Politics vs aesthetics

Judging a novel by its author's own formidable standards

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James Wood

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In 1995, when James Wood first arrived in Washington to take up as the post as the de facto lead book critic at the *New Republic*, American literary criticism was in a mess. Genteel, mandarin presences, whose names have disappeared along with the memory of their pieces, still presided over the major magazines and reviews. Who now scours the archive to see what Robert Adams or Robert Towers – or, for that matter, John Updike – had to say about any novel of the period? Several of the original New York Intellectuals – Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Elizabeth Hardwick, Susan Sontag – were still in operation but they no longer touched much new fiction, and their vigilance of the social reality around them had precipitately diminished. The most promising critics of the younger generation had moved away from the political preoccupations of their predecessors into almost exclusively moral terrain. What was an acceptable way to fictionalize the experience of the Holocaust? How would the internet ruin reading? What happened when you wrote an incest novel without irony?

Wood immediately registered as a different quantity: a rigorous aesthetician, a disciplined swooner, he appealed not only to argument but tested the reading experience against the actual, lived experience of the world. Beyond simply fulfilling the basic duty of the reviewer, which Edmund Wilson once described as "establishing identities for books", Wood came closer than anyone to fulfilling Henry James's maxim that criticism should serve as "the beautiful gate to enjoyment". If this were a James Wood review, now would come the Hussar-dash of simile: *James Wood was like an early-career Jesuit gunning for a Bishopric, dispatched to restore order to dissonant congregations, swinging his thurible with steady intensity, reintroducing pungencies we had all but forgotten back into our deprived nostrils*. Unlike that of so many of the critics around him, Wood's felt much closer to the writing of writers. His "writer's criticism", as he called it, bustled with elaborate metaphors and brazen generalities. His summaries of novels often competed with the plots themselves. In Wood's view, part of the underlying health of any novel was its ability to survive this exercise, which he called "passionate redescription". By the late 1990s it was almost beside the point that he signed his name to his pieces: we knew him by the style alone.

What distinguished Wood from most of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors was his focus on matters of aesthetic liberty over social justice, and the suggestion that there was a choice to be made between them. He once described the "formal task" of fiction as the establishment of "a licensed freedom". By this he meant that the novel is an art form that, through its very method, can avoid the theological and ideological impulse by cleaving to uncertainty, multiplicity, doubt. The novel, he wrote, "moves in the shadow of doubt, knows itself to be a true lie", and it is here, for Wood, that the form's fealty to the real can be found – a fealty that he sees as fiercely secular. The most alive characters in the modern novel, he suggested, were the result of their authors cultivating a kind of productive imprecision about their being, an indication of bottomlessness, in which the unknowable triumphed over the knowable, and unreliability over transparency. But the novel was also more than that for Wood: he showed how free indirect discourse, when managed nimbly enough, could become an enactment of freedom, yielding characters who seemed to exercise a sovereignty that they shared to some tantalizing degree with their creators. One of the reasons Wood has taken such an interest in an imperviously religious novelist such as Marilynne Robinson is that Robinson tries to reclaim some of these secular virtues of the novel as mislabelled religious gifts (a kind of Protestant religious freedom).

James Wood

The brisk, dictatorial narration of Muriel Spark's fiction likewise earns Wood's approval because her characters are equipped to outwit her own batterings. In these gaps of self-knowledge, which readers can fill in for themselves, Wood sees opportunity for the kind of improved, novelistic consciousness that can heighten readers' sensitivities to the real world, granting them "an almost priestly advantage over people's souls".

