

Juan F. Elices 2006: *The Satiric Worlds of William Boyd. A Case-Study*. Bern: Peter Lang. 259 pp. ISBN: 3-03910-691-0

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When Elices' book came out in 2006, William Boyd was already a well-known author actively publishing, as his latest works have shown (*Fascination* 2004, *Bamboo* 2005, *Restless* 2006). However, by then, few studies within the Spanish academic realm had analyzed or questioned Boyd's contribution, those by Lázaro (1997, 2000) and Rivas (1999) being the most notable ones. Thus, this book, which provides much more than 'A Case Study', is welcome as it fills an existing vacuum, and stands as a serious, original examination of Boyd and his work.

Elices approaches Boyd's writing with the intention of dismantling its peculiar satiric discourse. A serious analysis revealing a deep knowledge of critical and literary satiric works allows him to wisely interpret the use of satire in contemporary narratives. His previous scholarly studies in the field (especially *Historical and Theoretical Approaches to English Satire* 2004) credential him as a natural reader of satire and enable him to approach five narrative works written by Boyd before 2006. Even if it is not mentioned as part of the methodological apparatus, Elices implicitly offers a complex exercise of comparative literature as one of his most efficient techniques of analysis. Constantly referring to satirical tradition from its theoretical, literary and artistic perspectives, he shows how, even in contemporary times and with new elements, the powerful satiric machinery works.

The reader of the book sympathises with the author as he/she feels that various unsurmountable roads have been taken in the ever-complex theoretical battlefield of satire, and many primary texts have been read in order to ascertain the satiric nature of Boyd's work. Thus, the book reveals an extensive comprehension of traditional studies on satire, ranging through etymological, formalist, archetypical, rhetorical, and anthropological approaches. It combines celebrated names of the sixties: Highet (1962), Feinberg (1967) or Sutherland (1967), and the well-known voices from the seventies and eighties who have encouraged the revision of satire, such as Edward and Lillian Bloom (1979), Seidel (1979) or Fletcher (1987). Having taken into account the dense and overwhelming study by Dustin Griffin (1994) as well as Combe and Connery's contribution (1995) also shows Elices' awareness of the change of perspective that since the nineties has transformed the simple and conventional definition of satire into a theoretical interpretation of a complex, versatile and elusive spirit. As Ralph Rosen proves (2007: 17) and Herman Real intelligently stated, satiric critics are aware of the difficult explanation of the concept 'satire', that ultimately depends on a personal choice: "the definition of satire is no longer to be regarded as a factual question, but as a decision question" (1995: 9).

Elices' familiarity with satirical works, especially those from the English eighteenth and twentieth centuries allows him to unravel the sophisticated vision of William Boyd on human nature. The interest of the book lies in the complex point of confluence between satire and the discourse of contemporary fiction. In Boyd's case, one cannot consider his use of satire in simple terms precisely because of his profile and the themes that intermingle in his works. His African origin and Scottish upbringing comprise an explosive mixture that makes his work almost unclassifiable. Elices, however, marshals his arguments to justify Boyd's satirical individualistic touch, determined by realist parameters within the postcolonial discourse. This is not the first time that this complex mixture has taken place in satiric literature. Thackeray quickly comes to mind. Born in Calcutta and educated in England, he fused in his works proximity and detachment from the society he critiqued, leaving such successful portraits as the government official Joseph Sedley in *Vanity Fair*, who moves to London after working for the Empire in India. Like Boyd, Thackeray considered himself a comic writer in the serious sense of the term. Both include in their works the dynamics of a colonial or postcolonial setting (India or Africa) and the perspective of the expatriate, of the English abroad or at home with enormous doses of irony and a sense of humour that verges on cynicism and sarcasm.

Connections such as this can arise from the reading of Elices' book. Aware of the power of satire throughout literary history, and knowing how many authors have used it as a critical weapon, he weaves a complex web to analyze Boyd's narrative, convincing the reader that Boyd cannot be understood fully if Roman and Augustan satiric heritage, or works by Waugh, Orwell and Lewis among many are ignored. He offers a clever exercise of exposition and elaboration, given the many accurate and useful comparisons that allow the reader to imagine other possible associations.

Elices' work revises satiric discourse in contemporary narrative, revealing Boyd's personal interpretation of the plural and complex society in which we live. In general, his analysis points not only to Boyd's determination to use the satiric mode, so common among his predecessors, but also to his individualistic proposal, studied through recurrent features that Elices has discovered. It is an ambitious work as Elices finds what he calls "significant parallelism" (15), "literary connections" (80) or "echoes" (82) of traditional satiric strategies in Boyd's narratives and describes them in an exhaustive and up-to-date study. The key to this technique is set out at the very beginning of the book, where the initial quotes from Kernan and Swift postulate the adequate combination of theoretical proposals and detailed practical examples proved throughout the five chapters of the 259 pages in the book, introduction and bibliography included.

