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**LIDIA VIANU**

# British Desperadoes

# at the Turn of the Millennium

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## FOREWORD

This is NOT a book of scholarly criticism. It may not even be criticism at all, but an informed chat, a reading diary. Its major aim is to establish the name that could be attributed to all literature at the turn of the millennium. I am suggesting *Desperado* instead of the all too vague Postmodernism, which means everything and nothing any more. Any moment in the history of literature has its postmoment, but not every age has so many Desperadoes as ours.

I mean by *Desperado literature* everywhere that all writers are desperate to use all the tricks ever invented, to be different, to shock at all costs, to be their own trend. The main trick used during the last six or seven decades, which is not new, though, is the hybridization of literary genres, which now mix freely, creating new, baffling, uncertain forms.

Though light and friendly, this book is a tricky diary with a thesis, in the end. It aims at offering an image of diversity and unity in British literature at the turn of the millennium. It formulates common features, sneaks into theorizing when expected least, hides behind clarity in order to debunk the confusing myth of Postmodernism and replace it by a different approach.

The choice of writers is somewhat arbitrary – as the idea of a reading diary suggests – and open to all possible objections. Frankly speaking, this is only one first volume of a much larger project. Whatever reproaches may arise, we must bear in mind that Desperado literature creates its own Desperado readers and – why not – its own Desperado critics. Free to sail forward, the Ulysses term I am suggesting will hopefully roam the seas of many minds, and return to the Penelope of the text after trying and meaningful intellectual adventures. In the meantime, let us wait for him, while drawing imaginary paths and borders for the Desperado land.

## Brave New Novel – Aldous Huxley (1894- 1963)

Huxley's novels were mostly written between the two world wars. It is almost impossible to pinpoint him to a particular group of writers, which makes him a Desperado avant la lettre. Huxley is first and foremost an excellent writer, and saying that we have rescued him from all classification, which is exactly what Desperado authors aim at.

*Brave New World* (1932) may not be his most representative novel. This book includes it into a larger group of anti- totalitarian, more obviously politically minded works, whose ideas do not compare but converge insofar as they take the iron curtain very seriously. Huxley's *Brave New World* is of course a dystopia, written much earlier than Doris Lessing's novels, which could more easily afford being realistic.

In some respects, Huxley's imagination comes pretty close to the communist nightmare. It applies to the future of all mankind, in his intention, and, only as far as terror and lies are concerned, it definitely strikes the anti- totalitarian note. Those who have lived under a communist regime of course understand him better. His warning, made very obvious from the first page, by the motto of the book, states that utopias must never become real, that life need not be 'perfect,' it must merely be free.

*Brave New World* is an image of a possible future (now present) society, written with delightfully resourceful imagination, abundantly spiced with irony, and unified by an interesting narrative. It is, therefore, an enjoyable novel with a plot.

Huxley is a master of the story, and the fact that he tells it by placing himself inside the characters' minds is no impediment. On the contrary, he enriches the area of incidents with their broader echo in human reactions, which are analysed with insight and even warmth – rather unlike the Desperado writers of today.

In spite of the fact that he actually dissects his characters, showing us their innermost, painful secrets, Huxley surrounds their maimed souls with a halo of mesmerizing sympathy. Precisely because we understand even the vilest of their acts, all his heroes become likeable. Reading Huxley is an alchemy of understanding, which changes into sympathy. The more we understand, the more closely we feel bound, even to the most abject beings. What can be explained must be loved.

How does Huxley's irony keep pace with his need for warmth, for human feeling, that his novels evince? Many people have judged Huxley by his irony alone. We must admit his irony is so unbearably intelligent that it becomes devastating. But it is not an end in itself. It merely makes our inclination to love his characters more painfully clear. On the other hand, Huxley is not in the least a sentimental. But his readers – that is an altogether different matter – his readers must take care of their own sensibilities before they are stolen from them. Because Huxley can handle his readers and turn them round his little finger like nobody else.

*Brave New World* is placed sometime around the 25th century, and the background is the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre. Science and technology have taken dominion of life on earth. They are so highly developed that hardly any more thought can go into them. As a matter of fact, intelligence, the power of thinking are not needed any more. Everything goes on as planned long ago. Very few (out of whom only one is described) know anything except their particular division of work, which consists of mechanical gestures. People are turned into sophisticated robots. As Huxley puts it, they are 'standard men and women,' artificially produced in bottles, conditioned for a certain field of life and work. Even their happiness is planned: they get a ratio of 'soma' a day, a kind of drug which gives them a night's escape into 'eternity.' All superlatives, all dreams have been achieved. Nothing to struggle for, nothing to pine for, no soul necessary any more. An earth peopled by soulless beings, who hardly know who or why they are at all.

The classes of standard beings are Alpha, Beta, Delta, Epsilon... The Alphas are the best provided and very well off. They do the skilled work in this self-sufficient society. The Epsilons are the lowest workers, those who have to queue for their daily ratio of 'soma,' and about whose lives we learn nothing from Huxley. The plot of his novel winds among Alphas mostly. The story is very uncomplicated. Lenina is a healthy Alpha young girl, who goes to bed with as many men as possible, because this is an imperative of her world, and who knows that she must never ever beget a child, because that would be the utter disgrace. Children are combined in bottles, socially predestined, preconditioned by hypnopaedia. A family is a shame. Father and Mother are disgusting words. The slogan which is sacred, taken for granted, is 'Everyone belongs to everyone else.'

Bernard Marx, on the other hand, is a rather under-developed Alpha male, in whose bottle with blood-surrogate people suspect someone put alcohol, thinking he was a Gamma, so he came out somewhat weird. He likes solitude – a great sin, he hates Lenina for giving herself to man after man, as a mere creature of meat and no brains, he even tends to think, but there he fails. His friend, Helmholtz, also aspires to think, to become a writer. They are both punished in the end, by being sent from the comfortable centre of the Brave New World to some peripheral island, like Iceland.

But, before the end, something very significant takes place. Bernard and Lenina go for a holiday to the 'New Mexican Reservation' (Malpais), where, among savages (people who grow old, still have families, worship gods – in short, people who still live at the level of the 20th century), they discover a civilized woman, Linda (a Beta), who was lost on a similar trip and stayed there. The reason why she was forced to stay there was that, inadvertently, she became pregnant and was forced to give birth to a boy,

John. This shame was never allowed to happen among civilized people, so she had to live with the savages, took to drinking and – ghastly – grew old.

Her son grew up rejected by all the savages, as the son of the whore, since Linda preserved the civilized habit of going to bed with anyone who wanted her. John alighted on a book by Shakespeare and read it voraciously. When Bernard, who remembers his director saying something about having lost a travel companion in the Reservation years ago, brings these two beings back to civilization, the director is overwhelmed with shame and hurriedly resigns. Linda stuffs herself with 'soma' to forget her past misery, and soon dies. John, who thought he was entering Shakespeare's *Brave new world,* is so utterly disillusioned that he sees no escape other than committing suicide.

The novel is well written. The characters are alive. It is the work of a well trained mind, which mixes imagination (utopia, or rather, dystopia) with keen psychological analysis, and with a remarkable sense of humour. Let us examine a few of the imaginary operations which take place in this centre that produces human beings, and see if they are only ironical, or they also aim at political prophecies, some of which, in some countries, have indeed come true.
One statement is, 'fertility is merely a nuisance.' Most of the females are predestined to become 'free martins,' only thirty percent of the female embryos are allowed to develop normally. The man in charge of this explains:

'The others get a dose of male sex-hormone every twenty-four metres for the rest of the course. Result: they're decanted as free martins – structurally quite normal (except,' he had to admit, 'that they *do* have just the slightest tendency to grow beards), but sterile.'

The embryos in the Hatchery are given more or less oxygen, according to their future higher or lower caste. The lower the caste, the less oxygen they get, the shorter they are. The first organ affected by the lack of oxygen is the brain, then the skeleton. Some beings, like the Epsilons, need no human intelligence at all.

These embryos are carefully conditioned to do what they have to. As the Director explains to his students, who visit the Hatchery,

'All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny.'

The State Conditioning Centres have replaced the old idea of a family, and human beings no longer need to be 'viviparous.' Their moral

education must be anything but rational. They must be taught ready-made sentences, in their sleep. ‘Home’ is an obsolete notion, described as:

‘...a few small rooms, stiflingly overinhabited by a man, by a periodically teeming woman, by a rabble of boys and girls of all ages. No air, no space; an understerilized prison; darkness, disease and smells.’
Imagine a mother maniacally loving her children! Imagine anyone trying to withdraw into privacy and to cherish someone as his own! The conclusion is simple:

‘No wonder those poor pre-moderns were mad and wicked and miserable.’

In the first half of the novel, Bernard is a promising character. The fact that he turns out to be a failure in the end, just as superficial and vain as all the other Alphas, is more his author’s fault than his own. Huxley got more interested in the savage John on the way towards the denouement, and changed his mind about Bernard Marx, using him as a counterpart for the pre-modern John.

Bernard is a specialist in hypnopaedia. He feels how harmful it is, but he does his work all the same. He hates everything he has been taught in his sleep, which shows that there must be something wrong with him, or he would not make such desperate (not very fruitful) efforts to think on his own. He is eight centimetres short of the standard Alpha, he is slender, and he resents this inferiority. It is unfair to this so promising character that mere spite sets him against the established order. Huxley seems to have been too much in a hurry to dismiss him. His revolt is interesting and it could have become highly significant, but it did not fit the novelist’s idea of the plot. The best definition for Bernard is: ‘his self-consciousness was acute and distressing.’ He felt an outsider, alien and alone. He felt he was not one of many, but an individual.

We must not forget that, for the brief space of this novel, we live in a world where everybody is happy. Huxley tries hard to create a soothing atmosphere, which would make the sharpest brain go dull. Where he fails, ‘soma’ is offered, and his characters flow out into free timelessness. Lenina says she is ‘free to have the most wonderful time.’ In contrast with her, Bernard wonders what it would be like if he could be free, not enslaved by his conditioning. If he could experience passion, or feel something strongly. This is exactly where John comes in. He is free from conditioning. He does experience everything very strongly. Bernard and John turn out to be one character, if put together.

Bernard finds John in the Reservation and asks him if he wants to come to London, where his mother came from. The answer comes at once, in Miranda's words:

'O brave new world that has such people in it. Let's start at once.'

John falls in love with Lenina, but rejects her violently when he discovers that, from the Shakespearian point of view, she is a whore. Miranda no longer exists. As a matter of fact, man himself has disappeared.

Bernard could have become a man again if Huxley had not prevented him too soon. John's arrival makes him an Alpha-Plus once again. Proud of his civilization. Only John's disappearance (to a lonely lighthouse) makes him recover his former individuality, but he is soon punished, in the following condemning speech, uttered by the Director himself:

'The security and stability of Society are in danger. Yes, in danger, ladies and gentlemen. This man,' he pointed accusingly at Bernard, 'this man who stands before you here, this Alpha-Plus to whom so much has been given, and from whom, in consequence, so much must be expected, this colleague of yours – or should I anticipate and say ex-colleague? – has grossly betrayed the trust imposed in him. By his heretical views on sport and *soma*, by the scandalous unorthodoxy of his sex-life, by his refusal to obey the teachings of Our Ford and behave out of office hours <like a babe in the bottle> (here the Director made the sign of a T), he has proved himself an enemy of Society, a subverter, ladies and gentlemen, of all order and Stability, a conspirator against Civilization itself. For this reason I propose to dismiss him, to dismiss him with ignominy from the post he has held in this Centre; I propose forthwith to apply for his transference to a Sub-Centre of the lowest order and, that his punishment may serve the best interest of Society, as far as possible removed from any important Centre of population. In Iceland...'

As a matter of fact, this speech is uttered precisely when John comes on stage, and Linda rushes to embrace his father, the Director. But its content applies to the end of the novel as well. In the meantime, Bernard records John's reaction when confronted with civilized London, and wonders at John's attachment to his 'm_' (meaning the shameful word mother). Linda is old and ugly, and the fact that her son loves her is to Bernard an interesting example in which

'Early conditioning can be made to modify and even run counter to natural impulses (in this case, the impulse to recoil from an unpleasant object).'

The Savage, on the other hand, is just as amazed at what he sees. ‘Do they read Shakespeare?’, he asks. Of course not. Helmholtz explains it to him:

‘The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get. They’re well off; they’re safe; they’re never ill; they’re not afraid of death; they’re blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they’re plagued with no mothers or fathers; they’ve got no wives, or children, or lovers to feel strongly about; they’re so conditioned that they practically can’t help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there’s *soma*.’

The life of the Savage in the Reservation was plagued with too much loneliness, his life in London suffers precisely because of lack of privacy. He rejects too much comfort. He wants, he says, God, danger, freedom, goodness and sin. As someone wisely notices, he claims ‘the right to be unhappy.’ His suicide is the proof of man’s growing inability to stay human.

From the point of view of the narrative technique, Huxley’s novel is a science-fiction story told by an omniscient author. The point counter point device is alertly used. The major source of irony in the book is the implicit contrast between our own condition and what is going to become of it in a future which, owing to some details that have already come true, is fairly likely to come about. The novel is also a dystopia which faces us with a total loss of human attributes, moral values, joys, passions, curiosity, even unhappiness. It turns out, from the way Huxley handles the landscape, that unhappiness is essential to man’s life. As Blake put it, ‘Damn braces; bless relaxes.’

Huxley’s warning is savoured with ‘soma’–like comforts of an ultra–technical existence. There are taps with perfume, for instance, in every flat. If you are an Alpha, you are lucky. If you are a low Epsilon, you are preconditioned to be satisfied with working hard. The pill he makes us swallow tastes sweet, but, once it takes effect, it has devastating consequences. We feel our only alternative in that Brave New World would be to commit suicide, like John the Savage.

*Brave New World* is a likeable book with a meagre plot, that leaves you hopeless. The causes of this hopelessness, which are political as well as economic, are not analysed. Huxley has a scientifically-biased mind. Politically speaking, unlike Orwell – who does that more than anything else, he does not take much trouble. Do we accept dystopia without an accurate view of politics today? Is mere imagination sufficient? Can Huxley convince us we are going to be dehumanized by too much well

being? Whoever has experienced the deprivations of a communist society may be skeptical about that.

Many of us are more than charmed by the contrivances for human comfort imagined by Huxley. Communism was a dungeon. It is not the progress of science, but its arrest in our countries, that is scary. Our countries have had too little, not too much of that good thing. From the point of view of anyone who was born under communism, Huxley failed to create a credible dystopia, probably because he knew too little about the economic absurdity and the disastrous effects of communism on the human soul. He wrote his book as a warning for England. He did not have totalitarian Eastern systems in mind. Only the Soviet Union existed at the time. Although he mocks at the names of Lenin and Marx, he is still superficial. His choice of a pleasurably funny science- fiction book ruins his chances of becoming a prophet. He overlooked the evolution of communism, which Orwell, sixteen years later, was in closer contact with. Huxley wrote a book which we read today in hopes of finding it revolting, and which fails to relieve our resentment. Is this a brave new novel, and do we recognize this brave new world?

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*Ape and Essence* (1948) was published during the same year Orwell published his *1984*. It is meant to be a sequel to *Brave New World*, placed in southern California (Los Angeles, Hollywood) in 2108. It actually is a script within a story. A script by William Tallis is found, having been inadvertently dropped from the truck that was taking it to be cremated. On the last page of the novel, which takes place in a desert that was once Los Angeles, two runaway lovers stumble upon the grave of this writer, who foretold his own death:

‘WILLIAM TALLIS
1882- 1948
Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?
Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here
They have departed, thou shouldst now depart!’

Huxley’s own story begins on the day of Gandhi’s assassination, on Calvary. Bob has a wife, a mistress, and an idea for a script, plus a huge need of money. He is with the first person narrator when they find the manuscript of *Ape and Essence*, by ‘William Tallis, Cottonwood Ranch, Murcia, California,’ followed by the note

‘No self- addressed envelope. For the Incinerator...’

The following Sunday the two who found the doomed manuscript go to look for its author. They find the house, and right at the entrance they read:

‘The leech’s kiss, the squid’s embrace,
The prurient ape’s defiling touch:
And do you like the human race?
No, not much.
THIS MEANS YOU, KEEP OUT.’

Actually the owner of the house, an elderly woman, tells them Tallis had rented the house for a year, but he ‘passed on six weeks ago.’ He has no relatives in the States. He was sixty-six when he died. He had written the script for money:

‘...he wanted some extra money to send to Europe. He’d been married to a German girl, way back, before the First World War. Then they’d been divorced and she had stayed on in Germany with the baby. And now there wasn’t anybody left but a grand-daughter. Mr. Tallis wanted to bring her over here; but the people at Washington wouldn’t let him. So the next best thing was to send her a lot of money so she could eat properly and finish her education.’

He often repeated that if he died there, he wanted to be buried in the desert. It seems, from the script, that he was. Without further ado, the narrator says:

‘I print the text of ‘Ape and Essence’ as I found it, without change and without comment.’

What follows is entitled ‘The Script.’ It has directions for the producer, bits of strange poetry, quotations from Shelley, like the one on Tallis’ grave. The directions alternate with the voice of ‘the narrator.’ The story is pretty uncomplicated. Dr. Alfred Poole comes with a ‘New Zealand Rediscovery Expedition to North America,’ on ‘the twentieth of February, 2108.’ This is the time after the Third World War, during which New Zealand was spared, being too far away and isolated. It ‘flourished in isolation,’ keeping away from radioactivity for a century. The danger being over, explorers start ‘rediscovering America from the West.’

Two baboons drag two Einsteins on a leash. The narrator announces ‘the death, by suicide, of twentieth-century science.’

The Rediscovery Expedition lands west of Los Angeles. They have come in a ship with sails. Its thirteen members start finding the effects of radiation. Dr. Alfred Poole is a botanist. He stays behind and is caught by

‘three villainous- looking men, black- bearded, dirty and ragged.’

Los Angeles is a desert strewn with ruins. Its inhabitants worship Belial, make the sign of the ‘horns,’ call the Third World War ‘the Thing,’ and feel sure that this is the moment when God died and a new religion was born, their own. They live on what they find in coffins – from jewels to clothes – as they can produce nothing. The landscape is apocaliptic:

‘...it becomes increasingly obvious that the great Metropollis is a ghost town, that what was once the world’s largest oasis is now its greatest agglomeration of ruins in a wasteland. Nothing moves in the streets. Dunes of sand have drifted across the concrete.’

Huxley’s *Ape and Essence* is supposed to be a dystopia, the worst imaginable fears of dehumanization come true. It is a dystopia of science and religion. It shows the opposite of scientific progress and the opposite of God. People live without producing anything, just pilfering old graves, and Belial, ‘the Lord of the Flies,’ has taken dominion. The sign of horns is ironically similar to the famous V from Victory. Actually the political regime is supposed to be a Democracy. The chief states:

‘...the Law says that everything belongs to the Proletariat – in other words, it all goes to the State.’

Politically, Huxley is not really a prophet. Again and again, he knows too little to compete with Orwell, whom he actually tries to belittle in *Brave New World Revisited*. His scientific bias saves him from mere improvisation, but it is insufficient to create a real dystopia.

We learn that, three generations after the consummation of technological progress, a few thousand survivors live in the wilderness, and for thirty years they have found it safe to put to use the buried remains of modern comfort. Since they threaten to bury Dr. Poole alive, having lost the other twelve members of the expedition, the botanist offers to help them get better crops, consequently more food. He is partly integrated in their society. This is how we learn what could be in store for us.

The first hideous surprise is Belial Day. For two weeks men and women (called ‘Vessels of the Unholy Spirit’) mate at random, desperately, with no feelings, fidelity or morals. We are at the opposite of Christian religion. Because of gamma radiation, a while later babies with deformities are born, which are all killed by the Purification Centre. Poole makes his first mistake: he falls in love with eighteen- year- old Loola – some twenty years younger than he is, thus managing to escape the rigid morality of his mother back home, and the prospect of marrying his fellow, Dr. Hook.

Loola hopes with all her heart to have a normal baby. As she informs us,

‘They allow you up to three pairs (of nipples). And seven toes and fingers. Anything over that gets liquidated at the Purification.’

She herself has two pairs of nipples, she says. And she is terribly afraid of having her head shaved and her baby liquidated. Poole accepts everything with extraordinary ease. He eats bread baked at the heat obtained from burning the huge Californian libraries (one of which – in Berkeley – I am using at the very moment I am writing this book). He manages to save a book by Shelley, whom we find quoted extensively.

At school children learn that their duties are:

‘...to do my best to prevent (my neighbor) from doing unto me what I should like to do unto him; (...) to keep my body in absolute chastity, except during the two weeks following Belial Day...’

Woman is ‘the source of all deformity,’ ‘the enemy of the race,’ as opposed to the cult of the Holy Virgin, Mother of God in Christianity. Remembering the ‘dry bones’ of the Bible, maybe those in Eliot’s Waste Land, too, the narrator addresses us directly:

‘The dry bones of some of those who died, by thousands, by millions, in the course of those three bright summer days that, for you there, are still in the future.’

There are bones everywhere, constantly brought to the surface, constantly used to make glasses, necklaces and whatever else is useful. This long tradition of death ends in the reign of ‘His Eminence the Arch-Vicar of Belial, Lord of the Earth, Primate of California, Servant of the Proletariat, Bishop of Hollywood.’ Religion, communism and the world of movies are crammed together. The main religious hymn is ‘Glory to Belial, to Belial in the lowest.’ Mother is ‘the Breeder of all deformities,’ ‘the chosen vessel of Unholiness,’ ‘the curse that is on our race.’ Belial is propitiated by blood, and, when Poole is horrified by the impaling of deformed babies, the Arch- Vicar reminds him that his religion washes the sinners in the blood of the Lamb, too. Huxley’s irony is sharp and bitter. It is the time of ‘the chaos of lust,’ of ‘the Soul’s death,’ for ‘the Person to perish,’ ‘the Baboon to be master.’ The blessing is ‘His curse be on you.’

People who still believe in love are called ‘Hots,’ and Poole and Loola join them. They are faithful and live somewhere across the desert. They are

monogamous. The narrator comments on a different life than the one reigning in Los Angeles in 2108:

'Love, Joy and Peace – these are the fruits of the spirit that is your essence and the essence of the world. But the fruits of the ape- mind, the fruits of the monkey presumption and revolt are hate and unceasing restlessness and a chronic misery tempered only by frenzies more horrible than itself.'

This explains the title of the novel and also ends it almost. Poole and Loola have not turned into animals, they still have human feelings. The lovers are last seen by the script as fugitives across the Mojave desert. Loola is converted to God, and they come across the grave of William Tallis, which implies that he died while running away towards real love, a love that he could not find in California before the Third World War. Or maybe he did not even have that hope then.

Written in the spirit of the hybridization of genres, mixing script, fiction, drama, poetry and the essay, *Ape and Essence* is a captivating beginning, which ends too soon. Huxley seems to have been impatient with this book. Short as it is, though, it is at the core of many science fiction works today. The reign of the ape has been extensively exploited. On the other hand, Jonathan Swift's Houyhnms are very early signs of dehumanization, and Huxley merely follows in the tracks of bitter irony. Uninterested in politics, not very original in his previsions of an upheaval in science, religion, human nature, Huxley could horrify us in this novel if we managed to take him seriously. Unfortunately, his irony turns against himself. He discredits his own creation, discouraging the reader to become involved in the nightmare, so very much unlike Orwell, Lessing, Ishiguro. Teaching us to read mockingly, the novelist undermines himself. He slips into doubt, and the reader learns how to doubt him, too. The poignant reality of the text is absent. *Ape and Essence* is a hypothesis which we are in a hurry to discard, not having had enough time to become attached to it.

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*Brave New World Revisited* (1958) is a long essay written after Huxley's going to America, in 1937. It ends with Huxley's concern with human freedom:

'Meanwhile there is still some freedom left in the world. Many young people, it is true, do not seem to value freedom. But some of us still believe that, without freedom, human beings cannot become fully human and that freedom is therefore supremely valuable. Perhaps the forces that

now menace freedom are too strong to be resisted for very long. It is still our duty to do whatever we can to resist them.'

The foreword warns us that we should read this essay against the background of the Hungarian uprising and its repression. The very first sentence of chapter 1 states:

'In 1931, when *Brave New World* was being written, I was convinced that there was still plenty of time.'

We are now told there may not be so much time left before God is replaced by Belial. Huxley proceeds to discuss all the problems he raised in *Brave New World*: overpopulation, morality, propaganda, democracy, dictatorship, brainwashing, chemical and subconscious predetermination, hypnopaedia. He is positive that his prophecies are coming true, even sooner than he had thought, he says. He compares himself to Orwell, whom he appreciates, although it is obvious that he thinks more of his own dystopia. Some of his statements are memorable, such as:

'It is a pretty safe bet that, twenty years from now, all the world's over-populated and underdeveloped countries will be under some form of totalitarian rule – probably by the Communist party.'

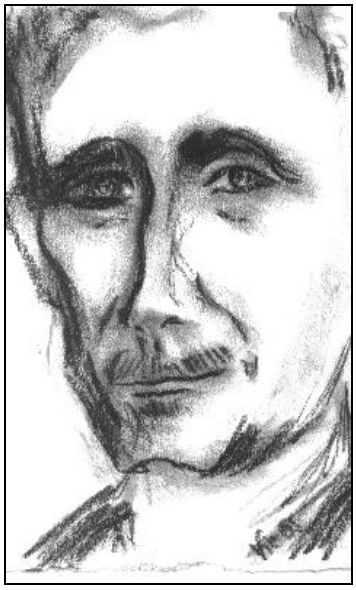
He is certain that the world is in for a permanent crisis. In his own words, overpopulation and over-organization are pushing society in the direction of a new mediaeval system. He discusses censorship in the East and the West. In the East it is exerted by the state, by state propaganda. In the West it is economic and controlled by a Power Elite. He feels that the latter may be less objectionable. He makes the huge mistake of actually applying his dystopia to the Communist world, writing:

'Throughout the Communist world tens of thousands of these disciplined and devoted young men are being turned out every year from hundreds of conditioning centers.'

Orwell had the intuition that dissidence was inherent to human nature, that such a thing as total mass loyalty to Communism was out of the question. Huxley is quite innocent in matters of Eastern politics. And his innocence is quite annoying to those who know the truth from their own experience.

On the whole, this apology of *Brave New World*, written by its own author, meaning to prove the concrete truth of prophecies springing from mere imagination, is irritating. It shows lack of insight and even of modesty. It fails to make a point. As brave new novels, *Brave New World* and *Ape and Essence* are remarkable. Huxley is a very special writer, who

can turn irony into most anything. His imagination works in literary terms. Once he steps over the boundary, trespassing into politics mostly, he is undermined by his own inexperience. Much earlier than many, he showed the way to Desperado literature, mixing genres, pushing the novel into the art of film- making, which is remarkable. His point counter point technique foreshadows contemporary movies and finally lies at the basis of all cheap, popular soap operas. Although he was almost Eliot's and Joyce's age, his literature runs ahead, into this brave new novel that we keep reading, under so many masks, today.



Portratit by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

# A Handbook of Despair – George Orwell (1903- 1950)

George Orwell's real name was Eric Blair. He was born in Bengal, and educated at Eton. He served in the Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell is a writer with a robot- like imagination and a fairly dry sensibility, which makes his plots look almost diabolical. He builds his novels by accumulation. He makes up images which convey, all of them, one major message: Beware of totalitarianism. The part he plays in *1984* is that of a stage manager who carefully puts together scenes, characters, lights, cues, in order to focus everything upon his thesis. Because of his monochord view, the novel ends by being very much like an exciting huge newspaper editorial written in small print. When I read it for the first time, in the 1970s, I was happy to find in it all the evils that surrounded me, named and described in detail. As Orwell's own character, Winston Smith, puts it, I felt relieved to see my situation dissected and be able to read the results of the diagnosis illegally. It was as if attaching a name to the horrors, I could struggle free from them.

On rereading the novel in the 1990s, its novelty and cathartic function gone, I found it questionable as a piece of literature. It does not afford the pleasure of captured, re- enacted life. It is a long explanation of the nightmare some of us have actually lived. It is so accurate that it resembles more a list than a recording of incidents. Orwell's imagination

is matter-of-fact. He demonstrates by explaining, not by involving the reader emotionally.

*1984* takes place in a future England, at the time of 'Ingsoc' (English socialism). The prophecy has not turned out to be true for England. The premises of Orwell's dystopia – his knowledge of the Soviet Union and communism at the time - enable him to foresee the evolution of the totalitarian system in the countries where it took over. What seems obvious today, when most of these countries have struggled out of it and we can consequently talk freely about *1984*, is that no advanced capitalist country outside the Russian sphere of influence could have joined it.

In contrast to Huxley's world of comfort, leisure, affluence and well being, the image of Orwell's future England (outlined sixteen years later than Huxley's) is wretched. Poverty is a major theme, and it darkens everything. It is a poverty totally opposed to Huxley's heaven of consumer goods. No sugar, not enough electricity, no coffee, no pans, no clothes, no chocolate. We know these things only too well. Only the most important members of the so-called inner Party have economic privileges, such as good cigarettes, wine, good coffee, good flats. There is one thing in abundance, however: the telescreen. The telescreen is a surveillance device and propaganda tool, as well. It exists everywhere, in every room. Everybody is watched, one is never alone, there is no privacy, the Party knows everything.

The constant fear of being seen or heard, betrayed by one's own wife or even children, is so painful to us because we have experienced it until so recently. In Orwell it is exaggerated beyond everything bearable. He devises the word 'thoughtcrime', which means to rebel against the Party in your mind. Even that can be seen, from gestures, countenance, a whisper in one's sleep. There even is such a thing as the Thought Police. Nothing is private. Just like Huxley, whose characters clamoured that everybody belonged to everybody else, Orwell's heroes are doomed to belong to the Party.

The view is so drab that it renders even the reader helpless. People are like hopeless animals driven to work. While reading this book, you feel constantly on the verge of tears. They are tears of sadness for the wasted lives, of humiliation and, at last, of utter despair. The face of 'Big Brother', 'the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features,' made to stare at you from whatever point you look at it, watches everyone all the time. Nobody has ever seen or heard Big Brother, he may as well be dead, but he is the chief of the Party and must be worshipped. All Party members have to wear identical blue overalls, to love Big Brother and hate fanatically the enemy Oceania is at war with (Eastasia or Eurasia, as it happens).

