

*The Imagination of Freedom: Critical Texts and Times in Liberal Literature*

Andrew Foley

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Andrew Foley's book offers impressive testimony to his passionate involvement with the values of liberalism. His declared purpose is "to explore the work of a number of writers who have responded, from a liberal viewpoint" to particular "critical moments in recent political history". Accordingly, in the nine chapters following his introduction to "Liberal politics and liberal literature", he has assembled a study of six novelists, one poet, one dramatist and one theorist, all of whom, in his view, exemplify liberal concerns and aims.

The introductory chapter offers a rigorously expounded account of the development of liberal political thought. Foley's extensive knowledge of all the relevant thinkers in his chosen field, and his particular interest in the tension between the issues of liberty and equality, enable him to provide a persuasive defence of the liberal approach to literature. His account would be especially useful for literary students because of the way each literary theory is considered with regard to its political implications – usually this is done only in relation to Marxism. On the other hand, amongst Foley's many helpful clarifications are the essential distinctions he makes between aspects of poststructuralism and Derrida's deconstructive practice, and his insights into the serious contradictions in Foucault's political standpoint. Wisely too, while firmly rejecting the "foundational assumptions and assertions of

Marxism, poststructuralism and postmodernism”, he acknowledges the gains from these theories for a liberal approach to literature.

The discussion of Alan Paton’s novel, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, reveals Foley’s profound engagement with the author’s concerns, and the way in which Paton positions the reader to share the protagonist’s momentous journey. Effective ripostes are made to the main criticisms of the novel, most notably Stephen Watson’s objection to the writer’s use of a love-hate antithesis resolution. Foley also makes an important elucidation of the significance of Paton’s use of Biblical passages, showing how these are underpinned by his sense of a profound alliance between his Christianity and his liberalism. Foley does not shirk from confronting the problems created by Paton’s portrayal of John Khumalo, Msimangu and Napoleon Letsitsi in the novel.

Foley’s third chapter, on Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, seems to me rather less convincing or adequately in touch with what the introduction proposes. While Foley deals helpfully with the Achebe-Conrad debate, his lengthy examination of possible reasons for Okwonko’s downfall seems more suited to a lecture-type of general exposition. One has to wait till the very end of the chapter to be informed that the conceptual and narratological ambiguity in Achebe’s portrayal of Okwonko is what gives his perspective its liberal flavour. Chapter 4 on Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is much more consistently in touch with Foley’s declared aims. To begin with, he offers a concise contextual account of the gap between America’s democratic ideals and practice post World War 2, and helpfully identifies four main allegorical strands of freedom in the novel. In relation to the character, Chief Bromden, Foley makes an important point about the link between cultural integrity and the attaining of individual liberty, and he is persuasive in his handling of the other main male character, McMurphy, as an exemplar of the “true spirit of both liberal democracy and humanistic psychology” (p. 107). The discussion of McMurphy as a Christ-like figure also proves illuminating, yet some qualification would have been appropriate. The implications of what Kesey seems to affirm as the value of the “free, uninhibited, joyful assertion of human sexuality” (p. 109), also surely merits further consideration in relation to liberal aims more generally.

Foley’s chapter on Seamus Heaney’s “Bog Poems” shows a sound grasp of the problem confronting the poet in terms of finding a fittingly

poetic means to address the political conflict. While carefully noting the tension between Heaney's humanist impulses and his cultural identity, Foley rightly emphasises Heaney's insistence on a "liberal perspective". A sound case is made for regarding *Wintering Out* as a transitional collection, and *North* as the realization of Heaney's full potential as a "poet of the Northern Irish Troubles". Foley sustains well and resolves persuasively the debate about Heaney's purpose and achievement in his symbolic poems. It is a pity, though, that Foley was apparently unaware of my own article, "Heaney: Poetry and the Irish Cause" (*Theoria* 63, October 1984), which would have enabled him to recognize the value of some of the less directly conflict-focused poems in Heaney's development towards his achievement.

In Foley's view the aim of Fay Weldon's *Praxis*, the subject of Chapter 6, is to balance the ideals of both gender equality and individual liberty. His contention that for her what is wrong is "not so much gender inequality as such, but the very institution of the traditional family itself" (p. 151), leads him to an apparent agreement with her wish for "a new, more flexible conception of societal institutions" (p. 152). In this regard he is clearly influenced by Robert Nozick who advocates that "people need to be allowed the freedom to work out the social arrangement which best enabled them to pursue their personal vision of the good life" (p. 153). Foley's affirmation of the Weldon-Nozick principle emerges clearly when he states: "The destabilizing of the compulsory traditional family structure, then far from undermining one of the bases of the democratic State, actually represents a further step in the evolution of liberal society" (p. 153). Here I feel rather less inclined to regard myself a supporter of liberalism since far too little attention is given to the possible implications, more especially for children, of such destabilization. In Foley's attempt to justify Weldon, he seems unaware of how much one is manipulated by her, especially through her far too neatly expedient rearrangement of the children from the fictional broken families. Weldon's form of liberal thinking does not seem to me to have been adequately prepared for in the masterly introductory chapter, nor does Foley seem to have considered how to reconcile his support for Paton's Christian liberalism with what Weldon proposes.

