

Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity

By Andrew McCann

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THE 'SINGLE AUTHOR' ACADEMIC STUDY IS RARE IN LITERARY STUDIES THESE DAYS, AND something of a risk for the critic. Authors are chosen usually because an academic likes them, or even identifies with them. (Who ever writes a study of an author he or she despises?) But to like an author can set limits to one's critical capacity: how critical can one *be* under these conditions? The risk of a single author study is simply that the author has too much concentrated influence. Such studies dutifully build themselves around the author's corpus, starting with the early stuff and working diligently through to the end: which is more or less what happens in Andrew McCann's recent book on Christos Tsiolkas even though, as McCann notes, Tsiolkas is only 'mid-career'. As the sole object of attention, the single author determines the approach and calls almost all the shots. He or she can even provide the terms of engagement: so that, for example, Tsiolkas's 2005 play about Pasolini's *Salò* means that McCann inevitably talks, at length, about Tsiolkas in relation to Pasolini and *Salò*. In a single author study, author and critic can easily come to reflect each other. It can bind author and critic together, intimately and ideologically, to the extent that readers can sometimes find it difficult to figure out where the one ends and the other begins.

One of McCann's keywords in his study is 'abjection': it comes, of course, from Julia Kristeva, but in the sense that McCann uses the term it is lifted straight out of Tsiolkas (from his essay 'On the Concept of Tolerance'). When McCann talks about 'Tsiolkas's habitual interest in abjection' (118) one question worth asking is: is he also talking about his *own* habitual interest? In a single author study where the author swallows up every page, the critic's relation to that author must itself be an abject one. Does the author leak out of the critic? Does the critic leak out of the author? It's hard to say either way. It is as if abjection is everywhere in this book (and it is!), which begins by looking at a newspaper article where Tsiolkas is interviewed in New York while on an American book tour after the success of *The Slap*: 'the moment I read it', McCann confesses, 'I decided I wanted to write a monograph about Christos Tsiolkas' (x). Why is this 'mid-career' newspaper interview so important? It is at least in part because an Australian writer now finds

himself in the US: reflecting exactly the journey McCann himself had taken a few years ago when he left the University of Melbourne for Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, where he is now a Professor of English involved in trying to get people 'outside of Australia interested in Australian writers' (x). Tsiolkas's trip to America produces a split in the author that therefore mirrors McCann's own predicament and in fact structures his book. Before this moment, Tsiolkas was a local, minor literary figure, focusing on 'experimental writing', marginalised identity politics, and so on. But afterwards, Tsiolkas becomes a 'literary celebrity', a novelist who is now read and discussed by the 'mainstream' and increasingly known in America (where *The Slap* was adapted to television and relocated to Brooklyn). These two positions are familiar enough versions of Pierre Bourdieu's autonomous and heteronomous poles in the cultural field; but they nag at this book over and over, influencing everything that it does. Much later on, they are re-expressed as a stark authorial choice: either the 'aesthetic withdrawal' of radical literary writing, or the popular appeal of something 'commercial' (137). For McCann, Tsiolkas is split by these opposite positions, to the extent of becoming 'a sort of double of himself' (138). There is something Jekyll-and-Hyde about these two alternatives as far as McCann is concerned: the horror of them, or the abjection of them, is that the transformation from one into the other seems to happen so easily.