The telescreen in every room cannot be shut off completely, it can at best be dimmed. It registers everything, so you are never alone, you must always watch your face, your lips, your gestures, your thoughts. When Winston fails to keep up with the morning gymnastics on the screen (which sounds just like North Korea), he is promptly scolded. The absolute lack of privacy as seen by Orwell is just as maddening as that in Huxley, only it is more painful because it is experienced in such grim surroundings:

'The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.'

Winston Smith, like Huxley's savage John, reacts fiercely against this compelled dehumanization and decides to keep a diary. There is a dark recess in his room, where he thinks he cannot be spotted by the telescreen. He buys an old, beautiful notebook, and starts writing with difficulty. His mind finds it extremely hard to struggle free from fear, which fear, he now realizes, slowly destroys his intellect, prevents it from thinking.

Winston works most of the day (very often prolonged hours) for the Ministry of Truth – Minitruth, as it is called in Newspeak, the new, official language of Oceania. This Ministry of Truth is busy concealing reality, in fact. A huge number of people are busy rearranging old articles in old papers, in order to bring them up to date, to eliminate the contradictions between past and present statements. The memory of a whole nation is deliberately annihilated. We have come out of a communist regime and we know only too well how far lies can go. But we also know that Orwell exaggerates, that nobody can destroy man's last refuge, his mind. Thoughts have been and will always be free. Communist countries did have a kind of Thought Police, though, in psychiatry hospitals sometimes. There the mind was tampered with until fear became so strong that it left the patient speechless.

In Oceania there are four Ministries, described as follows:

‘...the Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts; the Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war; the Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order; and the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs. Their names, in Newspeak: Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, and Miniplenty.’

The description sounds depressing to anyone who has experienced these realities, whose names have nothing to do with what activities actually take place inside them. The virtue of lying is a major achievement. When Winston feels overwhelmed with the distortion of truth, he attempts the highest offence possible, he ‘opens’ a diary. He knows that any thoughts directed otherwise than towards the Party could bring him death or the forced labour camp. Yet, he starts writing on the 4th of April, 1984. It may be hard to remember what each of us was doing on that day. The only certain thing for which Winston can swear is that he is thirty-nine years old.

As we go along, accompanying him to destruction, we cross a land mainly inhabited by two groups: the Party members and the proles. The proles are unimportant. They are uneducated and even poorer than a common Party member. The hope that they might overthrow the system is absent. They are freer, though, and are not compelled to take part in the daily ‘Two Minutes Hate’, for instance, when everyone is supposed to prove fanatic loyalty to Big Brother. Emmanuel Goldstein is shown on the screen, as the Enemy of the People. He was once a Party leader, but betrayed it and disappeared. He is shown denouncing the dictatorship of the Party, demanding freedom of speech, freedom of the press and of thought, crying that the revolution has been betrayed. Reading all this, some feel how depressing it is to realize we have lived through all that and seem to be living it now all over again. History repeats itself.

The Thought Police unmasks spies and saboteurs every day. The oppressive atmosphere of this book reminds us only too well of our own world of lies until not long ago. It may not even be dead yet. Winston feels more and more crushed by the necessity to hide his thoughts, reactions, feelings, even to control his face. And when he fails to do so, when, just for once, he is honest with O’Brien (a colleague of the Inner Party), he makes a terrible mistake. Instead of a fellow conspirator against the Party, as Winston deems him to be, O’Brien turns out to be the man who tortures Winston in the end till utter annihilation. When, at the end of the book, Winston ceases to be himself, after prolonged torture and brain-washing at the hands of O’Brien and the Thought Police, we also lose all hope that any conspiracy (the so-called Brotherhood included) may exist within such a perfectly organized repressive system. In a way, we sigh with relief: this is, however, *more* than we have experienced.

The loneliness of the characters in Orwell's book is more dehumanized than ours was. Yet it is not so very far away from it. Thoughtcrime is a fear that may have survived communism. So have the arrests that 'invariably happened at night'. People disappeared at night – do they still? – , nobody came to know how or why, no trials, they were 'vaporized', and all their traces were lost.

A world teeming with secret agents, in which even children spy on and betray their own parents, as in the case of Winston's neighbour, who shouts in his sleep 'Down with Big Brother', although he seems perfectly adapted to the system. His children denounce him, he is thrown in prison, and yet he is very proud of their education. His son, while playing, once shouted at Winston:

'You're a traitor! (...) You're a thought- criminal! You're a Eurasian spy! I'll shoot you, I'll vaporize you, I'll send you to the salt mines!'

All children belong to the Organization called the Spies. They learn at a very tender age the 'discipline of the Party.' They frighten their parents. In school girls have sex- classes, during which they are taught that making love in order to bear children is their 'duty' towards the Party. Orwell is a master at creating images for lives wasted from the cradle to the grave.

In front of the slow death of the human brain, Winston takes refuge in his diary, which he hardly knows how to use. For whom does he write it? He has no idea:

'To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone – to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone:

From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of double think – greetings!'

He works for the Party. He helps 'control the past' and promote doublethink, by changing all old articles in newspapers which are different from what the present states. His memory rebels against all this. His whole being reacts. His most manifest act of protest is falling in love with Julia. Feelings are not allowed. Marriages should be loveless. Besides, he is already married and merely separated, not divorced. Orwell's model must have been the Stalinist society of the 1940s. Had he been a more subtle thinker or analyst, he would have felt that human beings never fail to find some refuge, some form of protest against dehumanization.

Winston begins by meeting Julia in a country spot. She is twenty-six and knows absolutely nothing about any other world than her own. Winston can at least think of the previous (capitalist) society, and even dreams of it, desperately wants to learn more. He clings to the past with the hope that it might come to pass again.

Later, they rent a small room in a prole district. They think they are safe there, but in the end it turns out later that everyone around was a spy. Even the mild-looking old man who gave them the room and sold Winston the copy-book for his diary. Even the small prole room, with ancient capitalist perfume, where they think there is no telescreen to spy on them, has a screen hidden behind a picture. Absolutely nothing is safe.

Both Winston and Julia are taken to prison and reformed beyond recognition. They meet again in the final pages, as two beings who have no life left, two robots who politely ignore each other. Orwell's novel is a handbook of despair. Doris Lessing, for instance, took her psychological analysis to the utmost bearable limit: you could not split hairs or expose more than she does. Orwell goes to the outskirts of the nightmare.

Here, the question of the aesthetic value of their books arises. Doris Lessing is a good novelist, who passes the test of real literature. What about Orwell? Where can we place this essayistic, descriptive book? He enumerates evils and incidents. He does not venture inside a character, except to show it is empty, there is nothing alive in it. The plot is meagre, just a pretext to describe the surrounding world. He builds up a negative utopia, a dystopia, just like Huxley.

In many ways it is unfair to discuss the literary value of a dystopia. Orwell focuses upon building an essential image, a synthesis, like a definition of the totalitarian system. The literary ingredients he uses are meant to help us swallow his thoughts. His postmodernity mixes literature with journalism and political theory. He manages to arouse our deepest indignation and frustration. Had we not lived through most of what he describes, we would merely have been afraid. His atmosphere is haunting. As it is, we are saddened beyond speech. Saddened that his imagination, even as early as 1949, worked well, yet nobody in the communist countries had the power to do anything about it.
We could easily have been the heroes of this book, if the terror had continued. We had already started experiencing the loneliness, the fear, the poverty. Orwell may not have been a perfect novelist in *1984*, but he was an accurate visionary. For the relief people encaged in communism felt when reading his book, for the sadness that part of our own life has been wasted so far, and for the faint hope that we may still see better

times because we have emerged out of *1984* alive, Orwell is a writer who deserves our support at least, if no more.

# The Self-Indulgent Novelist – Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966)

*Brideshead Revisited*, 1945, 'the sacred and profane memories of captain Charles Ryder,' begins with a Preface added by Evelyn Waugh in 1949. The novelist states he is not very happy about the form of the novel as it stands. He notices 'glaring defects', and explains they are due to the fact that the book was written during the war. The real cause might be deeper than that, though.

What kind of a writer is Evelyn Waugh? A border-line novelist, I should say. He verges on being deep, perceptive, appealing. But he has not got it in him to be all that fully. He builds a plot. He strives to infuse life into his characters. He gives a certain credibility and coherence to the incidents he invents. His major flaw is that his tone is disabused. He does not know how to go about taking himself seriously. Consequently, we have doubts about him. Suspicion makes our attention waver, and we catch ourselves forgetting his book all too soon. He lacks the self-asserting poignancy of a strong, resourceful narrator.

The book begins and ends with two war scenes. In between we are invited to join the world between the two World Wars. Charles Ryder returns to Brideshead as a soldier and starts remembering. He is thirty-nine and claims he is beginning to feel old. Brideshead, he recalls, is the place where his last love died. The style in which we learn about his past life is remarkably elegant, flawless, almost blank with perfection.
Charles' memories have two acts, each with its own main protagonist: first Sebastian, then his sister Julia. Sebastian belongs to Charles' university days at Oxford. Charles is reading history, but only for a short while, because he is soon to become a particular kind of painter, a very famous one, concerned with architecture. Lord Sebastian Flyte, a young man of unusual beauty and eccentricity of behaviour, becomes Charles' best friend and – though unwillingly – introduces him to his family: his Catholic mother, Lady Marchmain, his elder brother, the Earl of Brideshead, his younger sisters, Julia and Cordelia.

Charles' mother was killed during the First World War, in Serbia, where she went with the Red Cross. His father is an elderly person, lives in London alone, and hardly notices his son when he is there. Charles is a solitary figure all through the book. This is the quality which most appeals to us in him. He is alone in his friendship with Sebastian, as he is later alone in his love for the latter's sister, Julia. Both Sebastian and Julia are left rather shallow and naked, while Charles is veiled in as many mysteries as Waugh could invent.

We know nothing about his mother. His father collects various kinds of things and is crazy enough to bar any possible communication. Charles' reactions are typically British, he is dominated by a well-mannered restraint. He follows Sebastian around, while in Oxford, and we hardly know what he experiences. Suddenly we find him married and a father, but we are not told how it came to happen emotionally. We do get to know the external facts, such as who his wife is (a former mate of Julia's). His feelings are an enigma. I do have a certain suspicion that Waugh did not even take the trouble to invent them.

On the other hand, he does try to explain the other characters, but in a rather patronizing, simplifying way. The Marchmains, Sebastian's parents, have lived apart since the war. The mother is a fervent Catholic. The father lives with his mistress, Cara, in Italy. They are immensely rich (or so it seems at first) in money, and amazingly poor in reactions. Mere sketches. Saying the witty things, allowing what is decent, fulfilling their author's whims. Waugh seems to have a good time inventing the plot, but the hell of a time making it fit in with the characters.

Charles has a thought, though, which he does not express, but which is in a way Waugh's explanation for him as a character. He formulates the following (in his mind):

'To know and love one other human being is the root of all wisdom.'

There is not much love lost in Waugh's book, but at least he tries to concentrate on Charles as its main receptacle.
Charles is also, in this book, the image of youth. Innocent youth, dragged into what a character calls Sebastian's 'sinister family.' He goes to stay with Sebastian because the latter has sprinkled his ankle, and the charm of everything and everyone around overwhelms him:

'Brideshead was a place of such enchantment to me that I expected everything and everyone to be unique.'

Towards the end of the book, when we are already during World War II, the charm wears away, leaving Charles with faded memories, like faded photographs of a would-be happy life.

Nobody is happy in this book. We witness Sebastian slowly becoming a drunkard and leaving the civilized world, lost to love, lost to our power of comprehension. We witness the Marchmains die, separately, in their lonely way. We witness Julia get married to another unexplained character, whom she divorces afterwards. Even her love for Charles is painful and comes to a bad end. Cordelia loses her femininity. Charles' wife loses Charles. Everybody seems to have lost everyone, in the end, and the only reality is the all-destructive war.

If religion was supposed to be a main theme of this novel, as it has been stated, then it is a failed theme. Sebastian's mother is a Catholic and she derives no consolation from it. Julia ends up giving herself totally to Catholicism and we register her decision as a waste. Charles himself confesses he has 'no religion.' His mother was a devout, she left her husband and went to Serbia to die. But this is all we get to know about her. Charles seems a man deprived of childhood, whose youth is equal to a state of permanent confusion and amazement, and whose maturity borders on emotional barrenness.

Considering the question of religion, Sebastian describes his family thus:

'So you see we're a mixed family religiously. Brideshead and Cordelia are both fervent Catholics; he's miserable, she's bird-happy; Julia and I are half-heathen; I am happy, I rather think Julia isn't; mummy is popularly believed to be a saint and papa is excommunicated – and I wouldn't know which of them was happy. Anyway, however you look at it, happiness doesn't seem to have much to do with it, and that's all I want... I wish I liked Catholics more.'

In the end, he joins the monks in Tunis, grows a beard and is very religious. Brideshead, on the other hand, forgets all about wanting to be a priest, and marries a woman older than himself, who cannot even bear children any more. No one after this last generation is going to carry the flag of the family farther. Not that there is much left of it, if it comes to that. As a matter of fact, we never get to know the real texture of the religious experience, as seen by Waugh. All of them keep confessing that they hardly know the others. Here is Charles about Sebastian:

'That night I began to realize how little I really knew of Sebastian, and to understand why he had always sought to keep me apart from the rest of his life.'

As a matter of fact, Charles understands nothing, because Evelyn Waugh has not put in anywhere anything that he really has to take the trouble to understand. We are merely given incidents, without souls. A Desperado book peopled with puppets, which was subsequently turned into a six-episode film.

One thing which is amply gratified in *Brideshead Revisited* is Waugh's love of travels. Sebastian and Charles go to Sebastian's house in Venice. Their trip is masterfully described. Those who have travelled very little in their lives read the lines with avid curiosity:

'And so we went; first by the long, cheap sea-crossing to Dunkirk, sitting all night on deck under a clear sky, watching the grey dawn break over the sand dunes; then to Paris, on wooden seats, where we drove to the Lotti, had baths and shaved, lunched at Foyot's, which was hot and half-empty, loitered sleepily among the shops, and sat long in a café waiting till the time of our train; then in the warm, dusty evening to the Gare de Lyon, to the slow train south, again the wooden seats, a carriage full of the poor, visiting their families – travelling, as the poor do in Northern countries, with a multitude of small bundles and an air of patient submission to authority – and sailors returning from leave. We slept fitfully, jolting and stopping, changed once in the night, slept again and awoke in an empty carriage, with pine woods passing the windows and the distant view of mountain peaks. New uniforms at the frontier, coffee and bread at the station buffet, people round us of southern grace and gaiety; on again into the plains, conifers changing to vine and olive, a change of trains at Milan; garlic, sausage, bread, and a flask of Orvieto bought from a trolley (we had spent all our money save for a few francs, in Paris); the sun mounted high and the country glowed with heat; the carriage filled with peasants, ebbing and flowing at each station, the smell of garlic was overwhelming in the hot carriage. At last in the evening we arrived at Venice.'

Sebastian's father, the man with a Byronic aura, who, during the war, formed a liaison with a dancer and stayed in Italy (although his Catholic wife would never divorce him), veils himself in an air of *'normality.'* It disappoints Charles, but the landscape amply makes up for it. He is barely nineteen, and his fortnight at Venice is dazzling.

Cara reveals to Charles the only important feeling at the core of this whole Marchmain family. It is hatred. She says the two Marchmains hate each other beyond words. Lord Marchmain is a 'volcano of hate.' They are all full of 'hate of themselves.' Sebastian hates his growing up, and is in love with his childhood. He hates reality. His refuge is drink, then a foreign country, and finally the monks. He is a total failure. His initial

charm is utterly lost. As we are told, it is 'the flight from his family which brought him to ruin.' He states himself:

'And I shall go on running away as far and as fast as I can. You can hatch up any plot you like with my mother; I shan't come back.'

And he keeps his word.

By getting to know his family more closely, Charles loses Sebastian. Later on he feels that in fact he had loved Julia in Sebastian, but his psychology is not really convincing.

At twenty, he leaves Oxford, in order to become a painter. He goes to Paris, so Book Two of this novel is entitled *Brideshead Deserted*. In fact, everybody seems to be leaving the place. Charles is in Ile Saint-Louis, at the art school. Sebastian is a pale shadow of his former uncommonly charming self:

'He was paler, thinner, pouchy under the eyes, drooping in the corners of his mouth, and he showed the scars of a boil on the side of his chin; his voice seemed flatter and his movements alternately listless and jumpy; he looked down-at-heel, too, with clothes and hair, which formerly had been happily negligent, now unkempt; worst of all, there was a wariness in his eye which I had surprised there at Easter, and which now seemed habitual to him.'

In spite of his mother's desperate attempt to send him abroad in the company of a reliable person (Mr. Samgrass), he constantly escapes, and drinks all the time. Oxford is over. He is over. Julia gets married to Rex Mottram. Cordelia returns to school in a convent. Soon, Lady Marchmain dies. Charles leaves the place feeling he has left behind something indefinite – 'Youth? Adolescence? Romance?' – he cannot say what. Illusion maybe.

At a certain point, a Jesuit, who undertakes to convert Rex to Catholicism so that he can marry Julia, makes a very interesting remark, which still applies to most young people today (it was uttered in the 1920's):

'The trouble with modern education is you never know how ignorant people are. With anyone over fifty you can be fairly confident what's been taught and what's been left out. But these young people have such an intelligent, knowledgeable surface, and then the crust suddenly breaks and you look down into the depths of confusion you didn't know existed.'

Charles returns to London in 1926. He goes all the way to Morocco, where Sebastian has settled to drink. He is ill, in a hospital kept by the

Franciscans. He is an alcoholic. Emaciated and dry inside, he does not even go to his mother's funeral.

Ten years later, Charles is a famous architectural painter. He publishes splendid folios and has exhibitions. In search of inspiration, he goes to Mexico and Central America for two years. In his absence, a son is added to the daughter he already had. His wife, Celia, whom he married six years ago, is an Oxford friend's sister. On the passage home, a famous painter with a wife who has a lover, Charles meets Julia again. She is in her late twenties. Sadder than ever and on the point of separating from Rex. The two fall in love. The description of their affair is hardly convincing. Charles leaves Celia, Julia leaves Rex, but in the end they are to remain alone. Julia with God, Charles with his painting.

After 'dead' years, now the future dies, too. It dies for everyone, because atmosphere is more important with Waugh than each individual character. Cordelia loses her short-lived femininity and goes on an ambulance to Spain. Brideshead is thirty-eight and marries a widow older than himself. The Marchmains are dead. Sebastian has settled in a monastery near Carthage. Waugh gives everyone a fixed status and a predictable end. 'Homeless, childless, middle-aged, loveless,' Charles Ryder re-visits Brideshead and states,

'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.'

A sad, hopeless novel, *Brideshead Revisited* has one charm and one major quality. The charm is that of a masterfully created atmosphere. The major quality lies in the perfection of each independent incident. But when we try to piece together the picturesque background and the incisive short sketches, we get nowhere. The novel is hard to remember. It offers no clear image either of the plot, or of the characters, or at least of the author.

Evelyn Waugh writes his book in the first person. Charles Ryder tells us all the stories. But, as a matter of fact, the novelist is an omniscient narrator, who refuses to have anything to do with innovations in literature. Apart from the fact that the diary has become very popular, and Waugh here narrowly borders on it, there is nothing special about him. Nothing to arrest our thoughts or make us gasp. A record of remote incidents, which happened between world wars, in a wealthy family, among the few rich. The words are many, the information scanty. Unwillingly we discover that no matter how much we may hate interference of other fields with literature, we do miss the political attitude of the writer, or of the characters, rather.

So many important political changes took place in Charles and Julia's world. Sebastian's slowly becoming an alcoholic is the least of all tragedies. Somewhere, just in passing, communism, fascism and Hitler are mentioned, but everybody carries on without giving them a second thought. The heroes are thus one-sided, hunting their own emotions, which they fail to find.

Judging Evelyn Waugh on the basis of only one book (although it is supposed to be his best) is unfair. Anyway, he can be reproached with too much self-indulgence. He writes in order to please himself. He delights in his imagination. He relies too much on it. Here and there we catch short glimpses of his real gift of psychological analysis. Yet, no character reveals more than one motive; it could even be said that each hero has a leit-motif. Once the leit-motif has been stated, Waugh takes no more trouble to enlarge upon it. Inventivity exhausts itself on barren incidents which lead nowhere, except to the presentation of some unmemorable lives.

Evelyn Waugh promises us a lot and we end up with very little. No news from the point of view of literary technique. No appealing opinions on anything. Nothing but an easy-flowing, treacherous style, which makes him hold on. After the last page, memory relinquishes its grasp and everything sinks into oblivion. A novel as soon forgotten as it has been read. Can blank literature be the new trend, the latest fashion? Can the novel have become so aristocratic that its blood has thinned? Desperado literature claims Evelyn Waugh as he is, but it also claims Doris Lessing, Kazuo Ishiguro, and many others who are less self-indulgent and more present on the stage of postliterature.

# The Rescuer of the Story – Graham Greene (1904-1991)

Graham Greene is first and foremost a skilful (not resourceful) story-teller. *The Human Factor*, 1978, is good proof of that, besides having some small connection with the totalitarian world, which makes it even more interesting. At the time of its publication it was acclaimed as the perfect best-seller. Which, to many, it must have been. To the student of literature, conversant with other Desperado writers, it looks rather flat. While reading it, we may realize sadly that a mere story is no longer enough for some of us. We have got used to sophisticated tricks, our taste has been spoilt. It would be difficult to go back to Dickens or even Galsworthy, at that. We need to see the game, we want to witness the writer's wit at work. But this Graham Greene is careful to conceal. He builds his plots and rears his characters in the utter silence and obscurity of his mind. He does not share his writing ability, his creative impulse with his reader. He is the hidden – not even the withdrawn – author. Consequently, since our relationship, our friendship with his thoughts is forbidden, we may easily reject the result. It is a well-made story, which we can remember, but which does not alter us. After reading Graham Greene one is still one's old self.

The story of *The Human Factor* is uncomplicated, and the end, in Russia, is even appealing to my imagination, though I suspect it of artificiality. While working in South Africa, Castle met and married Sarah, a black woman. He was working for the British, but he was helped to escape with Sarah (whites never married black girls there) by a Communist spy. When he married Sarah, she was already pregnant with somebody else's child. The boy, Sam, was born in England, as Castle's son. Castle continued to work for the British espionage, but this time as a double agent. He passed on information to someone he did not know, from the other camp. The leak was discovered and a young fellow of his, Davis, was killed as a suspect. Suddenly Castle comes to know about a large operation (Uncle Remus) and passes on this last bit of information to the enemy, knowing that it must be the end. He sends Sarah and Sam to his mother. He is smuggled into Russia, where he meets several compatriots, who have been doing similar things. He will never see Sarah again, because the

British will not give her a passport for Sam, and she will never leave her son behind. The novel ends with their first conversation over the phone, with Sarah's last words to Castle:

She said, 'Maurice, Maurice, please go on hoping,' but in the long unbroken silence which followed she realized that the line to Moscow was dead.

The novel was screened very faithfully. When a novel can be faithfully screened, the reading replaced by watching, by mere suspense and sequence of images and dialogues, I should say there is definitely something wrong with the quality of the text. Greene can always be easily screened, without much loss of substance. It looks as if he himself foresaw the screening and worked as a producer. It might be interesting to notice here that, while the status of the author has undergone so many changes and his game has experimented so much, the film director has so far been quite tame. He has always been behind his camera, arranging scenes silently. It is high time the techniques of film making suffered some devastating shock, or the films may start losing their intellectual audience and confine themselves to soap operas.

The characters are outlined slowly, with a certain eye to suspense. Greene takes his time, his skilled hand chooses the right moment to throw in every detail. Without this slow progress, which arouses our curiosity as to what is going to happen next, the novel would be absolutely dull. It takes the author quite a number of pages, for instance, to reveal to us that Sarah is black. Some things, such as the interests of the British and Russian spies, he never reveals. Which amounts, in the end, to a kind of superficiality, since not even the subject matter of the novel (let alone possible associations) is properly analysed.

All the characters, with the meagre exception of Maurice Castle, are sketched from the outside, like pieces of furniture, like a moving background. Sarah loves Maurice and her child, and acts properly on all occasions. Davis is in love, unhappy because his secretary rejects him, willing to go and work abroad. He can also play hide- and- seek with Sam and is killed by mistake, for what Castle is doing. Castle himself acts as if in constant torpor, he wishes for nothing, he imagines nothing, he reacts to nothing. These literary robots can hardly be convincing to someone who reads with an eye to the game of writing and the fun of reading. We have acquired the taste of being bumped into and baffled by the author's wild impulses. Maybe this is what is wrong with Graham Greene: he has no idea he could be wild. The story is sacred, and he tells it with an honest directness which kills our curiosity.

Yet, if his books continue to be read by many (or watched as films) with a certain amount of pleasure, there must be something in them which redeems them from utter dullness. I think it is the easy-flowing story-telling ability. For the written text, it is reflected in the structure of the sentence, the masterful use of illuminating dialogue. A book by Greene can easily be turned into a film by merely using these dialogues. Some authors cannot tell a story because they feel too much and resent patterning the feeling on a sequence of incidents (see Joyce or Woolf). Others cannot write properly because they speak too much and come up with a dissertation (John Fowles is not far from that). The hybridization of literary genres looms everywhere. Graham Greene escapes it though, by striking a very delicate balance. He rescues the story. It is a brave thing to do, after experimentalists and the rest, after Joyce & co. and also post-company.

If he had been more gifted, he might have made his stories more typical, more representative, more illuminating. As it is, he is a conscientious builder. Which is pretty much, after the time when the art of novels with a story was so much despised. Greene rehabilitates the narrative, he does so in an amazing number of novels, and should be praised as such. We must not forget that, if the novel had not come back to story-telling, it would most certainly have died.

# The Clockwork Novel – Anthony Burgess (1917-1993)

Anthony Burgess was born in Manchester and graduated from university there. He worked in the army for six years, then was a college lecturer in Speech and Drama, and a grammar-school master. Between 1954-1960 he was an education officer in the Colonial Service, stationed in Malaya and Borneo.

He became a full-time writer in 1960. By then he had published three novels and a history of English literature. He is also a composer, and his *Blooms of Dublin*, a musical version of Joyce's *Ulysses*, was presented in 1982. He also wrote a *Life and Work of D.H. Lawrence*, and *Man of Nazareth*, which was the basis of his TV script for *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Anthony Burgess is a highly enigmatical writer. He inherits the inclination for using literature as a puzzle game from Joyce. In *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), language becomes a serious obstacle to understanding the plot. As a matter of fact, the plot is simple and uninteresting. What makes it spicy and intriguing is the combination of Russian words and English spelling, which may easily look appalling to someone who knows no Russian at all. When you have read about half of the book, you start being interested in what is going on, but your energy is still sucked in by the arduous task of deciphering the language. The reader's natural desire to approach the characters is thwarted by his perplexed attitude when confronted with their words.

Frankly speaking, one could hardly state that *A Clockwork Orange* has any characters at all. It deals with violence, illustrated in a long line of incidents. A short (150-page) novel, it is written in the first person, narrated by Alex, a terrifyingly violent teenager. The atmosphere of killing, blood and assaults is so exacerbated, the characters' language is so full of Russian influences, that we may feel the fear that this could have been the England of the future (as seen in 1962), unless communism had collapsed. Read today, the novel loses some of its political poignancy, but not the philosophical one, the attempt to dig at the roots of crime.

As the main hero's words flow incessantly, in an alert rhythm, we learn that he has several friends as young as himself, with whom he attacks defenceless people in the street, destroys, beats, at last even kills. There is a certain point at which these enraged teenagers fight one another, and there is blood again. What these young boys do is a nightmare of death and horror. They all end up in special schools and prisons sooner or later, but the violence has no end. I find it hard to say why this rage of hurting needed so many Russian words, adapted to English in a mockingly Joycean way. Politically speaking, it reveals no opinion whatever on Russian society or the evils of communism. *A Clockwork Orange* is first and last the self-description of a ruthless mind, a ruthlessness whose reasons are hardly mentioned at all.

In this nightmarish England of the future, young Alex has two hobbies: blood (in its Russian variant) and classical music. He is caught after a series of violent deeds which make the reader's hair stand on end, and is sentenced. They try to cure him of violence by a special therapy, rather Freudian, which compels his brain to associate any blow or image of blood with physical ill-being, but also with classical music, the latter being the mere background of the therapy, and unwillingly (on the part of the doctors) becoming part of it. Alex comes out of this therapy as mild as a lamb. He cannot bear to see anybody hurt any more. He can't bear listening to his concerts, either.
Burgess makes him, as a significant coincidence, come across the very people he previously attacked. Some recognize and take their revenge on him. One of them, the author of a book entitled *A Clockwork Orange* (the book within a book is a typical Desperado device, but this title remains unexplained to the last page, and after it, as well), treats him kindly, until he suddenly suspects, by putting together some of Alex's remarks, that he was the one who raped his wife, who in the meantime has died.

As it seems, a similar incident actually happened to Burgess himself. His elderly wife was raped and died. As for 'orange', he explains at the end of a book on Joyce that he had in mind the word 'orang,' meaning 'man' in the Malay language, which connects more aptly to the 'clockwork' violence described. It is an encoded title, and, unless you know the writer's biography, understanding is baffled. But it also is a title that catches the eye by its verbal absurdity. Burgess explains, in *Joysprick*:

'I myself was, for nearly six years, in such close touch with the Malay language that it affected my English and still affects my thinking. When I wrote a novel called *A Clockwork Orange*, no European reader saw that the Malay word for 'man' – *orang* – was contained in the title (Malay students of English invariably write 'orang squash'...).'

