



Review: Will Self, *The Butt*

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Will Self's *The Butt*

London: Bloomsbury, 2008

by David Hering

Will Self's novel *The Butt* represents something of a vacation for both protagonist and author. Self's beleaguered protagonist Tom Brodzinski finds himself marooned in an unidentified country, subjugated by a plethora of tribal traditions and corrupt legal systems after flicking a cigarette butt from a balcony, subsequently inflicting a burn, and thereafter a life-threatening infection, on an elderly resident in the holiday apartment below. What is initially a holiday soon becomes a Conradian journey of legal reparation into the country's volatile 'interior', with Brodzinski accompanied by a fellow traveller, Brian Prentice, of whom Tom suspects a crime much more severe than his own infraction.

Self has never left London, fictionally speaking, for this long before, and *The Butt* represents the author's most completely recognised fictional environment yet. Like *Dorian*, the author's 2003 updating of Wilde for the age of video art, *The Butt* functions as both original creation and literary response. The texts most immediately implicated in this response are Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (a Frazer-esque tome, *Songs of the Tayswengo*, appears within the novel) and Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*. Self has spoken of how his appreciation of Conrad's novel is related to 'the way it's appropriated by whatever political agenda happens to be going — that's just an example of what a good book it is', and such an approach is also evident in *The Butt*. Self

appears keen to frame one potential aspect of Conrad's novel — 'the contamination of the West by some awful, chthonic, primal rhythm' — within contemporary structures of corporate bureaucracy.¹ The reader is initially presented with a situation in which a notion of primal tribal ritual has apparently become appropriated and neutered by the West into a form of irritating pen-pushing. However, as Brodzinski's journey of reparation concludes (and to explain the conclusion in detail would surely impair a first-time reader's enjoyment), it becomes evident that Self's agenda runs deeper than bureaucratic satire, and that something more disturbingly fundamental recasts earlier events in a very different light.

The Butt's subtitle — 'An Exit Strategy' — makes clear that while the fictitious country in the novel most obviously recalls Australia, Self also intends to engender discussion of the current situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The masterstroke of *The Butt* is Self's satirical approach to the notion of liberal intention, intended to make the reader uncomfortable and self-questioning in the manner of true satire. Brodzinski's belief that he is acting out of a form of long-suffering altruism towards his family, the indigenous tribes, even his health (the cigarette he flicks is supposed to be his last) is dissected to reveal a disturbing hollow, a man 'passively conforming to an invented belief system'. By the end of the novel, the implications for both protagonist and reader are alarming, and engender a series of fundamental questions: why do you believe what you believe? To what extent is it your belief? Is your notion of compassion built on altruism or self-preservation? Self's achievement is to embed these questions to the extent that they will only become fully evident towards the end of the long journey to the 'interior', the reader ambushed unexpectedly on the road.

¹ Christopher Taylor, 'Smoking Gun', *Guardian*, 22 March 2008, Books section, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/mar/22/fiction.willself>> [accessed 30 May, 2008].