Our modern concept of literary celebrity primarily derives from a very different novelist's journey to the US much earlier on. Charles Dickens's American book tours in the late 1860s—where the author was marketed and commodified through newspaper interviews, extensive publicity systems, public performances, the increasing influence of magazine print culture and photography, financial investments, cheap forms of transatlantic publishing, and so on—remind us that the kind of thing McCann is talking about with Tsiolkas is by no means new. McCann is well aware of this: in another recent and more ambitious study, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (2014), he turns back to bestselling nineteenth century authors such as Marie Corelli to address exactly this same cluster of issues. The problem for McCann—and this is also true of his much earlier Australian book, *Marcus Clarke's Bohemia* (2004)—is always to do with literature's fraught relation to the 'commercial' and the commodity form. In order to complicate this relationship, he turns his attention either to literary writers who appear to cross over into what I have elsewhere called 'the field of popular fiction', or to popular writers, like Corelli, who seem to him to aspire in some way to be literary. For McCann, Tsiolkas's *Barracuda* occupies precisely this kind of abject, contrary position. It reflects the 'reorientation of literature towards the popular' (121) and is 'firmly anchor[ed]... in the space of popular media consumption' (121). But it also writes 'against the mass spectacle' and against 'the mass media' and 'the homogenising forces of the market' (121). These opposite poles of the cultural field constantly bleed into one another—as if

literary fiction is abject too, held together by the very things that should be tearing it apart.

It must be said that McCann's view of the 'homogenising forces of the market' has less to do with the 1860s (or the 2010s, for that matter) and more to do with the 1950s: recalling, say, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, when commentators could still speak about the 'mass arts' in some coherent, generalised way. More specifically, it recalls Theodor Adorno. McCann is very fond of Adorno, but when Adorno meets Bourdieu here it can look as if standardisation eclipses differentiation every time. This reinforces a weary cultural pessimism that underpins McCann's book, taking it into a critical impasse from which there is no escape. Even the influence of Pasolini on Tsiolkas only demonstrates the dispiriting fact that Tsiolkas is destined, as McCann puts it, to 'be incorporated into the circuits of the culture industry' (13). Under Adorno's shadow, standardisation is a novelist's inevitable destination no matter how radical or marginal they might once have been. What McCann calls 'political writing' offers some hope, and he talks himself into the debateable view that contemporary Australian literature has brought with it a 'political urgency' (122) after the Howard years. He knows that the old elite/popular distinction is no longer tenable, and this leads him to suggest, perhaps against his better judgement, that political literary writing should also be 'commercially successful' (124). But the pessimism soon kicks back in: when 'the political is dependent on the commercial' (124), that surely can't be good for anyone. We quickly return to the old Adorno/Bourdieu problem, that is, the *modernist* problem: that the kind of emancipation promised by aesthetic autonomy is always essentially compromised (or, for Bourdieu, illusory). McCann has a general complaint to make, around which his entire book is organised, namely, that 'Australian literary culture is now less and less invested in producing writing that grasps the aesthetic self as a mode of resistance' (126). So this is a book about the end of modernism, a prolonged, self-lacerating end that contemporary Australian literature still apparently finds itself in the wake of. All this is only able to be understood abjectly, with Tsiolkas now rolled over into the 'culture industries' and literary modernism as nothing much more than a fading light in the distance. *Barracuda*, for example, is in a 'liminal position at which commercial technologies and a trace-memory of aesthetic autonomy seem to coexist' (126). Hyde has almost completely possessed Jekyll in this bleak, elegiac remark—which gives us a good sense of the direction this book is going in. (I should add that terms like 'commercial technologies' or 'commercial logics'—rather like the 'popular' itself—are never given any sort of definition here. They just *are*. It is enough that, in themselves, they enable the kind of cultural pessimism that gives this book its tone and direction.)

There is a brief discussion here of *The Slap's* relation to popular Australian TV soap operas like *Neighbours* or *Home and Away* (rather than closer equivalents such as

