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A novel to exercise the head

John Kenny

Twenty 16 Vision

By Hugh Maxton

Duras

287pp, €12.99

This was a difficult one.

But what exactly might we mean, asks George Steiner in his 1978 essay *On Difficulty*, when we say a work of literature is *difficult*? How is it that this way of working with language which we call literature, and which we hold dear for its possibilities of intimate communication, human association and fellow-feeling, can be judged on occasion to rather be turned away from us, to be unaccommodating, fundamentally self-regarding?

We can mean an impossible array of things by complaining of literary difficulty, depending on our own individual capacity for insights and blind-spots, but the overarching and simpler question is one of degree. In the way a malcontent couple have their relationship analysed in the self-help format, the question to answer before we can even think about proceeding to the critical group-hug in any particular case of literary difficulty is: Who is being *most* difficult, the writer or the reader?

Steiner's "theory of difficulty" confidently accounts for four types in our encounters with modern literature. "Contingent" difficulty is what drives us to our dictionaries and reference books in search of meanings for unfamiliar terms and facts. "Modal" difficulty is what happens when the form of aesthetic framing, or the genre of a work, is displeasing to us because of our own often inexplicable predispositions of taste. "Tactical" difficulty is a matter of the writer purposely making new and testing forms because he feels the older forms and language itself have become tired and useless and are in need of avant-gardist reanimation. The fourth type might be developed outwards from Steiner's thinking to describe the great difficulty that all of literature is facing in these advancing scientific and declining economic times. Is this old thing we call literature relevant anymore and does it serve a purpose in explaining the nature of being? This is an "ontological" difficulty.

In his typical concentration on only highly accomplished literature, Steiner entirely ignores a kind of difficulty that perhaps emerges only when we want our criticism to have a more democratic embrace – on the occasion of responding to a first novel for example. In even the experienced fiction writer, the challenge is always to match the original conception with convincing stylistic and thematic development, and even when the writer mismatches, when the work is not consummate, the attempt to meet that fundamental challenge of composition should be somehow perceptible. Good – or at least serious – intentions should be readable between the lines. We could call the additional fifth difficulty of recognising those intentions the difficulty of "understanding".

It is not a matter of the reader comprehending everything encountered on the page, but of being considered, if not necessarily considerate, towards the writer, of knowing when to acknowledge irreconcilable differences. It is not a matter of some easy generosity or a false harmony, but of arguing that while literature may in part comfort us, it has a responsibility also to attack us, to goad us, to make sure to make things damn difficult. And the purposeful assumption of that responsibility can sometimes compensate for other inadvertent failures.

With *Twenty 16 Vision*, Hugh Maxton's first novel, we get all these kinds of difficulty straight in the head (for there is clearly little intention here of engaging the heart). Maxton, properly identified as the creative *nom de guerre* of the literary historian W.J. McCormack, has published clever but emotionally resistant poetry since the 1970s and is now walking with seven-league boots out onto the rarefied Irish territory of "political science fiction", a genre that is often cumbersome generally. Based as it is on the two notional events of the 2016 Easter commemorations and a Nazi landing in 1941, this simultaneously frustrating and exciting novel will have you brushing up on your modern Irish history, will have you reconsidering the value of the currently rare phenomenon of patent linguistic and formal experimentation, and, in its swingeing and sometimes hilarious satire, will have you believing that yes, literature can be relevant, can attempt to explain, or at least analyse, the immediate socio-political world. And it will also take you far more time than normal to figure out just what is going on.

One of the ads increasingly placed within the covers of our new fiction advises us to "melt into a book" with a particular chocolate bar: "curled up on the sofa, Sunday morning in pyjamas ... escape with a good book". It is a grossly worrying difficulty for serious writers that advertising, which knows its own well-researched truths, now sees the constituency for fiction as one of disengaged readers who primarily want their cosiness consolidated. We therefore, as a matter of urgency, need challenging and discomfiting novels to annoy us into societal vigilance and self-awareness. *Twenty 16 Vision* will get you up off that sofa and exercised. For proper engagement, for readiness for the tackle, wide-awake rereading will be necessary here. So stand up straight at the back there. Roll up your sleeves.

John Kenny is John McGahern Lecturer in Creative Writing at NUI Galway. He is the author of *John Banville* and editor of *The John McGahern Yearbook*, the second volume of which is published by NUI Galway this month on the occasion of the John McGahern International Seminar and Summer School.