

Ian Watt. *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robinson Crusoe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 305pp., \$27.95.

Ian Watt is rightly regarded as one of the most distinguished members of the very distinguished post-World War II generation of literary historians and critics. His work on the development of the chief literary genre of the modern world, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), has been particularly influential. One reads with regret the little note that stands at the beginning of the current work: "*Myths of Modern Individualism* ... was all but completed when Ian Watt's health deteriorated in 1994 after a serious operation." But although the final editorial work was performed by another person, Linda Bree, the book has no air of discontinuity. It is throughout a graceful and elegant study of its subject - four great "myths of individualism," four great representations of individuals standing in opposition to their environment.

Watt does not call these representations "myths" because he wants to show that they are false (as well as fictional), but because he wants to emphasize their status as generally recognized symbols of some of society's "most basic values" (xi- xii). Here is an irony. Few real characters are more widely known than Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Robinson Crusoe - despite the fact that relatively few people have ever actually read Defoe's *Crusoe* or Cervantes' *Quixote* or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* or Goethe's *Faust* or Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla*, his play about Don Juan. "If," says Watt, "we should ever see a stick and a ball advancing together side by side down a road, we would immediately recognize them as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza" (73).

The deeper irony is that most of Watt's mythic characters began as anything but exponents of society's "most basic values," at least its official ones. Faustus and Don Juan started out as rebels against the moral and religious code, and Quixote started as a feckless reactionary who, as Watt says, "confound[ed] his fictional world with the real one" (52). These myths stem from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, a time when radical eccentricity was not greeted with applause at summer revivals of *Man of La Mancha*.

Crusoe came along much later, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and his myth was closer, from the start, to its society's "values." It was popular entertainment for citizens of a commercial and increasingly capitalistic country, people who could appreciate a story about sturdy individuality. Yet there is a values gap even here. The type of sturdiness that allows for survival in an island wilderness is not precisely what people wanted to see in their London business associates.

Watt's mythic protagonists were not originally cast as demigods. Watt calls attention, indeed, to the "punitive" element in the first forms of these myths. Don Juan and Doctor Faustus are punished for their rebellion against God; Quixote's eccentricity is perpetually self-punishing; Crusoe regards his solitary exile as punishment for his bad conduct. In this way, the characters provide an oppositional representation of values; they show what would be foolish or wrong to do. Nevertheless, it might be interesting to try it, and the characters certainly try with great intensity. It was this intensity of individual experience that planted them deep in the popular imagination.

They lurked there, ready for rediscovery and reinterpretation by writers of the Romantic period, who removed, deemphasized, or complexly refigured the stories' "punitive" elements. New interpretations "transformed" the myths and gave them "a significance beyond anything their original authors could have conceived" (192). The process of reinterpretation continued in the twentieth century. The attitude toward individualism, in works like Goethe's *Faust* and Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, might be favorable or unfavorable; more often, it was both. But individualism became something broader and deeper than the fascinating individuality of certain characters. It became an intellectual and moral issue that demanded serious examination in its own right.

Many books have been written about these subjects, but one could hardly find a more trustworthy guide to their literary history than Watt. He develops all the crucial information about the origins of his four myths, he surveys the literary, religious, political, and social influences exerted on their first or classic expressions, and he assesses the literary value, not merely the historical importance, of these expressions. He does the same for succeeding literary versions of the myths.

His fairness is exemplary, and more than exemplary; he bends over backwards to be fair. Mann's *Faustus* he lauds as "an undoubted masterpiece" (245), although this *has* been doubted. After admitting that he does not particularly like Goethe, he compensates by claiming that "we must nevertheless face the fact that Goethe's *Faust* is, among other things, probably the single most significant achievement among the works of modern individualism" (204). Well, it is, as he says, "the best known single work of German literature," and it does present individualism "in both its favorable and unfavorable aspects" (204), and all of that is indeed significant. But other kinds of significance might be emphasized, too. One of them is *Faust's* astonishing lack of dramatic and intellectual coherence. Watt reports concrete evidence of this, but he is too generous to draw the conclusion.

I am quibbling. One of the jobs that Watt does best is to remind us of certain things that literary historians often fail to mention, either because these things seem obvious or because they are not obvious at all to people who are preoccupied with more specialized or theoretical concerns. To cite one instance: Watt restores the freshness of *Robinson Crusoe* by observing that here "economic pursuits are described in such a way that we find ourselves fascinated by the ordinary occupations of daily life"; and this is not a sensation that most of the world's great myths provide: "[T]he Golden Fleece and the Rheingold, for example, are concerned not at all with the ordinary economic processes by which people manage to subsist, but with such fortunate seizures of wealth as will make it unnecessary ever to have to work again" (166).

Watt's philosophical or ideological analysis is not, to be sure, as good as his literary analysis. His discussion of individualism as a system of beliefs is underdeveloped, even somewhat skewed. This is partly the effect of his interest in the original protagonists of the four myths, who themselves

make no overt pitch for any individualist idea; they do not support individualism ideologically or politically; they merely assume it for themselves. (276)

The myths began in an age of the world in which individualism had not yet become the focus of any coherent ideology or system of human action. The soil from which Doctor Faustus, Don Juan, and Don Quixote were taken bore no prophetic savor of the moral, political, and economic benefits that would accompany the individualism of later centuries. Such heroes of individuality - even Don Quixote - would naturally appear "as individualists of a very negative and essentially egotistic kind." Here the word "egotistic" suggests that "none of them shows much real sense of being part of society" (276).

The idea of individualists as deeply and productively involved in social relations, or of an organically individualist *society*, had to wait for political and economic revolutions that placed individual rights, the division of labor, scientific and technological innovation, entrepreneurship, and the free market at the visible center of a liberal social order. Robinson Crusoe was invented during the first age of revolution, but as Watt shows, the positive individualism of even Crusoe's story can be over-read. A great deal of progress has been made since Crusoe left his island. Unfortunately, Watt hints at none of this progress when, on the last page of his analysis, he writes of an "insoluble conflict":

[H]ow can we resolve the eternal and many-sided struggle between the claims of the self and those of its social group? (276)

Modern answers to that question would fill a library, but Watt responds in only a conservative, narrowly literary way:

A dispassionate student of our four myths, after taking a hard look at our quartet, might well feel constrained to vote for the claims of society. (276)

Watt seems tempted to identify freedom of individual choice with certain possible, though hardly inevitable, results of this freedom, results that may include, and in literature often have included, such bad things as "hedonism" and "narcissism." At times, he appears sympathetic to the idea that "a sense of history, an absolute ethic of right and wrong, [and an] awareness of the rights and feelings of others" are all "anti-individualist" alternatives to the "perversions of modern individualism" (271). Individualism can, indeed, be perverted. But in passages like the one just cited, Watt seems unaware that the enabling forces of individualism as a modern cultural practice and ideology are a respect for rights and, consequently, a sense of right and wrong, together with enough sense of history to know what happens to rights and right whenever truly "anti-individualist" forces prevail.

The ideological analysis of *Myths of Modern Individualism* is disappointingly thin, but this is far from the most disappointing thing that could happen to a book. One of the worst features of recent works of literary criticism is their suffocatingly thick layer of ideological discussion. It would not be so suffocating if it added significantly to one's understanding of either ideology or literature, but this is seldom the case. Watt, however, makes no pretense of elaborating a complicated new treatment of ideology, so one can hardly feel betrayed when he fails to deliver on the nonexistent promise. He does attempt to trace the origin and development of a fascinating tendency in modern literature; and he does that, admirably.

Stephen Cox  
Professor of Literature  
University of California, San Diego