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I Love You (as they say)

Getting Used to Not Being Remarkable

by Michael Foley

Blackstaff

306pp, £8.99 in UK

Consequences of the Heart

by Peter Cunningham

Harvill

310pp, £15.99/£10.99 in UK

For those who have tired of the self-conscious culture of the postmodern era, the comprehensive task is to find a way out of Irony. In current literary fiction, the waywardness of human emotion is almost invariably couched in intellectual sang-froid; otherwise, the writer runs the risk of being called sentimental. Gustily proclaiming that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, Umberto Eco once suggested a way that the suitor could yet continue to profess devotion: “He can say, ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly’“. Given irony’s imperative of double take, it seems that even love cannot easily cut to the chase.

The huge, daemoniac irony that saturates Michael Foley’s third novel is flagged by a remarkable epigraph from Lautréamont: “They say I am son of man and woman. This astounds me.” The dehumanised narrator here is Martin Ward, an enervated Irish teacher of science in seventies London, who tells the tale of the progress of his hubris: “From early youth my head teemed with syllogisms—but still I was incapable of drawing an obvious conclusion. It was a long time before I developed a low opinion of myself”. A kind of Dostoyevskian clerk, docile but privately seething, Martin is sustained only by “nineteenth-century Frogs”, mainly “the Magnificent Seven” (Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Huysmans, Barbey d’Aureville, Villiers de l’Isle Adam).

A plain kind of intertextuality is on overdrive here. Foley includes upwards of two hundred and ten unsourced quotations from the Seven, extending from one-line quips to lengthy sentences and paragraphs. These are largely inserted, within brackets, in alternate sections where he tries to confer respective significance on a convincingly depicted youth in Derry. Though the narrative line is choked in places, the profusion of the quotes forms a thematic connection with Martin’s realisation that, in his “lofty detachment”, he has reached that “most terrifying of moments when the deceiver attempts to remove the mask and finds it has fused to his face”. A strange kind of love story develops as Clare, his wife, has an affair which revitalises the marriage and he learns the value of dropping the mask: “By the new standard of lack of hypocrisy, her stature was suddenly and hugely enhanced”.

Foley’s narrative style, despite some highly crafted sentences, has the same formlessness as his poetry, and the ending, particularly, peters out. There is, however, something very substantial and interesting about the content of this novel: it aims to be instructive, I think, in the deflation of Martin’s irony, in the move from his realisation that “The Seven were not the doctors but the symptoms of the disease” to his conclusion that “The purpose of life is to invest the clichés with a terrible truth”.

Peter Cunningham has performed the feat of investing a clichéd, Mills-and-Boon title with a new credibility. *Consequences of the Heart* is the epic story of Charles ‘Chud’ Conduit, born in 1922, in Monument “on the underside of Ireland”, into a Catholic family with faith in Union and Empire. “Mine is a tale of great love” he promises in a preface to a series of autobiographical pieces that he is keeping in ring binders and that take him up to the present day. His life centres on

Jack Santry, a reluctant member of an Ascendancy family alongside whom he lands on D-Day, and on Rosa, Jack's eventual wife and Chud's lover. Through various tribulations which contribute to the demise of old decency, Chud holds secret a dire event from their youth and a good sense of mystery and suspense is established as we have to wait until the very end for revelations.

Foley dismisses irony by heightening it; Cunningham does so by simply ignoring it. While there is a nice touch of chill in places ("I knelt beside her and went through all the motions to do with captivation"), this is an unabashedly sincere love story. Looking back on the detritus of his life, Chud says: "If asked what, if anything, I did well during those years I would in honesty have to answer, I loved a woman". Though Rosa isn't quite rounded as a character, Cunningham portrays Chud's lifetime obsession with her in such a detailed way that he gets away with saying the simplest things: "You fall in love. You pitch headlong, beyond balance or reason, time and again".

Unlike Cunningham's last book, *Tapes of the River Delta* (1995), this novel stays nicely on the right side of melodrama. Cunningham is uncompromising in his commitment to the plain storytelling of old-fashioned romance and the effect is something like that of a black-and-white movie that is apparently uncomplicated but yet becomes a classic. For once, one can call a book lovely without wincing or winking.

John Kenny.