

***The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies.* John Frow. Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2013. Pp. 349 (paperback).**

***Character and Person.* John Frow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 342 (cloth).**

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Books written by John Frow have a tendency to anticipate their reviews. More precisely, they insist that we, their reviewers, are conscious of that peculiar genre in which we are engaged. To cite just one instance of this anticipation, Frow recalls an episode from Honoré de Balzac's superlative excoriation of modern literary culture, *Lost Illusions*, when the otherwise ambitious Lucien Chardon publishes several pages of journalistic puffery in review of a potential lover's theatrical debut. "Ah!" it reads, "this alcalde's daughter makes you drool with love and arouses wicked thoughts. You want to leap on to the stage to offer her your heart and your hearth, or maybe an income of thirty thousand francs and your pen."¹ There are multiple ways of construing M. Chardon's excitable confession, from the innocence of adolescent folly to a damning symptom of artistic destitution. Frow's initial point of reference is a well-known interpretation by Theodor W. Adorno, according to whom the novel's unmediated inclusion of the purple prose stages "the work of art's reflection on itself."² For Adorno, M. Chardon's review constitutes a moment of aesthetic autonomy, where the literary novel critically distances itself from the sphere of mass-produced journalism precisely by recognizing that it too is governed by the cultural logic of the market. The argument coheres with Adorno's rule for modern aesthetics: by subsuming the commodity within itself the artwork asserts its autonomy from commodities in general; it is thus that art resists capital.

But, in Frow's account, the episode is something other than a manifestation of aesthetic autonomy. It confirms the fate of literature within Balzac's vision of 1820s Paris and thereby provides a clear-eyed view of the literary as such:

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt (London, New York: Penguin, 1971), 306.

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 34.

The “literature” that emerges from this play of forces and values is neither the transcendent stuff of poetry and the “high” historical novel, nor the mere corruption of journalism, but a writing which is torn between the two and whose defining character is its status, and its dissatisfaction with its status, as a thing to be bought and sold.³

What M. Chardon’s review teaches us, claims Frow, is that literature emerges from the dialectical interplay of multiple discursive forces, which together generate what he describes as the literary regime. By reflecting on its own status as writing, literature announces its ontological emergence; in moments of self-awareness, literature “validly affirms a mode of its being (which is to say a mode of reading, and the forms of textual complexity that respond to it).”⁴ The review, then, is an exceptionally regimented genre of literature, a form in which the literary regime reflects upon the value of its institutions but almost invariably from within the delineated realm of institutional value. “The implicit contract that binds writer to reader entails the ethical norms of the relevant regime,” writes Frow, “and however implicit and however ambiguous these norms, they form definite constraints on writing and reading.”⁵ Because, in the review, those “forces and values,” the “constraints on writing and reading,” are either deeply embedded or extremely close to the text’s surface, this genre will contain within itself the potential for making the literary regime’s dialectical tensions properly transparent—the potential for revealing literature to itself. We encounter that transparency in Balzac’s novel; in Frow’s chapter featuring that novel; and, now, in a review that opens with reference to both Balzac’s novel and Frow’s chapter.

To begin this review reflexively, by announcing its status as a review and acknowledging the entanglements that attend this genre, is to gesture at the defining characteristic of literature in Frow’s thinking. On his view, literature emerges through acts of writing and reading that take place in relation to institutionally consolidated structures of value. To understand the varying relations between the phenomenal determinants of the literary is to appreciate the

³ John Frow, *The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies* (Crowley: UWA Publishing, 2013), 7.

⁴ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 9.

⁵ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 164-5.

concept of literature as regime, that literature is simultaneously textual and social, that it is both aesthetic and cultural. The polarity of the literary regime informs the interdisciplinary framing of Frow's recent scholarship.