Since the beginning, Wood has sought to guard literature against claims of its being a kind of canonical religion, or pseudo-religion. Like a zealous new district attorney – all right then, enough – he was, shortly after his arrival in DC, bringing charges against some of the most egregious smugglers of religiosity back into literary criticism – Harold Bloom and George Steiner – whose worship at the altar of "greatness" turned out to be little more, in Wood's view, than the work of vague mystics intent on obscuring our sense of the intimate craft and minute choices behind fictional creations, of celebrants devoted to the polished product rather than the artifice of the form. If Steiner, one of Wood's predecessors at the *New Yorker*, was one of the young Wood's targets in bravura reputation-crushing, Wood was equally merciless towards another *New Yorker* elder for close to the opposite reason. He accused Updike of worshipping a "complacent God" and writing fiction that, in its promiscuous, sensory overflow that swallowed his characters, threatened to make all of its dramatizations of the agony of faith appear like one shiny, smooth surface. (This dissent on Updike separated Wood from Updike admirers such as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Christopher Hitchens, and showed that he belonged to something more than the English cult of the mid-century American sentence.) More than anything else, for Wood, Updike failed in the novelistic duty of helping readers to appreciate the arc of their own lives and, just a little bit, their own deaths.

But as untimely and refreshingly unfashionable as Wood once seemed at his entry into the American scene, he may have pushed less against the period than at first appeared. For the short 1990s, for those distant enough from its violent implosions, now seems like a sojourn from History, a caesura between the Cold War and the so-called War on Terror, when, as Fredric Jameson put it, "we could return to the untroubled cultivation of the aesthetic as such". Not long after Francis Fukuyama claimed to see the end of history in the form of liberal democracy, Wood saw something like the end of the form of the novel in realism. The comparison is not meant to be uncharitable. Much as Fukuyama was caricatured for celebrating the one-size-fits-all impositions of liberal democracy, when he meant only that it was the last ideology left standing capable of attracting new adherents, so Wood did not mean that realism was all there was left to do in the novel, but that a novel could only be judged by its relation to the real, not so much in terms of strict verisimilitude, but in terms of authenticity, or what Wood has called "an utterly unembarrassed relation to the mundane". Much as Fukuyama still saw plenty of room for wars and conflict after the End of History, Wood saw ample space for literary experimentation in the End of Form. "Realism is not a law", he liberally decreed, "but a lenient tutor, for it schools its own truants. It is realism that allows surrealism, magic realism, fantasy, dream, and so on."

The problem for Wood today is that politics – concerns about the proper shape and priorities of our society – have returned to the contemporary novel with little warning, in ways he could hardly have anticipated on setting out as a critic. The period of the "untroubled cultivation of the aesthetic", a time for which Wood was finely matched, now appears to have been more of an exception than a norm. His earlier sense that history was on his side is on display in his pieces that engage the tradition of American political-literary criticism. In a notable essay on Edmund Wilson, for instance, in 2005, Wood regretted Wilson's "swerve away from aesthetic questions", and worried that political literary criticism risked reducing itself to mere journalism. (The title of Wood's new novel, *Upstate*, is a deliberate echo of Wilson's own memoir of the same name, though Wood does not seem to have chosen this title in any discernibly competitive way; it's more like a playful genuflection to a local spirit.) But in a world in which the foundations of liberal democracy appear – once again – much less stable, it is striking to read the old political-literary criticism of the New York Intellectuals and to see how alert they were to what Trilling called the bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet. In 1957 Irving Howe published an entire book (*Politics and the Novel*) in response to Stendhal's remark that "Politics in a literary work is like a gun shot in the middle of a concert, something vulgar, but something impossible to ignore"; Alfred Kazin's essay of 1942 on Willa Cather seems a more capacious political-literary meditation now than when it was written. When one compares Wood to the New York critics in their full bloom, he can appear suddenly narrower: it is hard to imagine him, say, reviewing a contemporary historian with the virtuosic ease of Kazin on Perry Miller or Mary McCarthy on David Halberstam. And,

unlike, say, Steiner or Sontag, he is more reliant on translations into English. Ten years ago many of the leading critics and novelists in America held Wood in the highest esteem, and several tried to sound like him. But for the new critics and novelists now emerging, does Wood matter as much as he once did?

There is something uncomfortable in Wood's pieces these days, as if he knows he must somehow account for the political turn of novels, but is unsure how to integrate these concerns into his deep aesthetic commitments. Here is a recent piece on Jenny Erpenbeck's novel *Go, Went, Gone* – about refugees in Europe – which begins with Wood telling of a recent family vacation in Italy:

> We saw the young men everywhere in that Italian hinterland – usually in groups of two or three, walking along the road, climbing the hills, sitting on a wall. They were tall, dark-skinned, conspicuous because they were wearing too many clothes for the warm Riviera weather. We learned that they had made their way to Italy from various African countries and were now desperate to get into France, either to stay there or to push on farther, to Britain and Germany.

