

Geert Lernout

*THE FRENCH JOYCE*

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990. Pp. vi + 291

Reviewed by Michael Patrick Gillespie

In the penultimate chapter of *The French Joyce*, Geert Lernout refers to his own status as a lapsed Catholic to explain (perhaps disingenuously) his own inability to understand one critic's examination of the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism as a means of understanding Joyce's canon. Since he raises the issue of faith, I would like to suggest that Professor Lernout, like the author whom he studies, remains much closer to Catholic modes of thinking—if not to Catholic dogma—than he realizes. Throughout its pages, *The French Joyce* shows a remarkable facility for articulating ambiguities and cultivating mystery—the same traits that strike me as absolutely central in Catholic belief.

Whatever the source of Lernout's thinking, *The French Joyce* provides a valuable guide both to Joyceans and to readers interested in contemporary critical theory. In a sophisticated overview of poststructuralism in France, Lernout summarizes the central features—both the strengths and the weaknesses—of a variety of methodologies that derive from this philosophical movement. Furthermore, in a wide-ranging survey, he traces the development of diverse positions held by individuals who have become crucial thinkers in this area, and shows how the contributions of various continental intellectuals have shaped the conception of poststructuralism that informs the interpretive assumptions of many contemporary American critics.

One might legitimately wonder about the need for such a study, for many other scholars have already attempted to summarize the hermeneutic impact of the range of epistemologies recently distilled from contemporary French thought. Despite the diversity of these efforts, however, none has done so with the detachment and erudition of Lernout. Most overviews, in fact, grow out of one of two dichotomous intellectual perspectives. At one extreme one finds those so committed to the Gospel according to St. Jacques (Lacan and/or Derrida) that little more than uncritical hyperbole results. At the other, one sees writers with such a blinding antipathy for all elements of poststructuralism that the entire body of their studies collapses into reductive vitriol. Lernout, while well versed in the poststructuralist canon, eschews the roles of either proselytizer or persecutor. Instead, he offers a rigorous intellectual analysis of the evolution of the movement in France and of its transplantation and transformation in America.

The outline that Lernout provides cuts through the verbiage of the detractors and the idealizers to give a clear and balanced view of the basic features of poststructuralism. He recognizes the value of the unswerving self-referentiality of the poststructuralist critic, a gesture that disregards received opinions and overtly embraces the subjectivity inherent in any reading, whatever the epistemology. At the same time, as he perceptively points out, this sort of reading

leads inevitably to a degree of methodological contradiction: a fixation on the fragments that attract a particular reader can illuminate aspects of the text previously ignored, but the problem arises that these fragments "are necessarily presented in a unifying structure and that the resulting commentary always has some kind of coherence. In other words, these critics do supply a syntax but, as I have attempted to show, not always the same as that of their primary texts" (206). Sensitivity to such antinomies illuminates the entire work and make Lernout a particularly useful guide through the idiosyncratic world of contemporary French thought.

Lernout's detailed delineation of the interpretive methods of a range of French critics necessarily entails recognition of weaknesses as well as strengths. Unfortunately, such views may seem to some enthusiasts a clear indication of his intention to denigrate poststructural endeavors. As he himself notes, this approach will necessarily produce some harsh reactions. "The implicit totalizing gesture (deconstruction is not *a* method; it is the only method) is symptomatic of most defenses of Derrida's work" (192). Nonetheless, to object to this study on ideological grounds, as some critics have done, completely misses the point.

A singular strength of Lernout's book emerges in his ability to provide background information in a format that enlightens those unfamiliar with the topic without boring readers who bring some sense of the material to the work. The opening synopsis of the development of Joyce criticism in America, England, and France does not merely reiterate the conventional list of well-known works but rather points out central trends in hermeneutics that shaped the direction of critical inquiry over the decades. Chapters discussing important French readers do not simply regurgitate a litany of well-known names. Instead, Lernout integrates discussions of figures like Cixous, Derrida, and Lacan with commentaries on their contemporaries, and places all in a context of political and intellectual upheaval made clearer by precise delineation of the ontological assumptions that condition their ambiance.

To my mind, however, the most important portion of the book lies in a long chapter examining Phillipe Sollers and *Tel Quel*. Not only does Lernout draw attention to a figure often overlooked by American poststructuralist readers, but he also uses Sollers—both as a novelist and as the moving force behind *Tel Quel*—to chart the cultural, political, emotional, and intellectual forces that shaped French thought over the last quarter century. This extended view of Sollers and *Tel Quel*, again replete with valuable digressions on the evolution of contemporary French literature and on the social forces impinging upon its growth, places the work of more familiar French critics in a context that illuminates and demystifies much of their work.

I found the summary chapter on the impact of French critical methods in England and America the most disappointing. After a brief sketch of the growth of poststructural thought in England (indicative perhaps of the antipathy it still arouses in that country), Lernout chooses to highlight select aspects of contemporary Joyce criticism without going into great detail. Those already

familiar with the critical scene in America will feel somewhat restive, and those not familiar with it will wonder if that is all there is too it.

Second thoughts about this chapter, however, as likely betray my own critical idiosyncracies as reflect problems in Lernout's exposition. Overall, *The French Joyce* provides a witty, erudite view of critical methodologies that have exerted a profound influence on literary interpretation over the past three decades. It provides a wonderful antidote to the alternately dour and reverential tones of works usually devoted to the topic, and it will surely be an important force for years to come in epistemological and hermeneutic debates on responses to Joyce.

Gene H. Bell-Villada

GARCIA MÁRQUEZ: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

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Reviewed by Harley D. Oberhelman

Readers familiar with Bell-Villada's insightful *Borges and His Fiction* will find his latest critical study, *García Márquez: The Man and His Work*, equally meritorious. It traces the major forces that have shaped the Colombian writer and skillfully integrates his personality and politics with his literary creations. Divided into eleven chapters, the first five deal with the contemporary novel, Colombian geography and history, and the life, politics, and literary formation of García Márquez. The fifth chapter, "The Readings," is a useful overview of the presence of such writers as Kafka, the Greek tragedians, Rabelais, Faulkner, and Woolf, as well as the Bible itself, in García Márquez's prose fiction. Chapters 6 through 10 deal with his major novels and the short story collections.

Perhaps the most innovative section is chapter 11, a survey of the Colombian writer's influence on the contemporary fiction of the United States. Bell-Villada contends that the novels of such writers as John Nichols, William Kennedy, Robert Coover, and Alice Walker would not have been possible without the originating presence of the classic *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*). Kennedy and Coover have published serious essays on the work of García Márquez. Other contemporary writers including Norman Mailer, Lois Gold, and Anne Tyler mention his work and its impact on their own fiction.

Chapter 6, which deals with *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), and chapter 9, an analysis of *El otoño del patriarca* (*Autumn of the Patriarch*), demand special mention. Both chapters show a mastery of the novels as well as knowledge of the principal critical studies these works have inspired. Chapter 10 studies three novels focused on love. The section dealing with *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*), merits special attention for its depth and useful analysis. Because its publication was