

REVIEWS

Francis Mulhern, *Figures of Catastrophe: The Condition of Culture Novel*
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FICTIONS OF CULTURE

In one of Matthew Arnold's most celebrated lyrics, 'Dover Beach', the speaker projects his state of mind onto the sea, which he perceives as cold, unfeeling and foreign. Only at the beginning of the fourth stanza does he find some kind of comfort, in the presence of a beloved. But even this brief glimpse of hope is undercut and quickly gives way to disenchantment:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! For the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

'Dover Beach' appeared in Arnold's last collection of poetry, *New Poems* (1867), which was a swan-song of sorts: Arnold seems to have felt that poetry was unable to alter human conduct in ways appropriate to modern life. He therefore turned to criticism, in an attempt to craft the conditions that would reinvigorate poetry's potential to do so. One of his most significant contributions to criticism was, in his preface to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), the redefinition of culture as 'a pursuit of our total perfection by

means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits'. It was through the cultivation of this disposition that men of different classes would be able to meet on equal terms. Shedding light on the darkling plain of the present, culture would abolish the typically English religion of inequality. Born out of his experiences on the Continent, this definition of culture was a controversial one, as it challenged an older and very different idea of culture as a set of customs and traditions: given the weight that patriotism carried in Victorian public discourse, many of Arnold's fellow citizens would have been reluctant to alienate themselves from this more traditional notion. As a result, the Arnoldian quest for culture became something of a phantom formation, its potential unrealized and its purposiveness elusive. It is this constitutive instability that gave rise to a discourse in which culture began to speak about itself and its conditions of existence.

In an earlier study, *Culture/Metaculture* (2000), Francis Mulhern charted the course of this discourse in the twentieth century while, from the sidelines, taking aim at many of its practitioners for collapsing the sphere of politics into that of aesthetics. Statements in metacultural discourse, in Mulhern's analysis, tend to usurp the place of judgements that properly belong to the domain of politics. It is this observation that led Mulhern to posit a hidden continuity between the elitist cultural criticism of the first half of the twentieth century (as practised by such different figures as F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot) and the more popular criticism within the discipline of Cultural Studies of the second half (whose foundational figure is Stuart Hall). Mulhern's characterization of these two seemingly opposite schools of thought and the implication that they are antagonistic variants of a shared metacultural discourse did not go unchallenged, however. In the pages of this journal, for instance, Stefan Collini's review sparked a critical exchange. It was from this 'timely provocation', as Mulhern describes it, that his new book was born. In *Figures of Catastrophe*, Mulhern examines how metacultural discourse sustains a current in the twentieth-century novel: not only do these novels suggest the usurpation of the place of politics in metacultural discourse, but they arguably do so in the name of a specific selectivity—the 'best that has been thought and said'—within the totality of significations that comprise any given culture. Mulhern thus effectively taxes what he calls the 'condition of culture' novel with performing a double distortion, masking an order of power as an order of meanings, and doing so in the name of a particular, arbitrary hierarchy of meanings.

One of the fundamental insights of *Figures of Catastrophe* is the observation that the matter of culture has been dealt with in novels, presumably that most bourgeois of literary forms. For Arnold, after all, it was only in

(classical) poetry that an imaginative engagement with the conditions of modernity could be staged. Many later thinkers about culture also favoured the lyric. W. B. Yeats famously lamented that in the present ‘all neglect / monuments of unaging intellect’. T. S. Eliot, too, clothed his critical metier with his authority as a poet. And in ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’, Theodor Adorno declaimed that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’. To suggest that the novel has taken part in the development of metacultural discourse is thus not self-evident. Perhaps this built-in lack of affinity partly explains why, as Mulhern shows, the twentieth-century novel proved to be an inhospitable environment for Arnold’s critical enterprise.

Mulhern raises the stakes by suggesting that these metacultural novels constitute a distinctive genre—the ‘condition of culture’ novel. He maintains that it has its roots in the industrial novel, a nineteenth-century form in which a widespread social problem is dramatized through its effect on characters of flesh and blood. In the more modern genre of the condition of culture novel, this social problem takes shape as the threat posed to culture by, to stick with Arnold’s critical vocabulary, various forms of anarchy, or, to use Mulhern’s term, figures of catastrophe. In his definition of the genre, Mulhern opts for a flexible framework, which allows him to draw very different texts into his ken. In his introduction, he conceptualizes genre ‘in the broad traditions of Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin’ as applying ‘at a relatively low level of historical generality, identifying groups of texts sharing a distinctive topic or set of topics’. Although these criteria are strongly thematic and may seem quite arbitrary at first (next to *Bildung*, ‘topics’ include suburbanization and the consumer economy), Mulhern’s readings illustrate that these very different novels chime in with one another, often in unexpected and illuminating ways. His selection also has the benefit of overriding the distinction between modernism and post-modernism, thus yielding a more comprehensible picture of twentieth-century fiction than studies which insist on these two shibboleths.