The incidents are utterly unimportant, as they do not create a character or underline some idea, except the constant feeling of confusion, deeply embedded in many Desperado texts. The incidents are mere atoms of violence. We have here violence addressing us directly, devoid of any sense of guilt or of any restraint. Violence as a way of life. The intensity of this urge to kill dies as mysteriously as it began, when Alex decides he must have a son in his turn, and must find a wife. Here is the very astonishing and hard to explain conversion of the murderer in cold blood into a future decent grown-up:

'That's what it's going to be then, brothers, as I come to the like end of this tale. You have been everywhere with your little droog Alex, suffering with him, and you have viddied some of the most grahzny bratchnies old Bog ever made, all on to your old droog Alex. And all it was was that I was young. But now as I end this story, brothers, I am not young, not no longer, oh no. Alex like groweth up, oh yes.

But where I itty now, O my brothers, is all on my oddy knocky, where you cannot go. Tomorrow is all like sweet flowers and the turning vonny earth and the stars and the old Luna up there and your old droog Alex all on his oddy knocky seeking like a mate. And all that cal. A terrible grahzny vonny world, really, O my brothers. And so farewell from your little droog. And to all others in this story profound shooms of lip music brrrrr. And they can kiss my sharries. But you, O my brothers, remember sometimes thy little Alex that was. Amen. And all that cal.'

We are taken into the narrator's deepest confidence. The first thing to be discussed about this (unfortunately) Joycean novel is the mood of disgust and paralyzing fear it leaves behind. A 'terrible' world, Alex calls it. Burgess plays a little with the technique of thrillers to make us side with the murderer and hate the victims. To a certain point he succeeds, as long as he can keep us interested in the psychology of a murderer. But there is a limit to everything.

He uses irony in describing atrocities: the teenagers beat up an old man in the dark, and tear his books, leaving him unconscious. They beat the author of *A Clockwork Orange* and rape his wife, after they have cheated him into letting them in. They kill an old lady. Blood is their favourite sight. The courage to die is their main characteristic, but what they are heading for or bringing about is an absurd death. They are demons of destruction. I wonder if the main theme of this enigmatical novel could lie in here: how do children come to long for the taste of death? Who teaches them the pleasure to torture their fellow-beings? Is it mere defiance of the established social order that leads to such deformity? Doris Lessing has her own theory about that, in *The Fifth Child*.

I do not have the feeling that Burgess means to answer such questions, this being the main reason, I suppose, why the England he described seemed to belong to the future, or, I should say, rather to a time which cannot (yet or ever) be explained. The whole novel is a continuous question mark, a clockwork question mark enclosed within the forbidden orange (orang) area of the book. Everything is elusive in these pages, from the quality of the characters to the meaning of the incidents. We seem to be witnessing the many scenes of an unfinished act. Because violence does not die with the hero's decision that he has grown up and must leave it. Other teenagers may attack him sometime soon. The pleasure to kill looms hidden everywhere in Burgess' image of the world.

I should venture to say that Anthony Burgess shows a remarkable lack of interest in the literary side of *A Clockwork Orange*. The literary conventions of character, plot, themes, are not only disregarded, but even demolished. When we are on the point of catching sight of Alex's relationship with his parents, the blinds are drawn tight and we are left with the image of three strangers, out of which two (the parents) are ready to replace their son by a stranger who pays them a rent.

There is an intriguing lack of feelings, of human warmth, of emotional life – characteristic of most Desperado texts – in this dry novel. Julian Barnes, in *Talking It Over*, comes very close to the same thing. Like puppets, all characters move pulled by the strings of the author's inventivity. An evil imagination conjures up streams of hatred, revenge, brutality. The world is a very cold place, and so is the text imagined by the Desperado novelist. Even in *A Malayasian Trilogy*, which is a far more humane novel, Burgess recoils from probing the depths of the soul. He prefers to ignore that characters are more than bodies, which allows him to do without psychological analysis. Many Desperado writers are as shy as he was of using the famous stream of consciousness, leading their fiction towards a merging with journalism, the furthest degree of hybridization of literary genres. The clockwork orange might stand for the shell of a world populated by clockwork beings, but, frankly speaking, Burgess never invites speculation.

An imaginary set of characters, set in an imaginary world, speaking an imaginary language: all these are united by the fact that they stem from the cruel reality that our world has, indeed, disquieting islands of crime and bloodshed. Detective stories are full of that subject-matter. But Burgess does not build his plot into a detective one. The crimes are mere incidents. The message is that in this world, terrified by adolescent violence, hopelessness is the only alternative.

The traditional image of the naive beginnings of life is destroyed. Children are no longer innocent. They are born vicious, grow up into

monsters, end in prison and only maturity can soften their evil inheritance. Burgess does not try to explain, socially or psychologically, or in any kind of analysis, why the world is thus upside down. He records its distortion without any sign of amazement. I should reproach him with a certain lack of curiosity, which bars his readers from a closer contact with the text. But this is a major feature of most Desperado writers, whether poets or novelists. He teaches us – they all do – to be as enigmatical and incurious as he is.

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*Honey for the Bears* (1963) suffers from the same apparent superficiality, the same wilful indifference, of dealing only with the part of the iceberg which is above water. Unfortunately, his characters do not have weight enough to charm us with the unseen miracle of what remains unexplained. Maybe too much orality, an easiness of style, the quick flow of inspiration, kill the pondering, brooding author in him.

Paul Hussey and his American wife Belinda come to the Soviet Union for a short trip, meaning to sell some cheap fashionable dresses and make money. They get into all sorts of trouble. Belinda falls ill with an enigmatical diagnosis, which switches from the body to the soul. She is looked after by a Russian doctor, a woman who, using either her skills or her drugs, persuades her to stay in Leningrad even after the end of the novel. Consequently Paul loses his wife. He also loses his dresses, which he does not manage to sell because of the Russian vigilant security service. In exchange, he finds out that both he and Belinda are homosexuals at heart, and he comes to realize that he has grown pretty old. He leaves Leningrad trying to smuggle out, disguised as his wife, a person whom he thinks to be the son of a great composer, whom his dead boy- friend greatly appreciated. In the very last pages of the novel, it turns out that the young man is in fact a criminal turned loose in the capitalist world. The last word uttered by Paul in this novel of misadventures is ‘Freedom,’ followed by his reflection, ‘Whatever it is.’
The major theme of this fairly light novel, which in fact does not touch any major chord properly, is the ironical approach to communist reality. The same as Doris Lessing, Burgess notices the false, ridiculously untrue language people use. It is obvious that the Englishman comes to the Soviet Union with the worst of expectations, but he manages to experience something even worse than the worst.

What he suffers from is the acute lack of freedom, which at first he detects in others and to which he finally falls a prey himself. He cannot bring himself to believe that people living in the Soviet Union are not aware of what mistreatment they are subjected to. He is sure that the greater their fear of punishment is, the more convinced of communist

advantages they sound. When he offers the doctor a dress for free, her translator comments upon it in the following way:

‘In the Soviet Union,’ said Lukerya, ‘we do not have such things yet. But soon we shall have them. The important things first,’ she said, handling the dress with reverence. ‘Medical services and free bread and the conquest of space,’ she said doubtfully. ‘And then later better things than these. Though this,’ she said, shaking herself out of the official dream, ‘is very nice.’

The economic disaster is the main topic the story centres on. It is obvious that a totalitarian system leads to ruin: the ruin of the conditions of life, the ruin of the very essence of the human being. Russian society is presented as an underworld, a maze of fears, deprivations, betrayals, all crowned by the enraged desire to escape, to get out of it, to forget the advantages of communism, to be free.

Hypocrisy is depicted with a good sense of humour. Russia is a ‘country bloated with cosmonauts, starved of consumer goods,’ a ‘classless society’ in which, however, people have already organized themselves into classes which are almost impossible to ignore. The nomenklatura, the rich ones, the secret police, the helpless individuals who will do anything to lead a bearable life. Those of us who have lived for a number of years in a totalitarian system know what communist ‘happiness for everyone’ means. People acquire an obsession of uttering aloud the very opposite of truth, and develop a real fear of their own, truthful thoughts, which come out into the open unveiled.

Paul Hussey is at a loss in this world, whose code he ignores. He does his best to make fun of his isolation, but he puts his foot in it so many times because of his ignorance of the basic social rules that he reaches a very low standard. He is on the point of losing hope, of becoming one of those encaged, living in squalid conditions. We read the book with peculiar avidity: we are curious to know a foreigner’s reaction to the ordeals we were forced to undergo daily – poverty, deprivation, humiliation, misery, pain. Above all, intellectual starvation.
Labour camps are mentioned, but not at large. Two characters, Karamzin and Zverkov, are from the secret police. They easily discover Hussey’s intention of selling the dresses that had been bought by his friend Robert before he unexpectedly died of a heart attack. When Hussey tries to get in touch with Robert’s former contact, Mizinchikov, he is grabbed by those two, who accuse him:

‘Carrying on your friend’s bad work,’ said Zverkov. ‘Bringing in capitalist goods in order to sell them and thus upset the Soviet economy.’

Which is true. Paul Hussey really wants to sell those dresses and take the profit to Robert's wife, for whom he has taken this trip. It was supposed to be a five-day trip, followed by a booked return to Tilbury on the *Alexander Radischev*. Only Leningrad turns out to be 'a planet of another galaxy.' His shock, Belinda's treatment in a Soviet hospital, all these would have been highly interesting to follow if they had been analysed from an inner perspective. But Burgess chooses the mocking way, the outskirts of meditation. Everything must be funny. What is not funny is not recorded, and consequently what is recorded is rather shallow.

One sentence reminds us of *A Clockwork Orange*: 'In Russia there are no unhappy children,' says Dr. Lazurkina. Judging by the Russian's words, everything in the Soviet Union is all for the best in the best of worlds. Burgess makes however one serious mistake for a fiction-writer, in this book: he is too much in a hurry to contradict those words explicitly. Before we have had the time to discover the lies on our own, we are told (or whispered to) that we are being misled. It is a crude, unconvincing irony, which affords no pleasure.
When Belinda makes friends with her doctor, and even considers she might apply for political asylum, her condition does not appear humorous to the reader, but grotesque. She tells Paul:

'When I decide to come back to England I'll let you know. But I'm not giving you any addresses now because I don't want you to have any part of this decision one way or another.'

It all started with a rash she developed while on board the ship. She was taken to hospital. Visiting her there, Paul found out from her doctor that she had had a lesbian relationship with Robert's wife. She spoke now very affectionately of Dr. Lazurkina, whom she called Sonya. The sexual undertone does not match her political grotesqueness. Maybe the humour is too gross, maybe it is deficient. Paul thinks she was 'brain-washed.' We shall never know the truth, and, considering the fact that Belinda is not really a character, we are not even much interested.

One social side which is well observed by Burgess is the use of bribery. 'Corruption is going to be the ruin of this country,' a character says. The best moment of irony is Paul's last discovery that he has 'Let a murderer loose in the Western world.' Instead of the Soviet Union being infected by Western decadence, as the East fears, it is the West that suffers from Eastern corruption and criminality. This final suggestion of a reversed judgment is the best part of Burgess' irony here.

Comparing the two novels, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Honey for the Bears*, we could conclude that Burgess would have made a good political writer

if he had had better information, or he would have been able to write two more palpitating novels if he had had more nerve.

As it is, he offers an interesting image of the clash East-West, steps lightly around its outline, flirts with the idea of committing himself to it, and, suddenly, leaves us full of expectation and turns away. The novels are clockwork oranges that open and close mechanically before our eyes.

Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## The Uncomfortable Novelist – Doris Lessing (born 1919)

Doris Lessing was born of British parents, in Persia in 1919, and was taken to Southern Rhodesia when she was five. She spent her childhood on a farm there, and first came to England when she was thirty, in 1949. She brought with her the manuscript of her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, which was published in 1950 and reprinted many times. It enjoyed outstanding success in Britain, America and Europe. Doris Lessing was awarded the Somerset Maugham Award, the Austrian State prize for European Literature (1981), and the German Federal Republic Shakespeare Prize (1982).

Doris Lessing is an uncomfortable novelist. She was born in 1919, and 1922 was the peak of experimentalism, of stream of consciousness in literature. Thirty years later, she had already written her first novel. The traces of experiment are clearly to be seen. Dissecting characters with the eyes of the mind, as well as with those of the heart, is the vice bequeathed to her by Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

She is fully aware that the novel must return to the narrative, to a simple, obvious story, if it means to survive. She feels that the author gains nothing by withdrawing in the presence of his readers. She counteracts the former withdrawal of the author by boldly stepping ahead of all her characters and speaking in the first person. She is not in the least afraid of omniscience.

Yet, the age of fragmentariness has not died yet. The discontinuity of the mind and of the soul is a disease which all her characters have caught. Doris Lessing tries to patch up a narrative using bits of reality and imagination, combined into a piecemeal whole.

*The Golden Notebook* (1962), for instance, is a sequence of possible stories, sketched, then abruptly left, at last remembered faintly and never followed to a dead end. The main hero and narrator of the novel (although sometimes, in the *Yellow Notebook*, the narration switches to the third person – without fear of the ghosts of Dickens, Galsworthy and other previously much despised novelists) is Anna Wulf. She is a writer who has only written one novel and lives on the little money it still brings her. After reading the whole novel, which deals with her direct experiences, as well as with reworking and changing, prolonging or replacing these experiences into fiction, we realize that Anna Wulf is an inert character, who struggles hard to keep alive, within the limits of sanity.
Lessing is a keen, perceptive, painfully accurate observer of a particular kind of inertness: a laziness of the body to keep up with the mind. The eyes are usually the most expressive feature of her characters. Their bodies usually go astray. Because of that, because of the precipice between the alertness of the mind and the lagging behind, almost the wish to die of the body, Lessing's characters seem more often than not to sit on the furthest edge of sanity, their feet dangling into an abyss of non-being, an infinite, magic, all-reigning peace.

But peace (of mind or of body) is a non-existent realm, it is merely wishful-thinking, with Doris Lessing. Anna Wulf certainly never experiences it. She has long, torturing spells of unhappiness, she also experiences a longing for happiness which from time to time drives her to call out into wilderness, but when she could really be happy she is unable to enjoy it. Why is that? Because she is overburdened with the feeling of time, with the pang that the moment is short and going, going, gone.

Because of this permanent and breath-taking anxiety, Anna Wulf's life, as retold, or rather faithfully recorded, we should say (this is Lessing's chosen literary convention), by herself is a gasping, disconnected sequence of days, years, incidents and mainly regrets. I would not say

that Doris Lessing is a writer of uncommon, sickly sensibility. I would rather stress the depth of her peering into herself and others, and I should not add to it any tinge of compassion or self-pity on the part of the author at all.

The novel has six sections, and four of the sections are divided into the black, red, yellow and blue notebooks, according to the colour of the notebook Anna uses in recording what we are supposed to read at random, as it comes. The sense of disorder is not studied, as it was with her experimenting forerunners. She does not split her stories because she is unable to build them properly, like Virginia Woolf. She does not escape into word-dreaming, wasteful lyricism like James Joyce. Doris Lessing likes stories, she can easily make them up and she makes no bones about telling them. She does not choose her most beautiful words. On the contrary: she writes under the pressure of thought or of emotion, and is proud to use language bluntly, blind to adornments.

*The Golden Notebook* has five (out of six) sections entitled *Free Women*. Consequently, the language, the subject-matter, the denouement (hardly visible) are all free. All, I should say, except the women themselves. Their freedom is painful bondage. A bondage to loneliness, depression, disarray and, last but not least, to the rending feeling that they are growing old and no freedom in the world can bar that. Age is freedom, too, but you have to pretend you have chosen it. Because there is also the other freedom of rejecting old age, in the manner of W.B. Yeats. Anna Wulf bends under the burden of her age but will not complain. She defies herself.

The two free women in this novel are Anna and Molly. They are both divorced, have a child and do not remarry (Molly does so, or at least only announces her intention at the very end). The stories of their lives run naturally, apparently uncomplicated, though in fact they are a web of incidents when you try to retell them. The most important thing in their lives used to be their being members of the British communist party, but when the novel takes place Anna is no longer a member and both have grown disillusioned with it.

Disillusionment with communism is one of the few main themes of this novel. The characters learn slowly to overcome their naïvety. A teacher goes on a trip to the Soviet Union knowing all the history of the Soviet Communist Party by heart. He is utterly disappointed to find out that nobody there is interested in this knowledge of his, that people are almost indifferent if not averse to what he so fervently believes in.

The sternness of some British communists, their attempts to keep up with Marxism Leninism, to imitate Moscow and follow in the footsteps of

Stalinism are rendered with a strange mixture of humour and dismay. In America communists are black-listed; some of them even take refuge in England and become characters of Lessing's novel. They have only fear and powerlessness left, and no belief (if they ever believed, which we are not told). Americans are amazed at the British freedom (in the 1950s) to confess adhesion to the communist cause. They are even scared. When our English heroines (Anna especially) grow out of their communist beliefs, they are simply disappointed.

Anna reads newspapers fervently, and is driven mad by the violence and injustice on the political scenes. For a while she believed in the validity of socialism (when she was very young, in South Africa), then in the communist theories (when she came to England). Communism to her used to be like an open window. But the window is slowly closed and the blind is drawn. She withdraws from the lies she finds out, from the distorted beings who continue to fight for the frail credibility of the Soviet model. She notices how their natures are affected, how their words drift farther and farther apart from their deeds. Anna does not voice, but she feels the immense gap between communist theories and communist reality. In the end, she does not deny her socialist inclination, but she refuses to compel the reality of her life to be patterned on it.

The image of communism as seen by Doris Lessing is disheartening. The writer does not blame the communist countries. She shows their failure and the failure of a western communist party. She warns us in this way against the danger of huge, hidden lies which may rise to the status of laws, rules. People may (and do) get killed in the name of such lies. Lessing does not describe or envisage the fall of communism. She merely discredits it thoroughly.

The characters who choose communism in *The Golden Notebook* obviously do so honestly, not driven or paid by Soviet propaganda or Soviet spies. They believe they need and can build a better world. Only the problem is that people like Anna sooner or later realize that they have not chosen the right way. It is true, they also accept that there is no better world, but before that they give up all hope of reaching it by means of communism.

Doris Lessing's characters live in a western world, in a more or less flourishing economy, where they need not worry about food, clothes and other consumer's goods. Their approach to communism is consequently ideological, they need not undergo physical sacrifice in order to defend their ideas. This point becomes very clear gradually, as Ana drifts away from her communist friends, fits more and more closely in her capitalist surroundings, gives up working for free for the party, and, on the last page of the novel, as a final blow to everything she has been, she

announces she is going to take a job. She is also going to join the Labour Party and 'teach a night-class twice a week for delinquent kids.' (Should these children remind us of Burgess's Alex?)

Molly, who is herself going to get married and away from any preoccupation with socialism, remarks:

'So we're both going to be integrated with British life at its roots.'

There seems to be no other way. When Lessing finishes describing her characters' involvement with communism, there comes in a grim hopelessness. The world is as it is, and we had better not try to change it. Any change (in the direction of communism, at least) is a change for the worse.

Besides communism, another important theme of this novel is the relationship parents-children, especially in broken families. There is not one well-knit, happy family in sight, in the almost seven hundred pages of Doris Lessing's novel. Anna gets married to a man she does not love, has a daughter Janet and separates from him barely a year later. Molly also leaves her husband Richard when their son Tommy is still a little boy. The husbands are either dry or womanizers. Richard tries about half a dozen of his secretaries, first settles for Marion, has children by her, then finds a younger one, and so the story can continue forever. The ex-partners of a marriage either dislike or really hate each other. At least Richard still keeps a good eye on his son Tommy, while Anna's husband is nowhere mentioned.

The children who come out of these broken marriages are peculiar, more vulnerable and in disarray. Tommy attempts suicide before he turns twenty; he survives, but the bullet leaves him blind, and he ends up comforting his father's second wife Marion (an alcoholic) by apprenticing her to socialism. His evolution is grotesque and I have a faint idea that, by telling us that his own mother Molly, and Anna, can't understand him, Doris Lessing is also telling us that she herself is writing about something she cannot and will not bother to understand.

Lessing's characters are all tinged with such enigmas, at various points of their lives. At a certain moment they surrender, they shrug their shoulders giving up any attempt to understand, and all we are left with is this touching, powerless, extremely life-like image. The stream of consciousness writers also described the limited understanding of the human beings when they devised the technique of the point of view (see Henry James), but they were at the beginning, they were not able to do it as naturally and simply as Doris Lessing. *The Golden Notebook* is therefore a step ahead: it makes the theories of the experimentalists take

on the colour and texture of real life. While early 20th century writers were proud of having invented a new literary convention, Lessing tries to conceal conventions and pretends she is using none. Her simplicity is artful, nevertheless. She can't forget what her predecessors have taught her. All that she can do is to place these teachings at the back of her mind, and give more of herself in one of her novels than Virginia Woolf did in her whole work. There is a diary- like quality in her novels, which is both her convention and the innovation of Desperado fiction. The writer returns from the gulfs of the subconscious and proclaims: I am here, I am true, I am myself.

The children themselves are not well delineated as characters. What is really interesting is their mothers' attitude or rather relationship with them. Molly is in a state of continuous puzzlement and irritation versus her son. Her ex- husband Richard is not far from that, either. Tommy drifts apart from them, following a way neither his parents nor the readers can understand. Dissatisfied, presumably, with his own life, he tries to put an end to it. As he fails to do that, he finds another type of mortification: he continues his mother's former socialistic beliefs, which, everybody knows by now, were a mistake. He wilfully repeats his mother's failure, though he does not embrace communism. He is on the look- out for ideas that will change the world. Molly tells us:

'Well. Tommy's all set to follow in Richard's footsteps. He's already installed, and taking things over (...). Tommy is very definite about not being all reactionary and unprogressive like Richard. He says the world is going to be changed by the efforts of progressive big business and putting pressure on Government departments.'

To which Anna remarks: 'Well he, at least, is in tune with our times.'

On the other hand, Anna's daughter, Janet, is carefully trying to avoid her mother's mistakes. She has grown up in an atmosphere of insecurity, without a permanent father, but besieged by jealousy when her mother had a love affair, a man who kept them company in the house. Anna feels an immense tenderness for her child. The wrong thing about their relationship is that, having no male support in her life, Anna tends to rely on Janet. But Janet is not willing to give much, she is only a child, she needs to take. So she decides she wants to go to a boarding school, away from her mother's daily care (and demands), away from home. Anna finds herself alone and loveless.
Which brings us to the most important theme of this novel with discontinuous characters and intricate flow of incidents, all mixed up between reality and imagination, until you hardly know which is which, and take both for granted. That major theme is love.

In Doris Lessing's books love is a lonely illusion. Anna analyses the feeling by dissecting herself. We get to know exactly what she feels: the strong bond she experiences, the momentary happiness, the gradual, painful loss of the loved being, the solitude haunted by the deserter's absence, the desert of loveless days and nights, the impossibility to reiterate the miracle of love. What we never know – and here the author's silence is deliberate – is the man's inner being, the echo this love actually has in his soul.

Anna is a suspicious, mistrustful, proud lover, painfully aware of the tiniest sign of boredom or indifference towards her. Her exasperating sensibility makes her complicated to share a life with. She falls in love with Michael, who, five years later, leaves her. He was also married to begin with. We know absolutely nothing about the man. The author endlessly describes her own reactions, her agony over the loss of Michael, but she refuses to intrude upon the man's privacy and suggest him as a possible character.

Lessing deals with love in the form of a woman's private recordings of emotion. Like a hunted animal, she withdraws to lick her wounded sensibility in loneliness. She does not claim to be omniscient, although in her notebook on imaginary incidents she uses the third person narrative. Here we can see the strong influence of the stream of consciousness novel, of the point of view technique, of Joyce's and Virginia Woolf's endless interior monologues. Lessing is shy of exposing anybody else's emotions except her own. This is obvious in the reticence of all the other characters to confess. The only true, almost fanatically honest confessions are the narrator's. Mostly about herself.

Doris Lessing is a writer who does not spare herself in any way. First of all she passively allows herself to reach the utmost limit, the point where her suffering is unbearably intense, paralysing her body, shattering her mind. She does not defend herself, not even when she knows it is too late anyway. She allows the man to overwhelm and dominate her, she reaches out handing him everything she can give, and, at last, she is left empty-handed, crushed by maiming loneliness. She needs this suffering carried to its utmost. She needs to know the pain of the limit. She must find out how far she can go. A morbid curiosity prompts her to be 'free' to the bitter end. Free to experience and free to express. Because, on the other hand, once the experience is over, she does not spare herself verbally, either. She describes everything, but absolutely everything she remembers or she has understood. There is no restraint and no shame. She reveals both body and soul. She does not feel any word is forbidden to her. She was, or compelled herself to be free to live, after which she is just free to record.

It might be interesting to note that Anna's love life is analysed in far more detail than her political misbelief. She talks ironically about her early commitment to socialism, but she is in dead earnest when she keeps remembering Michael's embrace or her pain at being bereft. It seems that from the very beginning Anna found her own emotions far more important than her political choice.

The language Lessing uses to portray Anna's love life is almost psychoanalytically free. There even is a character, an elderly woman, who uses in the novel psychoanalysis as a therapy. She tries to make Anna write again, to cure her from her silence. Now, Anna's silence seems to the reader to be a false one, just one more way to add something to the suffering. As a matter of fact, Anna keeps weaving life into literature in her four notebooks. The literature she offers us resorts to the convention of chaos, carelessness, inability to conclude one particular incident before touching upon another. This is the inconclusiveness of real life, in fact, and we can conclude from here that, by making use of this particular device, Doris Lessing is trying to infuse more life into her book, to make it fresher than the old conventions, and therefore more credible.

I should say the writer succeeds. *The Golden Notebook* is a gasping record of unfulfilled love, of piecemeal happiness. At the same time, it is piecemeal literature. There is no attempt at (and, we are led to feel, no need of) a coherent narrative. Experiences come and go. Nothing is premeditated by the author's will to narrate. At the end of the novel, the reader has learnt the lesson of hazard. Our understanding fails to see our experience as a coherent whole, so we accept this fitful novel as a proof that we are all the same and literature can do no better than record our disarray.

If we try to piece them together, the incidents in this book are few and unrelated. They are mere pretexts for the analysis of Anna's soul. There is Molly, for instance, an actress who once divorced Richard. She has various affairs, she goes abroad for a year, she slowly forgets about communism (the belief of her youth). We do not really get to know much about her, although she is Anna's best friend and the second free woman of the novel. Anna feels deep affection for her. They even share a house for a while, when Anna's daughter is very small. Molly provides an interesting contrast to Anna. She is open, more carefree, rather an extrovert, while Anna is closed tight, worries to death and magnifies everything deep inside her.

No character can match Anna's intensity and lack of humour, which is indispensable, I think, to the deep probing of her sensibility. All the other characters people Anna's world like puppets against a vague background. Precision only belongs to the repeated incisions which Anna's soul

undergoes. She parts with Michael, she parts with communism, she even gradually parts from Molly, she seems to be in the process of altogether parting with life. She does not hide anything. She blames herself ruthlessly, for not being attractive enough, energetic enough, intelligent enough, for any fault she can find with herself.

As a matter of fact, Anna is a remarkable woman whom Doris Lessing denies a happy end. The lesson of this novel is 'Do not expect any end at all.' Indeed, as far as the author is concerned, the novel could have gone on for ever. It ended accidentally. It ended because the notebooks had no more blank pages, maybe. The Golden Notebook, destined to a coherent, amazing, ravishing story, is forgotten. Only the title of the novel preserves it, as a memento that literature no longer is what it used to be. It still means gift, the gift of phrase, of atmosphere, of retelling a story, but it is mainly enveloped in a confusing deconstruction. And this deconstruction is no longer a trick. With Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the incidents could in the end be rearranged, after painful figuring out, into a coherent plot. With Doris Lessing there is nothing to arrange. The point of the novel is to go deeper than the plot, into the texture of the soul. Atoms of feeling migrate according to unknown laws. Sensibility is a realm which our understanding fails to reach.

Consequently, Doris Lessing creates her own reader, who is different from the reader of her predecessors. She needs a disabused reader, who can take anything, who never complains yet never hopes, who, in short, can keep up with her. A reader for whom no surprise can ever rise again out of a literary trick. A reader so used to literature that he is ready to mistake it for life. Not life assimilated to the book, but the book re-integrated into life. This is, in the end, Lessing's lesson: read as if you were living. Literature is not the faithful mirror of life. It *is* life.

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In 1985 Doris Lessing published *The Good Terrorist*, a novel very much unlike *The Golden Notebook* emotionally, but very interesting for people who have lived under a communist regime. The tone and the approach to people here are totally different from those in *The Golden Notebook*. Vulnerability is ignored. *The Good Terrorist* is an analysis of political immaturity, of a prolonged childhood of the mind. Hideous ideas rise out of apparently harmless, naive heads. The atomic bomb itself could be invented, even dropped without the least compunction, by the dehumanized heroes of this book. They slowly slip into mere shapes of people, and all this is due to their attachment to Marxism and ultimately to terrorism.

Normal life is incompatible with the beliefs of the heroes in this book, who are all set on changing their society into something unknown to them, out of an impulse they do not bother to analyse. Unconscious violence, finding good soil in communist theory. This is where the main theme comes in. Its perfect embodiment is Alice, the main heroine of the book. Born in a well-off family, she seems to have grown up in an emotional vacuum. Her father divorces her mother at a certain point, marries another woman and has more children. Alice stays with her mother, she meets Jasper, a homosexual whom she falls in love with, in a platonic, disembodied way. Jasper introduces her to his group of communist-minded friends, who all address one another as 'comrade' when they hold a meeting, just as it happened in the meetings described by *The Golden Notebook*. The plot is rather uncomplicated, and to those who are not really interested in the effect of communism (even from afar) on people, it may even seem irrelevant. Alice starts resenting what she calls the 'bourgeois' life her parents are leading. She lives with Jasper and her mother for a while, in the large flat her father left them. Whenever Jasper happens to squeeze a certain amount of money from her, he vanishes for a few days, has some homosexual affairs, after which he tamely returns to Alice. Jasper depends on Alice materially. Alice depends on him emotionally. They have no physical life together. He cannot bear her to touch him. He is seen by Lessing as an evil imp, bent on mischief. He enjoys marching in any demonstration and doing all sorts of things against the so called capitalist order. Unconsciously, good Alice (the former good child and dutiful daughter) responds to Jasper's hatred of all order whatever, and becomes the 'good terrorist.' She moves with him and some of his friends to a squat, that is they find a house which is no longer inhabited, and is going to be pulled down. With an extraordinary practical sense, she repairs and sets everything in order, using stolen things, discarded furniture, stolen money. She shrinks from nothing. She even steals from her mother and her father. At first she is only practically involved in this nomad, common life, which is in fact meant to hide the barren souls of all those who share it. Gradually, as she becomes more and more efficient, she finds herself immersed in activities organized by Irish terrorists (IRA). She participates in placing bombs. One of the group is even killed. She begins as a good companion to Jasper and ends as a real terrorist, who kills and enjoys killing in cold blood.