The Practice of Value: Essays on Literature in Cultural Studies is keenly occupied with the interrogation of its own methodologies and how they understand the literary regime. This is what we encounter in the first sentences of its preface:

In recent years the disciplines of literary studies and cultural studies have engaged in occasional hostilities but very rarely in productive engagement with each other's methodologies. Yet each offers a set of rich resources for the other in a period of disciplinary crisis across the humanities in general and within these two fields in particular. Literary studies brings a range of tools for the unpacking of figuratively complex texts and a theoretical flexibility which allows it to frame its object and its own activity as moments of a nexus of practices; cultural studies brings an urgent attention to the institutionally structured uses which constitute the social life of texts.⁶

The essays subsequent to this prefatory note (which partially reappears as the book's blurb) test and prove the importance of a critical approach that combines methodologies from both literary studies and cultural studies, and which approaches literature through its regimes. Highlight essays include "Afterlife: texts as usage," in which a fictional prostitute named Jenny is shown to have been transformed and transvalued within the differently regimented writings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, Ezra Pound, Richard Wright, and others; "The Practice of Value," in which the Professor of English walks us through the numerous judgments he makes in the course of one day, whilst meditating on the regimes that inform those judgments; and "An ethics of imitation," another semi-autobiographical piece in which the author recounts a controversy caused when, in 1997, he published a letter describing Graham Swift's *Last Orders* as an unearned imitation of *As I Lay Dying*, which a London broadsheet misconstrued as a charge of plagiarism, thus mistaking the critical investment in aesthetics

⁶ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, vii.

with a lawyerly concern for private property. The cognitive yield of these and multiple other essays, which together read as case studies in support of a more far-reaching argument, is our realization that literature comprises and is comprised by its regimes. “There is,” we are shown, “no ‘system’ separate from its actualizations.”⁷

While many of the essays collected in *The Practice of Value* will be familiar to readers in either of its two fields, that they have been assembled as a single volume consolidates their individual achievements, marshaling them as a major intervention into the cultural construction of literature and literary value. The collection’s awareness of its own status as an intervention harmonizes its statements of intent with the occasionally idiosyncratic style of its prose. Reading over two decades’ worth of Frow’s essays in quick succession reveals some of his rhetorical predilections, and by observing them attentively we are repaid with a deeper insight into the project as a whole. If one of the stylistic consistencies in this collection is that the majority of its essays conclude with axiomatic statements worked into rhetorical flourishes or epigrammatic restatements and frequently positioned after colons or semi-colons (“the historicities of the text flow backwards and forwards from the uses to which it is put”; “the world is many, not double”; etc.), these well-earned moments of literary performance are often subtended by the language of demand (“I don’t know,” concludes one chapter, “in any schematic way, the answers to these questions; but I do know that it is crucial to the future of our discipline to get them right”).⁸ As an experiment, try reading the final sentences of each chapter, then go back and read the paragraphs containing those sentences. The outcome should be more than a registration of stylistic rarefaction or authorial imprimatur, which Frow might describe as a version of the signature, a kind of intellectual branding. It should also register the book’s structural antinomy, which unifies axiomatic truth-statements with the provisional nature of a methodological intervention. Style thus projects the value of this scholarship into a post-intervention future. Each essay works through a specific problem, but always in contribution to Frow’s overarching intervention, which directs its energies toward our methods of critical reading more generally.

⁷ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 13.

⁸ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 45, 67, 185.

If the goal is scholarship that combines literary studies and cultural studies to rethink literature via its regimes, then how should that scholarship produce sustained readings and more detailed arguments? This question has already been answered for us, with Frow's second book in as few years. Indeed, *Character and Person* is the profoundly satisfying payoff to which his essays have consecutively and collectively gestured. Its preface echoes *The Practice of Value* by maintaining that the object of enquiry is a dialectical form that will require the crossed searchlights of literary studies and cultural studies for complete illumination:

I seek to keep the categories of character and person distinct and specific to the fields in which they operate, and to explore the interaction and overlapping of those fields. This means that I need to understand not only how characters work as quasi-persons across a range of media and genres, but also how social personhood works as a kind of fiction: that is, as a model shaped by particular social practices and institutions (legal and religious frameworks, for examples), but also by the schemata that underpin fictional personhood.⁹

The critical challenge, which is described in the book's second chapter and repeated at its conclusion, is one "of holding together in a single frame at once the ontological discontinuity which allows us to distinguish a representational act from other acts, and the ontological continuity that binds them to each other."¹⁰ How Frow rises to that challenge is of the highest interest, because it gives shape to an unprecedentedly systematic model for understanding both literary character and social person, which are always defined in relation to one another.

The book's interpretive method is to provisionally divide character into eight mutually imbricated matrices of phenomenal production, so that that these various categories or features can be apprehended on their own terms, as produced by their own regimes. These matrices are figure, interest, person, type, voice, name, face, and body, each of which is remarkably complex and demanding of its own extensive chapter. To understand why, for instance, we

⁹ John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vii.

