

## Homely Thoughts

*Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day*, by Patrick Parrinder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 502 pp. \$45. Reviewed by Jonathan Pitcher, Bennington College.

Gibbon observes that in the Arabian book *par excellence*, in the Koran, there are no camels; I believe if there were any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this absence of camels would be sufficient to prove it is an Arabian work.

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (181)

With the exception of a reference to the University of Reading, Berkshire, the only county with a royal prefix, even paratextually, this book screams sedition. The back of the dust jacket promises to undermine national identity, a sentiment promptly followed by more of the same on its inside, hammered home by the cover's detail of William Hogarth's *The March of the Guards to Finchley* which was ultimately dedicated to Frederick II of Prussia after George II rejected the guards' debauchery, and corroborated by Patrick Parrinder's now mundane explanation of the popular, individual, vernacular, democratizing newness of the novel, a genre to correct that frightful Shakespearean habit of perceiving the nation "from the top down" (18): "Its status as private reading-matter gives it its unstable and potentially subversive function in relation to the family and the community at large" (13). Can this really be the *English* novel? Despite the stereotypical lack of interest in politics, the rather ambiguous nature of this literary history that is beyond annotation yet never quite matures into an ideological analysis of identity and is perhaps best described as glorified lit. crit., proleptically, Parrinder, author of *The Failure of Theory*, does manage to round up the usual refractory suspects, combining the polysemic, revolutionary literariness of Mikhail Bakhtin and Ian Watt with Fredric Jameson's reductive version of the novel as "national allegory" (4), Benedict Andersen's now commonplace rendering of the nation as social construct, and Edward Said's earlier vandalizing of it. What, no camels then? There are, in fact, more sensibly, camels galore, but the only indication that the introductory pages are almost entirely irrelevant to the remaining three hundred or so, that we are about to spend several hours attempting to unearth sedition in the oddest of places, that apparently we must now sell everything via subversion, applicable or not, is the inclusion, over and above Parrinder's acknowledgment that the English novel is epiphenomenal from beginning to end, its origins stemming from all sorts of foreign sources, of Sir Walter Scott, and the exclusion of Tayeb Salih, the favoring of insular tradition over counter-orientalism.

Parrinder's is not a tale of revolution, nor indeed of a tradition of revolution, but of a factitious palingenesis, a repetitive, elegiac *gestalt* founded on a very limited list of figures and themes, and a still briefer morphology of plotlines. It is a series of would-be King Arthurs (Guy Crouchback to name but one), Dick Whittingtons (Dickens's Pip), and Robin Hoods (even Lawrence's Mellors), of pilgrims, knights-errant, and loveable rogues "by whom it would be delightful to have been robbed" (136), of eventual, generally joyous alliances between Normans and Saxons, Cavaliers and Puritans, Jacobins and Jacobites, or Whigs and Tories, of the suffering of the Book of Job that will be rewarded "at the moment of narrative denouement rather than being reserved for a future state" (115), "the journey novel and male *Bildungsroman*, the novel of courtship, and the family saga and extended novel-sequence" (29), of a pluralistic,

idealized country that is often anachronistic, as opposed to injurious to the super-structural social flux, before the novels in question are even published.

Just pick a sturdy camel. The story is one that would not have been out of place in my traditional, ultra-Anglican, paramilitary boarding school but fifteen minutes from Reading, Royal Berks. More specifically, Robinson Crusoe is defined as a “whingeing pom and home-grown humbug” (81), *Tom Jones*’s gypsies form “an ideal commonwealth in subjection to an absolute monarch” (100), “the discourse about the English highwayman ... in some respects simply placed an acceptable gloss on the [eighteenth] century’s actual experiences of plebeian violence” (143), Scott’s “English novels are comparatively superficial entertainments evoking the nation’s aristocratic and Royalist past” (153), “For all her [Elizabeth’s] claims to equality, the point of her marriage is that it is splendidly unequal, and it is this that, of all Austen’s novels, brings *Pride and Prejudice* closest to fairy tale” (193), *North and South* “Necessarily ... concludes with a political marriage calculated to resolve the national divisions that the novel has so fully expounded” (212), an alarmingly pleasant Dickens is a purveyor of the “recognition-inheritance pattern” (217), with his protagonists aiming for “an untroubled, unambitious domestic happiness” (213), and *Doctor Thorne*’s Frank Gresham, “needless to say, ... falls in love with, and finally marries, the one woman who can save his family’s bankrupt estate” (269). In *Sybil*, there is even a dog, Harold, playing the role of yet another agent of unification: “This pedigree pet with a royal Saxon name is the embodiment of true social instincts” (170). The pervasive, oneiric *enantiodromia*, in which the novel is a foundational influence, belatedly reflecting society rather than preempting it, is most obvious when its anodyne properties are used to correct the aforementioned foreign sources. The Gothic receives several sharp raps over the knuckles, and its “novels take place ... outside England” (122), “Sexual desire in English fiction is famously muted” (31), the English *pícaro* is “decidedly more polite and wealthier” (47), “where Cervantes had introduced a democratic element into romance, Scott, writing for the prosaic bourgeoisie, had restored to romance its aristocratic element” (162), “For all their sympathies with the French Revolution, the English Jacobin novelists of the 1790s produced parables of a reformed aristocracy rather than visions of an aristocracy overthrown by the people” (181), “The Dickensian *Bildungsroman* ... comes after the great French novelists, Stendhal and Balzac, yet it is closer to folk tale and fairy tale than to the masterpieces of French realism” (217), and “*Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is Lawrence’s attempt to defy the traditionally tragic outcome of the European novel of adultery” (308).

