

THE CASE FOR ETHICAL RIGHTNESS

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The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon. By Brian Stonehill. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1988. 221 pp. \$26.95.

"Oboy, Oboy," a critical study which dares to grapple with a critically unpopular though not insignificant idea: the determination of ethical rightness in fiction. At a time when literary critics question the validity of ascribing meaning, truth, or morality to fiction, when philosophers explore the ability or lack of ability of language to convey meaning, and when science suggests that the notions of truth and reality are at root far more paradoxical and problematic than they once may have seemed, Brian Stonehill's The Self-Conscious Novel: Artifice in Fiction from Joyce to Pynchon takes an admirable risk. In examining the combination of "aesthetic neatness and ethical rightness" in modern and contemporary self-reflexive novels, Stonehill sets out to prove that self-consciousness, far from being merely self-indulgent and meaningless, "may in fact be one of the most convincing and compelling forms available to our writers for the expression of what is truly important today" (18).

This ten chapter study begins with an examination of the writer's impetus for writing self-consciously, for producing writing which calls attention to itself as artifice. Stonehill next relates the particular elements which identify this writing as self-depicting in his "Repertoire of Reflexivity." Then, using this Repertoire, he offers a historical overview of self-conscious fiction, finding evidence of the elements he has detailed all the way back to Pilgrim's Progress. He follows this overview with separate chapters on the self-conscious style of Joyce, Nabokov, Gaddis, Pynchon and Barth, and concludes with a broad brush analysis of what he terms "practical criticism" devoted to several of those authors and "theoretical criticism" focused on the self-conscious novel in general. The final chapter both summarizes the study and perhaps more importantly suggests a changing focus of more recent self-conscious novels in what Stonehill claims is a return to the mimetic: the "shifting from the limitations back to the imitations" (187).

An intelligent and ambitious work, Stonehill's study evolves from a thesis which is at once provocative and important in its attempt to redeem self-conscious novels, and the novelists who write them, from charges of nihilism. His plan is to show that these writers are in fact not writing strictly self-indulgent, narcissistic works but are instead creating works which offer their readers a sense of possibility within the limitations of our world. Throughout the study, Stonehill

suggests that the works' very self-consciousness harbors the value that redeems them. John Gardner's now infamous attack against literature that was not moral indicted "narcissistic" fiction, insisting on a narrow and prescriptive formula that demanded fiction be moral and then allowed for only a clearly mimetic work to fulfill this charge. Opposed to Gardner's notion that literature must be a "blunt weapon" to teach morality, Stonehill's view that self-conscious fiction does have an important ethical dimension embraces the very styles that critics like Gardner would be loathe to deem either valuable or serious. By contrast with the kind of criticism for which Gardner pled, most post-structuralist criticism, rejecting any attempt to prescribe morality, has emerged as an almost starkly intellectual exercise that largely eschews humanistic ends. In this study, however, Stonehill's philosophical thesis promises to combine the intellectual with the humanistic. Stonehill has the courage to argue that self-conscious fiction is most important when it transcends pure esthetic play to address the concerns of "real men and real women" in the real world, when it becomes jazz--improvisational play with heart.

Stonehill's seriousness of purpose is evidenced by more than his thesis. Four of the writers he has chosen as exemplars of that thesis--Joyce, Nabokov, Gaddis, Pynchon--are distinguished as the acknowledged difficult masters of this century, each, except for Gaddis, eliciting a continual wellspring of critical response. Critics have made no secret of the delightful drudgery that accompanies untangling such works, from Ulysses to Gravity's Rainbow, though some have labeled Gaddis's and Pynchon's novels dense, turgid, and impossible to read. For those who love these novels, Stonehill's study offers important insights; for those still skeptical about Gaddis and Pynchon, Stonehill becomes a valuable advocate for why and how their novels should be read. Thoughtful and thorough in his analysis, he demonstrates a sure knowledge of the works he studies, resurrecting characters, themes, styles, and structures to reaffirm each author's individual ludic sensibility and to speculate on evidence of ethical purpose.

Like any ambitious first book, however, Stonehill's study, though its thesis is provocative, is plagued by a few demons. While the book's strengths center around its thesis and Stonehill's willingness to take philosophical and stylistic risks, its weaknesses revolve in large part about Stonehill's failure to present a balanced analysis of a balanced thesis and to offer answers to some important questions which the premise of his book raises. What is "truly important today"? What is ethically right? What exactly is the Repertoire? And while Stonehill does offer at the end a few paragraphs which reassert that his chosen texts teach us "how to be," he resists explaining fully how they teach us how to be.