*The Good Terrorist* is an ironical, even sarcastic novel. It reveals the absurdity of lives dedicated to bringing about a communist way of life. When the Marxist characters talk about their cause, their hatred of bourgeois society (which, by the way, supports them as unemployed), we recognize with a shudder the lies, the intransigent (as a matter of fact criminal) attitude of party activists. The heroes in the novel, gathered in their squat, are an island of communism within British society.

Everything they do, from scribbling on the walls to killing innocent people, is absurd, meaningless. When they talk about communism they hardly know what they are talking about. They all have in common a certain inadaptability to normal life. Alice is in her late thirties, childless, loveless, without any memories of her own. Jasper is a thoughtless, whimsical homosexual, whom she gradually starts to resent. Two more women are lesbian, one being a neurotic, who dies killed by her own bomb.

There is not a single normal human being in this book. Those who join the squat temporarily are regarded with suspicion and disdain, and the author refuses to describe them otherwise than seen by the terrorists. The implication is that whatever is touched by communist ideas becomes dry, barren, lifeless. Meaninglessness and futility reign. Everything Alice does to make the squat inhabitable, to feed its inhabitants, is just wasted effort. She acquires some significance for her fellows when she at last joins their hatred of all established values.

Now, hatred is actually what this whole book is about. There is hatred at all levels: private, social, political. There is even hatred in the way the author herself handles her words. She is coldly detached and hates her characters, outlining them in bitterly unforgiving statements. No compassion, no sympathy overflow. Just perceptive, sharp understanding of their darkest psychical recesses. No refuge from hatred is allowed to the reader, either.

Alice begins by learning to hate her mother, her father, her previous way of life, her education, her profession (which she never practised). She extends her hatred to the whole system, which provides her allowance, to the people who have been kind to her, to everyone she talks to. In the end, she comes to hate Jasper himself, the others in the group, everything except her own futile life. She decides to move to another squat, with another group, and we feel that the circle of hatred will be renewed.

The idea of hatred raises the question of its sources. It becomes more and more obvious as we go along that hatred is bred by the communist ideas the terrorists try to live by. These young (some of them no longer young) people are totally deformed by the lies they force themselves to believe, by the violence hidden in the apparently noble idea that they are fighting for a better world. We witness their attempt at appropriating a language which those trapped in communist regimes have been forced to hear and use for many decades, and we can hardly believe it can possibly be true. Doris Lessing herself makes her characters turn into freaks. Her novel, at least to someone who has experienced life under a communist regime, is a nightmare.

When Doris Lessing wrote *The Good Terrorist,* the fall of communism was not a fact yet. The author's feeling that putting Marxism into practice is the worst thing that can happen to human beings is perfectly convincing. All the characters are at last estranged from everything, from their aim and their own lives as well. They are dangerous atoms of violence, hatred, distorted emotions and thoughts. They are thoroughly dehumanized.

This book should, of course, arouse in our minds one important question: how far have those who have actually lived under a communist regime been distorted, alienated, dehumanized? I do not think Doris Lessing can have known. She only meant to warn the non-communist world against the hidden hideousness of totalitarian regimes. Unlike *The Golden Notebook*, a novel whose characters engaged our emotions, *The Good Terrorist* is meant to repel, shake the reader and make him open his eyes.

Writing first an emotional book, then a rather political one, Lessing tries her hand at two kinds of texts: loving and loveless. Both approaches contain the same warning: stay away from utopias. Communism being the worst of them.

Should we consider Lessing a political writer? Should we look upon her as an analyst of the mind, of the soul? Anna does not find real love, Alice can't fall in love. Both are failures, each in her own way. I should conclude by saying that Doris Lessing – at least in the two novels under discussion – is a recorder of human failure. She cannot and will not separate the political from the private side of life. Her characters must constantly undergo a private ordeal, which is minutely analysed and which ultimately has political reasons. On the whole, Doris Lessing writes a primary on how to ruin a life by mistaking the worst kind of society for the best. She warns against communism, and I feel she can best be understood by those who have lived through that nightmare and grope their way out of it.

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*The Fifth Child* is, technically speaking, quite different from the previous novels. It is a short, coherent, yet utterly puzzling story. Harriet and David Lovatt meet at a party. They are two solitary, shy, introspective people and it is love at first sight. No time is lost. They buy a huge house, have four children in a row and invite the whole family over, for fabulous, 19th century holidays. Their home is warm, welcoming, appealing in the old fashioned way. It seems to go back into history.
Paradoxically, a fifth child is born to these tame parents, a child who makes them plunge both into primitivism and into the wildest contemporaneity of the ruthless civilized society at the same time. The fifth child is Ben, explained by doctors as a 'hyper-active' being (from

embryo to adolescence), and by his mother as a return of ‘goblins.’ The child exhausts Harriet until it is born. It comes into the world much larger than usual, and starts crawling right away. Everything Ben does is amazingly forceful. He has no age, physically speaking, but is quite primitive as far as his mind is concerned.

The fifth child scares the whole family away, his sisters and brothers included. Everything Harriet and David had dreamt of and had actually achieved is gone. They are left alone with Ben, in comparison with whom even a cousin with Down syndrome is a sweet angel. Ben kills the cats and dogs in the house with his bare hands, though he never admits to that in any way. After several years, Harriet allows herself to be persuaded to send Ben to a special home for abnormal children, where he might slowly but surely die. A few months later, she feels she has to see him, finds him in a straight jacket, in dire misery, and brings him back. The Lovatts’ life becomes a nightmare.

Everybody scatters away. The house is all empty. Ben goes to school but can learn nothing. He hangs about with a group of wild teen-agers, boys on motorcycles, who take him to be their mascot. Eventually, Ben grows and makes his own gang, whose leader he becomes. He speaks in broken, telegraphic English, but is respected. He hides in caves and other unknown places with his delinquent friends. They rob whatever they can. They kill. Harriet knows, and her inner terror is infinite. She understands the root of contemporary violence: it must be the ‘goblin children.’ *The Fifth Child* is a remarkably simple, yet sophisticated, philosophical answer to the same question raised by Anthony Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange*. Why do children, teen-agers kill and rob? Why the ruthlessness of innocence? Because, Lessing insinuates, we breed it inadvertently. Too much love and happiness may slip into the dark ages, and an unknown genre comes up. Whatever we do not want to see, whatever we fear and reject is all inside us. A mere incident can trigger it off, and another Ben may be born. Beware of the comfort of civilization, therefore. The dystopia is always inside ourselves. This is the true message of Doris Lessing, the uncomfortable novelist.

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*Martha Quest* (1952) is the first novel of the cycle *Children of Violence*. It announces Lessing’s major themes, all crammed in a pseudo-realistic text, heavily influenced by the stream of consciousness. It is hard to summarize this plotless novel, which however teems with incidents, like most Desperado novels. It is equally hard to forget this chronological maze, this apparently straightforward tale strewn with the most indirect approaches that can be devised. At first sight, Doris Lessing is a tame story-teller that leaves a bitter taste on your palate, an uncomfortable

anxiety at the back of your mind. On second thought, she is the hidden dynamite, the detonation of common sense in search of an enraged–Desperado–author. An author impatient with all conventions, yet weary with endless attempts. A mixed mood, of exploration and familiarity. The question mark among the literary Desperadoes at the turn of the millennium.

Martha Quest awakens to life in 'a British Colony in the centre of the great African continent,' and gets married at eighteen, in 1939. Everything is recorded faithfully, from her life on her parents' poor farm to the secretarial job she takes in the capital of the colony, upon finishing school. Things keep happening at random, out of the blue. A true Desperado, Lessing refuses to plan a plot. Details heap up, but few are followed into ulterior motives, suspense or at least coherent characters. The main state – of everything and everyone – is that of confusion. Faced with characters who brim over with emotion but deny their own sentimentality, who are very much in earnest but can only react with irony or in self-hatred, the reader is confused.

Nothing makes sense, yet everything is a hundred percent true, undeniable: we are trapped in verisimilitude. At times, we even try to help the writer, to step in and put some order in this unruly narrative, which is so clear, yet so inaccessible. The idea of Magritte's painting of a pipe comes to mind. In large letters, in the vicinity of the pipe, the painter wrote: 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe.' Lessing is sending out the same message: Do not expect literature, this is not a novel, everything is a failure, and this is the fun of life.

The story begins on the farm of the Quests, in South Africa, when Martha is fifteen. No lyrical or memorable quotation ever comes our way. Everything must stay – and be narrated – as commonplace as it can get. The obvious message of this book, as well as of others by Doris Lessing, (*The Golden Notebook*, *The Good Terrorist*, *The Fifth Child*), is that any family is a failure. Martha is 'resentful of her surroundings and her parents.' At the end of the book, she is actually getting married to a man she resents. We could safely say she even resents herself. She experiences, at fifteen, 'that misery peculiar to the young,' but she is not out of her misery at eighteen, when she marries Douglas out of an unexplained and unexplainable impulse or web of circumstances. She 'was tormented, and there was no escaping it.' In pure and genuine Doris Lessing tradition.

Looking around, in between the mass of books she swallows, Martha decides 'she would not be bitter and nagging and dissatisfied, like her mother.' Three years later, on the verge of her own wedding, she is just like that. But before going to town, at sixteen, she is 'idle and bored,' and

she is not up to much later on, either. Her intellect, her career do not seem to matter to her. A life without a sense of plan. She is too confused to allow herself to be guided by any kind of ambition. Lessing predetermines her to lose her way, and Martha does so conscientiously, to the bitter end, to the furthest consequences, which implies that, short of a miracle, she may cease to exist.

World War I ruined the health of Martha's father, and lingers in his endlessly repeated stories, which nobody listens to. World War II is close by. The question of antisemitism and the danger of communism are briefly mentioned. A young man dies fighting in Spain. The Jews and the Reds are rejected alike. Martha has a liking for both. She shows common features with Anna Wulf in *The Golden Notebook*. Socialism sounds interesting to her. She wants equal rights for the natives, but there is no hint at real political thought in this book. Just understatements, sketches of attitudes, broken opinions, suggestive of a more humane approach.

Part one ends with the last moment of Martha's hated adolescence. She has decided to leave the farm and go to town:

'And a door had closed, finally; and behind it was the farm, and the girl who had been created by it. It no longer concerned her. Finished. She could forget it.

She was a new person, and an extraordinary, magnificent, an altogether *new* life was beginning.'

Part two changes the background, enhances the exhilaration, but does not remove the deep-seated menace: life is ageing, and ageing is bitter. The frenzy of youth does not save Martha. Marriage will not save her, either. The author herself wants her lost. Lost in inner violence. The uncomfortable character of an uncomfortable writer.

Eighteen-year-old Martha is 'fierce and unhappy and determined.' She meditates upon her 'lack of feeling' and her 'calm fury.' The third part brings about Christmas, sex and, naturally for Lessing, 'disappointment.' As Martha muses, 'she was having her first love-affair with a man she was not the slightest in love with.' A genuine literary Desperado herself, Lessing rejects the stream of consciousness violently. Here she refuses to unveil minds and offer us her characters' heads upon a platter.

Part four still allows Martha to experience 'violent anger, a feeling of being caged and imprisoned.' It is aroused by her mother's letter, but in fact it extends to her whole existence. She grows dimly aware of the coming war, 'there, before her, like a dark chasm in her spirit.' She is 'depressed,' 'apprehensive,' confused to the point of denying herself. Her

experiences, her whole life are transitory. ‘Marry in haste, repent in leisure,’ Mr. Maynard thinks, after pronouncing Martha and Douglas husband and wife. The novel has no end, as it had no beginning. It narrates continuously, yet we find it hard to retell what happens. Doris Lessing is discovering here the Desperado trick of the secretly vanishing plot. A swarm of incidents do not make a story. Everything happens, yet the plot is void. Lessing has nothing to narrate, yet narrates it continuously. Out of fear. The fear to pry into hurting sensibilities and rent sentimentality. The fear of feeling. The shell of the soul will not open. Read by, the novel says. All life is a journey, and literature an imperfect window. Behind which Doris Lessing will not wave to us.

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*Under My Skin* (1994) is Doris Lessing’s ‘Volume One of My Biography, to 1949.’ The shock is shattering. The novelist turns out to be everything we – no, I – would not have wanted her to be. I read the book, I lost a friend. Doris Lessing is everything but friendly in her inner world. Anything but likeable. Her loveless heroes and solitude- crazed women are no accident. They are her all right.

An informational novelist (as she calls her merging writer’s self), she writes an autobiography made up of incidents after incidents. The same as in her novels, we rarely find a quotable, whether personal, wise, lyrical or whatever, sentence. Preeminently uncomfortable to read, Lessing reveals her secret here. Her literature is unwelcoming because she herself is just like that. Preeminently to be judged. Forgiven? Let those who have not lived under communism forgive her.

This autobiography is more of a novel, actually. Here and there we recognize something already seen, such as:

‘...my mother...did not love her parents. My father did not love his.’

Strange and unbearably uncomfortable, Lessing does not love hers, either. Should we then wonder why her heroes at best ignore their parents, if they do not hate them and spite them? A violent solitude (*Children of Violence* is not a title chosen at random) poisons all her narratives. The writer herself steps to the front, cruelly alone, and tells us bare stories. No intriguing hybridization, no softening lyricism, no soothing sympathy. Lessing’s narratives are heartless bodies which survive mechanically, by incident, by accident. She writes during the night of the soul.

Born in Persia, on 22nd October 1919, when ‘half of Europe was a graveyard,’ she explains:

‘I used to feel there was something like a dark grey cloud, like poison gas, over my early childhood.’

The question arises automatically: only her childhood? Or more? Her dryness is quite singular at this time of effusions and authorial madness. She states herself,

‘I feel every year more of an anachronism.’

She tries hard to take the reader into her confidence, and ‘write this book honestly.’ Maybe she tries too hard. Maybe we are better off not knowing more than just her novels.

She grows up in a ‘poor family’ in Southern Rhodesia, and leaves it in 1949. Her memories are as precise as a Japanese drawing, and as neutre as those. Is she incapable of showing emotion, is she devoid of sympathy, or is it just her (only) mask? *The Fifth Child* is present in a general statement:

‘ Forgive me for the banality of this reflection, but there is something very wrong with the human race.’

For a while, in early childhood, Doris Lessing went to boarding school at a Catholic convent, and there she discovered she did not fit in with the other girls because she was ‘too old for my age.’ A novelist born old, who never grows up or feels young? Her heroes are ageless, why should she not be the same?

She remembers:

‘At the Convent I was learning the skills of the survivor, of loneliness, of exile.’

All her books are an exile from joy and lyricism. The opposite pole from hybridization, Doris Lessing is a Desperado of the pure narrative. She feels the incidents should not be mixed with anything, maybe not even with the words (the huge adventure of Experimenters) if that feat were possible.

All her childhood she fought helplessness (her parents’, her own), and built a nightmare out of it. She swore to herself:

‘I was rejecting the human condition, which is to be trapped by circumstances.’

She does not say whether she thinks she has succeeded. Her books are all traps. Her heroes are trapped. The readers feel in the grip of emptiness. The author tells us the story in the third person, she talks to us, she informs us, yet – where is she? So that we can blame her, frown at her and say, as she did: I hate it. 'I will not.' I have had enough.

Doris Lessing read voraciously as a child, but did not go much to school, or at least not till she was thirty, when this volume stops. In her own words, she was

'A drop- out, long before the term had been invented.'

Mother of three (two sons and a daughter), she has next to nothing to say about her children, about her relationship with them. Actually, she left the first two with their father, while she married a communist (Gottfried Lessing), and became a communist herself. Was she too busy planning the future of the world? Too busy to be part of her own life and her children's? Her reason, in her words:

'I became a Communist because of the spirit of the times.'

She went to meetings, put in a lot of work. The second man she married turned out – possibly – to have been a KGB agent, who was actually killed in 1979, after he had climbed up and down the political ladder in East Germany. She left two small children, and

'I explained to them that they would understand later why I had left. I was going to change this ugly world, they would live in a beautiful and perfect world where there would be no race hatred, injustice, and so forth.'

Which makes her doubly guilty: as a mother, and as a woman with the wrong political beliefs. People like her should have been forced to live in that world of their dreams, they should have been fed communism forcibly.

Doris Lessing summarizes her political involvement thus:

'I was a Communist for perhaps two years, in Southern Rhodesia, from 1942 to 1944 (...). I joined the Communist Party in, I think, 1951, in London, for reasons which I still don't fully understand, but did not go to meetings and was already a 'dissident,' though the word had not been invented.'

A mistake admitted, but which will not go away, however hard the writer may try to scrub it out. A repellent choice. Just like Alice's, in *The Good*

*Terrorist*, only without the excuse of craziness. They had 'Political Education classes' in Rhodesia at least twice a week. She was shocked by the communist use of language. She claims it is all gone, yet she remembers the words:

'We believed in the infinite perfectibility of humankind, the imminent triumph of kindness and love – our myth was the same as the religious one...'

How can we take her word for granted when she says she was not really committed? Or that she got married twice, knowing both men were not suitable husbands for her? She once dreamt of a pink future (which turned out to be a nightmare, though not to her), now she sees doom everywhere:

'Now a different and deadly disbelief afflicts us: we are not intelligent enough – the human race – to make a new world or even prevent the old one from being destroyed.'

This autobiography suddenly makes her untrustworthy. Her word is to be doubted for ever and ever. No wonder she wrote, 'fiction makes a better job of the truth.' Describing her first thirty years, Doris Lessing poured herself into fiction and became just as insubstantial and insufficient. She did not write a real autobiography, but a fictionalized version of who she might have been. The question compulsively arises: Does she really know who she actually is?

She keeps saying she has always been very good at waiting. That doors have been shutting behind her all her life. That she was born 'out of my own self.' Now, this is a feeling to remember. Never live your own life, never know what it is like to be yourself. Reading must have made up for missed education, experience provided Lessing with enough to say. It was she herself who was absent most of the time. Everything else was there. The novels came out 'informative,' after one another. A long fictional travel with no affectionate stop. A brazenly straightforward, harsh personality that floats on top and can catch at nothing. Doris Lessing's autobiography leaves behind a sense of pity, of disrespect and superficiality. A lost novel, a losing battle against an unknown truth. This is what we actually learn for sure: Here is a novelist who cannot speak for herself because she has not yet found out who she is. Too bad.

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*The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) is an endless novel that half foretells (quite accurately, in part), half imagines. Violence seems to be a favourite theme with Doris Lessing. We have here the violence of humans reversing

to primitivity and cannibalism. The book slightly reminds us of *The Good Terrorist* (with its squatters) and *The Fifth Child* (as another parable or explanation for teen-age criminality). The place of the plot is England, yet nowhere (a dystopia, again), the time is not far away in the future (a generation later, most likely). A huge migration is on its way. Civilization is falling apart, people leave everything (homes, appliances, jobs) in order to flee the gangs of teenagers that are no longer human, basically.

The survivor is a woman, who speaks in the first person, and witnesses the constant decay calmly, unprotestingly, helplessly. 'Everything had broken down,' she explains, so she sees no point in opposing or even denying the inevitable. Doris Lessing confessed in an interview that, at first, she meant this book as an autobiography. The predicting side became stronger, however, and much more appealing. The autobiography was pushed into a kind of half-reality, a repeated escape beyond a dissolving wall, which reveals scenes from the author's childhood and adolescence. In the novel, they are attributed to Emily Cartright, a twelve-year-old girl, entrusted to the 'survivor.' The girl grows, and eventually leaves with a gang.

All characters are superficially sketched, and the plot is a sequence of days and details. Lessing generally builds bushy books, which lead you across mazes of incidents and offer no major lead. This is her Desperado streak. She changes fiction by mixing it with the diary, with a matter-of-fact, chronological rendering of most private experiences. Doris Lessing's greatest art is distance, from herself, her characters, or any kind of exciting plot. Distance from traditional sentimentality, first of all.

The novel envisages huge devastations started by 'hooligans,' which lead to 'mass deaths of hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people.' Refugees come and either stay, or eventually join the dehumanization that is spreading fast. The survivor muses:
'We can get used to anything at all; this is a commonplace, of course, but perhaps you have to live through such a time to see how horribly true it is.'

Emily is a refugee child, with a yellow-eyed pet which is half-cat, half-dog, and which, for a while, prevents her from losing her humanity. Because she loves Hugo, her pet, so passionately, Emily postpones joining a gang, and when she does leave the book, Hugo saves her again. The survivor (whose name we never learn) sees her vanishing into another universe, a beautiful 'transmuted' young woman, whose hand rests on the neck of a Hugo who is now a 'splendid animal, handsome, all kindly dignity and command.' They walk behind 'One' who goes ahead, showing them the way 'out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether.' They pass 'that other threshold,' followed by Gerald

and his gang of formerly barbaric toddlers, being transformed into another existence, as ‘the last walls dissolved.’

Before this vision of escape, though, Hugo is ‘an ugly beast,’ carefully protected by Emily from the teen-agers who would like to kill and eat him. As for Emily,

‘I did not ask. I never, not once, asked her a question. And she did not volunteer information.’

Typical for Doris Lessing. Her imagination finds it repulsive to probe inside (we might wonder how she managed to write *The Golden Notebook*, in this case). Her heroes are self-contained and hate sharing. We are kept in front of the gate, simply denied the key.

The only likeable hero of this novel is the ‘future,’ which this book both kills and revigorates. A dystopia with a happy ending? Imagination can associate the most dissimilar elements:

‘And so we talked about the farm, our future, hers and mine, like a fable where we would walk hand in hand, together. And then ‘life’ would begin, life as it ought to be, as it had been promised – by whom? when? where? – to everybody on this earth.’

Emily is brought to the survivor by a stranger, and left in her care. With Lessing’s already well known inability to sympathize with maternity, the plot outlines the closest image possible – in this author’s terms – of a mother–daughter relationship. It is resigned, cold, loose. Just like Anna Wulf and her daughter, in *The Golden Notebook*. A dryness that is just one more surprise, coming from a woman with three children, about whom she does not talk much. This particular book is dedicated to her son, Peter, though.

There is a faint similarity with William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Emily says about the gang one day:

‘Apart from eating people, they are very nice, I think.’

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* comes to mind as well. While all those horrors take place outside, the survivor keeps moving ‘through the tall quiet walls,’ and finds out a lot about Emily’s childhood and adolescence, which are in fact Lessing’s own, as she had first planned the novel. The solitude, the lack of affection, the younger brother, the emptiness. No wonder the writer hardly has any warmth to share with her readers, no wonder she is reticent and dry. Would a formal education have helped? I am tempted to say it would have organized her thoughts, it would have

made a difference in the quality of her meditation, the breadth of her vision. Intuition alone does not always do the trick for a writer who produces many volumes, in the hope that he or she has something to say.

The feeling Doris Lessing creates is that her books are invaded by weeds. This is her Desperado feature. She will not filter everything, she writes as she breathes, easily, indiscriminately. Which can prove trying to her readers at times, or simply unrewarding.

Lessing's imagination is conscientious, but not rich enough. She strikes gold with one idea, then stuffs the galleries with words, gestures, insignificant incidents which add up to nothing, are easily forgotten. In this book (before *The Fifth Child* or *The Good Terrorist*) she imagines a new society, after the death of the present one. The new social unit is the gang (like a tribe), whose members start with the vague feeling of 'inner violence,' and end up devouring one another, forgetting all about their humanity:

'By the end of that summer there were hundreds of people of all ages on the pavement.'

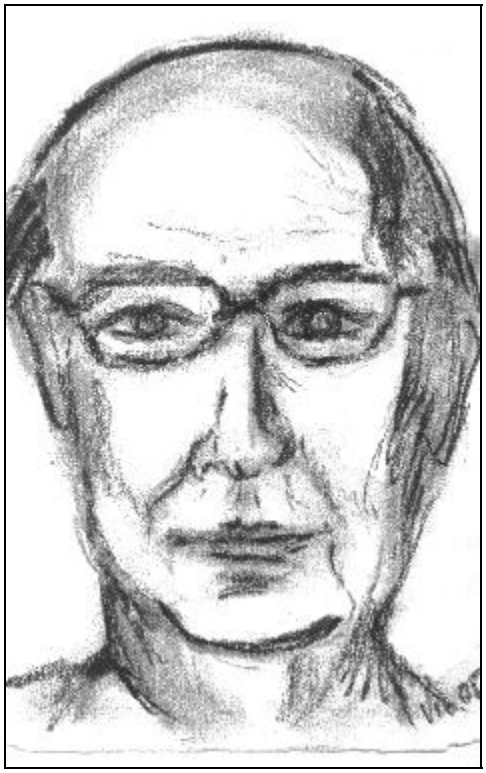
Almost everybody agrees to leaving the city that is now deprived of electricity, food, water, appliances, even air. It sounds like leaving the earth when it has self-destructed.

Towards the end of the novel, a new gang turns up, foretelling (in 1974) something similar to what is happening today in Romania to some 'children of the street.' Very small 'kids' (between three and ten) live in the Underground, like 'moles or rats in the earth,' and the only thing they are good at is surviving. Nobody knows how they have reached their present state: abandoned, runaways, with no knowledge of family life and no human reflexes whatever. No loyalty, no friendship, no memory: 'wicked' creatures, who inspire sheer panic. Gerald, whom Emily fell in love with, becomes their leader, and they all vanish into the inconceivable world beyond. Gerald is twenty, but these kids have outgrown him in their descent to sub-humanity:

'In every way they were worse than animals, and worse than men.'

This 'band of infant savages' associates angelic childhood with the most terrible horror of death. They kill everything. Everyone. Civilization is stifled by the pre-human. Doris Lessing descends to the hell of her own imagination.It may seem amazing how a book devoid of plot, devoid of characters, attracts readers. This is by no means pleasurable reading. It is repelling, tense, frustrating. To say that Doris Lessing is an uncomfortable novelist is mild. She actually bullies her readers into an

unrewarding text. We leave her world with a feeling of being poorer. She demands too much from us, and offers precious little in exchange. It is her way of being a Desperado: she manages to turn us into a perpetuum mobile. We are first readers, then writers (since she withdraws so abruptly), and puzzled critics at last. Do we like Doris Lessing? It is irrelevant. And, anyway, at this point, it is everyone for himself.



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## A Restlessly Reticent Poet – Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

Born in 1922, the year when the two stream of consciousness master works (Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) were simultaneously published, after long years of elaborate shaping and reshaping, Philip Larkin is a typical representative of Desperado literature, the timorous literature of 'everything has been tried, abandon all hopes of originality all ye who enter here.' Which does not mean that Philip Larkin actually gave up striving for originality. Quite the reverse, he was even prouder of his novelty (peculiarity, at least) than his predecessors. Like all his Desperado fellows, he felt he was an independent and unique world, a poet who would not imitate and would never be imitated. Yet, he cherished his uniqueness in secret.

Unlike Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Alan Brownjohn and many others, Philip Larkin was a shy poetic voice, whose imaginings often ran wild, but whose words took a long time in ripening and acquiring poise. He wrote poetry, fiction and essays. He only published four volumes of verse. A

1965 *Introduction* to *The North Ship* (the revised edition) discloses the particular irony that tinges Philip Larkin's reticence versus words. More often than not, this preeminently sensitive poet is unwilling to commit himself to literature. An interview with Peter Orr reveals him again as a high-strung poet, whose fondness of silence bursts from time to time, and then it gives birth to poems which are a constant source of amazement to the poet himself.

Let us remember T.S. Eliot's feigned sense of disbelief and verbal insecurity, as compared to W.B. Yeats' perfectly self-assured, overtly architectural poetry. Yeats was proud he was able to plan, to build a poem. He did not hide the efforts his mind made to arrest the right word, compose the music and engrave the thoughtful kernel. In early 20th century literature, the stream of T.S. Eliot's consciousness is more devious. The author professes to withdraw, almost resign from office. If Yeats attempted to be an organized and conscious consciousness, his experimenting followers (Joyce, Woolf, Eliot) profess a kind of literary dizziness: their own projects catch them unawares. This secrecy conceals their laborious intentions, making their texts look like a stream of random associations. At the centre of this sometimes confusing web, the creative mind is richer than ever – a wealth of meanings and correlations, but infinitely more impatient than the traditional slow and sure architecture.

T.S. Eliot's, Joyce's impatience with the laziness of words, their inability to convey everything (the maze of all their possible meanings) at once could not be easily forgotten. Poetry still is confusing, jumping from one thought to another, without obvious connections between one statement and the following. The understatement, so lavishly used in the early twenties, is still eagerly preserved, even enhanced. Philip Larkin himself acknowledges T.S. Eliot as a major influence upon his making as a poet. His introduction to the revised edition of *The North Ship* clearly defines the mixture of styles besieging the twenty-three-year-old poet:

'Looking back, I find in the poems not one abandoned self but several – the ex-schoolboy, for whom Auden was the only alternative to 'old-fashioned' poetry; the under-graduate, whose work a friend affably characterized as 'Dylan Thomas, but you've a sentimentality that's all your own'; and the immediately post-Oxford self, isolated in Shropshire with a complete Yeats stolen from the local girls' school. This search for a style was merely one aspect of a general immaturity. It might be pleaded that the war years were a bad time to start writing poetry, but in fact the principal poets of the day – Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Betjeman – were all speaking out loud and clear...'

So, this is the mood which hovers about *The North Ship* (1945). The title-poem, ‘a legend,’ we are told, distorts the natural fall of stresses, in an almost Coleridge-like image:

I saw three ships go sailing by,
Over the sea, the lifting sea,
And the wind rose in the morning sky,
And one was rigged for a long journey.