Offspring). For McCann, Tsiolkas's novel is 'critical of these mass media forms' but it also establishes 'a fundamental continuity with them' (127) since it, too, seems to be structured like a 'television series' (128). This Adorno-esque reading brings with it the expected regrets and frustrations. Sharing a part of the cultural field with TV soap operas means, for McCann, that *The Slap* contains only 'minimal... moments of cultural reflection' because 'quality television does not do critical theory' (129). Actually, this kind of observation owes more to Bourdieu than Adorno, since it more or less repeats the former's understanding of the popular (even when it is 'quality') as a space of instant legibility, to which readers or audiences bond emotionally rather than intellectually. Since McCann's book *does* do critical theory, to a degree at least, it marks out its own distinctions along similar lines: the intellectual *over* the emotional; academic readers over amateur, ordinary readers. After quoting Tsiolkas's comment that *The Slap* presented 'a culture in Australia that had literally made me sick, sick to the stomach', McCann writes: 'This would probably come as a shock to the multitude of reading groups that have fervently debated the ethics of smacking spoilt children' (101). This patronising view of the priorities (and the reaction) of amateur readers is important enough to McCann to make him repeat the point later on, telling us that *The Slap* 'was discussed in the reading groups to which it seemed ideally adapted... [where] readers were able to discuss [it] without any prior expertise or without having to perform any kind of interpretive work' (129). His own book, of course, is written for an academic readership *with* expertise: sometimes just a little too self-consciously so, as when, after telling us that Tsiolkas is 'mid-career', McCann adds, unnecessarily: 'to draw on the language of grant applications' (xii).

I think McCann knows very well that this view of the amateur or non-academic (non-interpretive, unreflective) reader is pretty flat. In order to rise above it, as it were, he offers another glimmer of hope by turning to a different sort of descriptor of the cultural field, the *middlebrow*. Drawing on Beth Driscoll's recent book, *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014), it seems for a moment as if this is exactly what McCann needs to get out of his critical impasse (and his cultural pessimism). But the middlebrow is already a hopelessly compromised term; when Driscoll talks about its 'reverential' relationship to 'elite culture', for example, we might conclude that, as far as Tsiolkas is concerned, it isn't very useful at all. To make matters worse, the middlebrow takes us *into* the world of amateur readerships and reading groups, a world McCann has no time for. (The important evaluative distinctions Janice Radway draws between book-of-the-month club readerships and academic readerships in *A Feeling for Books* [1997] would have given him a necessary counterpoint to work with.) For Driscoll, the middlebrow also has overt 'feminine' connotations, often with a domestic, family-centred focus: once again, pretty much the opposite of what we find in Tsiolkas's fiction. Having introduced the term, McCann is therefore understandably ambivalent—or even, abject—about its application. *The Slap*, for example, seems far *too* middlebrow, wiping out

any space for 'cultural reflection'. In this novel, McCann writes, 'the everyday wins out and marginalises any serious or sustained resistance to it' (133). The problem with the middlebrow is that the everyday is precisely the space it inhabits; it kind of likes it.

The turn from *Dead Europe* to *The Slap* does indeed seem to have disillusioned McCann. *Dead Europe*—where Tsiolkas momentarily seemed like nothing less than 'an iteration of Pasolini' (77)—is a moral condemnation of the 'corporeality of consumption' (81) and 'neoliberal desire' (133); it plays out 'the abject ruins of consumerist fantasy' (84), etc etc. This is the kind of world McCann seems more at home with as a literary critic. *The Slap*, on the other hand, is about 'redemption'. McCann's reading of *The Slap* is mostly built around the critical capacity of the novel's ethnic representations, and he makes some astute observations. Through Rosie and her family, the novel gives us an example of 'white abjection' where, now, 'white Australians' are simply 'one more minority' among others (100). Since the novel's main protagonists are successful, confident, upwardly mobile Greek Australians, this isn't really true; but certainly, the traditional Anglo-Australian dominant is traumatically displaced in *The Slap* through Rosie, her husband and their son. McCann is right to note that the 'multicultural experience' is barely explored, or critiqued, in this novel (101), which relies instead on the allegorisation of a few recognisable 'ethnic types' and on what I would think of as a kind of Geoffrey Blainey-esque atomised ethnic tribalism. Bilal's Aboriginal Muslim identity is a good example: although it could have been worth opening up, the novel in fact has nothing at all to say about it. Nor, however, does McCann: a reading of Peta Stephenson's work on Indigenous Muslim identity in Australia after Howard, in *Islam Dreaming* (2011), might have been beneficial here. (Stephenson also briefly but interestingly glosses the origins of Bilal's name.)

