

James Clements. 2012. *Mysticism and the Mid-Century Novel*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan. viii + 209 pp. ISBN: 978-0-230-30354-6.

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In *Fabulation and Metafiction*, a pioneering study of mid-twentieth-century experimental fiction, Robert Scholes adopted the term *fabulation* to refer to “a movement of great importance in contemporary fiction” that had been “ignored” or “misinterpreted” simply “because it lacked a name” (1979, 1). As a new narrative style, different from nineteenth-century realism and modernism, fabulation was characterised by its “extraordinary delight in design” (2), the movement “away from the representation of reality,” and the ability to “rejoice and refresh” its audience, often through didacticism (3). In order to refer to such disparate practitioners of fabulation as Lawrence Durrell, Kurt Vonnegut, Iris Murdoch, John Barth, William Golding, Anthony Burgess, Thomas Pynchon and Jorge Luis Borges, among others, Scholes revived the old term *fabulator*.

While many of the authors that Scholes discussed are nowadays called postmodernists, others are more often viewed as belated modernists. Although these have become accepted terms, the debates relating to the defining features of modernism and postmodernism have not ended, as shown by the competing definitions surveyed by Fokkema (1997). James Clements’s *Mysticism and the Mid-Century Novel* offers a new characterisation of novelistic postmodernism, modernism, twentieth-century neo-realism and even realism as practised in the nineteenth century. Clements’s aim is to find a way to insert, between the first two and side-by-side with neo-realism (the British Angry Young Men, for example), what he calls the mystical novel, cultivated by such English-language authors as Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Patrick White and Saul Bellow “between 1953 and the late 1970s” (2012, 25), thus redressing the critical neglect that the mystical elements in their novels have allegedly suffered.

In his Introduction Clements classifies realist, modernist, postmodernist, neo-realist and mystical novels according to three basic criteria: first, the focus on an objective reality (mind-independent or at least publicly shared) or subjective reality (mind-dependent *and* individually seen); secondly, the belief in the ethical meaning or meaninglessness of the world thus presented; thirdly, the reliance on or mistrust of rational structures, including the construction of master narratives. With respect

to the first and second of these, Clements contends that realism generally depicts an objective world suffused with ethical meaning, modernism tends to stress the ethical significance of the subjective, neo-realism foregrounds the lack of ethical meaning of the objective, postmodernism tends to emphasise the meaninglessness of both objective and subjective reality, and the mystical novels try to restore ethical meaning to the objective world (often by means of traditional realist techniques, the difference with realism lying in the discrediting of master narratives). In terms of the third criterion, realist novels interpret reality through such narrative frameworks as that provided, for example, by religious eschatology, whereas modernist, neo-realist, postmodernist and mystical novels are suspicious of explanations that, for all their consoling power, are ultimately reductive rationalisations, out of touch with reality. In his characterisation of the mystical novel, Clements identifies two additional features, closely tied to the restoration of objective ethical meaning. One is the privileging of forms of knowledge that are non-rational and non-linguistic—therefore difficult to communicate by means of words appealing to reason—to the detriment of forms of knowledge that are rational. The other is the acceptance of a metaphysical side to the world, which is only accessible in altered states of consciousness, alongside the physical side, which can be grasped through ordinary perception. In the Conclusion, Clements attempts to establish connections between mid-century mystical novels and a later post-secular movement, whose impact has been noticeable on philosophy as well as literature. Like novelistic mysticism, post-secularism rejects the positivist stripping of reality from ethical and religious value, while shunning rational dogmatism and keeping its distance from all religious confessions.

Clements's understanding of mysticism has a strong cognitive component. Strikingly enough, it does not put the accent on metaphysics but on non-rational cognition: for him *mysticism* is a mode of consciousness "through which one sheds or suppresses the rational mental constructs that form, organize, and distort immediate experience, in order to experience the world without mediation" (14). This definition differs from standard descriptions of the mystical trance, such as Gellman's (2011): "[a] (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual unitive experience granting acquaintance of realities . . . not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection." (If the experience is not unitive, that is, if the boundaries between subject and object are preserved, Gellman calls it *numinous* rather than *mystical*.) In Clements's understanding, which I shall follow here, mysticism encompasses all kinds of non-rational cognition, including unprocessed physical perception, presumably because they are harder to communicate than rational concepts; what his definition does not include, unlike Gellman's, is the kind of union that can be experienced after the intellectual forms on which knowledge depends have been shed and the subject-object distinction has been obliterated.

To understand how mystical experiences can be shared at all, argues Clements, we must attend to the effects that verbal signs have on the receiver. We can use words so

that they will appeal to reason; these uses—labelled *denotative* by Clements—are more suitable for the transmission of concepts. There are other linguistic uses that trigger non-rational responses and Clements presents these uses—which he calls *evocative*—as more suitable for the communication of mystical states. He explains that evocative communication recurrently appears in mystical non-fictional writings, where it is classified into apophasis and kataphasis. The utility of apophasis is more limited: since it turns on negation and even on the negation of contraries, apophasis can only say what the mystical is not. By contrast, kataphasis employs elusive symbols to convey what the mystical is like. *Mysticism and the Mid-Century Novel* deals successively with Murdoch, Golding, White and Bellow because they can be ranked on a scale of increasing kataphasis and decreasing apophasis.