Parrinder is adept with inter-text, in drawing conclusions across the novels and the ages, and the occasional hijacking of the reader is to be expected in a book of this length, but, as in the selection above, one of the dangers in recounting such plots, and in emphasizing their similarities, is of course that one’s own book becomes subject to the same repetition. The omnipresent sense of *déjà vu*, of an overriding filial, analeptic paradigm, however accurate, is wearisome, which is partly the point. Given the author’s ideological absence, at times the book seems to be simply confirming that at least a history of England is in fact charted in its novels, and such representations implicitly debunk the supposed sedition of the introductory pages. The tone grates, however, when in spite of his own mounting evidence, Parrinder is not prepared to give up on that introduction, intermittently and incongruously paying lip service to it, since “in every generation of English fiction there have been novelists who broke away” (34), or “In fiction the unorthodox individual is almost invariably vindicated” (331), when anyone reading *Nation and Novel* would have precisely the opposite impression. The novels that may shake such cultural *ataraxia* and allow some reprieve from an ill-suited theoretical apparatus seem few and far between. *Tristram Shandy* is limited to a couple of pages, Mary Wollstonecraft’s proto-feminism is mentioned only in passing, *Jane Eyre*’s ending is at best ambivalent, there are hints of sedition in *Vanity Fair*, *Daniel Deronda* offers a glimmer of “positive orientalism” (249) only to be dimmed by *Adam Bede*’s “gradual healing of a broken rural community” (274) and *Felix Holt*’s “fairy-tale ending” (276), even *The Secret Agent*’s bomber’s secular “roots are in provincial Puritanism of a recognizably English type” (257), Hardy empties paganism, nature, and Christianity, and yet *Jude* is structured via Job, Lawrence opts for “neo-pagan mysticism” (290), Forster (where the Englishness is now explicit, and thus potentially contains its own

demise, since reminding oneself of one's patriotism is surely a sign of its actual lack of significance) is skeptical, yet still manages a "mawkish attempt to turn back imperial development thanks to the recovery of an England capable of restoring the life of the body and holding the suburbs at bay" (302) in *Howards End*, Woolf's *Between the Acts* is rife with "pastoral memory" (313), and *1984*'s "rubbish-heap of details" (318) represents the cherished remnants of a more desirable past. In H. G. Wells's words, "In the meantime the old shapes, the old attitudes remain, subtly changed and changing still, sheltering strange tenants" (304). Remarkably, one of the strangest, in the only chapter on Empire that, at least literarily, is "nearly always kept in the background" (322), becomes a rehabilitated Kipling, filtered through Kim's hybridity, but is Kipling as outsider really the closest the English novel comes to subversion?

Well, no, for as the *ur*-narrative quickens towards its close, in the knowledge that the penultimate chapter will re-contextualize immigration back into the same series of paradigms so that rather than striking back the Empire attaches itself to preexistent novelesque themes, to solitude in a hostile London in Jean Rhys's case, or to the ruins of "pastoral fantasy" (402) in V. S. Naipaul's, and equally aware that the diluted conclusion, very much the product of the previous four hundred pages' process, will focus on the retrograde *Atonement* with its smattering of camels and must, therefore, admit that the novel is now "a kind of palimpsest" (411), Waugh wreaks havoc. In the wake of a study of Woolf's neo-Arthurian *The Waves*, which only succeeded in confirming her status as another reactionary, the now desperate lunges for implosion dismiss *Vile Bodies* and *Decline and Fall* in passing, their subject "a small upper-class clique living a virtually self-contained life in defiance of a wider, rapidly changing world" (342) that simply won't do, a rejection substantiated by "the romantic unreality of *Brideshead Revisited*, a novel which (for all its fascination) is much inferior to the later *Sword of Honour* trilogy as a chronicle of aristocratic England's decline and fall" (362). Exactly why it is inferior is never explained, of course, for its ontology must remain elusive here, scrapped in favor of an again brief nod to *A Handful of Dust*'s more appropriately nifty parodying of Arthur as a segue to Guy Crouchback's ambivalence. *Sword of Honour* receives eight pages, compared with *Jane Eyre*'s six, because, despite Parrinder's admission that Catholic readers may beg to differ, and with a modicum of assistance from Diana Cooper's deflating analogy to "'Mrs. Dale's Diary'" (362) and Christopher Sykes's account of Ludovic's *The Death Wish* as "a send-up of *Brideshead Revisited*" (368), Crouchback may be re-inscribed as "equivocal" (368), his "knight-errantry ... surrounded by ambiguities from beginning to end" (370), the victim of "a farcical discrepancy between [his] dream of belonging to a high company of warriors and the reality" (363). When coupled to the author's "laconic style" (364) that "suggests a world of moral uncertainty" (364) in which "the work of discrimination is ... left to the reader" (364), and given the dearth of other candidates in Parrinder's homely version of his predecessors, one would be forgiven for thinking that a proto-postmodern Waugh had almost single-handedly destroyed not only the English novel, but with it the past.

#### *Works Cited*

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1962.