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Review of

Matthew Michael Kaylor:

Arch-Priest of a Minor Cult: A Critical Study of Forrest Reid

The information on the title pages of the book I have received for reviewing and evaluating as a habilitation thesis is not entirely unambiguous as to its actual contents. The announcement "*Arch-Priest of a Minor Cult*": *A Critical Study of Forrest Reid* is followed by a different title, *Forrest Reid: The Tom Barber Trilogy*, which, on the third title page is further specified as a publication (published by a very minor American publisher) in two volumes: an edition with notes of Forrest Reid's *The Tom Barber Trilogy* plus volume two, which is entitled *A Critical Study of Forrest Reid and Explanatory Notes*; the table of contents returns to the first title, with a note that the 'explanatory notes' are not included; on the next page we find the title of the first page once more. It appears that after all this title-shifting and –adapting the reader, and the reviewer, is meant to expect a critical study.

In his short 'Author's Preface' Kaylor provides an introduction of his highly idiosyncratic approach and methodology. Instead of offering a scholarly analysis of the fictional, critical and autobiographical works of Forrest Reid, he intends to 'trace the erotic elements

evident in his life and works, particularly with a view to elucidating how those desires and their biographical and other contexts achieved a masterful synthesis in his magnum opus, *The Tom Barber Trilogy ...*. (7) This appears to be an extremely narrow angle for a publication which claims to be a critical study of an author.

The present book, I hesitate to call it a critical study, is a biography of Forrest Reid with commentary on his works. In his readings of the fiction of Reid, Kaylor wholeheartedly follows the school of biographical criticism without considering or reflecting on the pitfalls of this outdated method. His arguments for using this method are in themselves questionable, in that, for example, he claims that Reid 'was himself fond of forging such biographical links.'(7) Having promised a critical reading of the *Tom Barber Trilogy* he, a couple of pages later, finds that a plot summary and a tracing of the 'aesthetic lines' (10) (not exactly a very precise term) of one of the novels will suffice. In place of a well argued explanation of this revision Kaylor flings a statement into the face of the reader which can only be understood as a provocation: 'I could certainly craft an elaborate justification for this last decision – something scholarly in tone and perhaps even convincing! [sic] – but I will simply embrace what Reid boldly asserts ...' (10) His justification for selecting *The Retreat* for a what he calls 'close reading' (a hardly more cutting edge practice than biographical criticism) is even less scholarly: 'Since my boyhood, I have loved (on a very personal, perhaps inexplicable level) *The Tom Barber Trilogy* above all other literary works, and at the heart of this feeling is the novel at its heart, *The Retreat*.' (10) Emotional, subjective admiration rather than criticism is out of place in an academic book. Moreover, biographical criticism and 'close reading' are oddly coupled practices, as the New Critics, in disapproval of the biographical school, coined the term 'biographical fallacy' to indicate the drawbacks of this method.

The brief introduction/preface to the book lacks any theoretical, methodological reflection. As we are faced with a biography, at least some conceptual issues from a vast body of critical literature on life writing could have been taken up to give some basic theoretical underpinning to the book. Likewise, various theorems as developed in a growing body of queer theory would have lent the biography of a pederast an appropriate theoretical foundation.

Taken as a biography, this is an extremely well researched and documented life of Forrest Reid. An impressive amount of unpublished material (for example letters and manuscript drafts) has been put to good use in presenting almost every detail and every minor occurrence in Forrest Reid's life. Moreover, the wide-ranging relationships of the author among Uranian circles are impressively chronicled. However, to contextualize Reid's Uranian interests as well as his works Kaylor explores the Uranian networks so extensively that he frequently presents very minor issues, a practice that makes the book much longer but hardly any more substantial. While the investigation and review of Reid's correspondence with prominent writers of his day, particularly with E. M. Forster, is of special significance, it would have been far more interesting for an academic reader to learn about aesthetic analogies between Forster and Reid rather than which desires they shared. Although we find hardly any structural or narratological analysis in the book, Kaylor does relate core elements of Reid's oeuvre to a tremendous corpus of contemporaneous literary as well as (pseudo-) philosophical and (pseudo-) scientific works.

Kaylor follows the chronology of Reid's life referring alongside to primarily autobiographical elements in his fiction. The biographical incidents inspiring the narrative works do not vary considerably throughout the author's life, mostly due to Reid's very limited interests, which makes for a narrowly circumscribed range of themes treated in his fictional works. Kaylor enlightens us that Reid had no interest in political and social issues (almost unbelievable, yet highly significant in a writer who lived most of his life in Belfast). Given this uniformity it would have been interesting to trace a possible – strictly artistic – development of Forrest Reid. As his writing career spanned several decades of, essentially, the modernist period, considering his affinities with Henry James and his friendship with E. M. Forster, Reid's oeuvre would have suggested itself for an examination of its place in the literature of his time, not only among like-minded Uranians. However, we do learn that Reid disliked James Joyce for what he considers his 'obscurity'. The question whether this would imply an overall anti-modernist stance in Reid is never taken up. Kaylor's brief examination of the contemporary reception of Reid cannot compensate the lack of a more thorough and particularly more wide-ranging evaluation of the author's position in the literature of the first half of the twentieth century. The evaluation of his own works by Reid himself, often a major source of Kaylor's assessment, may be of (minor) interest but has to be put into perspective to arrive at a more objective, a more scholarly appraisal.

In view of the delicacy of Reid's major subject and the importance of subtextual nuances an analysis of the author's narrative strategies would have yielded interesting results.

However, the frequent blurring of the distinction between author and narrator as well as the near equation of biography and fiction in his readings of Reid's works and the lack of awareness of the fictionality and constructedness of all autobiographical writing do not allow Kaylor a differentiated narratological investigation. He believes to introduce a new term of his own coinage for *Apostate* – "Fictionate Autobiography" (298). This is a tautological term, as all autobiography is at least partly fictional, a basic concept in current life-writing theory.

In addition to the above mentioned deficiencies, the 'analytical' method and the 'critical' discourse employed in this book are only tangentially academic. More often than not long quotations are given preference over analysis; for example Reid's views of his own works frequently serve as parameters of interpretation, a practice that ends in circular argumentation (cf. 170); biographical incidents are often interpreted in terms of fiction and vice versa. Furthermore, Kaylor repeatedly explains Reid's authorial intentions in terms of the intentions of fictional figures in his own novels or works of Uranian friends. A telling example is the following: 'This decision was influenced by Reid's conception of his own oeuvre, which he perhaps best elucidates in Martin Linton's description of his own, in *Brian Westby ...*' (426) Likewise, Kaylor frequently indulges in oblique allusions rather than concrete and precise examination; for example, instead of an analysis of 'a dream that both Freud and Jung would have found enlightening' (255) we are put off with half a page of quotation from the primary text. When attempting to produce an argument why he avoids an exploration of the structural and chronological complexities of the *Tom Barber Trilogy*, Kaylor asserts that the book is not meant for an academic audience: 'these are pedantic questions, more likely to interest academics than casual readers ...' (425-6). This attitude may also explain why the book does not have a bibliography.

If the committee/the faculty is prepared to accept a biography as a habilitation thesis, I can recommend the book under review. However, if a scholarly critical study is required – which is the practice in my university – I cannot recommend it.

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