This reads as if the critic were learning of such deprivations for the very first time. But then Wood continues, stressing that he *does*, after all, read the news:

> I had read moving articles and essays about the plight of people like these – I had read several of those pieces out loud to my children; I had watched terrible reports from the BBC, and the almost unbearable Italian documentary "Fire at Sea." And so what? What good are the right feelings if they are only right feelings? I was just a moral flaneur. From inside my speeding car, I regarded those men with compassion, shame, indignation, curiosity, profound ignorance, all of it united in a conveniently vague conviction that, as Edward VIII famously said of mass unemployment in the nineteen-thirties, "something must be done." But not so that it would disturb my week of vacation. I am like some "flat" character in a comic novel, who sits every night at the dinner table and repetitively, despicably intones, without issue or effect, "This is the central moral question of our time." And, of course, such cleansing self-reproach is merely part of liberalism's dance of survival. It's not just that we are morally impotent; the continuation of our comfortable lives rests on the continuation – on the success – of that impotence. We see suffering only intermittently, and our days make safe spaces for these interruptions.

What is happening here? Wood seems to be indicting the participants in "liberalism's dance of survival" and, at the same time, with mustered honesty, including himself among those guilty of negligence and collusion. But the critique ends right as it begins: with a palpitation of political concern. After this passage, Wood turns to the novel at hand. It is as if, in calling attention to the inadequacy of his politics, he has somehow discharged his critical duty, and even suggested that there is no real alternative to his circling conscience, which, he assures us, will continue to spin.

But there is more than that. For over the years the fiction that Wood has championed has contained some of qualities of the passage above: politically ambivalent, rich in psychology. Wood, more than any other major contemporary critic, has had the rare satisfaction of having much of the very sort of work he called for in *How Fiction Works* (2008) actually come into being. His impatience with conventional narration, empty lyricism and "hysterical" or "paranoid" realism is shared by the most innovative cohort of contemporary novelists. Whether Wood was a prime mover behind the new wave of first-person "auto-fiction" is doubtful, but the rise of this sort of fiction clearly pleases him. His vaunted "reliably unreliable" and "unreliably unreliable" narrators now crop up everywhere. There is the peripatetic Nigerian-American narrator of Teju Cole's *Open City*, who is ambivalent about being claimed by any group, or any political cause that sounds too shrill; the exhausted aesthete alter ego of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, who is occasionally exhausted by the *bien-pensant* feminist politics of Stockholm's bourgeoisie; and the protagonist of Ben Lerner's *10:04*, who has a similar – though funnier – circling pattern as Wood when confronted with radical politics.

The point is not that we need more criticism in league with some great political programme, nor, as Wood once wrote mockingly of Jonathan Franzen, that there should be "a kind of competition between the novel and society". "The artist who wrote a novel called *Vive the Dole* would, most probably, find that his work died with the death of the specific situation for which it was written", Kenneth Burke wrote in 1931. Novels need not make amends to the savagely named Miss Kilman in *Mrs Dalloway*. But as Burke sensed in his own time, "a system of aesthetics subsumes a system of politics", and a novel can show the way impersonal claims of politics submit to the pressures of private emotions and vice versa. There can, in other words, be some fertile doubting about the existence of the aesthetic–political divide. Wood is hardly oblivious of this. But when he praises the powers of free indirect discourse as a literary technique – one that, correctly employed, allows characters autonomy that blurrily overlaps with the authority of the novelist – he tends to avoid any question of the liberal politics built into that style. The risk with free indirect discourse in today's atmosphere of *de jure* liberalism is that each major character's consciousness must be treated with equal access by the omniscient narrator, such that a kind of representative political utopia of equality is mapped onto the novel, giving it the polished feel of a form that, whatever themes or subjects it treats, presumes social stability, and is not given to the wild plunges of narrative upheaval that appear in, say, Dostoevsky, where a character appears to take control of the text for pages at a time.

