This Month We Have Been Reading...

November 2009

Richard Ford’s 1986 novel The Sportswriter is the first of three to feature Frank Bascombe as narrator and protagonist (followed by Independence Day (1995) and The Lay of the Land (2006)). While the title may seem a little unprepossessing to those who are not sports fans, Bascombe himself is not particularly interested in sport, even though his job is to write about it. He explains that he became a sportswriter almost by chance – being a once-published short-story writer and failed novelist – and that he finds sport congenial just because of his sense of the way that, focused as they are on a particular area of physical excellence, sportsmen and women tend to take things at face-value: unlike novelists, they don’t ‘see around’ things. And this plain-seeing, straightforward, ordinary way of being is one of the themes of the novel: Bascombe calls himself a ‘literalist’ and is to different degrees wary of narrative’s knack of explaining things in terms of causality, melodramatic plotting and existential dread (perhaps the theme of twentieth-century literature), the transcendent, epiphany, the uncanny. ‘The world is a more engaging and less dramatic place than writers ever give it credit for being’, he remarks. Sports writing, he considers, teaches you that ‘there are no transcendent themes in life’: the idea that there are, he thinks, is a ‘lie of literature’. Bascombe, the ‘arch-ordinary American’, as he describes himself in Independence Day, is ‘untranscendent as a tree-trunk’.

Ford is interested in rethinking the literary in The Sportswriter, then, in a way that revolves around the idea of the ‘ordinary’. Frank Bascombe, a 38-year-old divorced father of two children and of an older son recently killed by Reye’s disease, repeatedly refers to himself as ‘ordinary’, and at one point fantasises about marrying his current girlfriend and leading ‘a damn good ordinary life’. Paradoxically, perhaps, in celebrating the ordinary and by doing so in opposition to ‘literature’, Ford is developing one of the major themes in literature, and one of the major dimensions of the novel in particular over the last three hundred years. More than other genres, the novel celebrates the un-remarkable, the quotidian, the non-literary, the ordinary. But if Ford is in the great, paradoxical tradition of writers who create great literature by setting themselves against literature, he produces out of that concern a magnificent, enthralling piece of writing by inventing a voice that brilliantly expresses the concerns of a limited, middle-aged, somewhat ponderous, often salacious, melancholic and self-opinionated, wistful and witty, sometimes profound human being. Bascombe is the poet of emotional detachment, and therefore specifically not a novelist: ‘This, of course, is a minor but pernicious lie of literature’, he remarks at one point:

...that at times like these, after significant or disappointing divulgences, at arrivals or departures of obvious importance, when touchdowns are scored, knock-outs recorded, loved ones buried, orgasms notched, that at such times we are any of us altogether in an emotion, that we are within ourselves and not able to detect other emotions we might also be feeling, or be about to feel, or prefer to feel. If it’s literature’s job to tell the truth about these moments, it usually fails, in my opinion, and it’s the writer’s fault for falling into such conventions.

It is the Joycean epiphany that Bascombe is arguing against at this point, but in fact he is a kind of flawed Everyman in the same way that Joyce’s flawed Leopold Bloom is – an epic hero for his time, just on account of his determined, limited, yearning affirmation of the ordinary.