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Review of Victoria Best, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century French Literature*.

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Victoria Best, *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century French Literature*. London: Duckworth, 2002. 159 pp. ISBN 0715631667 (paper).

Reviewed by Nancy Lane, University of South Carolina

Victoria Best's *Introduction to Twentieth-Century French Literature* is a rapid, rather breezy survey of literature written in French during the century recently ended. In a tone more conversational than scholarly, Best serves as interpreter and tour guide for an Anglophone audience of students (and perhaps casual readers) lost in the confusing terrain of modern French literature. Faced with the daunting task of summarizing a century of disparate and complex literary production in 159 pages, Best focuses on the "interrelation of identity, narrative and history in its various manifestations, either in influential literary movements, or as shaping factors across different genres" (14). Best provides sketchy socio-cultural, historical, and philosophical contexts for each genre and movement she identifies, as well as very brief textual analyses of selected "difficult" works designed to help uninitiated readers (students and other tourists) overcome their initial bewilderment. After an introduction that uses Jorge Semprun's 1994 *L'écriture ou la vie* as a point of departure for an account of twentieth-century literature framed by trauma, the book's six chapters are organized by both chronology and genre. "First-Person Narratives: The Voice of No Authority" treats Proust, Gide, and Beckett's prose works; "Modern Poetry: The Witchcraft of Words" includes brief explications of poems (or fragments) by Apollinaire, Bonnefoy, Ponge, and Eluard. The chapter on existentialism, subtitled "The Impossible Ideal of Ethics," discusses *La nausée*, *Les mains sales*, *Huis clos*, and *La peste*, and "Experiments in Form: The Art of Losing the Plot" discusses *théâtre de l'absurde* and *le nouveau roman* with examples drawn from Ionesco, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute. The last two chapters are "Women's Writing: Imagination in Power," which includes Colette, Beauvoir, Duras, and Cixous, and "Trauma, Myth and Memory: Making History Personal" examines works by Georges Perec (*W ou le souvenir d'enfance*), Michel Tournier (*Le roi des aulnes*), and Assia Djebar (*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*). While comparatists and scholars of twentieth-century French literature will find flaws in the book (more on that in a moment), it does have several significant virtues.

Best is both intelligent and articulate, well versed in contemporary critical approaches (psychoanalytic, feminist, and postcolonial) and able to make them both useful and intelligible for the uninitiated. Far from being pedantic, she engages directly with her reader in a familiar, chatty tone: "Colette is quite the sanest writer I have ever come across" (107); "[these three texts] will be quite unlike anything you have ever read before" (124); "Being an impatient reader myself, I would rather gobble up a novel than chew through a poem" (36). An empathetic teacher, she frequently introduces a "difficult" movement or work by adopting what she imagines to be the perspective of her audience, injecting a dose of humor that may amuse some readers (while irritating others). She imagines, for example, that first-time readers of *La nausée*, frustrated by Roquentin's introspection, may mutter, "Why can't he just get a job?" (63). Likewise, faced with Eluard's poem "L'Amoureuse" Best joins her "utterly bewildered" reader for a moment ("Of course we could throw our hands in the air and cry, but it doesn't make any sense!" [56]) before offering her own reading. Unfortunately, she sometimes remains bewildered herself, as in the few pages devoted to "the nihilistic ravings of Eugène Ionesco" (87). For her,

La cantatrice chauve "seems impossible to approach analytically" (88), and yet "students tend to love the rebellious spirit of the plays, and their crazy, potent anarchy" (89).

Foremost among the book's virtues is Best's heartfelt defense of literature in the face of the widespread belief that it "is somehow irrelevant to the modern world" (9)--a belief held not only by students but also by growing numbers of academics (not to mention the corporate world, both inside and outside the academy). Situating her analysis within the context of the Holocaust as the central event of the century, Best argues throughout for the indivisibility of writing from life. Narrative and storytelling, she says, are crucial survival strategies in the face of trauma--the horrific violence, exponential growth in technology, and political instability that have marked the last one hundred years or so. "Extreme experience," she maintains, "brings with it the recognition that we are creatures of language, that language constitutes our very being, and self-expression provides our means of mental survival" (9-10). Of course, she says, literature has always pressed the limits of language and found new languages for new realities, but "the excessive and demanding twentieth century has explored the nature and structure of language [the raw material of literature] as never before" (11).

Best's focus on narrative as the intersection of the public domain and the personal (*histoire* as both history and story), where the modern subject struggles with identity, gender, sexuality, power, and meaning, provides a thread leading her perplexed reader through the exotic landscape of twentieth-century French literature. While this approach unifies the book and works fairly well in the last two chapters, in which the politics of storytelling by marginalized, oppressed people (Jews, women, former colonial subjects, for example) is foregrounded, it is reductive, creating some awkward and forced transitions. To introduce the chapter on poetry, for example, Best claims that first-person narratives and poetry "are not so very dissimilar in their concerns," because "poets are particularly sophisticated narrators" (36). Paul Valéry, along with most French poets, would certainly beg to differ--but Best never mentions Valéry. At the end of the same chapter, attempting to connect Surrealism to existentialism, Best is led to posit a shared "belief that reason had lost its power in the twentieth century" (57). While indubitably true for the Surrealists, such a belief can be ascribed to Sartre only with great difficulty.