After a detailed introduction, the initial chapter ('William Boyd's Narrative Production') sets off with a biographical sketch of Boyd, an author whose complex combination of humour and realism has detached him from the rest of the so-called postmodernist contemporary authors. That factor, Elices argues, makes it difficult to find critical approaches to his work (35). This is a useful chapter since Boyd's general narrative features are summarized and since some of the works that are not the focus of this study are mentioned: his scripts, short story collections and the novel *Any Human Heart* (2005). The reader learns about Boyd's literary background and although his

personal tribute to Rousseau (*The New Confessions* 1987) is mentioned, it would have been interesting to have more information on Boyd's personal debt to other authors, especially the satirists, with whom Elices cleverly makes connection later on. Normally, reviewers of Boyd's books recognise his influence from other writers and Elices takes it for granted. Since we get to know Boyd's admiration of Fitzgerald, Auden or Heaney, it would have been interesting to be given some insight into his direct preferences for certain satirists, or other personal and literary convergences, so as to complete his profile with other useful *rapports de fait*.

Each of the ensuing chapters focuses on one single work within Boyd's narrative, analyzed mainly around one aspect of the satiric discourse. In the second chapter, which deals with *A Good Man in Africa*, political satire and the recognizable anti-colonial attacks are carefully pointed out. Knowing the recurring presence of political subjects in satirical works, Elices engages with the topic through three aspects: the figure of the anti-hero, the satiric scene and the effects of colonialism. He confronts the anti-hero in the novel, Morgan Leafy, with a wide range of heroes, from classic figures to the postmodernist anti-hero. A necessary step into relevant modernist anti-heroes such as Bloom or Prufrock should have been included for a fuller understanding of Boyd's contribution. Reflections on the use of the grotesque complement the observation of scatology as a conscious weapon to mark moral and physical degradation of the character. Elices makes a clever comparison between Leafy and Gulliver, and successfully proves the power of satiric scenes in Boyd's book referring to analogous satiric representations such as those by Bernard Picart or William Hogarth. Important parallelisms are also established so as to understand the disorder, chaos and corruption of the fictional Nkongsamba imagined by Boyd in a knowledgeable reference to the satiric attacks on Rome by Juvenal, or London by Johnson. One of Elices' most successful points is the clarification of Boyd's degree of criticism in the way he diverges from the classics: even if at times his incisive rebukes acquire Juvenalian tones, he never offers solutions or advice for reform. His truly comic but disturbing narrative succeeds in making the reader reach his/her own conclusions.

With the explanation of another novel in chapter three ('Anti-war Satire in *An Ice-Cream War*'), Boyd's contribution is analyzed in detail. A description of the complex satiric scene is provided in a two-folded exercise. Stackpole Manor is studied as an emblematic centre of affectation, and the war scenario in East Africa is incisively portrayed, the British presence being deflated in a degrading portrait of deplorable administrative and institutional activities. In the contextualization of satirical approaches against war, Elices simply nods to Hasek and his work *The Good Soldier* (1921), leaving out other important works, such as Shaw's incisive *Arms and the Man*. To study the war scenario and its futility, Elices rightly chooses the theoretical reflections by Rosenheim (1963), a good support throughout the book, proving how satire needs to be grounded in a real historical background in order to be successful. His historical revision on satiric compositions on war includes the unavoidable examples of the mock-heroic tradition and, although he surprisingly forgets Fielding, his account of Cervantes, *Hudibras*, *The Battle of Books* or the comparison between Hasek and Brooke is enlightening. Boyd's technique, therefore, is well understood in this light. Clear examples of the animalization of humans and degradation in the portrait of the British

army are provided and scatological images are described, proving Boyd's connections to the literary tradition arising from Aristophanes. Old strategies used in a new context help to understand the deflation of the British presence in Africa, clearly revealed in the character of Felix Cobb, the representation of an immobilized and decadent England.