Arguing that, even as the self-conscious novel "exposes its own artifice, and professes itself to be an invention, it is

still able to fire our imaginations and move our emotions as do events in real life," Stonehill suggests that novels like Lolita which make us feel for the characters are more ethically right than those like Alphabetical Africa which merely assert their own artifice (14). Although the example of Abish's book suffers from being too extreme, in his study of Nabokov, Stonehill does convincingly explore the notion that self-conscious fiction can move us. But the novel's "moving us" by itself does not constitute its ethical rightness. Stonehill's obvious erudition should keep him from using such a notion as the standard for ethical responsibility, especially since it could easily be interpreted as a restatement of the Pathetic Fallacy, the carrying over of a vague emotional touchstone (are we moved by pathos, bathos, sentimentality, fear, joy?) to a realm that demands fine discriminations. To avoid misinterpretation, his idea requires that he both delineate specific emotions the novel "moves" and explain how these emotions are ethically significant.

In his chapter on Joyce, Stonehill argues that Ulysses "commends democracy" and "makes not élitists, but esthetes, of us all" (68). Stonehill believes that this democracy counts as ethical, but he needs to explain this notion more carefully to his readers, who might more readily agree if they came to this chapter armed with a clear definition of ethical rightness. In the chapter on Gaddis, Stonehill recognizes The Recognitions along with JR as "only faintly, just suggestively self-conscious" (174). But his desire to have The Recognitions fit his thesis keeps him from acknowledging, for example, that Wyatt's death is arguable, not given. At the end of this chapter, Stonehill offers the conclusion that "The Recognitions asserts the value of love, and displays love's rightful context in both life and art" (138). This reading no doubt implies ethical rightness, and yet this reference to love suffers both from the lack of an earlier definition of ethics and from its appearing so late and offhandedly at the end of the chapter.

Another implied answer to the question of what constitutes ethical rightness is couched in Stonehill's description of the "intimate honesty" the writer has with the reader. But how does, if it does, such an honesty make the work itself ethical? Finally, if these novelists do teach us "how to be," how specifically do they teach it, and what philosophy or philosophies of Being do they propound? Although Stonehill raises these questions, he stops short of adequately answering them, once again, mainly because his book lacks a clear, straightforward definition of one of its obviously central concerns--ethical rightness--a phrase whose meaning and application Stonehill needs to clarify every bit as thoroughly as he does esthetic "neatness" if his study is to be balanced.

In fact, though his thesis bespeaks a symmetry, his analysis belies any real balance. Stonehill's stated purpose is to show how the self-conscious novel (a term that perhaps should

be more openly acknowledged as Robert Alter's, from Partial Magic) can be both "esthetically neat and ethically right" (ix), balancing the ludic with the serious, effect with value, and the anti-mimetic with the mimetic. To this end, he should have kept his own study balanced by avoiding such a predominant concern with what makes a text self-conscious, especially since Stonehill himself acknowledges that this issue has already been explored. Nor need he have proved so thoroughly that the novelists he chose as exemplars of his thesis use a self-conscious style, since he also acknowledges that this too has been done. Rather, his task should have been to provide his readers with clear definitions and equal applications of both terms of his thesis throughout the specific analyses.

Instead, in each of the chapters analyzing the work of specific novelists, Stonehill devotes almost exclusive attention to how the works manifest the self-conscious style he has detailed as the paradoxical aspect of the self-conscious novel--its ability to balance esthetic play and ethical responsibility. But without rigorous reasoning this idea is doomed. One cannot logically say that the ethical power of the self-conscious novel resides in its balance of the esthetic and the ethical, especially without first carefully defining both of its key terms, else the thesis and the reasoning from it fall victim to circular reasoning. However, the paradoxical power that Stonehill alludes to is in fact an important point. By employing the touchstones of contemporary science or philosophy more fully, he could have argued that, by mirroring the balance of randomness and pattern, irrationality and rationality, chance and cause-and-effect, thought and experience, life and death, the novels in question teach us how to live in a world that since Descartes has seen fit to ignore that necessary balance.

In the chapter on Pynchon, Stonehill comes closest to such a theory, playfully beginning by telling us how self-consciousness "can also sharpen the edge of a particular wedge of paradox" (141). But then he often confuses paradox with its poor relation, contradiction, and assumes rather than demonstrates that paradox is ethical. He identifies "the specific esthetic effect which I shall call the Power of Paradox" as "the peculiar suspension of the intellectual and emotional faculties between two equally plausible but mutually exclusive modes of perception or belief. The novel's self-consciousness reinforces its paradoxical effect" (142). Does Stonehill mean that paradox is only esthetically powerful? Apparently not, since several pages later he identifies the texture of Gravity's Rainbow as "ethically paradoxical" (146). But how? Again, a clear definition of ethical rightness would have been invaluable to this pursuit, allowing Stonehill to prove Pynchon's paradoxes more than mere puzzles.