¹⁰ Frow, *Character and Person*, 70, 291.

enter into sympathetic relationships with fictional characters, why fictional characters are given to undertake emotional as well as representational labor, Frow's chapter on interest guides us through the world of digital gaming; through several episodes in Freudian psychoanalysis; through the novels of Lawrence Sterne and Samuel Richardson; and, finally, into the realm of visual pornography. "This," concludes the chapter (with a signature Frow-sentence), "is the paradox of fictional character: that there are real toads in its imaginary garden; its dream of passion comes true in our waking world."¹¹ And so it is for the other seven matrices of production, until the mutually informative concepts of literary character have been elaborately constructed, or even conjured, out of the simultaneously textual and social materials that we, as social persons, are also made of.

Reading these two books in tandem produces some instructive points of intersection and obviates against some potential criticism. One charge that might reasonably be leveled at *Character and Person* is that its close readings in literature privilege radically self-aware and experimentally reflexive novels to such an extent that the resulting mosaic might not be a representative portrait of literary character as such. If character and person are products of textual production, what happens when the evidentiary texts are consistently exceptional, deriving, for instance, from the novels of Julio Cortázar, Vladimir Nabokov, Lawrence Sterne, and Marcel Proust? Novels like these are all, as Frow describes *Tristram Shandy*, "something like a laboratory for the evolution of novelistic character,"¹² and for that reason their shared sense of character appears less akin to Victor Frankenstein and more like his mutant creation, a distorted assemblage cobbled together from overlapping and contradictory cultures, upon which it serves as commentary. And yet, the concept of the regime, as developed in *The Practice of Value*, preempts this criticism by accounting for the literary in terms of its emergence through productive self-awareness. In this argument, every moment of literary reflexivity (such as M. Chardon's review, which we encountered earlier) is understood as "a hard-won achievement of the text" and as "what most fully problematizes the category of

¹¹ Frow, *Character and Person*, 70.

¹² Frow, *Character and Person*, 58.

the literary.”¹³ Reflexivity is what makes literature emerge *as literature* from within its regimes. To constellate a theory of character and person around moments of literary emergence is therefore to prove that neither category has intrinsic meaning, value, or function, and to assert that they are at once an effect of social relations and of mechanisms of signification.

If reading these books together clarifies against potential criticism, it also raises questions about the kind of scholarship for which Frow’s essays advocate and which the subsequent monograph seems to exemplify. Whereas *The Practice of Value* is an eminently accessible collection, which amply rewards in both style and content, *Character and Person* is contrastingly dense, which may well daunt and dispirit more trepidatious readers. “The methodological consequence,” we are cautioned, “of focusing on the interplay between different ways of being a person is that the weight of the book falls not on a linear exposition of a progressively developing argument but, rather, on the exploration of juxtaposed materials and the threads that tie them together.”¹⁴ Because of its intercalation of literary studies with cultural studies, both of which are operating here at their uttermost sophistication, the book can be incredibly demanding. To be sure, every sentence of every paragraph bears an enormous cognitive payload and therefore requires patient consideration. Frow knows this, and likens the book’s path to that which John Donne describes in his third satire:

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go.¹⁵

Not only are the fields of interest truly enormous; when touring them we need to take in all the scenery. Perhaps this is why the book’s finest moments are when Frow allows himself to read, closely and patiently, as a literary critic, for it is in the critical readings that character and person begin to acquire their forms. “The figure of Hamlet,” concludes the book’s most satisfying reading, “is a paredros:

¹³ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 19.

¹⁴ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, vii-viii.

¹⁵ Frow, *Character and Person*, viii; John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin, 1971), 163.

a wildcard; a machine for generating interpretations.”¹⁶ Readings like this, which are strategically positioned all throughout the book’s complex argument, indicate what is to be gained from adopting Frow’s approach; they remind us that, while formal analysis is productive of knowledge, our knowledge of literature and literature’s knowledge of itself are bound to multiple overlapping regimes. That, too, is part of the project: for all its demands, this book is an object lesson in how to be a better reader, and its critical lessons are ultimately in what Donne would call “hard knowledge.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Frow, *The Practice of Value*, 140.

¹⁷ Donne, 163.