Emily Dickinson looms in the distance. Three ships go out at sea. The east and the west-bound ships return. The North ship goes

wide and far
Into an unforgiving sea
Under a fire-spilling star,
And it was rigged for a long journey.

The words manage to shock us into following their flow with a certain interest, but, unfortunately, they can hardly alleviate the emotional burden the poet is encumbered with. Confusion consequently creeps in. Which is an understatement, since, as a matter of fact, the poetic image is so indirect that it may easily elude our understanding. Indirectness is the main quality of a good poem, of course, on one condition, though: it must be well-built, carefully planned so as to impress and haunt the reader. Careful indirectness turns the poem into an emblem of a thought or mood which the reader can share. In *The North Ship*, still groping and hardly waking up to the dawn of youthful lines, Larkin is careless. Music, memory, emotional waves, all carry him away. He contemplates the idea of death with the ignorance of a young body. The feigned sadness fails, the gravity is unconvincing. Death may look picturesque, but it is a long way off: it may not even exist, as far as young Larkin is concerned. He merely needs a theme to vent his need for sorrow, and he finds it there.

Despondency resorts to clarity, too. Larkin is, on the whole, a lover of prosaic clarity. He departs here from the path of Yeats, Auden, Eliot. Like many Desperado poets, in his better poems he refuses to use language as a code. There must be no barrier between his mood and his reader. Consequently, the words are commonplace, the sentences blankly correct. A blind poem which makes us see. Somebody with a ‘loveless’ heart wakes up and hears a cock crying far away, pulls back the curtains only to see the clouds that are too high up to reach, and decides that, in a strange way, everything, alive or lifeless, is alike. Sweet momentary emptiness that will in a second bump into boisterous joy. Dumb idleness, a poem calls it. The fire is extinguished, the glowing shadows die, a guest steps away into the windy street at midnight, and leaves behind ‘the

instantaneous grief of being alone...' Prolific plant, Larkin calls this aimless sorrow: and a very resourceful alliteration it is.

Blake, Byron, Tennyson, Eliot merge. The lines sound like other poets, the meaning is still frail. 'My thoughts are children,' a poem states. Which explains why the poems do not ripen yet. It rains over a darkening street, over Eliotian 'stone places' (which lose all connotations in the text), girls with troubled faces hurry along as if hurt, while the writing hand feels the heart 'kneeling' in its own 'endless silence.' There is however a certain taste for exhibited emotion, which makes this silence promising.

Gradually, the words take over more responsibility, the style grows steadier, less wavering, grasping the idea more firmly:

So every journey I begin foretells
A weariness of daybreak, spread
With carrion kisses, carrion farewells.

Morbidity is, or rather will be, replaced by hopelessness. Frailty is on its way towards becoming a poetic manner: the manner of a restlessly reticent poet. He looks helpless when names (love, death) besiege him, but we must not allow ourselves to be cheated: helplessness is his style, and he works patiently to find and refine it. An interesting stanza turns up to prove it:

I was sleeping and you woke me
To walk on the chilled shore
Of a night with no memory,
Till your voice forsook my ear
Till your two hands withdrew
And I was empty of tears,
On the edge of a bricked and streeted sea
And a cold hill of stars.

Larkin is learning the craft of concentration, the skill of multiple meanings merge into one remarkable image: a sea which is built in, its freedom surrounded by bricks and crossed by artificial streets. The 'cold hill of stars' which follows has nothing to do with the previous, highly suggestive line.

I read the remaining poems of this first volume hunting for interesting images – which means I already trust Larkin and expect them to come up any time now. It seems I am not mistaken, though they are not many yet: 'a shell of sleep,' 'this season of unrest,' 'always is always now,' 'beyond the glass/ the colourless vial of day painlessly spilled.'

Ten years later, *The Less Deceived* (1955) came out. A title which applies to Larkin's readers as well. Less deceived by picturesque despondency, we are ushered into a realm richer in incidents once experienced, closer to our own lives, more genuine, more enthralling. A photograph album shows the loved young girl under the colours of childhood. Photography is a 'disappointing' art, Larkin exclaims. Sorrow has turned into disappointment. The past has come on stage, as a new theme. Sadness is replaced by a simple pain, that we can understand. The poet's soul races back to retrieve the lost years, then suddenly stops to contemplate itself. The poem is born:

In every sense empirically true!
Or is it just *the past*? Those flowers, that gate,
These misty parks and motors, lacerate
Simply by being over; you
Contract my heart by looking out of date.

The sentences flow naturally, as if uttered on music. Larkin carefully moulds the rhythm of his lines: slippery interruptions disturb the prosaic flow. The poet denounces himself as a character:

I, whose childhood
Is a forgotten boredom...

Eliot is at last left behind. A faithful, clear probing of privacy becomes Larkin's main concern. It may already be an old trick for young Desperado poets, but back in the fifties it was definitely fresh. Ostentatious, yet blank confession is Larkin's discovery (though not only his, of course). An X-ray of everyday life, clothed in everyday words.

The poems begin and end casually. The style is oral. This informal poetry may at first strike one as not being poetry at all. The abrupt end is discomfiting. No more plaintive rhymes. In the first volume, punctuation could not even be noticed, it was either overlooked or misused. Now it has earned its meaningful status. The statements, too, acquire the balanced rhythm of a mind thinking, of sensibility understood. A remarakable poem (*Next, Please*) makes new use of the North Ship, and this time we clearly understand the 'black- sailed unfamiliar' ship, 'towing at her back/ A huge and birdless silence' is the day when there is no 'next, please,' the end. The rhyme is used without irony, it wins back some of its lyrical force. No more Eliotian destructive refrain like 'In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.' Familiar and gentle, Larkin gives in to lyricism:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,
Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
Sparkling armada of promise draw near.

He also discovers now the theme of solitude. Larkin is everywhere a solitary poet, but his halo of loneliness is better noticed in this second volume, where he does not complain about it. The 'cold heart' was quite unconvincing. Devoid of emphasis, the lines strike gold. There is solitude beneath and beyond everything:

However we follow the printed directions of sex,
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar...

Larkin's words grow bolder. Four-letter words are a poetic commonplace today. They were a hard conquest for Larkin. He brought himself to use them because they were part of, proof of genuine, everyday life. But we cannot help feeling him blush whenever he is bold. He is at his best when he stifles his pain in loneliness:

At once whatever happened starts receding.
Panting, and back on board, we line the rail
With trousers ripped, light wallets, and lips bleeding.
Yes, gone, thank God! Remembering each detail
We toss for half the night, but find next day
All's Kodak-distant...

Self-pity has been left behind. It was much too direct and failed to impress. Now Larkin is rougher:

I detest my room,
Its specially-chosen junk,
The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order.

*Triple Time* is a poem as sharp as a knife. Our present is the dream of future of our childhood and our future is our failed past. The idea is more appealing than the words which clothe it. Overdoing toughness and informality, Larkin sometimes sprains his ankle by stepping outside the poem. He returns, however, with a deft line such as 'where my childhood was unspent.' It may sound like e. e. cummings, but it is so loaded with the verbal insignificance of the whole poem that it is far stronger. The rarer, the richer.

*The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), nine years later, is more self-assured. The poems abound in private meanings, and are somewhat less accessible,

though not obscure. We find here a special narrative coherence of the volume, which characterizes Desperado poetry. This narrative coherence means that one has to read the whole volume in order to understand anything. Nowadays anthologies are very hard to make precisely because Desperado poets build a story within a volume. Each poem unfurls a further episode. Larkin, too, discovers this trick by means of which fiction steals into poetry. The reverse of what happened in the 1920s – when fiction was submerged by lyricism – is taking place. At the age of forty-two, Larkin brings out a volume of poems which somehow tell the story of his own life. He selects significant incidents and builds an atmosphere to be remembered. We may forget the poems, we will not forget the mood. One clever poem is *Sunny Prestatyn*. It makes free use of indecent words, but that does not seem to matter. 'Come to Sunny Prestatyn' is a decorous advertisement for some seaside resort. The image of a beautiful girl in the sand, against the background of palms and a hotel, is gradually defaced by passers by. Anonymous artists turn her into a snaggle-toothed, boss-eyed, moustached and pornographic image. Conclusion:

She was too good for this life.

A knife stabs her through in the end. The next day another poster is slapped up. Maybe those who found the sea, the sky and the young girl ludicrous will be satisfied:

Now *Fight Cancer* is there.

The instinct to destroy versus our own final destruction. No more to be said. Larkin is bitter now:

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify *or so I feel*,
Or *well, it does seem so*:
Someone must know.
(...)
Even to wear such knowledge – for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions –
And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.

A wifeless, childless, loveless man, who will not go either backwards (into his past) or forward (towards nothingness) if he can help it, this is the hero of Larkin's third volume of poetry. Larkin belittles this hero. His initial tenderness turns sour. The emptiness the first volume complained

of was teeming with anticipation of what was too slow to arrive. This new emptiness looks final. We feel as if we had watched the first and last act of a play, but have missed the sentimental middle act. In short, we feel cheated. Even if the last line of the volume states that

What will survive of us is love,

we still feel scared by the blank stare of the last white page. Gentle Larkin is teaching us how to grow old.

Ten more years, and, at fifty-two, Larkin publishes *High Windows* (1974). In the *New Statesman*, the younger poet and critic Alan Brownjohn welcomed it:

'Despite his disavowal of a poet's obligation to develop, *High Windows* does show an indisputable development in Larkin (...). It's doubtful whether a better book than *High Windows* will come out of the 1970s.'

It seems that, in one respect, Larkin did follow Eliot's pattern: he did not print much. Out of the poems he printed, some may look commonplace if taken separately, yet each has a part to play in the volume as a whole. A sense of exhaustion, to which a growing bitterness is opposed, pervades everything. *To the Sea* blends present and past, memory and desire (to quote good old Eliot):

Still going on, all of it, still going on!

Walking along the shore, among children, parents and old people tasting their last summer. Instead of inspiring the sea, we take a deep breath of despair and go on.

The rhymes are sharpened to kill. The initial theme has come full circle. Apprehension has turned into much hated certainty (death):

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.
Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
(...)
Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Childhood appears sadder and sadder to the ageing sensibility:

Like the wars and winters
Missing behind the windows
Of an opaque childhood...

Another world comes in sight. Seen out of high windows – which remind us of Eliot climbing the stairs in *Ash Wednesday, III* – youth rushes back into a wasted body, but finds it uninhabitable. The ageing eyes look upwards and the high windows disclose the 'deep blue air,' 'nothing,' 'nowhere,' 'endless.' Larkin tries his soul at Eliot's assumed sense of acquired peace. The same poignancy results. Words (used as catharsis before) become useless. Speech refuses poetry. The poem refuses the poet. Here we stand, then, close to this poet at last: he has been banished out of his own words and moods, and we hold his hand, we share his despair.

Larkin's despair soon becomes uncomfortable (like Eliot's), very similar to Dylan Thomas' 'do not go gentle into that good night.' The poet stares old age in the eye, and sees Yeats' and Eliot's deep fears merge: mouths gape open, 'you keep pissing on yourself,' nothing can stop the deterioration or make the body work again. 'Why aren't they screaming?', Larkin chokes. The same as Emily Dickinson, he is at his best when he probes, almost pre- enacts death. All these lines are memorable. We knew death would come (young Larkin flirted with the thought in his early poetry), but then it

was all the time merging with a unique endeavour
To bring to bloom the million- petalled flower
Of being here.

Now, that it is almost here, we realize we should never have tarnished life with this apprehension, which is now too true. 'How can they ignore it?', Larkin screams again. The *Old Fools* sink back into the private reality of their own minds. They are there, not here. They are 'baffled' absences, unwillingly preparing to face what was once thoughtlessly imagined. Young imagination is as dangerous as ageing memory. Larkin's poetry is mined. With *High Windows*, we look back and realize that we must tread it cautiously, carefully, fearing all the time that any innocent word may blow up the poem.

Old age is called by Larkin 'inverted childhood.' His whole poetry (like Eliot's) is inverted, in a way. He grows more energetic and more fond of life, of a poetry of reality, as he grows older. What spurs him into writing well must be the same sense of loss which he was too young to

communicate in his previous volumes. Now his powerlessness is perfect. He has experienced some of it at last. Having found something in his own life that he can write about, he strikes the right voice and no longer wavers. Eliot once said that Yeats was preeminently the poet of middle age. Following that pattern, Larkin is first and foremost the poet of the last age – an age which he was spared by an untimely death.

Bitterness reaches a climax. We look back longingly at Larkin's early verse as we read:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.

In Joyce's *A Painful Case*, James Duffy realizes when it is too late that he is 'an outcast from life's feast.' So does Larkin.

A poet who wrote little, and published even less, Philip Larkin has nevertheless become a major voice in later 20th century British poetry. He best illustrates the transition from strong- willed experimenting (Eliot) to relaxed carelessness in poetry. He witnesses the slow withdrawal of lyricism from fiction and its reverse, the immersion of poetry into prose, or, rather, the creation of the Desperado poetic attitude: the disobeying of poetry. Like modern clothes, which can use any colour or cut as long as they are able to shock, Larkin felt free to look for his words everywhere. The hidden striving of his creation is to find a road of access to his innermost, real theme – the mood of the lonely, ageing man. Late found, this theme is not long dwelt upon. One last volume discloses its helpless despair. Speech needs no artifice, Larkin uses it as he finds it. Words cannot alleviate the painful poems of this poet who is unable to come to terms either with himself or with his poetry, restless but reticent to the bitter end.

# Fowles Outbids Fowles – John Fowles (1926- 2005)

John Fowles has a mobile intelligence, activated by the imp of irony. His novels are intellectual treats. *The Collector* turns a horrible experience (the kidnapping and killing of a young girl by a maniac) into a luminous memory. The core of the novel is the girl's diary. She is an art student, in love with a professor. She hopes to get away and stay alive. She struggles, she remembers, she fails and finally dies of pneumonia. When the book was turned into a film, only the kidnapping was shown, and the story was suddenly terribly poor. The true essence of Fowles's *Collector* is the mixture of maniacal gloom, absurdity and youthful purity of hope and love. The novelist makes these two extremes meet.

Like a magician – one of his novels is actually entitled *The Magus* –, Fowles mixes the most contradictory moods together, and ends up baffling all expectations. His plots end in the most weird and tantalizing way he manages to imagine. His novels are tantalizing on the whole, as a matter of fact, because his mind is always restless, always in search of something that should shock the reader.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) is a record. Sarah is the most baffling character in Post War fiction. Only an alert mind can keep up with the novelist's racing moods. With Fowles you never have a moment of dull rest. If the scene fails to change spectacularly at some point or other, his direct irony comes in. He speaks in the name of the author, in the first person, more personally than Dickens himself ever did. Intellectually speaking, Fowles is shameless, and will resort to anything to make us gasp for breath as we go on reading him.

In short, Fowles'ss main narrative device is surprise. All experimentalists (Joyce, Woolf & co.) wanted to shock the reader, there is nothing new in that. But they tried to use methods opposite to those we find in the Victorian novel. They defied the Victorian novel, by abolishing plot, chronology, characters. Fowles defies everyone, the previous defiers included. He offers a plot, but it has two endings. He offers characters, but in the end we do not know how to understand them, because they have two faces and our doubts storm. He uses Victorian England as continuous time, but jumps into one page or another, addressing us from

our own time. Diabolic resourcefulness is one major feature that marks a literary Desperado.

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* begins in Lyme Bay, in March 1867. The narrator announces his presence from the very first page, by speaking in the first person, as detached from his story, viewing it from our own time. This is one of Fowles's major tricks, to become solidary with the reader, allowing his characters a large share of ambiguity, of freedom.

Fowles is a professor of British literature. He knows Victorian literature thoroughly. He has studied in detail its plots and characters. Each chapter in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* begins with a quotation from various Victorian authors. Each quotation (belonging to novels, poems, essays) is spotted by the careful eye of someone who takes notes while reading. He obviously has read Victorian literature with a mind of writing about it, of making it appealing to his students. His knowledge of Victorian writers is amazing. His novels, therefore, evince a certain pleasure of didactic organization, an ingenious plan to capture attention. He even quotes papers of the time, which shows that he has studied the society of the time, as well. The way he chooses his quotations shows sharp sensibility, a keen eye for the seducing words, and a remarkable intelligence, which throws a very clear light upon the authors used. Fowles's novel is not only an entertaining, tantalizing, highly resourceful story, but also an invitation to read Victorian literature.

The plot of the novel is fairly uncomplicated. What makes it tantalizing is the narrative manner, the use of suspense. In short, Charles, a noble young man who expects to inherit his uncle's fortune, is engaged to Ernestina, the daughter of a middle-class but very rich businessman. Ernestina is some ten years younger than Charles, a superficial, spoilt child. Charles is not much brighter himself, in spite of his interest in paleontology, but has a much larger doze of boredom in him. The French lieutenant's woman is Sarah Woodruff, born of poor parents, and an ex-governess. She claims to have lost her heart and good name to a French lieutenant whose wound she took care of while he was a guest of the family that formerly employed her. She acts according to her nickname, like 'Tragedy' itself. She dresses in black, she takes long, solitary, dangerous walks close to the sea. Her second employment, with Mrs. Poulteney, is one more unendurable humiliation, which she accepts. Born poor, having learnt to live and enjoy things beyond her means, Sarah is the very image of impossible happiness. Charles, on the other hand, has everything she has not got, a young fiancée included, and is not any happier. It is in this light that Sarah spots him.

The atmosphere Fowles builds shows rich imagination and a real gift for novel-writing. Life is full of all sorts of thoughts, incidents, unexpected

shocks. Every character has his or her own world, and they are all credible, interesting, rich. This is definitely a novel with (not without) characters, and very firmly outlined, too, if it comes to that. Sam, Charles' manservant, for instance, is minutely described, by his deeds. He falls in love with Mary, the maid of Ernestina's aunt (Tratner, by name), and ends by siding with Ernestina, because in the end he is to marry the maid and be helped by her mistress and Ernestina's father.

Each destiny unfurls. As the stories intersect and build a really exciting, refined, highly intellectual plot (based on psychological analysis, that is), the author converses with us informally, brings us into the picture, talks as 'I' or 'we', and manages to make us sink into Victorianism with our 20th century minds. Remarkable debunking of tradition (so-called tradition, after all), which makes us experience the past with fresh gusto. This sequel of experiment, this Desperado game in and out of one or another time, is a remarkable discovery, but, once used, it cannot be imitated, it grows old at once. Fowles is also very hard to equal in his subtle analysis and thought, in his appealing, winning irony, in his position versus his characters, whom he both loves and mocks at.

Maybe we ought to be talking about Fowles's mind, because it is there that everything springs from. All his novels are alert in a very intellectual way. They afford great intellectual pleasure. The reason for the novelist's fearless presence as an 'I' in his pages is that he is aware of the charm of his thoughts, and is sure he can mesmerize us with them. He constantly comes up with a fresh idea, an overthrown expectation, an unexpected but very valid analysis.

Charles breaks his engagement to Ernestina. Sam and Mary get married and settle down comfortably in London. Mrs. Poulteney, who was a tyrant for all her servants while she was alive (Sarah included), dies and goes to hell – contrary to all her high expectations – in a very humorous scene, where we are taken straight to the realm after death. Here it is:

...Mrs. Poulteney died within two months of Charles' last return to Lyme. Here, I am happy to say, I can summon up enough interest to look into the future – that is, into her after-life. Suitably dressed in black, she arrived in her barouche at the Heavenly Gates. Her footman – for naturally, as in ancient Egypt, her whole household had died with her – descended and gravely opened the carriage door. Mrs. Poulteney mounted the steps and after making a mental note to inform the Creator (when she knew Him better) that His domestics should be more on the alert for important callers, pulled the bellring. The butler at last appeared.
'Ma'm?'
'I am Mrs. Poulteney. I have come to take up residence. Kindly inform your Master.'

‘His Infinitude has been informed of your decease, Ma’m. His angels have already sung a Jubilate in celebration of the event.’
‘That is most proper and kind of Him.’ And the worthy lady, pluming and swelling, made to sweep into the imposing white hall she saw beyond the butler’s head. But the man did not move aside. Instead he rather impertinently jangled some keys he chanced to have in his hand.
‘My man! Make way. I am she. Mrs. Poulteney of Lyme Regis.’
‘Formerly of Lyme Regis, ma’m. And now of a much more tropical abode.’
With that, the brutal flunkey slammed the door in her face. Mrs. Poulteney’s immediate reaction was to look around, for fear her domestics might have overheard this scene. But her carriage, which she had thought to hear draw away to the servants’ quarters, had mysteriously disappeared. In fact everything had disappeared, road and landscape (rather resembling the Great Drive up to Windsor Castle, for some peculiar reason), all, all had vanished. There was nothing but space – and horror of horrors, a devouring space. One by one, the steps up which Mrs. Poulteney had so imperially mounted began to disappear. Only three were left; and then only two; then one. Mrs. Poulteney stood on nothing. She was most distinctly heard to say ‘Lady Cotton is behind this’; and then she fell, flouncing and bannering and ballooning, like a shot crow, down to where her real master waited.

The excerpt above proves quite a number of qualities. First of all, Fowles’s first- hand irony. Second, his affectionate smile, which prevents him on all occasions from slipping into bitterness. Third, a mobile, mocking imagination, which winks at us from the corner of the page, saying, ‘If you do believe in God, do not take me seriously, you can easily see I am joking. And if you do not...If you do not... well... so much the better.’ Last but not least, Mrs. Poulteney’s end is a great emotional satisfaction to all those who have followed her while she was unjust, tyrannical, whimsical, mean and hypocritical to her friends and servants alike. While she was slowly turning Sarah into a victim of society.

Which brings us to the two main destinies of the book: Sarah and Charles. In fact, very satisfactorily for all tastes, Fowles indulges our expectations by offering the two endings. One is the conventional Victorian happy end: Charles marries Tina and they live happily ever after. Although Charles was disinherited by his uncle, who got married in the meantime, and has to depend almost entirely on Tina’s money (which he – Charles – hates), and even go into her father’s business (even more repulsive to a noble idler and traveller like himself).

The second ending is in fact the one we relish, and which baffles us. Charles is deprived of his fortune. Under Sarah’s repeated attacks on his sensibility, he forms a growing physical and spiritual attachment to her, of which he professes to be unaware at first. Sarah knows exactly what

she wants. She wants *him*. She acts as a victim of everything and everyone. She is helpless and will die unless she is saved. Tina is spoilt, independent and simple-minded. Sarah is shrewd, destitute, victimized and endlessly complicated. And Charles has a feeble mind. He falls in the trap. Fowles is happy to be able to mock at him. By making us sympathize with his refuted love, he mocks at our romance-devouring instinct, too.

What happens, in fact? Charles helps Sarah leave Lyme Bay, but she instantly informs him where she is. She stages a perfect situation to make him go to bed with her. Upon which he discovers she is a virgin. No French lieutenant. Now she tells him the truth. She did go to give herself to that man, but found him with another woman, so that was that. On top of it all, Sarah disappears right after their first night. Charles sends Sam with a letter to her, offering her the social status she may have wanted. Sam betrays him, takes the letter (and a brooch) to Aunt Tratner, and thus breaks their communication. Inexplicably, for a good fifty pages, Sarah is lost.

When Charles finds her again (helped by Sam, although Charles never learns that), she is living with the family of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She has a daughter by Charles, but will have nothing to do with him. Our taste for love stories is utterly smashed. No alternative is left. Suddenly all characters crumble under the burden of their author's ruthless irony. They become uninteresting. A question lingers, though: Do they really?...

What is it that in the last few chapters makes Fowles shatter his own novel, as he does with *The Magus*, *The Collector* and the rest? His novels, all of them afford a maximum of pleasure while we read. The satisfaction dies when the end is pronounced. Not only the emotional, but also the intellectual joy dies. It is as if Fowles had emptied his cup and will not take the trouble of filling it up again. It seems a pity. Lawrence Durrell, a Desperado, too, much older than Fowles though, does the same. Which proves they both suffer from the same disease. Although Desperado literature takes pride in isolation and utmost originality, this disease is catching. One of its signs is apparent here.

The age of experiment has left writers with the desire to shock. Durrell keeps us in a permanent state of dazzled amazement. Fowles is more relaxed, softer, but he insinuatingly does the same. Only he does it in a science-fiction way. He is present in two places at once: in and out of the novel. One of the last chapters (55) is significant. Charles is going to London, in his desperate search for Sarah. On the way there, he bumps into (would you believe it?) Fowles himself. Here is their alienating encounter:

‘The latecomer muttered a ‘Pardon me, sir’ and made his way to the far end of the compartment. He sat, a man of forty or so, his top hat firmly square, his hands on his knees, regaining his breath. There was something aggressively secure about him; he was perhaps not quite a gentleman... an ambitious butler (but butlers did not travel first class) or a successful lay preacher (...) A decidedly unpleasant man, thought Charles, and so typical of the age – and therefore emphatically to be snubbed if he tried to enter into conversation.’

The latecomer is the writer himself, who does not know how to end his novel:

‘Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles (...): what the devil am I going to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles’ career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom the characters must be given.’

So, the author throws a coin into the air, catches it and lets hazard decide. After which the train reaches the station, Charles gets off, followed by the bearded man, who disappears in the crowd.

The constant dialogue between author and readers begins as a prank, continues as a trick and ends in the form of a concentrated essay. It is obvious that in this procedure fiction, lyricism and essay mix. The frontiers between one literary genre and the other vanish. Fowles will refrain from nothing to catch our eye. Not our sympathy, though. He is not keen on our liking his heroes. I should even say he does not like them himself. What he loves about them is that they are all ‘figments’ of his imagination. Aside that, he is rather amused at them. He snubs them all the time. He makes the other characters gossip about one or another. He does so himself. He takes us into his confidence. But if he does not believe in his characters, we wonder who will? Here is one major feature of Fowles’s game: he undermines himself. He places dynamite under his own plot. Who is to blame then, if at the end of this baffling novel all readers run astray? If we fail to follow the story on and on in our minds, when Fowles himself has taught us that our minds are so unpredictable, unreliable? That he can snap his fingers and change the course of the novel just like that?

The game toys with the idea of game, and this is pure Desperado inventivity. Fowles is one of the authors for whom his work is not sacred. He has a delicious flexibility, which works as long as his reader is diligent, willing to go back to his text again and again. Rereading is easy with his novels. They are intellectually so entertaining, so full of a life of

the mind, that there is no moment of dull rest. Only, once we have stopped reading or rereading the text, the book vanishes from our minds, which is a proof that Fowles writes books of ideas, not of action. We remember the flow. Even though the action seems to have kept us so alert, we tend to forget most incidents as minor details. Instead of the solid Victorian plot (think of implacable Dickens), we are left with an intriguing web, a lace of somersaults. Fowles outbids Fowles.

Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## Blank Despair of Words -- Alan Brownjohn (born 1931)

Alan Brownjohn is the ideal representative of Desperado poetry, mainly because he cannot be included in any group, because he is always on his own. His favourite word, used over and over again, is ‘blank’. Everything can be blank, from the soul to the landscape and the lines which convey his moods. In Alan Brownjohn’s poetry there is a certain treacherous monotony, an apparent inertia, which hides cliffs and precipices, deep oceans of water and salt.

Enveloped in hazy clouds of silence, although words do flow from the poet's pen all the time, Brownjohn's ideas may seem dulled to the hurried reader, who does not take his time to peep at the words after stripping them naked. When everything is said and done, there is, at the back of Brownjohn's poetry, a discreet despair that can never be tamed.

The music of his poetry is, more often than not, discreet. Sometimes there are rhymes, there are also in his lines inner rhymes and most effective alliterations, but, in good Eliotian tradition, whenever a rhyme becomes too obvious, it sounds like a peal of laughter. The poet mocks at poetic musicality with the disabused countenance of a man who is both blind and deaf, but whose feelings can rage in a piercing turmoil.

Even when the poet wilfully uses rhyme on a regular basis, we are tempted to push it aside, as if it prevented our closer contact with the flesh of the words. The words themselves may sound disabused and common, but the general air of melancholy that springs from the whole combination of blankness, musicality, indifference, tenderness – always hidden under seven veils, at least, pervades the mask, and the tears that deface it at the end of a poem are more than real: they become our tears. Brownjohn manages to burden us with all his fears, regrets and bitterness. If this is true, Eliot cannot be far behind:

You, hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère...(*The Waste Land*)

Our life is a meek, mysterious travel into night. We are all lonely travellers, down dissolving streets (*Travellers Alone*), slipping deeper and deeper into the 'consoling, half-anaesthetic' darkness, which is 'barren.' Eliot, with his *Four Quartets* and his contorted sensibility, pops up in lines such as:

Night in the streets we tired of
Hides daylight features in tangible dark,
Seals up, presents as finite, endlessness.
We shall not see the sequel to our journey
That every housetop valley spread for us,
Or suburbs' prospect of our wandering.
We shall forget the arriving trains, bound
For the town's heart from stations not our own.

This is what Alan Brownjohn's poetry sounded like in the 1950's, when Eliot was still very much alive, and his *Waste Land*, the much abused 'sacred cow' of English poetry (thus called by some critic other than myself) had taken more than its fair share of reprieval. Of hatred, even. Alan Brownjohn is the following generation. Experimentalism is replaced by oversimplification, and Modernism plunges into the whirlpool of the

Desperado streak, which completely sucks it in, without any pre-digestion, whole hulks at a time.

Unlike the leader of Modernism, T.S. Eliot, the Desperadoes avoid biting their sensibility to the quick. On the contrary, they hide it under a thick coat of commonplace, and that is the reason why the poems look blank, dispassionate. Whenever they strike upon a resourceful image or a shocking suggestion, they scurry into immobility, and send us blank messages out of boiling grottos.

While a beginner in poetry, Brownjohn had his generous share of Eliot, as well as his right to reject him. In spite of his effort to sound devitalized, the very opposite of Eliot, his reticence to confess is pierced everywhere by the feelings pushed down, into the inferno of denial. Small flames, like the Devil's horns, sprout here and there, where we least expect it.