Gravity's Rainbow certainly is paradoxical, and Pynchon's prose does create "paradox by embracing within individual sentences a diction that is base, obscene, and suggestive of

disorder and decay, and a diction that is lofty, spiritual, and evocative of transcendent harmonies" (149). This observation alone provides Stonehill with the perfect vehicle for an in-depth discussion of Gravity's Rainbow's ethical dimension. But ultimately he demurs, saying that "Pynchon's fiction is not an ethical statement in disguise" and that it "allows itself no such direct moralization." Instead it offers "a sense of possibility: that perhaps there is a choice to be made, but perhaps not" (155). Returning to his implication that a novel's self-consciousness informs its ethics, Stonehill insists that "without its self-consciousness Gravity's Rainbow would be less paradoxical, and not itself. We have also been able to learn from paradox why the novel is preoccupied with paranoia, with entropy, and with its own relation to the reader's life. Not everything is lost to equivocation, then, for by displaying its own art, Gravity's Rainbow obliges us to affirm its value" (156).

Unfortunately, at this point Stonehill's own equivocation muddies the waters and keeps his readers guessing at what he should have made clear. First, when he says Pynchon allows no direct moralization, does he want to imply that perhaps the other writers he studies do? I doubt it. Second, some confusion exists about whether it is the novel's possibility or its self-consciousness that confers value, and if it is the latter, the same problem of circular reasoning infects the observation. Since the earlier direction of his study does suggest that both a novel's ethical dimension and its possibility rest in its "displaying its own art," Stonehill needs to offer the reader a clear unraveling of and thorough support for how self-conscious fiction, with any of its effects, manages this. Then, he can demonstrate this point in Gravity's Rainbow without accusing renegade Pynchon of being even discreetly moral.

In his final chapter, Stonehill notes a recent change in self-conscious fiction. He explains that the "trend among self-conscious novels" is "toward a new balance among the elements of self-depiction" where "the characters, accorded more respect, assume more narrational responsibility, while the implied author is less disruptive and insistent in asserting his own, ultimately responsible presence"--a trend which Stonehill locates in JR, Carpenter's Gothic, Creator, and The World According to Garp" (186-87). (The claim that JR and Carpenter's Gothic illustrate this new balance made me wish Stonehill had examined one of those books in his chapter on Gaddis.) Self-reflexive fiction, then, as Stonehill sees it, "is moving away from a preoccupation with self-consciousness to an accommodation with it," a movement he says that Barth, Carver and Levi exemplify. Such a view, given Stonehill's thesis, elicits the question of whether Stonehill feels that these writers are also by extension moving toward a more definite concern with ethical rightness. Such an implication, however, might move him closer to Gardner than he would like to be. Yet, since he has made the

distinctions throughout the book between the esthetically neat and the ethically right, between effect and value, between the anti-mimetic and the mimetic, between ludism and seriousness, and finally between fiction and Truth, and has maintained that the writers who manage more than esthetic play are the more ethically responsible, it would seem that he may indeed believe fiction is also moving toward a greater concern with ethical rightness. Rather than suggesting that the more mimetic fiction is the more ethical, however, the overall argument of Stonehill's study suggests that the self-conscious novels with the greater balance are the greater novels because of their ethical dimension.

Besides balance in the study and definitions of its key terms, two other additions to this book would have helped Stonehill keep to his thesis and helped the reader see its validity. First, a section--up front--that acknowledged contemporary critical schools such as Reader Response, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Hermeneutics, and De-struction would have been very helpful, especially since each of these schools addresses questions about meaning and value and would thus have provided useful fodder for Stonehill's argument about ethical rightness. Such a section would undoubtedly have led to the second and perhaps more important addition: a thorough discussion of language and its relation to ontological concerns, especially since self-conscious fictions do "play" with language. The argument can be made that writers like Joyce, Nabokov, Pynchon, and Gaddis purposely disrupt our expectations of conventional narrative patterning, not only to expose the limitations of this "prison house of being," but also to revitalize language whose primordial and experiential power is redemptive. Insights about language from Martin Heidegger, Georg Gadamer or Walter Benjamin would have proved useful here.

Definition and clarification of key terms and a more predominant focus on the claim of "ethical rightness" would have strengthened Stonehill's study, but it is nevertheless a welcome contribution to our understanding of fiction. To Stonehill's credit, he tackles a philosophically difficult and even unpopular premise in dealing with fiction and value. Also to his credit, he confronts difficult writers and difficult works and analyzes them thoughtfully. Certainly to his credit is his willingness to experiment stylistically in his own writing by varying his generally rich but conventional style with playful alliteration, for example, and even traces of elegance. Since, as Stonehill so aptly acknowledges, "the critic's work is never done" (193), we will no doubt be hearing more from him--perhaps addressing the new wave in those novels and novelists he cites in his last chapter.

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