The complexity of Boyd's incisive satire is also extensively analyzed in chapter four ('*Stars and Bars: Great Britain and the United States*'), a double rebuke comparing the old Continent with the excesses of modern civilisation in the new America. The chapter deals with Boyd's complex exercise in irony to point to the conflicts of racial identities. Elices relies on a concise theoretical framework based on Bhabha's (1995) explanation of cultural hybridisation, and describes the clever game that Boyd sets up in manipulating language to demystify the use of English (American and British). Linguistic errors and misunderstandings mark the lack of communication between speakers of English and enhance Boyd's critical attention to ignorance and lack of education. The complex analysis of witty dialogues clarifies Boyd's sarcastic attack and leaves an open field of study and research for any reader interested on the strategies used by Spanish translators, for example, Bernardo Moreno (Boyd 2006), when confronting those entangled exercises on language. Moreover, the complex degree of satire on immigration issues is clearly understood through the analysis of the protagonist Henderson Does, a British citizen on American soil, who ironically falls into a process of alienation similar to any other African or Asian visitor.

The fifth chapter ('The Relation between Satire and Cinema in "The Destiny of Nathalie X"'), deals with the first short story in the collection of the same title. Elices considers it the paradigm of the satiric short story as Boyd magnificently sets his examination on Hollywood and the film industry as the focus of satire. The question of immigration, so exhaustively analyzed in his other works is enhanced in the satiric portrait of Hollywood's superficiality. It is cleverly explained as the contemporary recreation of an imaginary Vanity Fair, and justifies Boyd's place in the tradition of Bunyan and Wolfe. This sets a smooth transition into the sixth chapter ('Conflicts of Identity: *Armadillo's* Satiric Approaches'), where London is studied as an exceptional satiric scene, the site of identity conflicts. For the contextualization of the use of London as a source of satire, Elices proposes an ambitious revision that leaves aside relevant authors, especially those satirists from the nineteenth century whose vision of London is essential in the history of satire (Austen and her depiction of the subtle superiority of the high classes, or Thackeray's description of rich *parvenus*). The implications of the double identity of the main character, Milomre Blocj transformed into Lorimer Black, is carefully explained and provides a good example of the figure of the stranger as an object of satire. An exile, immigrant and expatriate, he becomes the excuse for all Boyd's sarcastic observations on the situation of contemporary multiracial societies, and brings to the reader's mind Dalnehoff's (1973) and Kristeva's (1991) studies on the outsider, revealing the multiple possibilities of this satirical type in a twenty-first century interpretation.

Throughout the book, Elices seems to have in mind Genette's (1997) *Paratexts* as he considers relevant paratextual elements that are so frequently ignored in satiric analysis. His close attention to the satirical possibilities of initial quotes and endings proves how those elements contribute with relevant connotations to the total effect of Boyd's satire,

as shown, for example, when discussing the ending of *A Good Man in Africa*, or likewise its beginning, he compares it with Clarin's opening of *La Regenta*. A similar approach might have been expected in the treatment of Boyd's powerful prologues, as in the famous revealing letter that opens *An Ice-Cream War*, or the shocking initial paragraph in *Armadillo*.

All in all, this is a book that can be enlightening for readers who are fond of scrutinizing satiric strategies. In the early chapters Elices is inclined to offer a too detailed description of the plot of the novels. For those readers not well versed in Boyd's works, it can be quite useful, for those who have read the novels, it becomes an extra complement that slows the complete exercise of research and reflection proposed later. The clever organization of the contents analyses each work around one contemporary crucial theme (political colonialism, war, racial identity, immigration, multilingual city lives) proving Boyd's skilful manipulation of effective traditional satiric strategies. Cultural and literary connections between centuries explain satisfactorily the transformations that the versatile satiric spirit has undergone in order to be incorporated successfully into contemporary works. The combination of classic postulates with revisionist proposals of updated criticism enriches the theoretical support of the literary reading. Web resources could have been included, such as the well-known useful bibliographical link by Brian Connery from the University of Oakland (*Theorizing Satire. A Bibliography*), which updates theories of satire, narrative satire, drama satire, satiric strategies, satire in historical and national literatures, extra literary satire, etc. The book relies mostly on eighteenth century satire and thus, useful references to satire in the 19th century have not been included, such as Lockwood's study on the so-called post-Augustan satire, Palmieri's (2003) research on post-Juvenalian satire or Marcus Wood's (1994) study on satiric visual images.

One of the book's best values lies in its power of suggestion. Some reflections are enlightening, evoking our curiosity and stimulating the motives for research. Reading Elices's book one is aware of the many approaches that can be taken to trace the rough tracks of the satiric spirit. The reader feels able to apply, as does George Test (1991), five basic categories to rightly understand Boyd's intentional satire, as his truly comic production proves to be a disturbing, intelligent coordination of aggression, game, humour, judgement and censorship. His surprising use of realistic details and his harsh wit as seen in Elices' study show themselves to be a clever exercise to uncover the truths of our contemporary times and of our human nature.

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