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The Practice of Cultural Analysis: A Review of Bal

Bal, Mieke (ed.), The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation. Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999. ISBN 0-8047-3067-9. xix+392pp., A\$44.95. Distributor: Cambridge University Press (Australia).

Let's call him CS for short. When the book arrived in 1999, he was depressed, clinically diagnosed as such and made to take strange drugs. This led him do some things that were, by more or less any of today's moralities, evil. (It all had to do with his friend Phil O. who had been with him from the start and two very different, but distantly related, women called Poppy and Sophia – but we needn't go into that here.) And because CS accepted that having done such evil things made him an intrinsically evil person, he became evil and therefore (in Nietzsche's sense) bad – bad because he had given himself up to the distinction between good and evil.

His depression turned him against more or less everything. He was anti-historical, anti-philosophical, anti-literary, anti-authority, anti-disciplinary, anti-methodological, anti-technical, anti-scholarship, anti-departmental, anti-institutional, anti-instrumental.... And pro-pretty-much-bugger-all, except for watching TV while resolutely refusing to enter a library. So when the book arrived in his mailbox, all he could manage was to dip into it here and there, looking for ways out of his problem, looking for therapies, as he was looking everywhere, those days, for such things: in the garbage, in the museums, in the shopping malls, in his mistaken relationship with Poppy and in his hopeless attempts to forget Sophia.

To make the therapy work properly though, he soon found that he had to sit down, drugs at the ready just in case, and make himself read the whole thing cover to cover. So did he get better (for it)? Yes and no.

Yes: because it gave him some cogent guards against several of his bad tendencies. The reading cure reassured him that there were professionals out there (albeit in Amsterdam and other distant places) with a type of analysis for his condition and who could help him restore at least three good things in the face of his malaise. The first was a new respect for (a looking forward to) history, memory and the present as the future of the past: history as a medium for everyday living rather than as a dead pastness to be mourned or else buried and forgotten. The second was a return: a return to the fundamentally literary idea that close readings are not only OK but the nearest he might get to being answerable to the actual everyday materials ("data" even) at hand. He could no longer just say whatever he liked; now he had to analyse the cultural-historical world, and the analysis had to hold water when actual fragments of that world were inspected closely and in detail. The third was a meta-analytic realisation: that methodological rigour is not like the application of some kind of algorithm but only arises in methodological self-reflection on what one is doing, analytically, as one is doing it. And this is true, he found, if only because his analyses were themselves always already cultural objects and therefore ontologically inseparable from the cultural "texts" they analyse.

But also no: because his analysts frequently (all too frequently, perhaps) promised him these three new (or return) steps to partial well-being, but rarely did they deliver at the end of the day. What he saw in the analyst, by analysis's end (pp.325-327), was little more than a very slightly distorted picture of himself: somewhat lost, somewhat unsure of just what interdisciplinarity is and how it can and does operate in today's tertiary institutions, knowing fully what it is against

but still quite unsure of what it is for. Looking, with his new eyes – closely, historically and self-reflexively – at that “text” or “picture”, he saw nothing more hopeful than yet another “site for imagination” (p.347).

Depression is and always has been the downside of Romanticism, he reminded himself, even if, as with this book, it is significantly attenuated and balanced by close analysis. The reading did not cure him, then, but it pointed in the direction of a possible remedy to come.

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