When it comes to the return of politics as a dominant force in the novel, Wood seems somewhat unprepared. Even when he responds, at times acutely, to overtly political fiction – such as that by Zia Haider Rahman, Hari Kunzru, Joshua Cohen, or his beloved Norman Rush – his attention tends to be drawn to the politics of the self (or to the limits politics imposes on the self) rather than the larger political and historical canvas on which these authors work. And in his rapturous responses to, for example, W. G. Sebald's haunted chronicles, we might even say that he likes his politics served well done, with questions no longer live, the passion already spent. The reasons for this may have something to do with the fact that he has devoted so much time to pursuing another, older question: the problem of belief in God, as opposed to the belief in poli-

tics, which he often makes seem like the more antique concern. In his first novel, *The Book Against God* (2003) – Bellovian in its intellectual yearning, though anti-Bellovian in its fundamental tidiness – Wood brilliantly parodied the situation of a God-haunted secularist like his own critical alter ego. But in his more recent writing – the several *New Yorker* pieces that present sketches of his childhood spent in the shadow of Durham Cathedral, where he grew up in a religious household – his background increasingly features as a well-worn exotic artefact for his secular American readers. Here is Wood, in full exhibition mode, in "The Nearest Thing to Life":

> When I asked where God came from, my mother showed me her wedding ring, and suggested that, like it, God had no beginning or end. (But I knew that someone had made the ring, even if I didn't say so.) When I asked about famines and earthquakes, my father told me, correctly enough, that humans were often politically responsible for the former and, in the case of the latter, were often to blame for continuing to live in notoriously unstable areas. Well, so much for remediable poverty and pestilence, but what about cancer, mental and physical handicap, awful accident . . . . I was told that God's ways are incomprehensible and that, in many cases, a Job-like humility before the incomprehension must be cultivated. But Job was a complainer before he was a saint or stoic, and I fear that my childish questioning got permanently jammed in the position of metaphysical complaint.

This thwarted unspooling of the moth-eaten brocade is very fine, but by this point in his career, Wood has presented us these wares so often that it's become a bit of a wearying wind-up routine that almost slips into self-flattery. The Ivan Karamazov side of Wood wants to know why God makes famines and will not be satisfied by prevarications involving politics: so it was in Wood's youth and so it remains. For in Wood-World the ideal is to be a metaphysical complainer who has some underlying theology to grouse about and reject – and he gives off the sense of half-pitying his readers whose concerns were not forged in the same kiln, and who thus may miss out on the finer tints of his unique personal glaze.

Upstate is a family drama, modest in scope and written, you sense, fully cognizant of the scrutiny that will attend every move made in it. Wood once mocked J. M. Coetzee for *Disgrace*, which he claimed read like "the winner of an exam whose challenge was to create the perfect representative of a very good contemporary novel". With *Upstate*, Wood must be aware that any novel which appeared to hew too closely to the instructions of his own starter-kit *How Fiction Works* would breach the territory of self-parody. The protagonist is Alan Querry, a real estate mogul of the second tier, who works in Durham, has a big old house; a new New Agey wife; an estranged, dead one; and two daughters. The older daughter Vanessa is a philosophy professor at Skidmore, in upstate New York, and has had some kind of mental breakdown. Vanessa's younger boyfriend, Josh, has contacted Alan and Helen, the younger, London-based music executive daughter, asking them to visit and help to bring her back from the brink. The entire novel takes place over five days, as Alan meets Helen in New York and the two of them journey north and stay at Vanessa's ramshackle house.