From Eliot's peers, we turn into 'our minor beings,' though the land we tread is still waste and all environments are dry and barren. Love is no longer exquisitely painful, it is frustrated, wasted in isolation, deeply doubted. The poem evolves within a hidden self besieged with 'pestering shames' and 'deserved disgraces', 'crippling horror', 'doubt', 'guilt'. If Eliot howled and whispered at the same time, Brownjohn seems to have been struck dumb. His lines are absent-minded at first sight, because emotion withdraws and leaves the text crystal clear. Too clear to make sense.

The poet's sensibility seems to have a fatal flaw that we shall never be able to pinpoint because we are offered masks, not the real thing. There is no joy in these lines, and there is no obvious intensity, either. If Eliot raved and proclaimed his torture out loud, in disgusting images which became the aesthetic standard for quite a while, Brownjohn shyly hides his misery, almost coyly. Eliot ended *The Waste Land* with the whisper 'shantih', meaning 'peace that passeth understanding.' Brownjohn goes even farther than that on the path of silence: he excludes the very idea of understanding. If Eliot stated that poetry could communicate before it was understood, Brownjohn begs to differ; in his case, poetry must communicate without being understood. He is an extremely cautious poet, whose loveless poems – only apparently loveless, though – are uttered in the reticent monotone of a shy sensibility, coiled like a snail inside the shell.

The poem is always in danger of being overwhelmed by *Bad Advice*, a 'path trodden' which comes dangerously close to the 'edge of the cliff'. The poet warns us that 'caution seems best', we should withdraw before the wind unbalances us, but he does not go back in the least: on the contrary, he peeps bravely over the edge, and asks victoriously, 'haven't

you nearly/ Lost your old fear of heights?' Obviously, there is more to these mild lines than meets the eye. Secrecy is a habit with the poet, and a challenge to his readers.

Sometimes Brownjohn himself seems afraid of what he is trying to do, of the abyss of the inarticulate in which he is pushing us, by declaring words insufficient, by mistrusting them, emptying them, using them as shells of meaning. *For a Journey* asks rhetorically:

Who knows what could become of you where
No one has understood the place with names?

Like a *Red Ink Bubble*, the universe is an accident, 'the beautiful can sometimes be accidental.' In Brownjohn's state of mind, everything takes him, and us, by surprise, yet the poet conveys to us that he is disabused because he expects the worst. His numbing obsession is that of the end. Right in front of him, he can see death, the 'blank wastes' of time, the 'endless pause' (*If Time's to Work*). Sometimes the tragic burden is alleviated by his imperfect rhymes, which make the text sound like a mock- poem, imperfect and insufficient, consequently not to be taken for granted. It is a feature that the Postmoderns inherit from Modernism: the meaning is mocked at by the limping rhyme.

Considering the blankness of his poems, Alan Brownjohn is an uncomfortable poet, making us contemplate our own disappointment, frustration, even emptiness. Wherever he wanders, wherever he roams, his dispassionate style hides the intensity of his emotions, as it happens in the following concentrated poem:

In this city, perhaps a street.
In this street, perhaps a house.
In this house, perhaps a room
And in this room a woman sitting,
Sitting in the darkness, sitting and crying
For someone who has just gone through the door
And who has just switched off the light
Forgetting she was there.

The lines are short, concise, prosaic statements. The poet does not write poetry, he merely talks to us, telegraphically, somehow wilfully ignoring our great expectations of a show. He discovers – though he may not be the first or the only one – the stating poem, impressing the page like an impartial black and white photograph.

The feeling of impending doom, whether of the world at large or only of the individual's inner universe, is present in a dystopic poem, 'We are

going to see the rabbit...'. We find in it a future England, with one patch of grass left and only one rabbit, which everyone wants to see, as a curiosity, a memento of the good old days of yore. Even the rabbit ends by taking refuge under the earth, and it seems that the viewers will follow him there, too.

The 1960s bring a change in Brownjohn's manner. The feeling of emptiness is still there, though: 'The middle- afternoon is the worst of the blanks,' and the poet cannot help experiencing ' the permanent grief of time.' An *Interlude* shyly brushes against lust, in even lines, which offer a semblance of quiet but hide deep earthquakes of anguish. *Go Away* strikes Eliot's vein for a very brief moment. A man whose garden is about to be blown up is planting bulbs and narcissi, when someone unknown warns him ruthlessly:

But even if you plant them they won't grow. They won't have
Any time to sprout or flower.

This poem suggests a more general truth, namely that life with Alan Brownjohn is not safe. It is like this garden which may blow up at any minute, and the owner, the poet, wants to feel and die alone so the reader is not invited but repelled: Go away! Desperado poetry no longer tries to please. Alan Brownjohn in particular means to displease.

*At the Time* reminds again of Eliot's *Waste Land*, with the girl who hums 'well, now that's done and I am glad it's over', but also with the image of possible love as the 'awful daring of a moment's surrender':

Perhaps the daring made it
Seem all right. Or
The memory of the daring.

The poem exhales an infusion of veiling words:

...all the mere
Ungainliness of limbs:
There was the wanting
To get it done and over,
And to resume a proper,
Acceptable posture.
Only much afterwards, was there
The having done, was there
That person (think of it),
And that place; all the daring
Shame of it. Only afterwards,
That. There was, really,

Nothing at all of this,
Nothing at all, at the time.

This is one of the enigmatical poems which can shamelessly deal with anything, even the very act of love, in the most high-brow, word-diseased manner.

Poems like *1939* describe childhood as another country, too, capturing teenage emotions in grown up, lapidary lines. *Farmer's Point of View* reveals Brownjohn as a 'careful' poet, careful with his words because he is first of all careful with his sensibility, with labelling emotions, which, frankly speaking, become a lot more poignant when not uttered, when perceived as absences. The poet refuses the spectacular stage of Modernism – raging emotions and despair – taking refuge into silence, void space, blankness. The poem in question is remarkable along those lines. A farmer complains of the strangers who come to hide and have furtive sex in his woodland. It happens in August. The man speaks in the first person, about *'my land.'* He specifies:

I've tried to be careful. I haven't mentioned 'love'
Or any idea of passion or consummation;

And I won't call them 'lovers' because I can't say

If they come from affection, or lust, or blackmail,
Or if what they do has any particular point

For either or both (and who can say what 'love' means?)
So what am I saying? I'd like to see people pondering

What unalterable acts they might be committing
When they step down, full of plans, from their trains or cars.

I am not just recording their tragic, or comic, emotions,
Or even the subtler hazards of owning land –

I am honestly concerned. I want to say, politely,
That I worry when I think what they're about:

I want them to explain themselves before they use my woods.

Somehow, Brownjohn himself would like his readers to explain themselves before they come to him. He is not willing to harbour confessions, pain, poignancy in his lines. He wants to be the witness, and his peace suggests turmoils, but never actually utters the hurricane.

The rhyme Brownjohn uses confuses, dispels the meaning and makes too much noise, as if suggesting it is too good to be true. The poet only uses it as an uncomfortable bell. Underneath it, the lines are misleading, seemingly careless, actually guilty of the utmost precision. Like a surgeon of language, Brownjohn cuts off all the 'poetry' (see T.S. Eliot again), creating his own literary genre, which is Desperado poetry.

The poet is the slave of a discreet sensibility, which is unwilling to hurt anyone, yet is hurt all the time, and suffers the blows quietly. This savage attack from everywhere takes place in poems which are sequences of incidents, connected vaguely into a short narrative, an hour, a day – elliptical interior monologues, hiding from any similarity with the stream of consciousness, steeped in deliberately monotonous Desperado defiance of everything.

Brownjohn is in a strange relationship with his words. They are 'shells of deception, all a lie.' He lets us know:

I will apologize
With metaphors.

Too much aware of his power over his words, Brownjohn dims them at will, only to make the hidden emotion all the more hideously intense. What is not said is much more effective than what has been named. It could be stated that Alan Brownjohn's sense of suspense comes from his silences.

Brownjohn plays upon words as well as upon themes in his poetry. He experiments with rhymes, breaking sentences, even words, trying every trick to reach his halo of meaning. His favourite themes are solitude, jealousy, loss of love, vain love, hopelessness. He is not exactly a solar sensibility. There is in him a mild bitterness that gives him the vantage point of aloofness. He can afford to be vague, never explicit, devious, insinuating, incomplete, yet unambiguous.

The constant halo of sadness, regret, stifled despair and confusion finds an attempted cure in the 'healing verse': Alan Brownjohn sees himself as the healer, the mild physician of loneliness, whose cure suggests more and more silence and indifference to oneself. Written in the first person, or the third sometimes, the poems connect in the story of a lifetime, that we peruse avidly from poem to poem, skipping unclear links, hoping for a happy ending, for the advent of light.

There are, here and there, poems of 'hounding truth', but the poet teaches us not to interfere:

Close your shutters. Read
Or sleep. Let them alone.

His biting irony is seasoned with painful sympathy, and the result is thoroughly discomfiting. The end of love is ‘our autumn day’. Two lovers part without words, without gestures, without thoughts, almost without parting. The only being alive around them is a dog which menaces to run loose. It makes us view Alan Brownjohn’s poetry like a huge temple, cold and deserted, ready for worship, yet forbidding it.

Sometimes, as in *The Victory*, the poet is writing to himself about his own desecrated inner world. He remembers ‘sweat-nights groping for metaphors’, but now

The wires are down. My brain can’t ever seem
To stop still enough to think you. My
Bland words talk alone about themselves.
It’s yours, this victory, then.

The mystery of the lines often happens to blur clarity, to drown us in concision, and we suddenly fail to understand the mood, the pain, the memory. What is left to Brownjohn in this waste inner landscape which hides in fact all kinds of deftly veiled treasures is the idea of game: he plays all kinds of games. Some are more obvious than others. Every poem is a game, as a matter of fact. Writing is a game and reading invites, compels rereading – reentering and winning (understanding) the game.

In the act of writing, which is an urge – ‘It’s up to me’, ‘I had to do it’ – the poet gives up almost all responsibility to sense. He writes informally, acts his thoughts without theatrical gift, lives in a comfortable monotone of his imagination. He uses rhyme like an axe, which makes his lines sound ironically final, like a true sentence to poetry-writing. But of course emotion lurks behind blank statements. Even the word *love* sounds meaningless, like a neon sign blinking irrationally. In spite of this even temper, *Affinity* manages to provide a beautiful, sensitive analysis of the first revelation and expectation of love – the moment of solitary need and projected fancy. Brownjohn hates love but he does not ignore or reject it. On the contrary, love is needed and craved for, even though the words that evoke it are far from unusual. Love is not a shock, but an everyday burden.

Since both Moderns and Desperadoes are under the spell of the hybridization of literary genres, it might be interesting to notice that Brownjohn’s poetry is flooded by fiction, drama, essay and even a kind of psychotherapy. Each poem is a psychological analysis and a point of view at the same time. The major realm of his poetry is the mind. A poem is

‘The Holy Empire of your consciousness’, and what better spur into poetry than ‘insomniac nostalgia’? Of course, nothing would be farther from the truth than to say that Alan Brownjohn’s poetry equals recollection in tranquillity. The poem is rather a disquieting memory that embitters the present.

It is surprising that the poet can hide so well his inner fireworks behind dispassionately spoken lines, in an even tone, as if there were no more possible surprises in store for the poet – not ever. The poet actually strips his body of all clothes, his face of its countenance, and comes forth as a shadow that utters the innermost truths in the most colourless manner possible – the clash between public and private thus creating a tension that makes a hole in the boat: lyricism drips, drop by drop, in every blank word, until the poem is one huge heap of emotionally soaked, yet ambitiously colourless words.

Musicality never deserts Brownjohn, he can easily handle it, but does his very best to make it unobtrusive, as unnoticeable as possible. *Ballad for a Birthday* is the poem of a forsaken girl, who every four lines repeats, ‘I feel the same, but I wouldn’t want to call it love.’ In between, for the space of six stanzas, we have three rhyming lines. Music makes for a monotony of meaning, which only the fourth, maddeningly repeated refrain breaks, conveying the true meaning: love is denied, emotion is doomed to solitude. The gestures described, like all gestures in this literature of Desperadoes for novelty at the turn of the millennium, are small and almost endearing, in a very discreet way. The girl cleans up the house, banishes the telephone, examines her plant, puts the cat outside, arranges her dresses on laundry hooks, looks out of the window, wonders if she has already aged. The poem continues:

What if he phoned, and I heard the bell
With my feet on the bath- tap, and I couldn’t tell...
Well, I heard it... should I answer it as well?
I feel the same, but I wouldn’t want to call it love.

If he wrote a letter, saying Could we meet,
Or if we met by accident, in the street
– When something’s finished, is it *always* complete?
I feel the same, but I wouldn’t want to call it love.

The psychology behind this hardly audible interior monologue betrays a sensibility as painful to harbour as Eliot’s, only infinitely less noisy. Brownjohn avoids the bang and prefers the whimper, so to say. This is the way the world of all his poems ends, invariably going round the prickly pear, prickly pear, prickly pear, at any time, whether it is morning, noon or night in the soul.

In good Desperado tradition, Alan Brownjohn writes best when he mingles poetry and something else, narrative being his choice more often than not. Whenever he has an incident to retell, he is sure to produce a good poem. There is a movement of his lyricism which makes it inseparable from story-telling. Concentration is still there, but so very different from Eliot's suppression of verbal explanatory links. Brownjohn concentrates the story, choosing to relate it telegraphically, with missing acts and in remarkably ambiguous words. What is important here is the quality of Brownjohn's new found ambiguity. It looks like clarity at first sight. An insufficient clarity, which leaves us incredulous: Is that all he had to say? Why bother? It is a blank ambiguity, that plays on the concrete and abstract attributes of the words at the same time. We are not told what actually happens, we are given flashes and, when we try to bring light to the forefront, we realize that all words are treacherous: every line means two things at once. The poet is in the seventh heaven: he has brought us on the threshold of despair, the same despair of words Eliot and Valéry deplored yet revelled in, but this time he has done it behind our backs. We are really taken aback: a decent, empty poem turns out to be an exciting mystery, and we gaze at it agape. How does the poet perform his magic trick of obnubilating us?

*The Packet* is a perfect example of the above stated reading mood. A woman leaves a man, the man suffers in silence and solitude, no hope is left, tragedy mounts to a pitch and we hardly realize it as we race through the mild words:

In the room,
In the woman's hand as she turns
Is the packet of salt.
On the packet is a picture of a
Woman turning,
With a packet in her hand.
When the woman in the room
Completes her turning, she
Puts the packet down and leaves.

On the packet in the picture
Is: a picture of a woman
Turning, with a packet in her hand.

On this packet is a picture: of a woman,
Turning, with a packet in her hand.
On this packet is no picture

– It is a tiny blank.

And now the man waits,
And waits: two- thirty, seven- thirty,

Twelve.
At twelve he lays the packet on its side
And draws in the last packet in the last
Picture, a tiny woman turning.
And then he locks the door,
And switches off the bedside lamp,

And among the grains of salt he goes to sleep.

The idea of a picture within a picture is perfect: the turning within the turning away, the leaving within the turning, the man's subsequent understanding within wait, the solitude within solitude, the core of loneliness is touched. Excruciating pain is to be deftly inferred from the poet's perfect economy of words. There is not one sound more than necessary for us to be able to follow the argument. By Desperado standards, this should be the perfect poem: concise yet clear to the utmost. In short, as a conclusion, clarity is back, beware of clarity.

Brownjohn's poems are 'games of melancholia', and when the playfulness or the blue mood fail the poet, there is the old Eliotian fear that inspiration may run dry, as we learn in *White Night*:

I did not dream it, no I *was*
A t.v. screen left on shining, and
Insensately vibrating, and
Blank, in a shop at night: like a
Flat yet restless pool.
I could picture nothing...

As an instinctive precaution against barrenness, the poems are dry, avoiding picturesque landscapes, touching issues; they prefer to impoverish all images to the utmost limit, and debunk emotions until the skeleton of naked poetry dangles before our eyes. Had Eliot not dreamt about a poetry with bare bones? Here is Alan Brownjohn kindly obliging, both Eliot and posteliotian readers.

The voices in Brownjohn's poems are amalgamated: first, second, third person, 'readers', letters, a man, a woman, a remembered child. An inventory of his words would revolve mainly around *sad, blank, alone*. Although the poet does have a definite sense of humour, he takes great pains to rebuke it. He tries hard to be equally blank both to comedy and tragedy. Consequently, a poem like *The End* evinces no cosmic calling, no apocalyptic thrill, no awareness of the inconceivable, no metaphysical

thought. The poet sulks when too much seriousness and professed profundity are expected of him. He prefers everything to be matter-of-fact and pitiable. Here is the end of the universe in the words of this miser of the imagination:

Not simply human, but all,
But all matter dying there,
Dwindling and tottering away to
A much-more-than-cosmic pit,
An ultimate dark,
An inconceivable collapse...

Yeats lavished rhymes, alliterations, adornments and grandiose ideas on his Byzantium world of the beyond. Eliot conjured up frenzied fits of apprehension, of helplessness. Brownjohn, who almost quotes Eliot with his poems on cats, with *The Waste Land*, goes a step further: he deprives lyricism of its life, whatever that is. If Eliot used to say, 'Leavisitism finds literature living and leaves it dead,' Brownjohnism – it is becoming a trend in itself, so why not give it a name, after all – finds poetry exhibitionistic and leaves it a prude.

*Grey Ground* is a kind of both Eliot and memories revisited. The beginning is strikingly reminiscent of the celebrated end to *The Waste Land*:

In the Cornwall wind
I stood with the mine-shaft behind me.
Something said, a toneless kind-of-voice said, 'Don't
Walk on that ground.'

Which the poet did not do when he was ten, he says. What *The Waste Land* deliberately avoided – for purposes of ambiguity – and Brownjohn makes peace with, is punctuation. He is befittingly correct and punctiliously clear. Maddeningly clear, most of the time. In an uneventful sort of English, he describes a painful memory, a perpetuated interdiction, which, because of the poet's not taking sides with any of his words, does not sound terrifying but supremely matter-of-fact. Descriptions of nature are anything but romantic. They sound casual, antagonistic to lyricism, to the poetic blood that runs in the deeply hidden veins of the poem. They are completely colourless because they avoid all tenderness or cajoling. Thirty years later, a lifetime and a love-time away, end of human time almost, the poet is still on the Eliotian shore, with the arid plain behind him, but he does not choose to vent his despair. Quite the reverse, we read and wonder, not in the old way, 'Do I dare? and Do I dare?', but, Am I there? Am I anywhere?

The sun is out. A woman touches my arm.
We are standing with the mine-shaft behind us swallowing
Echoes of thirty years ago, of a minute ago,
Pebbles we have both thrown, smiling.

If Eliot revelled in his literary memories and praised them by misquoting as often as he could, Brownjohn takes the next step: why bother to argue with old contexts and contradict old sentences? Why remember them at all? He often grumbles about the way knowledge is passed on. There is irony in all his poems about teaching, encyclopaedias, textbooks. There is mockery, too, in his long speeches that squeeze the commonplace out of every faintly interesting gesture. He feeds on the unimportant, even feasts on it. Intensity, obvious intensity, is avoided as if it were a plague, liable to infest poetry and take it back to old fashioned, before-Desperado literature.

A *Letter to America* is addressed to the poet's lover:

I take a long lick of this envelope,
Getting an unsweet, unAmerican taste:
The glue of England, which does not pretend. (...)

... One day, we parked outside
A backstreet house in Wandsworth, kissing
In just that way, not thinking of social class,
And this in broad daylight, very visibly,

When an aproned lady came out quite displeased,
And motioned to us, literally shaking
Her hand with her wrist as if her hand
Were shaking a duster, wanting us to move on.

The moral disapproval was very clear.
And the point is, do you remember this at all,
Which came to me as I began to lick
Your envelope?

The poet seems to be reciting his thoughts like a bad actor, a monotonous mask. Because Alan Brownjohn is the masked poet, the opera ghost, who sometimes smiles, sometimes howls, sliding indiscriminately back and forth between comedy and tragedy. He feels he must always be artificial, hide real personal feelings, run away at all times, from the true, living face of retold emotion. This is far from being emotion recollected in tranquillity; it is war on emotion, death to sympathy (good old Eliot must be turning in his grave), it is long-live-assumed-inexpressivity, protective blankness. One thing is obvious by

now, though: Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf? We are certainly not fooled at all.

Brownjohn operates with a dulled sensibility, terrified of any outburst, of any display of friendliness with the reader, of any invasion of privacy. Poetry has become the public place of a very private soul, a Desperado that does not want to be found out. Consequently, he hardens everything he feels into stone wall-like lines. He mocks at everything, from solitude to love and growing old, until nothing is left to cherish. He does a very exhaustive job of it, too. We have here a mistrustful poet, who debunks all feelings and desecrates the heart.

In many cases, Brownjohn tells elliptical stories, which we have to piece up out of understatements of incidents: a fake decency prevents the poet from calling things their true name. This is a withdrawal from the position Eliot devised. Eliot clamoured the daring of the moment's surrender, the courage of the timid. Brownjohn could not care less about his dead master's drama. He writes a conversational poetry, in which everything is uttered with omissions of meaning that make the text highly enigmatical, yet perfectly clear. Alan Brownjohn is a late Eliotian dissenter: he was influenced by Eliot in his training and then spent all his energy outsmarting him, begging to differ, so to say.

There is however one theme which brings Brownjohn close to Eliot again, and that is the sadness of ageing. Growing old is always unwanted and deplored in Eliotian self-pity, rather than with Yeatsian courage. *A Night in the Gazebo* is a good example. There is in it a peculiar mixture of bitterness and disgust, displeasure and enjoyment, life and slowly proceeding death. Nothing in life seems to console the living for the pain of their death-to-come. Being alive is a punishment that not only saddens, but also angers Alan Brownjohn beyond all decision or determination to be peaceful.

*Ruse* is an inspired image of quickly lost ages. A child plays hide-and-seek and finds himself forty years later. Good idea, good poetic trick, unhampered by musicality of the lines or anything that might distract our attention from the idea to the poetry. The child hides, the others are supposed to find him, but

I ran
And left them there, I ran back home
And left them.
Turning today
A tower-block corner, I saw them
In the gathering dark, bemused
And middle-aged, in tattered

Relics of children's clothes, still
Searching even now in the glittering
Scrubland of my Precinct, for
What had deserted them, what had
Cast them there; blank-eyed, and
Never to tell what I had built,
What I had left them with in forty years.

What the poet built was the poem, which steals time away ruthlessly and can make no amends. *The Leap* steals the feeling of safety and pushes life back into cave-existence, the insecurity of below-civilization. The lights go out and a couple in a cheap restaurant suddenly forget all human feelings, their own love included. All these poems turn out in the end to be just prosaic garments for a very nostalgic poet.

Most poems are long haiku: they are longish descriptions of rough sketches, repeated odes on Grecian urns. Brownjohn includes images within images, until the infinite 'nearly' hurts. In *Entering My Fifty-third Year*, the poet describes himself as 'lightheartedly serious', and his life is, just like his poetry, 'both profound and easy.' Somehow, Brownjohn is a kind of Yeats in reverse: he would rather be the poet of no age, because all ages actually terrify him. Eliot's lesson has been well learnt and is now taken further into Brownjohnism: we stealthily learn from these blankly despairing poems how to be ashamed of our own sensibility. Which is highly uncomfortable and piercingly effective, one must say. Only a Desperado of poetry at the turn of the millennium could be so determined to hide his fear that the end of the world is near.

# When they clearly *understand* what I am saying I am happy – whether they like the poetry or not

## Interview with Alan Brownjohn

**LIDIA VIANU***:* I believe you, Alan Brownjohn, to be one of the chivalrous Desperadoes of poetry at the turn of this millennium. Your poems are at the same time entreating and baffling. You are the patron of the North and of the South Pole of sensibility, with the Equator of scorching feeling in between. When did it first occur to you to breathe into poetry?

**ALAN BROWNJOHN***:* At the age of five, the poems my mother read and/or sang to me (Edward Lear's 'The Owl and the Pussy-cat' remains my favourite poem) and the poems one schoolmistress read to us – these seemed to me to have sharper, clearer, more beautiful images of the world, real or unreal, than the actual world. Mrs. Palmer (the schoolmistress) made the dog in Walter de la Mare's poem 'Silver' sound better than a real dog, a *perfect* representation of a dog. How wonderful it was that you could hear and see a dog *in words* and did not have to go out into the street and look for a dog.

Shortly after those experiences I began to realise that it might be possible for me to *make* the words which would preserve those pictures – and stories – for me, and provide them for other people. That is how 'breathing' in poetry began for me. Anything 'baffling' comes *much* later. At the beginning, everything was simple. Not easy, but simple and clear.

**LV**. Your poems abound in words synonymous with 'blank.' It is obvious that, against Eliot and Eliotians, you try to pretend emotion is dumb, although your lines are in fact extremely eloquent, dressed as they are in everyday words. How do you think you reconcile the apparent silence of your poems and the inner turmoil which they betray? Do you imagine that whoever reads you will be fooled by this veil of shy blankness?

**AB**. I feel sure that I derive some of my understatement (which sometimes borders on the negativity of early Eliot) from Eliot, the poet of our time I first read when I discovered modern poetry. I have always tried, or felt I have done best *when* I tried, to let the strength of a poem (if it has any strength) emerge at a second or third reading, not a first. I

do not believe in violently direct, or shocking, poetry (or prose for that matter). I hope that the inner turmoil – which is indeed there – will be apparent when readers think carefully about what I am saying. So, if you like, what you cite as a 'shy blankness' is a veil which I hope the readers will feel persuaded to lift. The idea of a veil irresistibly brings to mind Keats' great passage about the goddess in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Veils are used to conceal interesting mysteries which should be clear when they are lifted.

**LV**. You are a novelist as well as a poet. Do you admit that contemporary literature mixes genres, discovering a kind of fictionalized poetry, which tells a story in terms of small, shy emotions, which build guidelines? When you say you do not believe in 'shocking poetry,' is it an admission that you prefer it filtered by fiction?

**AB**. I am not sure that fiction and poetry have come closer in recent years. There have been superficial changes in the *form* of fiction, although fundamentally the task of a novel, or a fiction – call it what you like! – is to tell a story; or that's one of the main tasks which writers ignore at their peril. Poetry must be primarily about catching the essence of something, not necessarily via narrative.

By implication a 'poetic' novel has less of a story to tell, is more like an extended poem. I don't find the fully poetic novel very interesting. I don't find the indulgence of formal 'originality' in fiction very fruitful, unless those basic elements – story, character, place – are still indubitably there (as they were in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or even Nabokov, and *certainly* in Anthony Powell – an Proust! – Saul Bellow and John Updike).
Isn't the answer simple? Poetry comes in a small, concentrated bottle, fiction is a much larger one, to be drunk more slowly – but drunk completely to obtain the full effect. I make both of items sound like medicines. I don't mind that. The world can be a sick and strange place, and the arts, as well as giving pleasure, can be medicinal. I won't get deeply into matters like catharsis...

**LV.** Would you subscribe to any literary label out of your own free will? I have called contemporary writers Desperadoes because everyone is trying to be their own trend. Can you look in your poetic – and intellectual, on the whole – mirror, in order to say what you see? You *are* your own trend. Would you venture to give it a name? Or is it like the 'naming of cats,' a heresy?

**AB.** One does not get a chance to dispute literary labels (or one does, but one disputes them in vain!). But I cannot complain about any that have been applied to me, for example 'post- Movement,' to describe poets who followed the 1950s 'Movement' in British poetry, were influenced by its

attitudes and forms and yet were crucially different. When I look in my mirror – or look over past work and try to understand what I was doing and, more significantly, whether I *understood* what I was doing –, I see (or I think I see) a label like 'moral concern' stuck to it, and under that heading, 'attention to detail' and 'striving for truth' and 'irony' and 'comedy' appearing in the smaller print of the list of contents/ingredients. I don't think giving a name to trends is a heresy – it's inevitable, anyway. Of course we more and more need the labels so as to gain a grip on the volume and variety of what is being written – with the labels in our minds we can then start to read, and think, and differentiate for ourselves.

**LV.** What is your relationship to T.S. Eliot's poetry? You quote him here and there. On the other hand, your concealing (though apparently candid) verses seem determined to push him away. You reject, I think, Eliot's codifying concentration of emotions. You choose to deal with emotion in what looks like everyday words. Yet, whoever reads you carefully realizes that you do have your own tricks. Are you the generation that inaugurated the reaction against Eliot? Have you made your peace with him? Do you still read him? Do you think he would enjoy reading you? Or approve of what you do? Do you care?

**AB**. T.S. Eliot provided my own introduction to modern poetry – I read the first cheap edition of his poems while on holiday with my parents in summer 1948 or 49 (whenever it was it was my last full holiday by the sea with them). Eliot made an immediately overwhelming impression, an excellent illustration of his own dictum (only found much later) that 'true poetry can communicate before it is understood' (quoting from memory). His rhythms and images (diluted versions of them) were in my own early verse, only gradually yielding to influences like Dylan Thomas and William Empson (a very little) and Philip Larkin (much more). I took up Eliot's diffidence, and have never wholly lost that, in poetry or fiction. My 'everyday' words are my own kind of code, I suppose – Eliot's reticence but not much of his tone. I never consciously rebelled against Eliot, and I don't feel many later poets have (as they did against Yeats, for example). Probably most poets just left Eliot aside and listened harder to other great poets of their period. I've never felt I had to 'make peace' with Eliot – I'd never had his politics or religion, so there was no intense acceptance followed by a rejection. He is just always there as a magnificent, exemplary poet (I do still read him and would like to think he would have time for my work if he were still alive). I still find – unfashionable view, increasingly, his criticism valuable also, the rather puritanical drift of it!

**LV**. Do you think you belong to any group at all, or are you alone in the world of literary trends?

**AB.** I feel I am 'post- Group' (the London 'Group' of the 50s and 60s) and post- Movement.

**LV**. What present poets do you relate to? Whom do you value, whom do you feel akin?

**AB.** As an older writer I look mostly to my own seniors – but get pleasure from the work of younger contemporaries in England/Britain like (some are fairly new names) Paul Farley, Douglas Dunn and Seamus Heaney (both *'of course'*), Ian Duhig (a wonderful and serious intellectual joker), Conor O'Callaghan, Paul Summers – some are *very* new poets I've been reading recently.