In the readings that follow, Mulhern frequently has recourse to a particular method. Inspired by Fredric Jameson, he creatively reshapes Algirdas Julien Greimas’s figure of the semiotic square. As Mulhern points out, the square often adds little to what is not already apparent in other ways, but it can be a powerful interpretative aid and reveal narrative possibilities that are not always visible to the naked eye. In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, for instance, Mulhern detects a non-necessary opposition between ‘nobility’ and ‘literature’, which has ‘reputation’ as its narrative resolution. This in turn produces a second opposition between ‘common people’ (the non-resolvable opposition of ‘nobility’) and ‘life’ (opposed to ‘literature’), which has ‘obscurity’ as its narrative resolution. The newly formed opposition between ‘nobility’ and ‘life’ creates another outcome, ‘ecstasy’, whereas that between ‘literature’

and 'common people' creates 'calm'. The peculiarity of this particular square is that all the narrative resolutions ('reputation', 'obscurity', 'ecstasy', 'calm') are present in the novel and all of them put the protagonist, Orlando, in a favourable position. The novel thus creates 'an unchallengeable ideal of cultural wholeness'. As Mulhern concludes, Orlando's development 'is not the outcome of transforming contact with others—as in Margaret's case in *Howards End*, for example—but rather a process of self-elaboration'. In short, the semiotic square reveals how in *Orlando* the Arnoldian ideal of culture has become deeply narcissistic.

Arnold's significance for the history of the condition of culture novel comes to the fore most visibly in Mulhern's first chapter, in which he points out how the drama of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* is coded in the terms of Arnold's tribute to Sophocles, 'who saw life steadily and saw it whole'. In Mulhern's reading, *Howards End* suggests that the attempt to reinvigorate bourgeois liberalism with working-class aspiration takes a toll on the latter, personified by Leonard Bast. Through his association with the Schlegels, Bast is not completely alone in his quest for culture: *Howards End* anticipates a moment when men and women will be made equal by their common humanity, even though Bast will not live to see it. In Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, in contrast, the perfunctory utopianism of *Howards End* is wholly absent: its working-class protagonist, Jude Fawley, is continually and tragically thwarted. By pairing these two novels, Mulhern highlights their shared sympathy for the victims of ruling-class arrogance, even if they fail to represent a convincing alternative. Later novelists are less keen to extend such sympathy, as he shows in the next three chapters.

The book's second chapter, 'The Aristocratic Fix', focuses on the interbellum. Mulhern suggests that Woolf's *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* explore two complementary narrative trajectories: whereas in *Orlando* the aristocracy is figured as the guarantor of cultural continuity, in *Between the Acts* the opposite holds true, with what passes for culture slowly dissolving into petty-bourgeois sociability. These two different trajectories are combined, so Mulhern argues, in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, a connection that is as surprising as it is revealing: although Woolf's secular worldview chafes against Waugh's Augustinian pessimism, Mulhern deftly shows how these two writers meet when it comes to the matter of culture. Both believe culture to be under threat, even as they locate the origin of this threat in different places: for Woolf it is the entrepreneurial middlebrow, while for Waugh it is the philistine plebeian. The narratives from the post-war era that Mulhern explores in his third chapter, 'The Horror . . .', further showcase characters who are not qualified for the knowledge that culture is supposed to offer, and who threaten the existence of those who are. In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving*, John

Fowles's *The Collector* and Ruth Rendell's *A Judgement in Stone*, the 'horror' that Mulhern's title refers to appears in the guise of militant socialism or the outgrowths of the welfare state. The final chapter, 'End-States', spans the period from the 1980s to the present day. Martin Amis's *Money*, V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* and *The Mimic Men*, Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album* and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* suggest, in different ways, that the enabling conditions of culture have disintegrated through the pressure exerted by the cocktail of neo-liberal capitalism and colonialism.