Rosie defends Bilal's conversion to Islam; later on, Bilal viciously abuses and rejects her. McCann has little to say about Tsiolkas's treatment of women in his fiction, but Rosie's vilification in *The Slap* is surely worth commenting on. The novel certainly demonstrates some level of 'sublimated aggression' towards her family, but most of this is directed at Rosie herself: an Anglo-Australian woman who is cast as promiscuous ('She had fucked and fucked', the novel gleefully tells us), socially precarious, overly maternal, a bit of a bohemian but aspirational too: a disenfranchised middle class woman with a residual sense of entitlement, who can't afford to buy into the inner city but who finds the far outer suburbs drearily depressing. The novel despises her almost pathologically, finally getting Bilal (rather than, say, his female partner Sammi) to vent its rage at her, delivering what Tsiolkas has elsewhere called 'the real slap of the book': that is, a man slapping a woman (Megalogenis). McCann does note Tsiolkas's 'sadistic' treatment of Rosie, but he rationalises it through the novel's critique of the white cultural dominant—missing the chance to engage with the simmering misogyny that inhabits this

critique. As for the actual slap itself, the one that reading groups debate without any 'expertise' or interpretive capacity: it is read here as a massively 'overdetermined' event, spiralling off into multiple directions and dispersing itself through a sequence of other slaps in the novel, both actual and metaphorical. McCann likes the descriptor 'overdetermined' almost as much as he likes 'abjection', using it a number of times: and with good reason in *The Slap*, where an arrogant Greek Australian man hitting an annoying Anglo-Australian child is a trigger for any number of issues and causes (and effects), all of which never allow anything to settle back down again until the novel's awkwardly sentimental, overwrought final moment.

This book's dependence on Adorno and Bourdieu, its elegiac view of 'aesthetic autonomy', and its investment in a politically oriented 'fiction of critique' that 'resists' the 'homogenising forms of the market' and the tyranny of the 'everyday': all this is interesting in some respects, and limiting in others. It means McCann ends up more or less where he began, stuck in the critical impasse he still can't get out of. It also means that, even though his book talks from time to time about Howard's Australia, the suburbs, 'global economics' (in *Dead Europe*) and so on, it is at the same time relentlessly inward-looking: too caught up in an all-too-self-consciously articulated academic chronicle of the predicament of one particular Australian novelist. This is precisely the limitation of a single author study: it isolates the author as if nothing much else counts out there. As I read this book I found myself wondering about the comparisons it never makes: to a writer like Frank Moorhouse, for example, whose League of Nations novels give us one of the few examples of a contemporary Australian novelist engaging with political institutions. Moorhouse's Europe is decadent, not 'obscene'; his cosmopolitanism is less abjectly registered than Tsiolkas's; and his influences are Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald rather than, say, Pasolini. Fitzgerald may be important to Tsiolkas too, who similarly charts the contingent histories of a resentful middle class, with their trajectories of decline and failure and their sense of being pimped out from time to time to the culture industries. (Anouk in *The Slap* is a Fitzgeraldian character.) On the other hand, the ambitious political fables of Fitzgerald's American contemporaries—Theodore Dreiser or John Dos Passos—are far removed from Tsiolkas, whose interest in the disenfranchised in his essays and articles (along with his critical view of the urban Left and new environmentalist movements) never translates into his fiction. There is, as McCann notes, no overarching political-historical vision here: but there should be. As much as he admires Tsiolkas—and as close as he is to this author's predicament—McCann is therefore quite right to be disappointed by Tsiolkas's literary writing, which is good at fracturing things up but not very good at bringing anything much together.

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