**LV.** How far from Eliot have you travelled? Can he be said to be the skeleton in the closet of your poetry?

**AB.** We don't revere Eliot enough nowadays!

**LV**. What is the future of poetry, in your opinion of a poet at the turn of the century?

**AB**. Poetry has a future as long as it retains a tough core of imagination and honesty and doesn't surrender to either ideology or populism (populism is now the greater danger).

**LV**. If you were to start all over again, would you still be the writer you are, or do you have new strategies in mind?

**AB**. I would simply try to write more, and better, and concentrate on *creating*. There have been too many distractions!

**LV**. What is your major expectation from your audience? Have your readers ever made you feel happy you are a poet?

**AB.** When they clearly *understand* what I am saying I am happy –whether they like the poetry or not.

**LV**. Has your attitude to language changed, as compared to Eliot's or Joyce's?

**AB**. I don't see language as a vehicle or opportunity for experiment – but as a means of understanding the world and the things in it. Heaney has a good sentence about poetry 'as a representative of things in the world' – very simple, terribly true.

**LV.** Is reading still popular or do you feel drowning in a world of screens and scripts?

**AB.** I don't let myself be drowned by screens and scripts. I know very few poets who do that. In the end, you are alone with the words and ideas, however you put them down on paper or screen, and however you transmit them to an audience. (I believe the book will *always* be with us.)

*(1997- 1998, London- Bucharest, by mail)*

# At the Gates of Commonsense – Malcolm Bradbury (1932- 2000)

Malcolm Bradbury begins as an ironist, for whom mocking fiction is the target, while the plot of the soul, the intricacies of character and the sophistication of psychological analysis lag way behind. His first two novels, *Eating People Is Wrong* (1959) and *Stepping Westward* (1965) make fun of universities (particularly academics in the English Department) and the occasional writers they invite, who almost always put their foot in it. Literature and the academic background seem to be incompatible in Bradbury's humour.

The novelist confesses:

'Like most comic novelists, I take the novel extremely seriously. It is the best of all forms – open and personal, intelligent and enquiring. I value it for its scepticism, its irony, and its play. My novels are all forays into various kinds of comedy...'

*Eating People Is Wrong* is *'a comedy,'* too, as the author announces from the very first page. It is a mass of comic remarks and incidents, indeed. A provincial university, with a Department of English whose head is Professor Stuart Treece, imparts the joys of literature to a bunch of unlikable individuals – but we must not go farther than that, since, the title warns us, *'eating people is wrong.'* Malcolm Bradbury just munches them a little, then spreads them on the page like a doubtfully amusing (or nourishing) paste.

Among the characters there is twenty- six- year- old Louis Bates, a *'self-made'* student, whose father *'was a railway man.'* He comes for education to a university college whose building was formerly the town lunatic asylum, grown *'too small to accommodate those unable to stand up to the rigours of the new world.'*

Louis Bates (as we learn in the end) was the inmate of a mental hospital before, and he ends by attempting suicide and going to another. During the interval in between, he studies in a building which *'became an asylum*

*of another kind.'* As Bradbury muses, *'great wits are thus to madness near allied.'* The windows of this college still have bars over the windows and there is nowhere you can hang yourself, although Treece constantly feels on the edge of doing just that. He has a meaningless affair with his fellow, Dr. Viola Masefield, and, though he is forty, he has another one with his twenty-six-year-old post-graduate student Emma Fielding. Neither means much to him, or he is (Bradbury is?) unable to reveal any emotion at all. Stripped naked of all humanity, Stuart Treece roams aimlessly towards the last page like the caricature of a despondent Don Quixote, who has been deprived of his windmills and feels useless and used.

Not unlike Oscar Wilde, Malcolm Bradbury focuses on humorous sentences more than on human beings. A sociologist called Jenkins returns from a Chicago University, where he had a Rockefeller scholarship, with the thought: *'...soon it won't be necessary for us to go to America. It will all be here.'*

The black son of a tribe chief in West Africa is called Eborebelosa, and declares himself prisoner *'in the toilet'* when we first hear of him. We never get to know much about him, or about anyone for that matter, anyway. The truth of the matter is much fiercer: Eborebelosa was sent over to be educated at the expense of *'a terrorist society devoted to driving out the British.'* Treece, we are told, *'was quite prepared to help Mr. Eborebelosa be a terrorist, if that really was his fulfilment,'* but the latter kept hiding in the lavatories. On top of these two heavy pieces of ammunition, Eborebelosa also falls in love with Emma, who – far from black terrorism – is writing a thesis on *'the fish imagery in Shakespeare's tragedies.'*

Another instance of witticism is the dialogue between a Herr Schumann (who has come from Germany to study English language and literature) and a nun. The nun tells him *'pleasantly'*:

'It is very good of you to come to England, of course, since you were fighting it only a few years ago. It is very civilized of all of us to forget this so easily. I think we are all very developed persons.'

The words were uttered in the 1950s, when the plot takes place. It is the period when people were beginning to take driving tests, so Treece failed his, although he was just driving a bicycle with a small engine attached to it.

Bradbury seems to be fascinated by the iron curtain. He always has at least one character fleeing from communism. It is Tanya, in this book. She is a lecturer in Slavonic languages, she is *'of Russian stock'* and also

possibly a lesbian, who has taken Viola ‘under her wing.’ She is not described at length, but then, no characters is. Malcolm Bradbury hardly touches the shell of his heroes and withdraws in awe. And we soon understand why. Each of them has a terrible skeleton in the cupboard. Some unconfessed abnormality. Louis Bates his madness, Treece his inability to feel, and Emma suspects herself of *‘eating people,’* thus explaining (rather feebly) the title of the novel:

‘...Emma collected people. When, a little time ago, a song came out with the line ‘Eating people is wrong,’ Emma felt a twinge of conscience; she agreed with the proposition, but was not sure that she exactly lived up to it.’

The reader himself would be tempted to eat Bradbury’s people if there were any available, but the author (deliberately?) starves his visitors.

The novel is a small, confusing world devoid of any rules. It is just as the German student Herr Schumann puts it, in an Oscar Wilde-like statement:

‘I like the English. They have the most rigid code of immorality in the world.’

Louis Bates, for instance, is also confused in the Wildean manner. He falls in love (he thinks) with Emma, who does not want him, so the author concludes:

‘...sometimes the opposite sex were just too opposite for him.’

Literature itself is described as bewildering, pointless, narcissistic:

‘...nowadays all the novels you seem to get are about what’s wrong with other novels.’

Bradbury’s novel is indeed a kind of tacit argument with other manners of writing. Like all contemporary Desperadoes, although he conceals the attempt, he hopes to found his own, inimitable trend. He is entertaining to a point, then falls short of getting serious, which, we feel, he would very much like. When Treece tries to take a trip into his own inner world, it sounds wildly, though unwillingly, comical:

‘He knew that he always expected too much and would never be satisfied in this human world.’

Peter Ackroyd is entrancing. Bradbury may wish to grip the reader’s imagination in his first two novels, but he fails to do so. There may be

too much self-awareness in what he writes. He is a writer who wants to forget he is writing and create out of instinct, but sophistication stands in his way. Actually the whole book seems to prepare the arrival of the young novelist Willoughby for a short visit. Here is how Treece, who puts him up, introduces him to the Department and students:

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, we're delighted to have with us Mr. Carey Willoughby, who needs no introduction from me. He is one of the so-called novelists of the new movement – I mean one of the novelists of the so-called new movement...'

Everyone in the book, after two hundred pages of nothing happening, seems to be ready for a revelation. If we can't have lives, emotions, a plot, then at least the intricacies of tricky writing, reflections on new texts might do. But Willoughby refuses the invitation. *'There is no movement,'* he declares. Treece feels as betrayed as we do. Nothing new to talk about? No trip into new techniques, new views? He attacks Willoughby with a question that is meant to threaten all Desperadoes:

'...do you write more than you read or read more than you write?'

Willoughby blushes and the author in him whimpers:

'You have no friends in *this game*. In this game you just have to have merit. And I never did have much of that.'

The reason may be, as he later states, that he tries to write about *'life and how it's lived,'* but ends up recording *'why it can't be lived properly any more.'* Deficient lives, deficient texts, and authors in disarray. It would be interesting to know whether Willoughby speaks for Bradbury as well, when he concludes that his novels have no 'proper endings' because

'I'm not trying to butter up my public,' said Willoughby. 'With my sort of book there's no resolution because there's no solution. The problems aren't answered in the end because there is no answer. They're problems that are handed on to the reader, not solved for him, so that he can go away thinking he lives in a beautiful world. It's not a beautiful world.'

As if to prove the truth of this belief, Treece falls ill, goes to hospital, is visited fleetingly by Emma, then

'She went away, and he lay there in his bed, and felt as though this would be his condition for evermore, and that from this he would never, never escape.'

Nobody is involved with anyone else, and nothing leads to anything. Suspense is killed. Bradbury tries to write as uneventfully as he breathes, and we follow him empty-hearted, stripped of all expectations. The uneventful text falls like a veil. We cannot see the outline of literature because of it.

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*Stepping Westward* (1965) begins by reassuring the readers that everything in it is pure invention, which is not true by any means. Several motifs remind us of the previous novel: the Slav émigré (Jochum), the writer confronted with the life of a university (James Walker), that strange emptiness of what Alasdair Gray might call 'unlove' (Julie Snowflake). One major theme is added, namely the reverse of James' view: England trotting towards America, Europe put to shame, yet redeemed by Walker's final choice to stick to it as his only way out.

The town of Party, whose university (called Benedict Arnold) invites James Walker to come and spend a year on a writing fellowship, may be given an imaginary name (very suggestive, too), but its people and surroundings, its daily life are more than real. Bradbury himself spent a year teaching at Indiana University. He views America tongue in his cheek. Walker's voyage across the Atlantic is in fact the result of the devilishly cunning Bernard Froelich's plot. The latter coveted the position of Head of the English Department, and manoeuvred Walker's being invited, as well as his subsequent behaviour to his purpose, which is finally fulfilled.

The British jobless Walker (with three novels to his name) leaves behind Elaine, his wife of eight years, his seven-year-old daughter Amanda, and a desert of hopelessness, in order to become a creative writing fellow across the Atlantic. He is a Don Quixotic Ulysses, and, as he sails to America, he appears to Jochum – his fellow traveller – a *'Henry James in reverse,'* the

'European innocence coming to seek American experience.'

At first, James Walker experiences *'all the menace that the Englishman feels when he steps off his island into the void.'* Soon he meets Jochum, a Slav émigré who teaches at Party University, where Walker is going. They travel together on the train, then the boat. He also meets the very young student Julie Snowflake (paradoxical name in more senses than one), later on he reaches America and is befriended by Bernard Froelich and his wife, Patrice (who even sleeps with him, with her husband's blessing), and Walker's first reaction is to write home, to ask for a quick divorce, for

freedom. There is only one rub: the *'loyalty oath,'* which Americans sign. Walker feels he cannot promise loyalty to another government than his own. He is labelled a communist after he talks about freedom during his first speech at the University; everyone interprets the freedom he praises as freedom not to sign the oath. He was anticipated – actually manoeuvred by Froelich – as the *'English genius, the man who was to change Party.'*

Dr. Jochum disagrees with Walker's misunderstood protest and, after Walker's actually innocent speech, he resigns. As he confesses, he has a deep reason for loyalty:

'I was another refugee. Who was to pick out Jochum? My books were not translated. I had written no distinguished novels. But America gave me what I did not have; that was a country. So that is why I am grateful.'

He is an émigré from Poland. Walker's speech on *'The Writer's Dilemma'* ends in a speech on freedom from marriage, parenthood, commitment, England. This is misunderstood as freedom to disagree with the American government.

Obviously, the peak of the whole novel is this comically misinterpreted speech. Walker begins by analyzing the contemporary writer's status:

'The writer today is talked of as an outsider. He is called disoriented and disgruntled. But was he ever the inside man, the loyalist, the patriot? Was he ever oriented?'

Walker has no idea what he should talk about. He, owner of a B. A. , talks to academics, PhD's, people who expect a lot of him, the *'angry young man,'* as Party welcomes him in an article which states that the angry British writer lost his anger in Party. Walker clamours he was not angry to begin with. He does not feel he is anything, not even himself. The character Bradbury is trying to create strives desperately to acquire identity. He ventures to say:

'I have come to America,' he said, 'to be called a writer, to feel like a writer at all. (...) I came here for the chance to be uncommitted. (...) I came to be loyal to being a writer.'

The audience disapprove. Tremendous upheaval follows. Papers rave:

'British Author Lashes Loyalty Oath.'

Students withdraw from his class. The town *'is really out against him.'* Jochum, an *'old campaigner for loyalty,'* supports the oath. Bernie

Froelich is in favour of the university opposing the oath. Jochum, Walker's first American friend, leaves. Walker feels terrible about it. It suddenly dawns on him why he finds himself in Party: it was Froelich's machination all along. He brought him to the Department, used him as a bomb, and then, taking advantage of Bourbon's (the Department chief's) imminent resignation, Froelich becomes Head. His plan has worked. Bradbury is a master of satire, here as everywhere.

*'Trapped in being Walker,'* the British novelist sails back home before the first semester is over. He spends Christmas vacation travelling West with Julie, and in San Francisco he makes the decision of going back home. The first American city he saw, New York, is the last one as well. He leaves the town of Party, as well as the premises of the novel, before we have managed to be even mildly interested in or even properly introduced to him. He stays an enigma, a blank hero, running away from his unknown friends, the readers. The hero of a satire, not a stream of consciousness novel.

The last chapter of the book, like the first, describes a meeting at Benedict Arnold University. The new English Department Chairman, Bernard Froelich, has been elected by the department after Harris Bourbon resigned. The reason of the resignation is summed up by President Coolidge:

'Now we all know that Harris boobed a bit in not making enough enquiries at the start, and letting our writer last year get way out of line...'

The academic machinations are laid bare, as ugly as they can be. Froelich, who had actually persuaded his fellows to bring Walker a year before, now dismisses the writing fellowship (it has already served its purpose: he is Chair), and suggests putting the money *'into a literary quarterly edited from this campus by the staff of the English Department.'* The hidden reason is that his own book has already been refused by four publishers and, since now he has reached the status he coveted, he does not need a book any more, but a review in which to publish what he wrote as articles.

Froelich thinks of Walker's *'cryptic letter of resignation written from San Francisco,'* which basically stated, *'You have made me destroy a man.'* He could not care less. His immorality is compulsion- proof. He has what he wanted, now we know what Walker's journey to the (Brave?) New World was all about, and we feel cheated. How dry, how unrewarding, how inhuman, too. How masterfully stairical. Fortunately, the characters are mere sketches, so we do not need waste much sympathy. Whatever Bradbury had in mind to achieve in *Stepping Westward*, it certainly was not to lure readers. We are frustrated, starved, repelled. America is

painted in disagreeable colours, but England is not a much better refuge. We have nowhere left to go, but shut the book.

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*Rates of Exchange* (1983) starts by claiming:

'This is a book, and what it says is not true.'

It is a humorous description of the People's Republic of Slaka, a communist country. Malcolm Bradbury is so busy mocking at communism that he completely misses the human tragedy behind the iron curtain. Just like Anthony Burgess' *Honey for the Bears*, Bradbury's *Rates of Exchange* remains disagreeably shallow to the very end. The author's note proposes an agreement:

'...as the literary critics say, I'll be your implied author, if you'll be my implied reader.'

The book may have aimed at implying a lot, but it sure fails to say much. It satirical aim is, on the other hand, amply fulfilled and totally fulfilling.

Dr. Angus Petworth, British professor of linguistics and dignified emissary of the British Council all over the world, is mysteriously invited by the Ministry of Culture in Slaka for a lecturing tour. Even at the end of the book, after three hundred pages, we hardly get to know anything about this character. We merely hear him talk and accompany his discomfort. Whatever Bradbury ever saw in his characters is very hard to tell, since he most certainly does not share any deep knowledge with us.

On the other hand, the author's humour is not rich enough to keep us occupied all through his fairly long novel. The plot is mostly picaresque: incidents come and go, in a linear report of more or less enjoyable adventures. Slaka is

'that fine flower of middle European cities, capital of commerce and art, wide streets and gipsy music.'

In many ways, it reminds us of Bulgaria. Backwards, frightening to poor innocent foreigners, indoctrinated and lying through its teeth, this country could, yet could not be any communist land. Which means that Bradbury did perceive a number of details correctly, but he was denied real understanding. He describes puppets, not real human beings, and if he, as a writer, is satisfied with that satirical approach, I suspect so must we be. We have no choice, anyway.

Slaka is *'in the Soviet orbit,'* and a member of the Warsaw Pact. As far as externals are concerned, Petworth notices quite a lot: *'secular materialism is the official state philosophy,'* everything is a triumph of *'proletarian endeavour'* or a heroic achievement of *'socialist planning,'* everything is the *'best in the world.'* The country is full of *'apartment blocks for the workers,'* there is a *'Park of Freedom,' 'friendship of all peoples'* is repeatedly celebrated, there even exists a certain Grigoric, who

'resolutely delivered the nation over to the Soviet liberator in 1944.'

We must not forget the 'Museum of Socialist Realist Art.' The novelist's sense of observation is remarkable. Unfortunately, he looks for inessentials (his way of surviving), and the real meaning slips through his fingers.

Dr. Petworth is *'forty and married, bourgeois and British.'* He teaches at a Bradford college. The plot of his Slakan trip is almost primitive: he visits two universities, meets Plitplov (very likely a security agent, who claims to have been instrumental in inviting him to Slaka), struggles daily with his guide, Marisja Lubijova (whose name reminds us of the Slav verb *'to love,'* and who is also a security agent, in all likelihood). He also meets the novelist Katya Princip, who briefly and dangerously makes love to him in her bed- sitting room, and then indirectly (through Plitplov) asks him to take her manuscript of a future novel out of the country – a very illegal thing to do – in order to be translated into French and published abroad. Which he tries to do, but fails, owing to Customs complications in Frankfurt.

Constantly confused, just like other characters, Petworth floats on the surface of incidents and takes refuge into humour. He visits Slaka in 1981. He knows that travel is 'the ultimate neurosis,' yet practises it extremely often. His life seems to be measured by these trips to all continents, at the bid of the British Council:

'...he is a man who has spent his life circling around and away from domestic interiors, hovering between home, where he sits and thinks, and abroad, where he talks and drinks.'

The whole novel is about the *'fascination and the void of foreignness.'* He even knows he is not a good traveller, but enjoys the commotion, the unusual, the secretly forbidden. He is thrilled by airports, those *'dangerous holes in all societies,'* even more so in the Slakan world. He slips into a *'state of foreignness, which is a universal country.'* Bradbury places Petworth in a category that he ironically labels as:

'...in the rooms, the professors come and go, talking of T.S. Eliot.'

There is no British Council office or representative in Slaka, but Petworth is instructed in England, before he leaves, not to bring any papers out of the country, *'however compassionate the story.'* For the sake of Katya Princip, he breaks the rule, but hazard makes his attempt fail. As it turns out, Katya Princip is not exactly a woman of firm principles or a real dissenter. She has had three husbands (one of which was a high party official, who committed suicide after her first novel was published), and is very close to a professor who is the head of the Academy, as well as to mysterious Professor Plitplov. Revolutions are done and undone, politics tilt this or that way, and Katya Princip steers her boat as best she can – which is not bad at all. She uses every person who crosses her path, Petworth included. As Plitplov puts it,

'one must be here an artist in relations to survive.'

In a very confusing way, Petworth is warned by his guide against Plitplov, and by Plitplov against his guide. It looks like everyone is afraid of a huge conspiracy directed at each one in particular. Bradbury senses correctly this feeling of collective mistrust and chooses to make fun of it. Which is one way out, though not the most intelligent one.

The humour of the book is mostly linguistical, as Slakans torture English in the most inventive ways. One joke comes directly from Plitplov, the man who boasts he has *'had a finger in the pie'* in the Ministry inviting Petworth. Plitplov turns up or leaves the scene at the most unexpected moments, he turns out to be doing simultaneous translation for a congress (which might point to his being a security agent, after all), he knows everything about Petworth both in Slaka and in England. Plitplov is the perfect image of the secretive pets of the regime. Here is his joke:

'We have here a saying: why is Slaka like the United States? Because in the United States you can criticize America, and in Slaka you can criticize America also. And in the United States you cannot buy anything with vloskan, and in Slaka you cannot buy anything with vloskan also.'

The joke is on the edge between the dangerous and the harmless. It is true, too. The fact that Plitplov has the courage to tell it points to his ambiguous status.

The slogans Lubijova feeds Petworth sound artificial. No guide would indoctrinate a westerner in that primitive language:

'...in my country, here we always put our work before our homes (...). That is why we make such a good economical progress.'

Everybody knows they are lies. Even Petworth realizes the lack of consumer goods, the fear, the pressure, the humiliation. But Bradbury does not choose to enlarge upon that. Does it seem a trifling or merely an unknown matter? Satire wins over compassion and narrative depth.

One funny sentence reveals the author's real political horizon. Lubijova, in her broken English, explains that Grigoric, the 'Liberator,'

'set us free to the Russians after the war, and planned our socialist economy.'

Katya Princip seems to be more at ease and unafraid to approach Petworth. She has the courage to tell him:

'Here, if they do not like what you write, they let you drive a tram.'

Then she adds that she drove one herself at some time. Probably before she had discovered that

'In Slaka, sex is just politics with the clothes off.'

Thereafter, she prospered. Fair- haired, many- husbanded, well befriended and graciously conniving, she is Petworth's great disappointment. He goes back home to his dark wife, and is even deprived of the beauty of dreaming of a pure, selfless, loving Slakan novelist. He feels at the opposite pole from Miranda, with her ejaculation, 'Oh brave new world that has such people in it!'

The borderline between consenters and dissenters is narrow and very confusing. Katya could be a dissenter, and yet... She describes herself quite aptly:

'Yes, I have some protection,' says Princip, 'It is best always to have some protection. But I am not reliable, you know. I have friends in America who make to me some telephone calls. I go abroad perhaps too many times, and meet wrong people. I am not polite to those apparatchiks. So often they like to watch me.'

She shows Petworth that Slaka

'is not a nice world and everyone must take care for themselves.'

Which she does very well. Is she a security agent, is she not? This uncertainty is one of Bradbury's major satirical devices.

The title of the book, *Rates of Exchange*, springs from the five different rates of exchange of hard currency into the national coin (vloskan), but actually aims at the way westerners and communist subjects connect. They do not seem to have much, or anything in common. The five rates of exchange are in fact five arbitrary paths of the mind, and none is reliable, realistic.

Bradbury has a gift for significant names, suggestive of the opposite of the word incorporated in them. The British representative of the Embassy is Felix Steadiman, a man who hardly knows where he is or what to do with himself, and blissfully stammers into the funniest word combinations. Petworth's first name is Angus, which reminds us of anxiety, his constant mood. His guide is Lubijova (*lubov* is love), the most unfeminine and unlovable creature ever. Katya Princip can be accused of anything but owning firm principles. Plitplov is suggestive of the noise of a fish out of water: his quality (spy? communist? conformer, merely?) makes him extremely ill at ease. Picnic is the name of what Lubijova most determinedly calls an 'agent' at the Faculty of Germanic Languages (the name seems to belong to the Romanian faculty of Bucharest, which Bradbury has also visited). The whole novel is certainly no picnic and, come to think of it, to someone who knows communism from the inside, not much fun.

There is one remarkable sentence in this book that is worth remembering. Katya Princip utters it:

'It is a state of mind, you know, to be watched.'

The whole novel is pervaded by a feeling of guilt, which the same heroine explains:

'...we do not know ourselves at all. We all feel a bit guilty to exist. And this they know very well. To be is the crime we commit...'

She means to say that life under communism is an endless line of experiences under pressure, that the inhabitants of a communist country are psychically afflicted with well-grounded fear. It is a subtle observation, one of the few trips into human interiority of this book.

We get to know next to nothing about all the characters. Petworth is the most enigmatic. He manages to be the main hero with no inner life, no special deeds, just passivity and blankness to boast of. Marisja Lubijova takes us by surprise. Very close to the end of the book, we find out she was once married to a medical student, whose father was *'high in the Party.'* As a doctor, the boy went to Vietnam *'to help those people against imperialism,'* he fell ill and died there, leaving behind a wife and a small

son. When the widowed mother is not a guide, she says, she finds a *'line,'* and brings *'good things'* to her son. Life is not exactly a bed of roses, and Petworth at least notices that.

The secret network of relationships and favours perplexes and scares Petworth. Plitplov explains:

'...in my country many things are possible if you know a someone.'

Which also applies to Petworth's guide, who gets places on the plane for them to fly back to Slaka when political turbulence unexpectedly appears:

'...this flight. I know the stewardess who takes it, I teach her some English. And she is mistress of the captain, so we get a place. Here it is always best to know somebody.'

Half of Petworth's tour is cancelled because of a mysterious political riot and radical change. The same as the author, his hero cannot make head or tail of it. The president changes. Past history is worse than forgotten, it is denied. Orwell's Minitruth is very effective here. It makes the book somewhat repetitive, because real events did not take place like this.

It turns out that Petworth stopped short of going to Provd, a place where, Steadiman tells him (in his usual stammer),

'they were shoe shoe shooting people.'
Petworth got lucky and returned to Slaka instead, missing all the action, hoping for a passionate time with Katya Princip. She had promised him the end of a story about 'Stupid,' but it turns out, eventually, that Petworth knows that story better than anyone. It is his own story of his Slakan trip. The linguist goes back to his wife none the wiser, and we leave the book none the happier, or at least more amused, for having been patient with it.

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Much more amusing from the linguistical point of view, which is the main source of humour in *Rates of Exchange*, too, *Why Come to Slaka* (1986) is a 'guidebook and phrase book' translated into English by Dr. Plitplov, with an introduction by Dr. A. Petworth, published in the People's Republic of Slaka. The contents reminds us of the recent political change. We find in the book a 'message from the Slakan head of state,' 'Comrade-General I. Vulcani,' a chapter on geography and history by 'Professor-Academician Rom Rum' (Katya Princip's protector), another on 'the languages of Slaka' by Katya Princip herself. This small book concentrates whatever was funny in *Rates of Exchange*, and it reads quickly and easily.

Here are several illustrations of Bradbury's humour. The head of the state lets us know:

'Dialogi' is the great spirit of amity and concorde. 'Dialogi' means the desire for true intercurse – an intercurse where each partner is an equal and no one is on top!

The citizens of Slaka will do anything to please tourists:

'See their loins, girded to the task of giving you pleasure!! Know our motto: please come to us, and we promise, one day we will come to you!!'

That day has now come. The Slakan chief of state unwillingly foretold:

'...our many fine travel- workers who exist only to turn your turstii dream into harsh reality.'

Later on, we find a description of the Slakans which is, again unwillingly, very true:

'...modern Slaka is a young nation proudly on the march, its eyes firmly fixed not on the day after yesterday but the day before tomorrow!!!'

No history, no sense of time, constant dangers (even 'magnolias bloomb'), and an incurable hunger for hard currency are all marks of Slaka. In *Going to the Bank*, here is what we read (in English version, since the Slakan one is, of course, entirely imaginary):

'There are many rates of exchange
The diplomatic rate
The business rate
The congress rate
The tourist rate
Yours is the worst'

The reader's rate of exchange trades time for a few smiles. Does it make the book worth our while? I am inclined to say that the mere fact that Bradbury approached the hidden face of communism redeems his case. He did not go very far or very deep into the matter, but – at least – he tried.

***

The one book that gives Bradbury the status he probably always hungered for, that of an ironist of the intellect, is *My Strange Quest for Mensonge, Structuralism's Hidden Hero* (1987). As one who has put Structuralism and Deconstruction both behind and aside, subscribing to intelligible criticism, I am delighted with Malcolm Bradbury in this small book. It ought to be forcefully fed to many academics. It offers such relief from the incomprehensible theories that lead nowhere, the babble of minds which have lost all love of and sense of everyday language. It mocks at all those who attempt to deprive literature and criticism of relaxed, unpretentious readers, who merely want to enjoy a text, not hack it. It is subtle humour for a very good cause. Actually, *Mensonge* may be Bradbury at his best.

The first thing we see when we open the book, before the title itself, is the large photograph of a bald head seen from behind, and below it we learn that this may be Mensonge's only extant image. Even the name of the photographer is followed by a question mark. This whole book is a friendly question mark, meaning to say: Which way do you want to go? For those who want out of the intricacies of devitalizing deconstruction, it certainly is a good and enjoyable book.

The first page quotes Michel Foucault ('What Is an Author?'):

'What difference does it make who is speaking?'

It is not unusual for Bradbury to invent words, thoughts, situations. Nothing he says here is to be taken seriously. That is probably what should make deconstruction addicts very, very angry. That must be why this tremendously funny little book is not better known.

In statement after statement, the whole ridicule of the deconstructionists' code is more severely admonished. At one point we are told:

'...thanks to Deconstruction, truth is very much an open question.'

Bradbury hates the snobbish occultation of understanding, but he knows that fighting it openly might only breed more addicts, so he chooses the flirtatious, roundabout way:

'...Structuralism–Deconstruction, in keeping with the times, is clean absurdism or cool philosophy.'

He warns us, in his ambiguous mockery, against

*'the age of the floating signifier*, when word no longer attaches properly to thing.'

He describes new but ‘confusing’ opportunities, which we learn quickly to recognize as poison. Whoever has been up the blind alleys of these two trends cannot miss both the fun and the satisfaction of no longer having to worship a god of mis-, or rather non-understanding. ‘Isms’ used to be the target of T.S. Eliot’s ridicule. He once wrote:

‘Leavisitism finds literature living and leaves it dead.’

Good pun, which makes those of us who prosper in the comprehensible feel revenged. Maybe this is why even the term Postmodernism leaks meaning so rapidly, losing popularity more and more.

Apparently, the author of *Mensonge* (Bradbury himself) professes to praise Mensonge and his co-Deconstructionists. He declares, tongue in his cheek, that we must feel challenged when it is proved to us that language ‘is not working.’ We do not feel elated. We are scared stiff. We know exactly what we want to do when he continues:

‘In brief, Structuralism and Deconstruction are and remain important because they have quite simply disestablished *the entire basis of human discourse*.’