The first chapter focuses on Murdoch's essays, the novel *Under the Net* (1954) and her fiction from *An Accidental Man* (1971) to *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). According to Clements, one important characteristic of Murdoch's thought is the belief that disinterested, selfless cognition—especially if non-rational—is more accurate than selfish reasoning at the service of will. In Clements's view, Murdoch regards selfless vision as a moral necessity, because it is more penetrating and puts us in touch with the essence of reality—the transcendent Good. As he puts it, for Murdoch “the closer we are to a selfless and accurate vision of the world, the less likely we are to do harm” (2012, 38). By contrast, interested cognition is usually associated with reason and leads to evil, as it separates us from the underlying Good. According to Clements's interpretation, Murdoch's fiction goes from an early struggle with the problem of linguistic representation and narrative authority to the deployment of different apophatic strategies. However, Clements sees Murdoch as rejecting the possibility that literature “can truly overcome the limitations of language” (65). Likewise, Clements concludes, Murdoch remains suspicious of the kind of mysticism that overcomes all knowledge, because it “is above or beyond compassion,” hence “beyond good and evil” (39).

The second chapter turns to Golding's early novels up to and including *The Spire* (1964). According to Clements, Golding shares with Murdoch the belief that the Good can be objectively located, and that disinterest and selflessness are necessary to reach it; but unlike Murdoch, Clements says, Golding sometimes identifies this Good with God. In Golding's fiction the presence of the divinity—and of whatever remains outside the purview of knowledge (particularly of rational knowledge)—jeopardises the individual self. Clements's contention is that Golding's first novels put the emphasis on what this dimension beyond knowledge is not, while his last novels resort to symbolic presentation to hint kataphatically at what that dimension could be like.

The third chapter analyses White's novels from *The Tree of Man* (1955) to *The Solid Mandala* (1966). For Clements, what these works have in common is their attempt to blur the self-other distinction through mysticism. In Clements's view, White's goal is not to take his characters and readers beyond the surrounding world, but to help the self dissolve in it, where the immanent Good (God) lies. Clements contends that White

likes to identify this Good God with the Australian wilderness, which the rationalism of the continent's non-aboriginal colonisers cannot quite comprehend or control (on the contrary, rational attempts to control the wilderness alienate them from the Good and give rise to evil). White's novels offer what Clements calls "a treatise on Australian identity"; as Clements puts it, they aspire to show that the path of selfless humility could "aid the nation to raise itself from its evil 'mediocrity'" (130). As for White's style, Clements argues that he never resorts to apophasis, preferring "to evoke the mystical . . . by complicating and destabilizing his prose so that meaning is never allowed to settle, endlessly unwinding itself" towards the non-rational in an impressionistic, kataphatic manner (103). If in White's novels "meaning is endlessly interpretable," as Clements writes, it is not because these images are weightless, but because they point to "the infinity of God" (113).

The fourth chapter deals with Bellow's novels from *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) to *Humboldt's Gift* (1975). Clements states that Bellow never downplays the possibility of attaining mystical states, but that, unlike the three other authors, he "does not aspire to . . . the possibility of imparting such a vision in his own novels" (149). In comparison, Clements observes, Bellow is more interested in the ordinary human condition, and does not put so much emphasis on selflessness. In Clements's opinion, what Bellow stresses, as do the others, is the intrinsic value of objective life, the inadequacy of reason's reductive systematisation to discover that value, the necessity of liberating cognition from its rational blinkers, and literature's duty to do justice to non-rational knowledge by means of evocative—or, as Bellow calls them, "musical" (quoted in Clements 2012, 173)—uses of language. Clements's contention is that Bellow does so not by focusing directly on the metaphysical, but by showing that the "outer appearances" of the visible universe, far from being "masks that conceal" the object's and the person's essence, are revelatory of that essence (152).

On the whole Clements's readings of the novels are clear and persuasive. Also convincing is his view that the authors he deals with are intent on demoting rationality, focusing instead on non-rational cognition and on the difficulties of communicating its contents. What is arguable is whether the emphasis on the mystical in the works of Murdoch, Golding, White and Bellow can be regarded as the keystone of a whole new novelistic movement—and on an international scale to boot. The fact that Clements restricts his discussion to the authors originally mentioned by Murdoch in one of her essays may be indicative that it is not easy to find other post-war novelists with the same interest in the ineffable non-rational. The conclusion of the book, where mysticism is reduced to an "undercurrent" running through mainstream fiction, seems more realistic (185).

One of the chief merits of the book is the identification of philosophical influences and parallels. Tracing the origins of the ethical devaluation of the objective, Clements mentions Kant's contention that ethical value is not given but made through one's virtuous action, and Wittgenstein's advice not to discuss such metaphysical topics as

ethics at all. In the chapter devoted to Murdoch, mention is made of Wittgenstein, Plato, and Simone Weil. Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas are used to throw light on White's concerns. With Bellow, Rudolf Steiner is presented as a major influence, and as regards Golding, the main author that Clements mentions is the early Christian mystic Gregory of Nyssa. Unfortunately, Steiner's possible impact on Golding is not dealt with (despite the evidence offered by Carey 2009), and neither is Golding's affinity with Schopenhauer (explored, for example, in Saavedra-Carballido 2014). These qualifications notwithstanding, Clements's book is a product of serious scholarship, and a useful introduction to four great contemporary novelists.

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