Not surprisingly, given the incommensurability between the scope of the subject and the slightness of the book, oversimplification and lack of depth are problems in every chapter, particularly with regard to genre and technique. The following examples are representative of such problems. Even though the focus of the book is on narrative, Best ignores the work done on narratology from Henry James to Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman and Gerald Prince, to name only a few, so that there is no distinction between voice and perspective, narrator and focalizer, for example. By limiting the first chapter to discussion of first-person narratives, she excludes the only work of Gide that he called a novel (*Les faux-monnayeurs*) and devotes the entire discussion to his *récits*. There is no systematic presentation of either the history of the novel in France or of developments in narrative technique: Sartre and Camus are "existentialists"; Colette, Beauvoir and Duras are "women writers"; Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet are practitioners of the *nouveau roman*; and Perec and Tournier are examples of recent 'avant-garde' writing. Thus, the reader gets no sense of the transformations of the novel as a genre through time, nor of the intense debates about the question of representation. Discussions of poetry and theater are equally lacking in instruction in fundamental techniques and literary

history. The uninitiated reader will have no real understanding of how French prosody differs from English, or of the vast differences between French theatrical conventions and English ones. The chapter on poetry gives a wholly inadequate response to the question of what poetry is, passing over more than two millennia to situate the origins of this debate, indeed, of literary criticism itself, at the beginning of the twentieth century. "It was acknowledged," she tells us, "that poetry was the most supremely literary of all literary forms, and so it must, therefore, contain the key to understanding what distinguished the literary from other forms of writing" (37). Aristotle, Boileau, and Goethe, not to mention Valéry and many others, would surely be astonished to read that this question arose only at the beginning of the last century. Best gives her reader the impression that modern French poetry is particularly difficult, if not incomprehensible, omitting any discussion even of Apollinaire's well-known lyrical poems. Lacking a foundation that would enable the neophyte reader to begin to 'unpack' poetry, said reader is too often assigned the position of dreamer and told to enjoy the rhythms and images "as if the poem were a beautiful, evocative but inexplicable dream" (56).

The insular character of the book is another major flaw. Best makes almost no attempt to situate literary movements or critical methodologies in a context broader than French history and culture; rather, she treats Surrealism, experimental theater, innovations in narrative technique, and so on, as though they were specifically French phenomena. Best's account of Surrealism, for example, does not mention its Dada antecedents in Zurich, its pronounced internationalism, or André Breton's central position as founder and arbiter of the movement in France. While she is right to emphasize the interrogation of language and meaning as a central issue in twentieth-century French literature, she fails to mention the crucial contributions of linguistics and anthropology, Prague structuralism or Russian formalism to the elaboration of this discourse. Likewise, she treats avant-garde theater as though it were a curiously Gallic phenomenon, ignoring the seminal influences, both early in the century and during the years after World War II, of German Expressionism, Brecht, Hugo Ball, Italian Futurism and Pirandello, Russian constructivism, Asian theatrical forms (as interpreted by Artaud), and even Peter Brook and The Living Theater, on experimental theatrical practice in France.

The insularity of Best's book is cultural as well. That her audience is British is evidenced by her sweeping characterizations of "the French" as viewed from across the Channel. According to Best, French life and national identity are imbued with "abstract concerns with language and psychoanalysis" (12) that are uniquely French. The book will convey to uninitiated readers the assumption that the French are also alone in "incorporating philosophical thought into fictional writing" (130); statements such as "France has a strong literary tradition of which it is immensely proud" (12), while true, imply that the French are somehow 'different' from other nationalities in this regard. Responding perhaps to centuries-old British mistrust of the French, Best explains that, unlike the "pragmatic British" (82), the French have "a natural taste for abstract theorizing over the intricacies of language and a fiercely held belief that language organizes our personal and political situation," leading to "an understanding of literature as potentially revolutionary" (12). Again, the presentation of the French as vaguely exotic foreigners may be an effective way of making their modern literature easier to swallow for skeptical students, but it is incomplete at best and inaccurate at worst.

A handbook rather than a scholarly work, the book contains a useful "Glossary of Authors," as well as a very brief list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter. Francophone writers figure prominently in the list of authors, which includes not only writers, but also artists and filmmakers ranging from Picasso and Braque to Claude Lanzmann. Unfortunately, one name missing from the glossary is Jorge Semprun, whose memoirs Best used to introduce her book; readers unfamiliar with his work will not learn anything more about him than the fact that he survived the Holocaust. The lists of suggested readings are eclectic but selective, chosen (with two or three exceptions) to be accessible to the student audience for whom the book was written. Finally, the book is marred by some mistranslations. With the exception of two poems, all translations in the book are Best's own, and at least two of them (on pp. 11 and 132) are misleading if not wrong.

Prof. Best is an unpretentious but engaging writer whose lively tone will attract nonspecialists seeking a pocket guide to French literature of the past century or so. Those seeking a more nuanced and comprehensive introduction in English would do better to consult Denis Hollier's *New History of French Literature* (Harvard UP, 1989), Chris Robinson's *French Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Newton Abbot, England: David and Charles; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1980), or Jennifer Birkett and James Kearns's *A Guide to French Literature: From Early Modern to Postmodern* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).