Head Dominic, The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond.

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Dominic Head. *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell (Blackwell Manifestoes), 2008. Pp. 175. £19.99 (Pb.).

The health of the novel has been brought into question repeatedly over the past decades. Prior to the 1980s, the English novel was thought to be a form in decline, oftentimes described as "withered" or "exhausted." Some critics and novelists went so far as to pronounce the form "dead." As a result of this, critics in the 1990s, faced with the flourishing of the form (rather that its demise), were led to discuss the "resurrection" of the novel: it was the form that had come back to the land of the living and that continued in its role to feed our search for meaning. With hindsight, this killing and bringing-back-from-the-dead highlights one thing: that literary critics seemed to have lost their feelers. A too large gap existed between the critic and the novelist. It is this gap that Dominic Head attempts to address, with the hope of minimising, in his book *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond*.

Head begins by suggesting that this false declaration of the death and subsequent resurrection of the novel stripped novels of the 60s and 70s of their proper significance and established a false historical break. His book is as much about reinstating a historical continuity, mainly via provincial realist novels (and thereby providing a framework for comparing novels of the 60s, 70s, and 80s with contemporary novels) as it is about gauging current trends of novels in Britain (and beyond) and closing the gap between critics, novelists, and readers in order to point us in a common direction for the future.

Head's area of expertise is British fiction. He has moved from detailed studies of a single author's works (J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Ian McEwan) to writing and editing reference books on modern British fiction between 1950 and 2000 and fiction in English. His latest studies of form include not only this book, which takes stock of the state of the novel, but also of the modernist short story.

Head states his reason for writing this book as being to "locate topics that should be of equal concern to novelists, critics, and readers, with the aim of helping to reorientate academic literary criticism and theory" (127). The reorientation involves making us rethink established theories or notions of the novel in Britain over the last 40 years. Here are some of the arguments Head puts forth: the novel did not die in the late 1970s; yes, we are moving in a direction of global multi-culturalism and cosmopolitanism, but realist novels of middle-class daily lives also are flourishing and continue to evolve, especially after 9/11; and, we should embrace cosmopolitanism as a way out of the impasse that novelists, critics, and readers alike find themselves in the post-9/11 world.

In order to bring to light a historical continuum and falsify the 'death of the novel' thesis of the late 1970s, Head examines novels of provincial realism, a marginalized genre of British fiction in literary circles, and its sub-genre, the seaside novel. He suggests that these novels document subtle social and class changes in British society. In texts of provincial realism, one can see both a unifying element of British fiction (thereby keeping intact a historical continuum that the death of the novel thesis of the late 1970s tries to break) and a radical shift, expressive of post-consensus British society, towards a new creativity. While in pre-1980s novels (Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* or Stanley Middleton's *Holiday*), the seaside served as an idyllic landscape, where characters went to contemplate and reach a state of self-awareness, in contemporary fiction (for example, McEwan's *Saturday*), an inversion of the seaside stereotype is enacted. The seaside becomes "the scene now of familial tragedy, not the setting of a childhood idyll" (41). Head goes on to argue that the 1990's seaside novel "distils the essence of social relations post-Thatcher [by] revitalizing the prosaic descriptiveness of provincial realism with the reflective tones of confessional narrative" (46). The seaside becomes a place that reveals underlying social relations and contradictions, an insularity and social breakdown that is characteristic of 1990s British society and beyond.

Head's chapter on terrorism and more specifically the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, evaluates the effects of 9/11 on novels and critics. In intellectual analyses and responses to 9/11, two distinct ideological positions were evident: 1) the humane, empathetic response in which intellectualising was conditioned by the spectacle of terror and 2) the post-structuralist (robotic) stance, which came across as insensitive and divorced from reality. Intellectuals were forced to place themselves in one of these two camps, creating a static binarism. Head argues that the novel was forced to cede its authority to the news and the image, which proved to be better mediums for representing the shock that this event sent through society—a shock too great to be contained within the framework of the novel. His analysis of Don DeLillo's *Mao II* outlines in detail the way in which this text acts out how terror and news of terror usurped the novel's terrain, and how the novelist cedes his authority to the artist and the image. His discussion of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* provides an example of a novel's inability to give an acceptable shape to 9/11. Head makes allowance for a different (and perhaps more optimistic) interpretation in the future by stating that, as we move further away in time from the event, these novels and the records they create may be judged differently.

Where then does the novel stand in a post 9/11 world? Is it simply a medium unable to portray the terror of a twenty-first-century world in terms other than caricatures? Head concludes his book with a detailed discussion of the ideological divisions that 9/11 forced upon novelists, leading them to the aforementioned static binarism or "binary impasse": they were either forced to take the position of the West or to betray public sentiment. Head's way out of the impasse is a push for cosmopolitanism, a push for novelists, critics, and readers alike to explore its possibilities: "The 'road-home' is then a return to principles of moral responsibility in a new global context. This cosmopolitanism should be the orientation that unites novelists, readers and critics in the twenty-first century" (151). Cosmopolitanism, with its breaking down of oppositions (between centre and periphery), offers us a way to embrace our moral responsibilities in a global (rather than national) context. It works on the same level as terrorism, which is one of the factors that led us into the impasse in the first place: the fear of terrorism knows no borders and works in a global context. He makes a particular appeal to postcolonial literary theorists, who look down on cosmopolitanism as an effect of late capitalism, to take lessons from their colleagues in philosophy, political science, and sociology, who have focused on the strength of cosmopolitanism and its potential.

Head's leap away from the national borders of the United Kingdom to include writers from the United States reflects this embrace of globalisation and multiculturalism that he calls for. This inclusion of a handful of non-British works (covered by the "and beyond" in the book's subtitle) suggests that globalisation has served to create citizens of the world rather than of countries, and novels of the world rather than novels of countries.

Head sets out on a task that is, as he himself notes, extremely difficult without the privilege of hindsight: to take stock and attempt to provide guidelines for the future. Does one (be it novelist, critic, or reader) feel reoriented after finishing Head's book? Do we have a clearer sense of where we are going? Perhaps. Head offers interesting, detailed readings of contemporary British and American novels (which in and of themselves provide an important contribution to the field) to support his views, and his detailed discussion of 9/11 and its impact not only in literature but also in society is enlightening. His suggestion for an "openness to pluralism," an "accompanying humility," and a "willingness to develop in unforeseen directions" (151) is as much a guideline for living in the twenty-first century as it is for writing about and analysing texts of the twenty-first century.

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