In relation to Athol Fugard, Foley shows himself fully engaged by the huge field of criticism engendered through his work, and ably justifies his complaint about the way the dramatist's politics have often been dealt with.

An economical and yet comprehensive contextual account of the period culminating in the CODESA deliberations initiates the chapter. Foley's discussion of *The Road to Mecca* shows full alertness to the implications of the play with regard to a political perspective. Similarly in *My Children! My Africa!* he notes how both aspects of the play, the condemnation of apartheid injustices as well as the challenge to those who resort to violence as a solution, exemplify liberal thought at work. The chapter as a whole succeeds in endorsing Foley's affirmation of the way "such fundamental liberal values as tolerance, compassion, and mutual respect and understanding" (p. 189), as exemplified in Fugard's plays, help to underpin the kind of democratic society to which South Africa is aspiring.

Chapter 9, devoted to Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, offers a lucid account of the 31-year dictatorship of the Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo, while ensuring that the essential aspects of the writer's liberalism are consistently foregrounded. Fully in touch with critical reactions of Llosa's work, Foley goes on to deal fascinatingly and compellingly with his evocation of Trujillo. In so doing he provides an appropriate opportunity at this late stage of the text for a reminder of what contemporary liberal political theory espouses, and grapples vigorously with the liberal dilemma: is it permissible to use violence (via assassination) to free the people from tyranny?

In the penultimate chapter, concerning Richard Rorty's theoretical viewpoint, Foley is concerned to clarify how certain aspects of postmodernism may be maintained within an overarching liberal political vision, a daring but ultimately worthwhile challenge in which he succeeds. Having accepted Rorty's refusal to dismiss postmodernism, and taken up his idea of "liberal ironists", but dissatisfied with the theorist's choice of Orwell and Naboka for exemplification, Foley then proceeds to reveal how, in particular cases, liberalism and ironism are intertwined. This strategy provides him with a most useful opportunity to examine the work of particular writers, including Fugard and Weldon, and to make a brave, partly persuasive, attempt to bring J.M. Coetzee also into the liberal ironist camp.

In the final chapter Foley mostly reveals a sound grasp of Ian McKewan's concerns and strategies in his novel, *Saturday*. Foley notes the significant way in which McKewan gives full scope to the representation of the protagonist Perowne as a brilliant, skilled neurosurgeon; and further that

he is not merely a gifted technician in his work but is fully aware of the wonder of human consciousness. The writer is also ready to acknowledge the ways in which we are convinced by McKewan that Perowne does experience happiness especially in his family life, and in the midst of performing operations. However, Perowne does lack adequate imaginative empathy for those less fortunate than himself as emerges in his initial encounter with Baxter, and their second encounter is crucial for his further development in this respect. But is Perowne actually right in convicting himself of “shameless blackmail” in using his professional knowledge to avoid being beaten up by Baxter and his two cronies? I would be inclined to say he had every right to try to save his own life in his extremely vulnerable position.

Much of the essential ambivalence in Perowne’s thoughts about the imminent possibility of war against Iraq is thoughtfully captured by the writer. Nevertheless there are some oversimplifying aspects in the overall portrayal of Perowne which I would like to highlight. To start with more emphasis is needed on the underlying morality of Perowne’s work, involving, as it does, sustained compassion and concern for all his patients. Baxter’s case induces him to take his commitment to an extraordinary new level, but the basis has been present all along. His leaving his home at the dead of night, in the midst of a family party, to save the life of the man who came close to raping the daughter, Daisy, in front of the assembled and terrified family, is surely worthy of more credit than a recognition of his sympathy. Daisy’s reading of Arnold’s “Dover Beach” which has such a stunning and surprising effect on Baxter, is a brilliant stroke of resourcefulness in the midst of her pitiful predicament. Yet, while it is crucial that Perowne learn about the merits of poetry through this grim event, I would expect some attention to be given to the lack of a reciprocal awareness on Daisy’s part, of the life-saving skills of her father. It is surely highly significant that McKewan reveals in his acknowledgments that he spent two years watching neurosurgical operations. His portrayal of particular operations in the novel is akin to a tour de force, which might even suggest that an alternative form of poetry is being enacted. In short, although Foley gives much attention to McKewan’s handling of ambiguity in the novel I would expect fuller awareness of the profound and pervasive degree of ambivalence which McKewan achieves.

*Book Reviews*

Foley's *The Imagination of Freedom* has a striking cover design, cleverly announcing the names of the selected writers, while the content is elegantly but unfussily presented. Unfortunately a minor problem occurs several times in the typography: the last letter of a word has become attached to the first letter of the next. Some random examples are to be found on pages 29, 129, 47 and 185. Three final missing references need to be noted: Pieterse and Duerden (cited in Chapter 3, p. 76); Curtis (cited for Edna Longley in Chapter 5, p. 137); and Updike (cited for Barreca in Chapter 9, p. 230).

Despite my disappointment with aspects of Chapters 3, 6 and 10, I regard Foley's book as seminal, an invaluable invitation to engage intensely with the liberal approach to literature in relation to specific, noteworthy cases, as well as to re-examine the relationship between this approach and other major current approaches.