The most substantial part of *Figures of Catastrophe* is its concluding essay, in which Mulhern picks out common themes, such as the significance of books and houses, while also drawing distinctions between, for instance, narratives of situation and narratives of transformation. His observations are persuasive; if the previous chapters are often linked through association, here he provides a more rigorous picture in which the individual parts are made to reappear with flair and sophistication. It therefore feels churlish to summarize two missed opportunities that Mulhern himself identifies. As he points out, this is a decidedly Anglo-Saxon history of the genre, which would gain much from a comparative perspective. He provides some helpful suggestions about the development of the condition of culture novel in the United States and Germany, but even here his vantage-point remains distinctly UK-centric: while he points out that the English genre is marked by the specificity of the class struggle, he is less clear about what might distinguish other variants. This omission is striking: in Germany especially, the decline of culture cannot be understood without reference to National Socialism, which was a very different kind of catastrophe.

Another reservation one might voice is that Mulhern's focus on class issues tends to obfuscate the importance of gender. To be sure, he demonstrates that in these novels the search for culture is decidedly masculine, and briefly pauses to reflect on the ways the female characters may 'embody' culture, or function as obstacles to it. But there is more to be said. Even though most of the prominent figures in metacultural discourse and metacultural fiction have been men, one must also recognize that culture has a long-standing association with the feminine, up until the present day. One of Arnold's main efforts, in fact, was his attempt at rescuing 'sweetness and light' from the feminization that it had received from the likes of John Ruskin. Mulhern does not linger on this paradox, but it is to his credit that he has created a framework for future investigations into the gendered aspects of metacultural discourse, be it in the novel or academic criticism.

In a more positive way, *Figures of Catastrophe* provides a fresh and innovative contribution to the study of the politics of intertextuality, which will be of interest to scholars working in reception history. One way in which cultural discourse reflects on its own conditions of possibility, Mulhern

contents, is through the practice of citation. 'Dover Beach' affords an instance of this practice: as Isobel Armstrong puts it in *Victorian Poetry* (1993), the poem's final scene 'recalls a crucial text for Oxford intellectuals, Thucydides's account of the battle of Epipolae, a night battle in which the Athenians, not being able to tell friend from foe, fought one another'. Mulhern shows in great detail how the condition of culture novel, too, uses allusions and paraphrases to establish within the novel an image of what competences the reader should possess. He pays careful attention to the difference between the way in which the process of cultural evaluation is acted out in the narrated world of the novel and the way in which the discourse of culture appears, at a higher level, in 'the distribution of cultural capital' between writer and reader. In a cunning manner, Mulhern plays a similar game with his own readers. For instance, discussing how Forster in *Howards End* examined the fact that his liberal culture depended on 'an illiberal entrepreneurial class fraction that it conventionally disdained' as well as 'a labouring population to which it extended little more than disquieted solicitude', Mulhern sums up as follows: 'after such knowledge, what resolution?' Readers familiar with T. S. Eliot's poetry will recognize that Mulhern alludes to a line from 'Gerontion'—'After such knowledge, what forgiveness?' Even though Eliot plays only a minor part in this book, this reference suggests that his influence cannot be circumvented.

Perhaps one might go further and consider Mulhern's allusion as an actualization, from a critical rather than a post-colonial point of view, of the kind of mimicry that he so deftly analyses in the novels of V. S. Naipaul. A similar act of appropriation is evident in the chapter title, 'The Horror . . .' The allusion to Kurtz's dying words in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is tantalizing: does Mulhern mean to suggest that this novel's brutalization of Africans is somehow a prelude to the depiction of the figures of catastrophe in the post-war years? While these two instances may give the impression that *Figures of Catastrophe* is haunted by the conservative discourse that it analyses, one might also argue that Mulhern turns this discourse against itself. The second reading is strengthened by the fact that he often goes out of his way to take the reader by the hand, as when he translates the logical fallacy 'post hoc, ergo propter hoc' in a footnote. By thus playing with his readers' cultural competences, Mulhern 'performs' his thesis in his own criticism: his readers are made to feel, like characters in the condition of culture novel, that 'culture is its own cruelly satirical reward, dangerous at worst, and in all not worth the candle'.

