

Eva M. Pérez Rodríguez. 2012. *How the Second World War Is Depicted by British Novelists since 1990. The Passage of Time Changes Our Portrayal of Traumatic Events*. Lewinnton, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen. x + 251 pp. ISBN: 13: 978-0-7734-2615-3; 10: 0-7734-2615-9.

JACEK MYDLA · ALEKSANDRA MUSIAŁ

Institute of English Cultures and Literatures · University of Silesia, Poland

jacek.mydla@us.edu.pl · ak\_musial@hotmail.co.uk

Eva Pérez's book, *How the Second World War Is Depicted by British Novelists since 1990. The Passage of Time Changes Our Portrayal of Traumatic Events*, is a study of novels that deal with World War II (WWII) and were published in Britain after 1990. Pérez provides an overview of the major concerns that the conflict has raised for contemporary British writers.

Although the World War II trend in criticism has never been dormant, it is subject to fluctuations of interest. Pérez's book belongs among the scholarly re-visitations of the war's mythology that, in a broader sociological context, were launched by Paul Fussell's seminal *Wartime. Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (1989) and have continued into the 2000s and 2010s, most recently with Marianna Torgovnick's *The War Complex. World War II in Our Time* (2005) and Edward Wood's *Worshipping the Myths of World War II* (2006). With its strictly literary realm and its British focus, there are some parallels between Pérez's book and Bernard Bergonzi's *Wartime and Aftermath: English Literature and Its Background 1939-1960* (1993), both of them covering a number of authors and operating within a well-defined timeframe. The most important study on the subject to date is Mark Rawlinson's *British Writing of the Second World War* (2000); however, while Rawlinson and others have dealt with *wartime* literature, the novelty of Pérez's undertaking is its dedication to modern British authors and their novels. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of World War II* (MacKay 2009) includes a chapter by Petra Rau on contemporary WWII fiction by writers of various nationalities; some of the texts chosen by Pérez are already discussed by Rau, but in a more general fashion than in the volume under review. Even though Pérez's contribution to the field can be comfortably placed within the established traditions of academic interest in war writing concerned with WWII, her study inaugurates scholarly concern with second- and third-generation writers and their perspectives on a war they did not witness. As such, her book is, to date, unique in its precise focus and subject matter.

The book is divided into three parts. Their titles are largely self-explanatory: In part one, Pérez analyses the "debunking" and "preservation" of myths. In part two, she invites

us to “revisit history.” Part three is about how individuals and nations cross paths. The novels chosen for close analysis are: Sarah Waters’s *The Night Watch* (2006), Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), William Boyd’s *Restless* (2006), Sebastian Faulk’s *Charlotte Gray* (1998), and Robert Harris’s *Enigma* (1995), in part one; Tim Binding’s *Island Madness* (1994), Owen Sheers’s *Resistance* (2007), Peter Ho Davis’s *The Welsh Girl* (2007), A.L. Kennedy’s *Day* (2007), and A. McCall Smith’s *La’s Orchestra Saves the Word* (2008), in part two; Helen Dunmore’s *The Siege* (2001), Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room* (2001), Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991), Louis de Bernières’s *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* (1994), Mark Mills’s *The Information Officer* (2009), and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans* (2000), in part three. Pérez’s decision to examine sixteen novels testifies to her ambition to cover as much ground as the subject matter and the argument require.

Rather than dealing with soldiering, military tactics and campaigns, combat and warfare, or international diplomacy, the novels Pérez studies treat WWII as backdrop for stories of civilian lives. The sixteen novels are not war fictions—only four of the novels deal with “the vicissitudes of the front, and then only marginally” (2)—but tell stories of common lives warped by a wide range of war-related circumstances and war-induced problems. Pérez asserts the value of such a small-scale view of an epic event with the help of Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of micronarratives, or *petit récits* (2), as opposed to large-scale or “macronarratives,” such as the “master-narrative of Britain’s participation in the Battle of the Atlantic” (80). Yet she does not ignore the broad arena, of which the reader is constantly reminded. Thanks to her competent and skilful use of factual information, we realize that the two perspectives—micro and macro—are not incompatible. Large-scale and military historiography needs to be complemented by small-scale histories.

Pérez structures the book to give an interpretive treatment to each of the sixteen novels. This critical egalitarianism has its merits; however, the chapters read as essays in their own right, at the expense of the unity of the whole work. Cross-references have been impossible to avoid and there are shared themes, some repeatedly and overtly made reference to in the book, others covertly apparent to the reader, but they are not summarized in more general discussions that would sufficiently elucidate them. For example, among the most conspicuous issues is the question of national identity (chiefly, of course, the British national identity), appearing in most of the novels under discussion; yet nowhere in the book is the subject given systematic treatment as a major overarching concern influencing British WWII writing, or, conversely, as an issue finding various and complex expressions in the books that may aid in defining just what the British identity is. (We shall return to this topic presently.) Despite the often captivating readings of the novels, in places her analyses tend to focus on minute details of plots, and due to lack of grouping and summing-up we sometimes lose sight of the broader context.

The modes of treatment of the literary material vary considerably. For example, *Atonement* is analysed mostly as a literary text, with much of the discussion centred on postmodern discourse. In some cases, Pérez stays attuned to what she regards as the novel’s main feature or concern; in others, we receive summaries of plots and explanations of

the historical circumstances of events. Perhaps the undisclosed purpose is to be always in motion and to prevent one perspective or approach from monopolising the analysis. While some readers will like this quicksilver style, others may not.

