John Frow, The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies,

My review copy of John Frow’s The Practice of Value was pre-read. Not only pre-read, but pre-interpreted. This is not some abstract theoretical statement, as the pencilled marginalia confirms. The stranger’s hand proves irresistible. Marginalia are indices of a reader’s immediate response; markers of dialogue rather than a considered, retrospective monologue. Impulsively written, they can often be fussy or critical, although praise can be shown be the mere act of underlining a sentence or two. In agreement with most of the comments, others puzzled me. But a pre-digested book on the subject of interpretation confirmed that I was not reading alone; just one of a community of readers situated within a particular regime. Reading is never a solitary encounter between reader and text.

Frow’s most popular book to date is Genre (2006). Following a Bakhtinian-Foucauldian synthesis, he shows how genres work as discursive practices; something a text performs, rather than a category to which it belongs. Consequently, a text’s genre is dialogic; neither pre-existing the act of reading nor imposed on the text by the reader. Genre is characteristically intertextual.

The book review is a genre to reveal one reader’s encounter with a text and then by mobilising a supposed context, rhetorically restrict its meaning to reveal the ultimate purpose of the review: a value. Welcome to my book review.

With The Practice of Value Frow has collected essays written over more than two decades. The unity, it is claimed, is the exploration of the conflict of two values: the aesthetic and the economic. As these two very different regimes collide, the value of a text becomes a battleground that Frow seeks to unpick with his very distinctive writing style.

Outside the academy, Frow had a brief brush with fame in 1997, when he accused Graham Swift of plagiarising Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying. The British media picked up the story, and people took sides in one of those rare occasions when the press realises that humanities academics exist. In one of the most entertaining essays in The Practice of Value, ‘An ethics of imitation,’ Frow defends himself from having accused Swift of piracy, instead accusing the press of having misread an aesthetic value judgement for a concept derived from a property-based regime (p.164).

Instead, Frow claims, he was simply concerned with developing an ethical basis by which it is possible to value the transformation of another author’s text into an ‘original’ work. In this case, Swift’s Last Orders had not sufficiently reworked Faulkner and so was something stronger than unoriginal (p. 150). Frow’s disavowal of having accused Swift of plagiarism is somewhat disingenuous. Not sufficiently reworking another text—all talk of the inevitability of intertextuality and regimes of reading aside—is to at least hint at slavish copying. Whether or not this is actually true of Last Orders remains outside the scope of this review.

Another diverting essay is ‘Afterlife: texts as usage,’ in which Frow traces the
line through which Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s fictional prostitute, ‘Jenny’, moves from avant-garde to ‘unreadable’ following the advent of modernism (p. 32). He traces the poem’s history through the differently positioned responses of Ruskin, Pound, and Wright. Frow observes that if production is inseparable from consumption, then a reading of these later texts establishes a history of the transformation of Rossetti’s ‘original’ (pp. 43-44). In an intertextual world, every act of production is inevitably an act of interpretation of one’s forebears.

However, Frow is not an ‘anything goes’ type, and the reader-producer is not a free agent to impose any arbitrary meaning on the text, but an effect of systems, ‘not their cause’. Hence the preoccupation with reading as an act, rather the reader, although the latter can be seen as ‘at once rhetorically invoked by texts, shaped by the norms of reading, and in turn modifying those norms and the texts that carry them’ (pp. 42-43).

When Frow asks ‘Is Elvis a god?’, he demolishes with ease the superficial cultural studies that sketches comparisons between Elvis and the Deity but completely fails to understand either religion or even vaguer concepts of spirituality. He argues that reading the sacred must become an essential part of criticism, along with materialist readings of mass culture. He ends this essay by broadening his claim to say that non-Indigenous academics will only be able to comprehend Aboriginal land rights when they are simultaneously rational and yet empathise with other forms of knowledge, without denying these their own legitimacy.

However, he ends in a frustrating ‘I don’t know, in any schematic way, the answers to these questions; but I do know that it is crucial to the future of our discipline to get them right.’ (p.185) And this points to a weakness in a number of the essays: the reader is sometimes left feeling, ‘So what?’ Frow occasionally seems to be going somewhere before the essay abruptly terminates with a rhetorical flourish rather than a conclusion. This may be a cute stylistic trait to some, but this reader (as well as my anonymous penciller) found it exasperating.

The most unconvincing essay, and one that highlights a danger of being trapped in the prison-house of language (Jameson 1975) is ‘In the penal colony’. Frow offers a Foucauldian analysis of Port Arthur, the 1996 tragedy, and the history and heritage of the convict settlement. Using Kafka’s ‘In der Strafkolonie’ (1919) as a way of linking regimes of punishment with regimes of reading makes for an clever piece, but not one that persuades. There is too much of the body, both in Martin Bryant’s victims and the flogged backs of convicts, to find a purely textual analysis likeable. The sympathy which Frow demanded for our engagement with the sacred is curiously lacking here for actual people. The dead require more than language games, they require respect, and this is not something at which either cultural or literary studies have often proved expert.

Having written a review, I am obliged by the rules of the genre to summarise in a value judgement. All in all, The Practice of Value suffers the flaw of many collections of essays. It is an assembly unified only by the very real existence of the author and a title, which only just succeed in holding the book together, even if the writing quality never drops from page to page. For those who want an introduction to Frow’s thinking, Genre will prove much more satisfactory, but it is likely that everyone will find at least one readable essay in The Practice of Value, regardless of the
regime from which you are reading it.

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