Because of its close relation to *Culture/Metaculture*, *Figures of Catastrophe* will come in for scrutiny from certain corners. Just as Stefan Collini voiced reservations about the way in which Mulhern constructed the tradition of metacultural discourse, so I am not wholly convinced that the selection made

here is representative of the many ways in which this discourse has been encoded in the modern novel. By defining culture in Raymond Williams's terms, and by positing that the condition of culture novel is a continuation of the industrial novel, Mulhern rules out the possibility that instead of being a social problem, culture might also be a platform for the promotion of equality. What if Mulhern had taken George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* instead of *Howards End* and *Jude the Obscure* as his beginning or—to enlist a more provocative candidate—Anthony Trollope's *Ayala's Angel*? Both, I think, meet Mulhern's requirement of being 'synoptic and specific, foregrounding the cultural dimension of the social whole, undertaking a synoptic narrative evaluation of the social relations of culture'. And what if Mulhern had chosen novels which highlight different modes or which can be decoded in different ways? Mulhern briefly considers the example of the *Bildungsroman* as an instance of a genre whose defining topic 'is everywhere in modern culture, far exceeding the recognizable boundaries of the genre proper'. Given that for Arnold, 'culture' was a cipher for *Bildung*, the *Bildungsroman* would have been an equally interesting model. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, English novelists have adapted the genre of the vocational novel to the context of a Britain in the throes of global capitalism. While Mulhern shows that the condition of culture novel is a creature of many hues, extending the range of his readings to include different, but equally well-qualified novels might have yielded a more complex picture.

If the seemingly self-evident way in which Mulhern assembles his corpus serves to hide potential fissures, the at first sight flexible theoretical framework also yields a number of questions. On the one hand, the book wears its theory lightly. Mulhern prefers to put concepts into practice rather than to elaborate them in detail. The fact that Greimas and Jameson are relegated to an extensive footnote is an instance of Mulhern's methodology. It is to be hoped that this hands-on approach will allow the study to reach the wide readership it deserves. On the other hand, the study would have been strengthened by a more elaborate justification of its theoretical premises. In particular, I think that to combine the Marxist ideas of Lukács with the formalist views of Bakhtin requires a more thorough explanation than Mulhern offers. He apparently takes his cue from Lukács's later work, such as *The Historical Novel*, in which Lukács examines how the genre entered a period of decline after the revolutions of 1848, when bourgeois novelists retreated from their ambition to express popular consciousness. Mulhern's narrative runs in a parallel fashion, insofar as he sees the condition of culture novel as a modified resumption of its prototype, the industrial novel. Bakhtin has a very different idea about the ideological uses to which the novel can be put: if for the later Lukács it reflects the ideological interests out of which it was born, for Bakhtin the form retains the potential to be subversive because

it comes into being through the polyphonic play of different voices or discourses. While the idea of polyphony often crops up in Mulhern's argument, as when he writes that *Between the Acts* 'quickly establishes an imagery of natural violence that will persist as the novel's interpretive ground-bass', this idea often does not lead to the kind of complementary reading that the presence of Bakhtin in the introduction hints at, and which some of the novels that Mulhern selects lend themselves to. Indeed, some novels also tell a story about culture's emancipatory potential, and not just one of authoritarian exclusion. Take, for instance, *Brideshead Revisited*, in which one may fruitfully see a case of queer tutelage in the homosocial bond between Charles Ryder and Sebastian Flyte, who teaches Charles to see life as an art and whose aid leads to Charles's first commissions. At the centre of the novel, then, we find a moment in which characters manage to create the communal form of coexistence that, as Mulhern rightly points out, is cancelled out by the novel's melancholic conclusion, in which the ancient house becomes a garrison for soldiers who are unaware of its complex history. The novel thus has a part that resonates strongly with Mulhern's own findings even as it challenges some of his conclusions. It might have strengthened Mulhern's argument to acknowledge that the novel articulates a number of intellectual positions. Such an acknowledgement would also have given his salute to Bakhtin a stronger justification.

Mulhern's reference to the theories of Lukács is less problematic, but here, too, a difference should be noted. Like Lukács, Mulhern situates various novels in their respective periods, though without literally ascribing a given novel to a given mode of production. But Lukács also explicitly delivers aesthetic judgements on specific novels, explaining their strengths and weaknesses as works of art. Mulhern's judgement is tacit and essentially political rather than aesthetic. Given that the literary merits of some of the works in his canon are debatable, some assessment of them in terms of their successes and failings as aesthetic objects might have enhanced his detailed account of how they participate in the genre.

