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Michael Schmidt, *The Novel: A Biography*.
Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard UP, 2014.
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Reviewed by Michael Bell

Michael Schmidt has written an unusual, ambitious and absorbing study of the novel. He adopts in practice a version of E. M. Forster's notion of all the novelists of the tradition inhabiting the same ahistorical room; or rather, in this case, a great variety of rooms within the capacious house of fiction. Moreover, despite its formidable range and scholarship, his book is ostentatiously unacademic. He quotes Mary McCarthy's image of the "ideas … expelled by a majestic butler at the front door" of the Jamesian novel (504). In this book, however, it is the academic scholar who is excluded with equal firmness from the writers' club while entry is pretty much restricted to those critics, such as David Lodge, Ford Madox Ford, J. B. Priestley and Edmund Wilson, who are also novelists. Likewise, typical academic preoccupations, such as "taxonomies", are "worth attention" only when they offer the double illumination of coming from a major writer (350).

The word "biography" in the title is misleading in so far as the singular story of the novel is precisely what this study largely abstains from giving, yet it is richly biographical in the double sense of following individual lives and showing the conversion of life into writing. Despite its eschewing of conventional historical progress, the claim to present a biography is multiply, if indirectly, fulfilled in so far as each novelist is given an ample life story from which the fiction is seen to emerge. As if in retort to the academic fashion that once claimed the death of the author, this is an unabashed lives of the novelists. The reader sees the rise of many rich tributaries flowing into the great stream, and much of the flotsam which it bears from the past, without being given a direct overview of the river itself. Schmidt respects the individuality of

his writers and protects them from being swept up or drowned in the big generalisations. In that regard, the book's most appreciative reader is likely to be one already familiar with most of the authors, and with the traditional genealogies of the genre, rather than a student seeking a first orientation.

Schmidt's spirit is generously inclusive. He not only covers an extraordinary number and variety of writers but his method is largely to let us overhear the novelists discussing each other while at the same time offering his own interspersed commentary and judgements. He does not for the most part develop a critical case of his own around his authors so much as record the range of responses they have evoked in other novelists. This procedure leads to some ambiguity as it is not always clear whether he is quoting one novelist's judgement on another with approval as an expert witness, so to speak, or simply as part of the larger openness of the field in which rival responses must continue to jostle. It is after all a proper feature of being a creative writer, as opposed to a literary historian, to have very often narrow or idiosyncratic tastes. We readily understand that Charlotte Brontë, to be the writer she was, had a blind spot for Jane Austen, as Tolstoy did for Shakespeare, without endorsing her judgement or even thinking less of her for making it. Indeed, one can imagine an entertaining and instructive compilation of such judgements by great authors and such unwittingly illuminating interactions are a rich aspect of this book's inner dialogue, but much of the time such quoted commentary is itself left without commentary and stands by presumptive default as authoritative. When, for example, a number of later novelists are adduced as disapproving of Fielding's long interpolated story of 'The Man on the Hill' in *Tom Jones* are we meant simply to endorse this view or to note how the book's cousinship with the philosophical fiction of the period, such as *Rasselas* and *Candide*, became dated for later generations (138)? Of course, we remain free to do either or both in keeping with the underlying catholicity of Schmidt's account and, if one danger of such a project is bland catholicity of coverage, then Schmidt's own sharp, even

peremptory, assessments effectively counteract any such tendency. At the same time, it is precisely his own moments of criticism which heighten the occasionally ambiguous function of the quoted commentaries.

Schmidt's own tastes and judgements come through partly explicitly and partly by implication through relative prominence in the presentation. Indeed, another dimension of the "life" signalled in the book's title is to see how the novel grows from complex living contexts and feeds into the life of the reader. Austen receives lengthy sympathetic reading from Schmidt while Thomas Hardy's openings are discussed with the admiration of a fellow writer. As the book goes on its initially comparative range narrows to that of contemporary Anglo-American, and specifically British, fiction. This is understandable as a practical limitation but it seems also to reflect a standpoint of sensibility. Edmund Wilson's dismissal of Anthony Powell is itself dismissed as too "harsh" (523), yet the reader who is similarly sceptical of this author's reputation is given no positive case for the defence. It is as if Powell's reputation requires no justification. More strikingly, Martin Amis is quoted throughout and the last pages of the book, where the reader might expect a final orientation to the genre, are devoted to a eulogistic account of his work. Amis, who is declaredly unsympathetic to *Don Quixote*, was much earlier allowed the last word on Cervantes's novel. It is one of those moments when a new reader would be given at best a blurred, if not reductive, vision of a masterwork and the overall structure reflects Schmidt's recurrent tendency to be the absent author just when his presence might be most valued. Nonetheless, the book has in abundance the strengths of its chosen method underwritten by the evident personal investment and wide reading of its author. Above all, it communicates the varied wealth of life both in and of the novel.

Readers of *JDHLS* will be pleased to know that Lawrence is given serious and generous attention and that Schmidt makes extended use of his signal contribution to modern criticism: his advice to trust the tale not the artist. As always, Schmidt sees the

formative importance of Lawrence's life (his working-class origins, his parents' marriage, his poor health) in the work without reducing, or seeking to explain away, the achievement. He communicates very well the vitality and directness with which Lawrence challenges his readers, including other novelists, and indicates how a number of them rose, or failed to rise, to the challenge. In this instance, Martin Amis appears to be quoted for his evident inadequacy as reader while Schmidt notes Lawrence's fruitful impact on a number of women and American black writers who shared his sense of outsiderdom. It is perhaps Schmidt's appreciation of the living historical context, and of the power of Lawrence's spirit even as he was dying, that leads him to accord a high value to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as a vivid rejection of the inchoate, half repressed tragedy of the post-war. It is perhaps the book of Lawrence's about which responsible judgements now differ most extremely and, if it is due for reappraisal, Schmidt's sense of the relevant proportions, literary, historical and human, provides a suitable starting-point for such a discussion.