbolic” or “vertical dimension,” the “dimension of depth” with which post-Enlightenment civilization has lost contact. In Tillich the lost contact was with “the presence of the infinite in everything finite.” Webb settles for a sense of the symbolic as “never fully reducible to reasoned argument” and acknowledges Kahn as his model of “symbolic thinking.” Love in the symbolic mode, says Kahn, overcomes the “subject-object divide without doing violence to either subject or object.”

But the shadow of the knowledge of one's death flickers always along its surface, and "the flight from recognition of mortality" is what constitutes evil.

The choice of evil locates "ultimate meaning" within, "asserting the self as all." Perhaps to avoid the obvious neither Kahn nor Webb names Milton's Satan as prototype of this self-centered modern idealism: "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n"; "Evil be thou my Good." Denial of one's own mortality predisposes the subject to actual or psychological murder, leading Webb on *Frankenstein* to a conclusion that leaves the "intended reader" in the dust: "Why does Victor want to murder Elizabeth?" Webb's explanation is that Victor, notwithstanding his estranging scientific obsession, has inherited a family fatality. His father established a precedent for trying to "get on with generation without a sexual partner." Like the Chuzzlewits and Chatterlys (but less convincingly), successive generations of the Frankenstein family have failed in their function of relieving its members of their death-haunted isolation.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the broken system is feudal society's legacy to Austen's failed fathers: "Invented as the preserver of value, love, and meaning, primogeniture/ entail is exposed as capable of destroying value, love and meaning." The evil (in Kahn's sense) of the system and of a father's self-absorption is masked or muted by the style of romantic comedy. Austen's style—poised, ironic, authoritative—commands assent from a "community" of readers who "want to be [among] the narrator's confidants rather than someone of whom she might not quite approve." Webb would agree with Trilling's naming of Austen as "agent of the social terror" whose coercive power depends on the reader's desire to join her as one of the "secular spiritual elect." It is the *secular* character of her judgments, Webb suggests, that deprives *Pride and Prejudice* of the "dimension of depth." The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy provides the comedy with its happy ending, resolves (conventionally) the problem of class differences, and rescues the heroine from the consequences of her father's negligence. Yet Webb makes a point of the novel's failure to report offspring from the union of hero and heroine. To require such a supplement to the plot recalls a famous essay on the limits of critical inquiry: "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" Webb explains that children would restore the family's morbid subjection to primogeniture. The alternative *sterile* union in turn would place Austen's happy pair in the improbable company of Victor Frankenstein and Clifford Chatterly.

The form assumed by authority in *Pride and Prejudice* is monological (another bit of critical currency omitted in *Rereading*), and the conflict or dialectic between love and evil goes unresolved. In *Frankenstein* author-

ity breaks down into a set of nested narratives, multiple perspectives, all presented to Margaret Saville, figure of the audience in the text, stationary, sheltered. Both methods serve to illustrate the “aesthetic for uncertainty” compelled upon nineteenth-century writers. Austen’s is the way of realism, Shelley’s of symbolism.

In his “Preliminary” Webb promised to open “new points of entry” into the nineteenth-century novel. The reader of his chapter on Austen, Shelley, and “the Problem of Evil” might find the opening partially blocked by Kahn’s recondite *Genesis*. In the final chapter, “*Toward a Conclusion*,” (emphasis added), Webb provides a valuable summary of his progress with added light from Frank Kermode and Paul Ricoeur and a kind of apotheosis of *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. The chapter’s title refers to multiple movements toward an ending—the critic’s, the novelist’s, the reader’s—all tentative. Kermode interprets endings in their relation to an “Apocalyptic paradigm” in imitation of the Biblical model but subject to the shift from “transcendent” to “self-made” authority. Ricoeur approaches the ending, in effect, from the other end, identifying it as the point where the reader reconfigures the narrative in the light of its closing moment.

The necessary allowance for “flesh-and-blood” readers should open the way to disagreement with Webb’s own sense of certain endings. One might ask why, in *Mary Barton*, the historically sound and promising remedy of emigration should be rejected as a violation of the novel’s “realism” in favor of a solitary, tragic instance of Christian healing. As for the end of *Frankenstein*, Webb calls it “opaque and inconclusive”: “we don’t see at all into the future, and we do not receive a clear moral.” The closing details propose a different reading—allegorical. While promising self-immolation by fire, the creature escapes the homebound ship to be “borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance.” Either he has chosen an alternative means of suicide or his “spirit” has been released into our world (Margaret Saville’s, the reader’s). It is the “spirit” of matter, signifying the replacement of the supernatural by (mere) nature as the source of creation and destruction. By this reading the novel’s “moral” might be lost but not its compelling history lesson on the crisis of authority.

Finally, Webb’s distinction between James (“Master”) and Lawrence (“Bard”) will annoy the Jacobites. He redefines “Master” to mean “defender” of “the dominant cultural identity, assigned “a role, a house, and a pension by the State.” James’s admirers might well prefer the Master’s own “restless analyst” or even the present reviewer’s “homeless drifter.” Webb’s “Bard” seems to refer to the prophetic “voice” to which Blake summons his audience in the “Introduction” to *Songs of Experience*, or perhaps to a set of Rus-

sian poets by that name who opposed the Soviet system. Lawrence as Bard is distinguished by “independence,” he derives authority “from something trans-temporal,” he “roams the moors and speaks truth to power.” In a less epideictic mode Webb declares that “All of the deepest dilemmas of the nineteenth-century novel, certainly all of [those] in the novels I have here discussed, are brought up to date in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*.”

*Rereading’s* final words are Lawrence’s well-known tribute to the “cleansing and freshening” potential of the novel form. This way of ending seems fitting in light of the convergence, in substance and spirit, of *Lady Chatterly’s* conclusion with Webb’s. The novel ends with the letter from Mellors to Connie expressing his fear of the future and his belief in “the little flame” that unites them. Webb comments that this “earnest, disenchanted note of tentative conviction” represents “the only honest stance appropriate to the novel” in a post-cataclysmic world—“our world—not just the modern...but the human world.” Clearly for Webb the same stance would be the most appropriate for criticism. Consequently, despite its generously acknowledged debt to Iser and Ricoeur, no part of *Rereading* will ever appear in one of those “case studies,” cited in its preface, that parse the critical enterprise into (say) reader-response, phenomenological, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, cultural, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and so on. Webb objects that such specialisms tend to predetermine meaning and to undervalue the pleasure of the text. His own method will prove more responsive to an approach to experience that is religious in the broadened and secularized sense of inducing “awe and reverence” and more adaptable to the novel’s “ability to give voice to many views and many people.” For these reasons his “Old Criticism” will look fresh and new to today’s students of fiction, professional and other.