To expand the point just made, Pérez pays considerable attention to the different types of narration, and specifically to how a novelist's "technical" choices influence the reader's understanding of events and situations. The book's title has already indicated that the scholar is concerned with how the passage of time affects a person's (and a nation's) way of seeing a traumatic event. The relations between a novel's formal aspects and the various ethical and historiographical issues they raise are in some cases especially intriguing, e.g., in *The Night Watch*, with its retrospective type of narration (22-23), and in *Atonement* (35). Pérez's foregrounding of narration, however, is not consistent. In some sections she applies the tools of narrative theory to examine an author's technique, while in others attention shifts to different matters.

Pérez's book offers a felicitous combination of accuracy and reader-friendliness; she avoids the kind of debate that the non-specialised reader might find tedious, yet never compromises the rigours of academic discourse. While the formal features of the book do meet the requirements of a scholarly study, in many passages the temptation to step out of academia was occasionally too strong for the author to resist. When Pérez reaches for theories, she tends to rely on secondary sources (e.g., Roland Barthes on page 48; Michel Foucault in note 29; Wolfgang Iser and Hayden White on page 35; and Jean-François Lyotard, as mentioned above). The overall impression is that Pérez takes a pragmatic approach to theory and is interested in ideas and conceptions that are useful in her analysis. Obvious also is her determination not to allow theory to obfuscate the subject matter in hand; war, in other words, is not to be an occasion to settle theoretical debates.

British identity and its shaky position is evidently an issue that attracts contemporary novelists to WWII. The different ways of addressing it in recent fiction (e.g., *Night Watch*, *Atonement*, *Restless*, *Enigma*, *La's Orchestra Saves the World*) suggest the impossibility of constructing a fixed and stable national character. This is especially interesting in view of today's resurgence of faith in the British pre-war spirit. It is to Pérez's credit that she is critical of attempts to define the "national character" (128). She never tires of pointing out what she calls "the dissonance between what the nation believed [and still believes] and the facts" (42). This kind of dissonance, disquieting as it may be, is perhaps unavoidable, at least as long as nations willingly inhabit what Salman Rushdie memorably described as "imaginary homelands" (1982).

We have commented already on the informational value of the book, surprising as this statement may sound when made in relation to a study of fiction. The reader will be impressed by the amount and scope of research that has gone into the book. Pérez is not only familiar with the textbook history of WWII, but also knows and shares many intriguing nuances the reader may be ignorant of or tend to ignore; these include the German occupation of the Channel Islands, the spy networks, the French and other

national allegiances or Poland's involvement. Pérez skilfully combines factual history with literary interpretations, making her readers more aware of the social and cultural issues the novels address.

Pérez's decision to study current fictional re-visitations through a workable sample is as interesting as it is justifiable. Although a relatively recent event, WWII as reflected in the novels is a field for the imagination, eligible for changes of perspective. The novelists have not witnessed the war themselves, which justifies the term second-generation imagination and supports her focus on myths and their cultural "lives." Alternative or fictional history is still read as history; and if understanding an event or a process requires the exercise of the historical imagination, then the reading of a novel may be justified as a way of putting this faculty to use. What is more, one of the issues that Pérez's book makes the reader confront is that imagination is a factor active in the very process of an event's coming into being. As we read in the first chapter, the novels help us address complex phenomena, not only that of "the country's collective imagination," but also those of "selective memory" and "historical inaccuracies" (17-18).

Pérez succeeds in convincing her readers, as a reflection of the literary material she looks at, that WWII continues to be re-visited in order to be re-interpreted, placed in new contexts and put to new uses. She assesses the current image of the conflict in popular culture (most of the novels seem to answer to this category) and shows her readers how the myth of WWII continues to thrive: how it is re-imagined and re-appropriated, and what stories it can accommodate. Some of the novels are evidently closer and more appealing to Pérez than others. The section on *Atonement* shows the scholar at work on a text that poses special challenges for her hermeneutic skills. In what reads as a superb essay in its own right, Pérez notes that a critical perusal of *Atonement* "becomes a virtually endless exercise in interpretation" (37); the wealth of issues that this novel raises does indeed come through in her analysis. In the foreword, Fernández-Corugedo remarks that Pérez's book encourages a person to read the novels it discusses; this is certainly the case with the analysis of *Atonement*, as well as a number of other novels she discusses and about the content of which she feels strongly.

WWII remains a theme that novelists regard as worthy of artistic exploration. Simultaneously, the way in which the temporal distance has affected perceptions and attitudes is another incentive, imaginatively, to travel back in time and explore the past. Perplexities inherent in any traumatic event of international magnitude are not only intriguing but almost overwhelming. In particular, what was then, and still is, at stake is a society's and a nation's identity. As the title of Pérez's concluding chapter suggests, the past may be "elusive," but history is "inescapable." Close or distant, historic events are not easy to grasp, but novels about them may help us to do the grasping, due to the generic demand for closure. At the same time, elusive as the past may seem, we find ourselves in its grip. Wars are times when the grip of history feels more like an iron hasp. Stories of the entrapment of lives in and by war make up the substance of war fiction and are a fascinating area for scholarly explorations.

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Received 15 May 2013

Revised version accepted 23 May 2014

Jacek Mydla holds an MA in philosophy and English philology, as well as a PhD in literary studies. He is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures (University of Silesia). He has published on a variety of topics in the area of literary and cultural studies.

Aleksandra Musiał holds a BA in Ancient World Studies from University College London. She graduated with an MA in English from the University of Silesia, Poland, where she is currently a PhD student at the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures. Her research interests include war reception and representation in society and culture.

Address: Instytut Kultur i Literatur Anglojęzycznych (Institute of English Cultures and Literatures). Wydział Filologiczny Uniwersytetu Śląskiego. ul. Gen. Stefana Grotta-Roweckiego 5. 41-205 Sosnowiec, Poland. Tel.: + 48 32 364 08 50; +48 507225668.