It is worth emphasizing this withholding of evaluative judgements, given murmurs of a return to a more properly 'critical' attitude in literary studies. I here use 'critical' in a specific sense, as Joseph North defines it in *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017). According to North, literary criticism, properly understood, disappeared from the academic scene at some point during the late 1970s or early 1980s, when it was replaced with a variety of historicist and contextualist approaches. This turn to scholarship is often understood as a political victory for the liberal left: Fredric Jameson's much-heeded call to 'always historicize' helped to place Marxism at the centre of the discipline. But with this transformation of literary studies into social theory, the evaluative impulse behind literary criticism was lost, along with its ability

to cultivate the aesthetic capabilities of readers. The left's victory, then, was Pyrrhic: the historicist attention to specific details came at the cost of isolating literary studies from the real world.

Given Mulhern's own interest in this turn, as his review of North's book in *NLR* 110 attests, it is noteworthy that *Figures of Catastrophe* seems closer to the scholarly than the critical end of the spectrum. The study's primary aim is contextualist in nature, as it essentially traces a social-political trajectory across twentieth-century Britain, into which each novel finds its place. However, Mulhern does not use this historicizing approach as the platform for a political manifesto. One could interpret Mulhern's conclusion that the condition of culture genre is a regressive form—there are few consolations in these novels for those who still believe in the redemptive and civilizing power of art—as a call for a progressive kind of literature that would alter human conduct and serve the interests of equality. But Mulhern is content to leave this interpretation up to the reader. This is arguably a wise choice: to deliver a political judgement would be to fall into the trap of metacultural discourse with which the condition of culture novel is affiliated and in which the aesthetic is effaced by the political. Mulhern might, however, have shed his tactical reserve and combined his historical account of the genre with a more evaluative diagnosis of individual works. The issue of the critic's personal taste is particularly relevant in a study that deals with genre, after all. For a critic such as John Frow (*Genre*, 2015), 'genre is not a property of a text but is a function of reading'. In his view, all readers have a cultural repertoire that functions as a filter for their reading of new texts—texts that will, in turn, create new or refined filters. Some of Mulhern's readers may want to use the condition of culture genre that he identifies as a filter to re-read works that might be illuminated by it, even if, in Mulhern's view, these novels do not fit the bill. Mulhern shows himself to be well-attuned to the different modes within the condition of culture novel, but is nevertheless quite authoritative in dividing the goats from the sheep.

Let me illustrate this final point by providing a more critical reading of a text that confirms the validity of Mulhern's theory even if it is one that Mulhern himself might not classify as a condition of culture novel. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), often designated as a post-9/11 novel, meets a number of the touchstones of the condition of culture novel, as in its circular movement, its autobiographical tone, and its concern with class, nationhood and family. Like many characters in contemporary condition of culture novels, McEwan's protagonist, Henry Perowne, is unreceptive to the civilizing power of culture. His daughter Daisy, a poet, has forced him to read *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*, which leave him unmoved. The novel's story illustrates how this dismissive attitude is perilous. Early in the day, Perowne's car collides with that of Baxter, a lower-class thug, on a London street that

has been barricaded to control a sea of anti-war protesters. Perowne, a neurosurgeon, manages to escape unharmed by explaining that Baxter is suffering from Huntington's disease, thus defusing his aggression. Seeking revenge for this humiliating encounter, Baxter and a companion later invade Perowne's house and threaten to violate his daughter. She saves herself and her family by reciting 'Dover Beach', which both Baxter and Perowne mistake for her own work: overcome with emotion, Baxter drops his knife and asks Perowne for help. In this resolution, the signature of the condition of culture novel is clear. Daisy Perowne is a latter-day Miranda Grey, who uses her cultural resources to try and tame the latter-day Fred Clegg who has subdued her, while the novel's citation of Arnold's words is reminiscent of Forster's allusions in *Howards End*.

But is McEwan's portrait convincing? 'Are we really to believe', as John Banville wonders, 'that an intelligent and attentive man such as Henry Perowne, no matter how keen his scientific bent, would have passed through the English education system without ever having heard of Matthew Arnold?' Is Perowne's act of disinterestedness in saving Baxter's life consistent with his character, given that throughout the novel he has been pondering his own inability to control his destiny in a world of unsurpassed complexity? By reducing events like the war in Iraq to occasions for self-regarding introspection, *Saturday* should be faulted for causing its readers to mistake the pleasures of melancholy introspection for heroic action. If literary criticism is to prompt readers to see culture as an inducement to commit oneself to real, material change, pregnant questions and fighting words such as these may be necessary. Of course, this attempt at a more evaluative stance and at moving beyond the strict limitations of the genre is only possible thanks to Mulhern's own thinking about the subject. I can only hope that it shows how *Figures of Catastrophe*, as a timely intervention on an important subject, is certain to stimulate further debate on the direction that literary criticism should take.