Wood has stacked some of the environment to his advantage, allowing his mild Bellovianism to feed the American landscape through Alan's middle-class English eyes. Wood, via Alan, does a lot of "serious noticing" in this novel. He notices, for example, the "pleated, laugh-like noises" of sheep in Northumberland, and the "wasteful slippage of the big automatic V8" in New York (Wood is very good on cars). The American sky strikes him as "therapeutic blue"; watching television he finds "the colors were more garish than on the English telly – almost what he thought of as an Arab brightness in the lighting". There is a kind of doubling down on the New York-under-European-eyes technique that won Joseph O'Neill such acclaim in *Netherland* – not least from Wood. In some moments Alan's noticing becomes almost too baroque, as if Wood were deliberately botching it, as when he finds himself being driven through a "long sour tunnel, and suddenly with a few large bumps they were in the middle of the city, which was like heaven and hell combined, infernal but glittering with lights". A wonderful metaphorical hazarding comes aboard a northbound Amtrak train, when Alan returns from the bar car holding "a soi-disant Danish" and Helen watches it "sugar-sweating inside its clear plastic wrap". Some of Alan's philosopher-daughter's vocabulary seems to slip into his usage, as when he considers the snowfall in New York as a kind of "negation", but by the time Alan is surveying his daughter's bathroom with the eyes of a contractor, dismally noting the poor materials, he is by far the most sovereign and interesting character in this book, its undeniable beating heart.

Alan is strong-minded and positive, to the point that his talent for maintaining the buoyancy of his moods becomes an obstacle for taking the drama of the depressed philosopher-daughter with full weight, or at least as much weight as Wood seems to accord it. Vanessa appears, at first, to have been contrived as a kind of unfathomable Dostoevskean heroine who promises an upsetting of the bounds of what is otherwise, in large part, a drawing-room novel. She is the metaphysical complainer in the drama, or as one of her favourite philosophers might have put it, she is prey to "madness that may actually occur if the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted is somehow lost". This madness has shown itself in what may have been an intentional act of self-harm. It might have been more persuasive if Wood had kept the dimensions of her depressive episodes more opaque, but this – in a sense – is where the politics begin to come in. In her childhood, she was half in love with a boy from a working-class family and Alan, determined to climb socially, forced her to break off relations with the philosophically inclined youth. She has been suffering from that parting, and Alan's from her mother, ever since. In contrast, Helen has apparently been thriving as a mother and a music executive, except that it turns out that she, too, harbours a few of her own grievances: mainly that her passion for pop music is not adequately appreciated by the family, a failing accentuated when Alan, in financial straits, backs out of lending her money to start a new music company geared to internet audiences.

The success of much of this novel lies in Alan's Zeus-like position of keeping the peace between his daughters, gently sizing up the charming if ultimately elusive Josh, and probing, however inexpertly, the source and possible balms of Vanessa's crisis. Alan is a man who has benefited from and participated in the Thatcherite revolution to the best of his abilities, destroying many of the sorts of buildings he most admired to bring in the new. Wood captures the ethos of a figure who is tired of all this talk of leaving a light carbon footprint when he prefers the idea of leaving a "very big footprint", and who looks back with a kind of pity at the foreshortened vision of the working-class men of his childhood which he dimly remembers as a kind of underworld:

> In truth, he'd always been a bit wary of the Socialist Hall and Café. The seats there were communal wooden pews, and the thin men sat next to each other, and they all looked the same to him. They sat at their tea and bread-and-butter (Alan was wondrously allowed a stotty cake), with the same studious poverty, wearing the same flat caps, their faces pale as string, patient, humorous, modest – and finally conservative . . . as Alan saw it, they wanted more money and jobs so that the smoky underlit important monotony of things could continue just the same as before.

This feels true and persuasive as a depiction of soft neoliberal condescension towards a presumed socialist nirvana – a cool glance at what Wood has called elsewhere "the slow rotting of the ideological harvest". *Upstate* never carries explicit wisdom about how the hallowed deprivations of his youth made Alan – and much of his generation – the sort of people who get deep thrills from luxury, which in its turn triggers a new generational cycle of political purification.

Upstate is set in the winter of 2007 before Lehman Brothers collapsed. It includes some political dinner discussions when Vanessa and Josh chirp on about the prospects of Barack Obama taking office. We have seen these same kinds of discussion in McEwan's *Saturday* and O'Neill's *Netherland*, but where both of those authors used such vignettes to look in askance at the opposition to George W. Bush's wars, Wood forces these scenes into place with the cruel lever of distance: the naivety is laid out like the rest of the dinner spread. It is Vanessa's crisis of personal belief that is meant to be the novel's problem, but it is gradually overtaken, as the book unfolds, by both Josh and Alan's inability to face up to it – a failure of male understanding, perhaps, but one that is moving partly for the sensitivity with which the failing is felt by all the characters. If *The Book Against God* was Wood's novel that, in its very telling, confronted a running concern in his criticism – the problem of freedom – *Upstate* diverts from this problem to the question of individual happiness, and to the most mysterious variety of happiness, family happiness.

This kind of theme might be enough to sustain an entire novel, but the shortcomings of *Upstate* are a product of the kind of theatricalities that intrude on it; the way that scenes that might have been better if reflected in one of the characters' minds have been flattened and cheapened by their narration in a kind of standardized omniscience. Here, for instance, is a family scene, at the dinner table:

> Helen was enjoying a measure of righteous grievance when Vanessa, who was one-handedly clearing plates from the table, stumbled slightly and dropped a small celadon-green bowl. It hit Josh's lap, and a tiny piece of the bowl's delicate rim jumped into Helen's lap. "I have it," she said, and carefully put her fingers around its parched, new edges.
>
> Vanessa stood still and lamented, "My favorite bowl! The only one I cared about."
>
> Josh said that they could easily fix it; Alan added that she wouldn't be able to see the crack. Helen, rubbing her fingers along the chalky shard, rather enjoyed the trivial torment.
>
> "You don't understand. It's not the bowl. Of course I can go to the potter who made it and get another one – he lives nearby. It's the idea: everything that is most dear to you will eventually be taken from you."
>
> "Then that's a very important lesson to learn," said Helen, without emotion.
>
> "Fuck it, leave me alone," replied Vanessa.
>
> "All right, I'm going for a little walk," said Alan, who took his coat and woolen cap and almost ran for the door.

This is a sharp but stagey moment, where we watch as Wood's precision ("parched, new edges") gets squandered by a kind of theatrical laziness ("almost ran for the door"). Vanessa, who tries to bring the "teaching moment" home to the tough crowd that is her family, snaps back into her shell. You begin to long to be back in the Wood/Alan retrospective mode, when we can take in a more textured perspective. Those of Helen and even Vanessa, which become, I think, unintentionally indistinct in this novel, seem to show up the whole problem of free indirect discourse too rigorously apportioned. Sharply individuated characters are hardly *required* in a good realist novel, except when the premiss is psychological depth. Likewise, free indirect style does not *demand* equal opportunity – there is *Madame Bovary* – but when it is used in such a way it can become an unwelcome source of tidiness. Each of the three major players in *Upstate* gets their representation, gets their voice, but it is Josh, and Alan's wife, who vibrate more memorably, while the town drunk who randomly encounters Alan at his hotel provides a welcome patch of anarchy.

If being the leading critic-novelist of America means every once in a while delivering a novel that shows you understand the follies and vast smugness of the middle class in the heartbreak house of capitalist culture then perhaps Wood has done his work: this novel is, in terms of sheer writerly execution, better than Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate Country*, better than Trilling's *Middle of the Journey*, and better than Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*. Yet it does not appear very different from the recent fiction by O'Neill and Jonathan Dee, who confidently play us back the society around us. For Wood politics has become a kind of draught that he allows to waft through *Upstate* from time to time, and that even drags parts of his story forwards, but one that feels distinct from real life. The sense of complacency that pervades *Upstate* may partly have to do with the way Wood's narration reflects his resigned liberal politics, each character a sealed compartment, which closes when the next opens. It is not a defence of liberal values, like Trilling's agonizing *Journey*, but something closer to an index of Wood's stoical posture towards the way we live. As a balm we get to marvel a bit at what Wood has reclaimed from "the unaesthetic here and now". With the New York Critics there was wilder reaching, and less calm. Politics in the novel may be like a gunshot, but in James Wood's second novel its weak ricochet feels like a dodge from one of our most arresting writers.