We want to turn our backs, stuff our ears, block our minds in the face of a future when

‘it will be necessary to re-write everything.’

Bradbury calls that vista an ‘increasingly difficult world.’ He tries a history of its beginnings, with Saussure, concluding:

‘Hence there is langue, which is more or less what allows us to talk, and there is also parole, which explains why nobody bothers to listen.’

To prove his point, he rushes to Paris, where, he reminds us, in his very pro-Deconstructionist mood,

‘Hemingway wrote his one true sentence, Pound cut *The Waste Land* down to size, and Joyce met Beckett and generously asked him to translate *Finnegans Wake* into French, an act of friendship most of us have been fortunate to have been spared.’

The alleged apologist of Deconstruction goes on with his outline of the (privately considered fatal) movement, and expresses his devotion to it in immensely funny sentences, all the more so as they are supposed to be highly serious:

'...far from thought being written in language language was writing thought, and not doing it well.'

He mentions among the leading new gurus 'the psycho- analytic Structuralist Jacques Lacan,' who actually explained:

'I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.'

We are confronted with a revolution after which thinking might not survive, but enthusiast deconstructionists could not care less. They achieved their ultimate goal, turning everything into 'creative misreading,' and Bradbury is sincerely amazed that they
'need a lot of critics to help them misunderstand.'

He captured the mood of the time in a sentence such as:

'The wind of change was blowing everywhere, and the day of the modern reader who did not read a book at all was born.'

It is more than obvious that *Mensonge* is a nightmare, a dystopia of criticism, as he advises us to bear the burden, to

'comprehend the significance of his non- significance.'

Actually, Mensonge has hardly ever been seen, heard, acknowledged. He is the core of mystery. He neve wrote anything, yet his book was published and vanished. He is the author who denies himself: the deconstructionists' dream come true. Bradbury resigns himself to commenting:

'It also had considerable appeal for British critics, who had always taken the view that all authors were dead anyway, or if they were not then they should be.'

This criticism meticulously sets about deconstructing 'the author as a person.' The death of the author, prerequisite for the birth of the reader, is explained by the Deconstructionist author, who gets all the attention, while the original book is dead and buried. The Deconstructionist takes all the credit. He becomes the author. Bradbury calls this an 'illogicality,' but he actually means fraud. He explains that Mensonge's
'non- presence is exactly what constitutes his authority, or rather, precisely, his lack of it.'

The whole praise of Mensonge springs from an 'aesthetic of silence,' which only applies to literature proper, not to Deconstructionist

criticism, which is highly talkative, as a matter of fact. Creating a whole new language is no easy thing.

Unlike other Deconstructionists, Mensonge claims to be a *'totally absent absence.'* He is extremely moral in his non-existence. That is why Bradbury considers him to be

'...the ultimate case of Deconstructionist *integrity* – the man who has out-Barthesed Barthes, out-Foucaulted Foucault, out-Derridaed Derrida...'

His book ends by proclaiming *'the absent absence of Henry Mensonge'* – which could also mean an unbearable presence. Entitled *La Fornication comme acte culturel*, it was published by the 'Imprimerie Kouskous in the Rue des Timbres – Postes,' Luxembourg, and it is rumoured to have been printed on paper that destroys itself. The book can hardly be found, anyway. There are also rumours about a manuscript, *Non-Mensonge par Non-Mensonge*. Actually hardly anyone has read (and no one can quote) the work of this *'elusive non-author.'*

There are faint rumours that *La Fornication* is due to be printed in its English translation, and

'...will appear in due time from the West Coast Marxist-Feminist Gay Collective Press, under the title *Sex and Culture*, with a lovely cover, in their 'His-and-Her-Meneutics' series.'

It becomes more and more obvious where Bradbury's sympathies go, and that he is having the time of his life denying it in the Deconstructionist manner. The future of 'la nouvelle critique' in Bradbury's description is hilariously menacing, wildly ironical, though apparently favourable to Deconstruction pushed to its furthest achievement:

'What everyone was waiting for, everyone needed, was the coming of the centreless centre, the presentless present, the writerless writing, the signless sign that would draw everything together and put it into its true lack of relation.'

The 'supreme negation' has Bradbury splitting with laughter, yet hiding this heresy under the cult of Mensonge (lie). The great man declares:

'This is not the book I did not write, (...) and I refuse to acknowledge it as not mine.'

Consequently, *La Fornication* is 'the greatest unread work of our times,' which is a relief, after all. As a title in the (imaginary) bibliography states, we have read a 'Fabula Rasa.'

Unlike Bradbury's other novels, which relied mostly on humour, the writer's deep- rooted need to be approved of and indulged, gratified by the reader's laughter, *Mensonge* has an intellectual point to prove, a theory to 'deconstruct.' Malcolm Bradbury is sick and tired of the meaninglessness and pretentiousness of all critics who claim they can create a new meaning and dispense with all traditions, that of the author included. His book proves the uselessness of incomprehensibility.

*Mensonge* may very well be Bradbury's best claim to the status of a literary Desperado lost in a world of Deconstruction. He starts out as funny, and ends in bitter reprimand, veiled in irony. A Desperado who melancholically looks back and rejects any misuse of language. At the gates of commonsense, he strives and smiles. If we follow him, we do the same.

Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## The Self-Consuming Dystopia of Age – Alasdair Gray (born 1934)

Alasdair Gray was born in Glasgow in 1934. He is the representative of his native Scotland both in his literature and painting. Among other things, he wrote *Lanark: A Life in 4 Books* (1981), *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (1983), *1982 Janine* (1984), *Something Leather* (1990), *Poor Things* (1992), *A History Maker* (1994).

Whatever Desperado literature includes, Gray amply illustrates it all, for reasons that go beyond the fact that his imagination strives for experiment at a time when the experimental area has been fenced and the 'No Trespassing' sign has been stuck into it. Gray's first novel, *Lanark* (1981), begins as an oppressive nightmare and ends by making us want to linger on in its universe. It is a dystopia which consumes itself, progressing from despair to acceptance. The horror consumes itself, leaving us in the end with a bright feeling that even the worst of worlds is inhabitable as long as we are alive, and death may very well not really exist. The narrative which tries to project us outside ourselves eats its

own head, and we are left with the body of a book and of a world that we do not want to leave. It haunts us with peaceful certainty, feeding on its own death, which is the death of death, or, in other words, the beginning of rereading.
Lanark is the hero of a *Life in 4 Books*, whose order is 3, 1, 2, 4. The story begins in an imaginary world of the future, where Lanark arrives without memories, chooses his own name and starts a desperate and hopeless search for happiness. Everything is repelling and confusing. The letters of Lanark's name could be rearranged as *'carnal,'* and the meaning of the word is in fact the very opposite of what is happening slowly in the book: the heroes lose their bodies, transferring their flesh to something impalpable, their hidden soul, which they watch fiercely. Gray's beings share nothing with the others, they are exasperatingly lonely creatures, starving, tormented by the need to feel.

The imaginary universe is baptized the city of Unthank, then the Institute, the intercalendrical zone, the city of Provan. In between these dystopic places, Book 1 brings Glasgow and Duncan Thaw, a painter and writer who committed suicide by drowning in the sea, thus landing in Unthank with his pockets full of seashells. The book begins and ends with Thaw melted into Lanark. He falls a prey to dragonhide, a disease that changes the body into a very thick shell, inside which the soul is a prisoner. The disease is caused, it seems, by the lack of sunshine, as the sun becomes a rare sight in this world of the future. Lanark is saved and healed at the Institute, where he also saves Rima, a girl he met in Unthank, and whom, as we find later on, he loved while in Glasgow, and may even have killed before drowning himself (the text is ambiguous here). The two have a son, Alexander, who grows by fits, while we are unaware of the passage of time. As a matter of fact, time is hidden everywhere, there are no clocks, but it is not abolished; it undermines all bodies and buildings, and in the end it kills Lanark, since Book 4 ends with an epitaph:

'I STARTED MAKING MAPS WHEN I WAS SMALL
SHOWING PLACE, RESOURCES, WHERE THE ENEMY
AND WHERE LOVE LAY. I DID NOT KNOW
TIME ADDS TO LAND. EVENTS DRIFT CONTINUALLY DOWN,
EFFACING LANDMARKS, RAISING THE LEVEL, LIKE SNOW.
I HAVE GROWN UP. MY MAPS ARE OUT OF DATE.
THE LAND LIES OVER ME NOW.
I CANNOT MOVE. IT IS TIME TO GO.'

This short poem, a summary of the emotional life of the book, is followed by 'GOODBYE,' spelt in huge letters on the last, otherwise blank page of the book.

The story of Lanark – the newcomer, Sludden – the head of the gang 'the Elite,' and all the rest is fragmentary, told in the manner of *Ulysses*. The difference lies in the fact that we do not deal so much with meditation as with incidents, which are linked together by a masterful, painting-like geography of the imaginary world. The characters inhabit a masterful map, drawn in its minutest details, overcrowded with faces and places, like Gray's own sketches.

When we first enter the novel, not knowing what we expect unless a good time of relaxation, we are baffled. We do not find scholarly complications, but we do not find anything familiar, either. Gray's first effect is one of shock, because whatever it is that he wants to describe, he underlines that everything is illogical, or rather alogical. All logic we are accustomed to is defied, and the story builds its own rules as it goes along. The Desperado spirit becomes visible.

We find ourselves in an uncomfortable intellectual posture, partaking of a mind that defies and rejects all conventions, from chronology (which is not a new rebellion) to emotions (Joyce and Woolf cherished those). *Enfant terrible* of the Desperadoes, Gray mocks at whatever seems comfortable, and the consequence is an apparently dry text, which we must learn to enjoy, against our prejudices and expectations. We must learn to live with a writer who actually despaired of literature.

The story of Book 3 begins in a café above a cinema hall. Lanark comes in and meets Sludden and his gang. He does not know the first thing about this new world or its inhabitants. He is completely alone, and stays like this to the very end of the novel, not allowing himself to love anyone, except his son. All the way up to the end, here and there Gray uses shameful words freely, and talks about sex dispassionately. It seems to be a common feature of most Desperadoes, to force language into four-letter words and worse, without fear or danger of pornography. Sex seems to be a major topic here, but love is not, or rather, the largest issue at stake is the absence of love.

Another sign that Gray is part of the Desperado army of tricks is his utter disrespect for the reader's eagerness to understand, to find the key to coherence. It is only at last that we do find coherence behind and beyond the air of science-fiction of the text. The label that dispels confusion may be dystopia. But until we diagnose that, we have a hero coming from nowhere that we know of, on a goods train, to a town where there is no light of day, where dawn lasts for two minutes at most. Unattached to anything, emotionally empty and materially floating in non-existence, Lanark chooses his name from a memory of a place mentioned on a picture on the train. The name can be squeezed for meanings, of course, one leading us to the word in his epitaph, *'landmark.'* We have to accept

Lanark without an identity, without memories, without any profession that he knows of. We have to accept his amnesic nightmare, in which his only occupation is to chase the dawn, to run like mad at the moment of light, only to lose it in a world of darkness. It could be the darkness of Desperado fiction, is still groping for rules.

The way people turn into dragons, and are either cured or die at the Institute at the core of the mountain, to be used for energy and food, arouses our curiosity in a sick way, peculiar to Alasdair Gray. The details which are the only explanation, such as the hole opening in Unthank and engulfing Lanark at his own request down the corridor of time, into the ward where he becomes a doctor after being cured, are stripped of any human emotion. Gray keeps his distance, the same as Ishiguro and most other Desperadoes, whether novelists or poets. The book is a continuous slip into the unknown.

Unthank is the beginning of forgetfulness. Whenever the light goes out, someone vanishes, as we later learn, in order to continue his or her disease, to become a dragon and possibly die of it. Rima becomes such a fabulous animal, enclosed in a huge shell, and is ready to die when Lanark kindles her soul back to life and they both leave the Institute on foot, to cross another portion of time and reach Unthank again. Gray's beings are almost all the time 'on the lip of a horrible pit,' on the verge of something close to death but not quite it. The chain of mishaps forms and drags Lanark farther and farther away from the age he had when he first jumped off the train in Unthank. He keeps growing older without experiencing his ages. The disappearance of time is nothing to be thankful for, since growing old is a nightmare that cannot be stopped.

The torment of forgetfulness extends to language as well. At some point in the beginning, 'Lanark tried to think of other words.' The language of the whole novel, its style, is parsimonious. No word slips over the border of uncommitted neutre approach. No sentence suggests sympathy or pity. The words step all on the rope of a faked indifference.

Dragonhide, the disease which gives the affected limbs a will of their own, *'spreads fastest in sleep.'* It also thrives on inactivity, but it seems that any kind of activity is harmful, since the group called the *'protesters'* fight all businessmen, wanting to restore the sunlight and along with it probably the sense of time. Nothing helps, though, and Lanark, exasperated by his dragon arm, shouts, *'I want out!'*. A mouth in the wall opens at once, saying, *'I am the way out,'* so he plunges into infinite darkness and travels to the bottom of the mountain. When he recovers, he finds himself in a ward with a screen instead of a window, and a clock that has twenty-five hours on it. A feeling of unreality pervades every corner of the novel and the lack of all human contact leads to

dehumanization. Together with the right to a sense of time, everything vanishes: light, view, health, and above everything, love. The world which replaces reality is the fruit of what may appear at first morbid imagination. In time we realize that morbidity is the very weapon to fight death.

*'I hate despair!'*, shouts Lanark, and it seems that the words define the whole story of his life. The author endows him with the courage to want to leave one circle of hell after another, from his real life to existence in a two-minute-dawn Unthank, then to dr. Ozenfant's Institute. Ozenfant, the doctor who watches dragons burning into energy supplies, is a combination of the wizard of Oz and the French *'enfant'*, as it must be obvious. His emotions are simple and unambiguous: he wants to climb the social ladder and actually ends by becoming the twenty-ninth Lord Monboddo, head of the imaginary world of nightmares. He is not subjected to the empty dream most characters live. He does not fear the emotionless nightmare, and he never wants to leave. Constant threats are his power and his smile. He thrives on the hideous, which is so characteristic for Desperado texts.

Book 1 follows after Book 3, reinforcing the feeling that all life is a trap. An oracle retells Lanark's previous existence as Duncan Thaw. Family, friends, possible lovers are even in real life disembodied, haunted souls. Somehow, except the horrible asthma, Duncan's body vanishes, and an ugly mind is left floating, looking for memories, for attachment. The heroes, *'lonely and magnificent,'* are repulsive and drown in a general solitude. Book 1, a portrait of the artist as an asthmatic, can be summarized as a collection of oppressive memories of childhood, a stifling present and an ominous future.

The third person narrative does not mislead anyone into thinking this could be a traditional novel. The sensibility behind this traditional narrative manner erects edifices of bitter, unpleasant emotions. The hero rejects himself and everyone else, all characters are inimical and the surroundings, even nature, are a constant menace. Duncan is a compulsive painter and cannot enjoy anything but his work, which is more like a curse to find and watch himself, than the joy of creation. The war in childhood, his mother's death in adolescence, his torturing asthma, are part of a lightless life, perceived by the obscurity of his soul. The narrative is dry because the writer refuses to be involved in it, and consequently his voice, his style is dry, unemotional, leaving the soul hidden deep down, almost elusive to a hurried eye.

Duncan Thaw's real life is even less appealing than life in science-fiction or Orwellian Unthank. There is no joy of life, there is no enthusiasm, not even the slightest trace of sentimentality. The writer loves his

lovelessness. Duncan creates like Proust, despairingly yet hopefully imprisoned in his asthma and his solitude. He feels that *'suffocation waited like an unfulfilled threat,'* making life seem a *'punishment.'* At times, he almost goes mad with loneliness but will do nothing to change his life. The lack of air, his impossibility to breathe properly, cause a diminishing mood. Nothing is important any more, except his compulsive creation. As for the rest, we are all 'big balloons of hate.' This autobiographical Book 3 is written in the naturalistic vein, with accents from Joyce and D.H. Lawrence in it. Perception is depersonalized, the story of Duncan's early life is grim all over. He dreams of writing a 'Divine Comedy with illustrations in the style of William Blake,' and becomes the prisoner of his own inferno.

Book 2 continues Duncan's nightmare. Compared to Ishiguro's delicate, subtle, decorous silence, Gray is rough, gloomy, scary. Thaw reads Huxley, but he finds him annoying:
'He shows a world with too little in it to believe or enjoy.'

As a matter of fact, Gray's own world is just that. Poverty is a burden which, as in Orwell's *1984*, darkens all worlds. Duncan is offered a scholarship at Art School, and he takes to painting dead bodies because

'I want to like the world, life, God, nature, et cetera, but I can't because of pain.'

His paintings are full of *'ugly distortions,'* and even youth is a calvary. Genius ends in provoking death. The name 'Lanarkshire' turns up in a newspaper, linking the real and the after- real characters together. Life with asthma and without any joy in it is such a crushing torture that Duncan drowns in a state of torpor, after painting the mural of a church that was on the point of being abandoned. The real story ends thus, thoroughly depressing, after having discarded gloomy, stolid true life. The Desperado spirit has taken the lead.

Book 4 is a return to unreality, which in the meantime has become more engrossing, by contrast. Somehow, we have become immune to the brutality of both real and imaginary worlds. This fitful sequence of incidents is another Desperado device: Gray can very well build an alert plot, but he prefers interrupting it and feeding us fragments, 'books,' parts of the story. Curiosity is both confused and stirred.

Using 'emergency exit 3124' (which is the order of books in the novel), Lanark and Rima leave the Institute for Unthank. Wherever they go, Gray keeps imagining the unimaginable: a forgotten murder, a birth in a cathedral, people dying and being recycled into energy and food, intercalendrical zones which make the heroes age instantly. He furnishes

the void with surroundings inhabited by people who are only half human, the other half having been wasted during their lifetime. They cry out in despair, knowing that something is lost forever, and get 'dragonhide,' which means they are built in that hideous, gigantic shell of dragons. The shell kills the human being, and life appears as a lonely race through and through.

Gray's novel can be associated with quite a number of other books, mainly from the point of view of the images, the future he imagines. Orwell's *1984* is one of them. Life is oppressive and doomed in both books. The humans are helpless and time crushes them. The telescreen does not offer the views of the screen in Lanark's ward, and the political implications in Orwell are stronger. Yet, the oppressive atmosphere of the imagination is similar. The Desperado spirit is felt in both.

Huxley's *Brave New World* also comes to mind. Unthank is aimed at *'killing hope slowly.'* Huxley's world is born without hope, and John, *'the savage,'* a real human of the old times, brought from the reservation, cannot breathe in it, so he commits suicide. We have the same feeling in Gray's world. When we start reading, the nightmare is so strong that we can hardly struggle free from it. We are compelled to submit to a stifling horror, and we are made to feel that, sooner or later, we, too, will become part of it. As we go along, the book suddenly charms us in a very devious way; we feel we would like to know more. Huxley does not have Gray's Desperado skill at making our head spin, whether it be with too much complication or too much imagination. The horror is turned into delight by a feat of Gray's despairing magic, and we are reluctant to leave the scene, which, unfortunately, consumes itself and leaves us agape.

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, especially the Inferno, comes to mind. The souls of the beings we meet are so bitter and in pain, so solitary in their suffering, and Lanark himself is so oppressed by the darkness, that we feel they all have to go from circle to circle of hell, in search for a spot of peace – which they can never find, since Gray's book does not go beyond the inferno of life, or whatever his imaginary world is supposed to be.
Kafka's *Trial*, with its labyrinths, its maddening terror and utter loneliness is also a possible connection. Nobody listens to anyone, there is no available help, only ominous corridors everywhere. The feeling of nausea Lanark experiences all the time comes very close to Sartre, while his imagination flies in the footsteps of Wells; Gray has Wells' delight in filling the unknown void with menacing acts and vistas.

These associations are caused by the quality of Gray's imagination, mainly. While attempting to visualize the future – whether near or remote, he does not say – he comes close to most people who have done

it, even to Swift's Houyhnms, for that matter, except that his despair is so complete that we end by enjoying its perfection.
A few proofs of Gray's haunting visions are the 'mohomes' (houses in a car, with a screen for mechanical games in place of the windshield), the 'department of chronometry,' the food made from human bodies consumed by dragonhide. Science has reached a frightening stage, where, instead of helping life, it feeds on it. Faint echoes from Sylvia Plath and Eliot float in the air. Someone hums, 'measuring out our life with coffee spoons,' which suggests the despondency, the emptiness of whatever human life might at one time in the future become.

With Desperado irony directed against the text which consumes itself, the last book introduces an author within the author. The king of Provan tells Lanark, *'I am your author.'* What follows is a list of plagiarisms in the novel, a kind of Notes like those Eliot appended to *The Waste Land*, perverted, half made up, half misinterpreted. The author within the author is mockingly depicted, he is shown creating, the book is described in the making. Fowles's *Mantissa* is one other example of an essay on creation. Many Desperadoes like to talk about the way they write, they like to split personalities and imagine themselves in the mirror, pretending to know less than they actually do. The king of Provan states that he is in the process of living Lanark's story. The fact that he admits he does not know the future yet instils in the text a sense of absence, though not of loss, since there is no hope or regret, just emptiness.

The Desperado novel feeds on literature, the text devours other texts, reading invites rereading. The concern of the author is mainly intellectual, concealing emotions under a thick layer of tricks. In a way, this novel could be said to suffer from the disease invented by Gray for Unthank – dragonhide. It begins by patches of erudition and cleverness, and ends in a thick shell of innovation at all costs, which bursts open only when it is too late. Alasdair Gray does not go so far, though. His *Lanark* has the freshness of a painting, combined with the nightmare of a dry style.

We could consequently say that the Desperado spirit is an exacerbated awareness of past texts, which it uses cleverly, not emotionally or with limp irony, like Eliot. The art of indirect quotation is perfected upon. Gray thrives on sarcastic invocations of other texts, which he proves irrelevant in the end. The original is disparaged and the pride of each new creator swells like a dragon. Irrelevance becomes an attribute of all literature but that of the author in question. Gray feels alone in a world of useless words clustered in dragonhide, and his book is built on them. The word has lost, yet paradoxically has won everything.

The inability of the author to sound emotional is also of the Desperado kind. Imagination has gone dry, the soul can no longer be searched, psychology is hidden behind incidents, the stream of consciousness has somehow become useless, futile. The character Gray imagines as being the creator says:

'I'm like God the Father, you see, and you are my sacrificial Son, and a reader is a Holy Ghost who keeps everything joined together and moving along. It doesn't matter how much you detest this book I am writing, you can't escape it before I let you go. But if the readers detest it they can shut it and forget it...'

The reader indeed feels a kind of rejection, he begins by reading unwillingly, because his better judgment prevails on his sentimentality, which is deeply frustrated. He does not read with love in his heart. Yet, this does not mean the death of loving reading, of the reader's emotional involvement; I should call it its secrecy.

The conversation author- hero at the end of the novel is an essay on creation, in which the author within the author utters what the real author cannot bring himself to state. We suddenly realize that Gray is very much aware that too much resentment can kill a text, so he grants us an interview author- hero, which does not change much, except our state of mind, and this is a major achievement. We suddenly realize that whatever displeased us so far has dispelled, when confronted with the prospect of replacing our imaginary author (Gray) by a king of Provan, a stranger to our imagination. Consequently, the imaginary author is exposed and we are glad of that. We rejoice that the real author lurks behind him, and creates the 'magic' which is – as we perceive at last – the texture of the novel.

This magic stems from the fact that we are offered a forbidden view of a possible future of Earth and mankind. It no longer matters that Lanark 'couldn't remember what happiness felt like,' that all there is to feel in this novel is just 'pained emptiness.' We realize that the author, just like his hero, is 'locked in fear and hatred.' It is hatred of all order and pattern, and what gushes forth out of it is a text that pushes literature beyond the stream of consciousness, into the realm of Desperadoes. All incidents are formally disconnected, though linked by the hidden flow of spiteful moods in the book. Fragmentariness has reached the stage of incoherence, disorder borders on chaotic lack of all rules, we are overwhelmed by a denial of the very idea of order.

The novel gathers ultimately around the age- old theme of death. Lanark prays,

‘give us all enough happiness and courage to die without feeling cheated.’

The novel, the same as the hero’s past, is a ‘muddle of memories.’ Before Lanark dies, the author gives us a clue to the mingling of the real and imaginary levels of the book:

‘First he had been a child, then a schoolboy, then his mother died. He became a student, tried to work as a painter and became very ill. He hung uselessly round cafés for a time, then took a job in an institute. He got mixed up with a woman there, lost the job, then went to live in a badly governed place where his son was born. The woman and child left him, and for no very clear reason he had been sent on a mission to some sort of assembly. This had been hard at first, then easy, because he was suddenly a famous man with important papers in his briefcase. Women loved him. He had been granted an unexpected holiday with Sandy, then something cold had stung his cheek.’

We discover that we no longer need this revealed chronology, and this is the precise reason why the author decides we can have it. He proves to us we are no longer the same person who read *The Waves* or *Ulysses*. We have gone a little farther on the path towards *‘the age of alienation and non-communication.’*

The head of the universe beyond Lanark’s drowning, Lord Monboddo, has a ring of ‘my body’ to it. If it was meant that way, it was only to underline the dehumanization, the half-mechanical nature of life in Unthank, Provan or the Institute. This is the essence of Gray’s dystopia. In it, we travel from Hell to real life: from our worse fears of an imaginary future to a drab present, which is ours as well. The trip back and forth makes the future turn into the present under our own eyes. We find ourselves, exhausted, on the last threshold of a life of absence, sternly measured in swift, ‘decimal’ time. We sympathize with Lanark at last, when he thinks to himself, *‘I ought to have more love before I die.’* Only, once he feels that way, his trip ends, and *‘he was a slightly worried, ordinary old man but glad to see the light in the sky.’*

The dreaded ‘goodbye’ closes our communication with him, and we feel sorry for having felt so little. We feel like going back and rereading the novel in a better way, since we know better now. We could say here that in this way the Desperado writer’s hope has been fulfilled.

Alasdair Gray makes us give up all rules and accept his imagination as the only law. His book is enthralling, after being repelling at first. The nightmare turns into a delight of participation to the unreal, the undesired, the implacable, the out of the ordinary.

Gray is an enemy of the tame, expected, natural flow of incidents or of words. His subject matter is frighteningly, appallingly appealing, his language, apparently austere, is a reversal of the face value of words, a revolution in the world of meanings, diving into the volcano- core of our brain, where speech is born.

We end by claiming, yet questioning both language and reality, by doubting our senses and our power to articulate. The whole human universe is under a huge question mark – and there is no answer anywhere. This dystopia of age is speechless and self- consuming.

# A Desperado of Simplicity – David Lodge (born 1935)

David Lodge began writing his first published novel, *The Picturegoers* (1960) when he was twenty-one. He was born in London, taught in the English Department of the University of Birmingham between 1960-1987, after which he retired and became a full time writer. His first novel is amazingly life-like for a beginner. It mixes the realistic tradition with the stream of consciousness. It is divided into episodes which build up stories of couples. There is the elderly couple that already have a large family (the Irish Mallorys), the poor orphan young girl who ends up marrying the poor young man in the Army, the young girl who gets pregnant by the elderly married man, the ex-novice who loses her lover to priesthood, the violent teenager who finds a mate and calms down. At first the stories are kept separate, but towards the end they begin to entwine and the coincidences are hard to believe and reduce the realism of the book, making it more of a game than a piece of real life. The fingers of the conniving author show.

What all the characters have in common is going to the cinema during the weekend, as if they were projecting themselves on the screen. David Lodge begins by X-raying their thoughts in a mildly Joycean way, only towards the end he changes his manner, and decides in favour of a more Hardy-like plot, with premonitions, blatant coincidences, unresolved frustrations. The priest and the literature student could not be farther apart than they are at the beginning of this merry-go-round, but they come to share the same fanatic Catholicism in the end. The author does not make it seem a view on life. It is just a choice like any other.

The novel does not really have a unitary plot. There is a major story, that of Clare and Mark (the ex-novice and the young man who turns into the priest-to-be when she expects it least), and a rainbow of small incidents, bits of other stories attached to it by coincidences, in the end. The trips into the characters' thoughts are very interesting. Each episode has its own atmosphere and a fresh reaction to the world.

One really interesting character is Harry, the angry teenager, who is violent, even attempts rape, and ends up with a girl friend of his own, which tames him, as it seems. In describing him, Lodge joins Burgess and

Lessing in their concern with teenage violence (see *A Clockwork Orange, The Fifth Child, The Memoirs of a Survivor*). Harry, just like all the other characters, lives in a stifling world, a small universe, a cinema hall full of ice-cream, hopes for the future, drugs to numb the present. From here to Mark Underwood's 'change' from a non-practising Catholic to a fervent one, the distance is huge and insufficiently explained. Mark is a mystery, like a black hole in a comfortable book.

The novel is indeed agreeable, well narrated, with individualized heroes. It creates its own world. This world is commonplace, soothing, very traditional. If it is told in episodes, like flashes of thought, it is because actually David Lodge must have put it together as a bunch of short stories that, at a certain point, happen to artificially intersect. For a beginner, it is an appealing book, that envelops you in the magic of an imaginary world. Which is a lot more than many mature books do.

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*Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962) is David Lodge's second published novel, and it mixes neorealism and comedy in a very readable way. The author confesses in the introduction:

'Like my narrator, Jonathan Browne, I was drafted into the Royal Armoured Corps shortly after obtaining my B. A. in English language and Literature at London University (in August, 1955 to be precise).'

He also confesses to having been deeply influenced by Graham Greene, whom he studied closely during his postgraduate years, after he had already been under his spell *'in the formative years of adolescence and early adulthood.'*

The story is written in the first person, and alternates past and present moments (or present and future, for that matter). The main hero is a young recruit in one chapter and one ready to be released, in the next. The title is just a line from a funny song that does not come true, since this is a book about the army:

> Ginger, you're barmy,
> You'll never join the Army,
> You'll never be a scout,
> With your shirt hanging out,
> Ginger you're barmy.

Wishful thinking. Both Jon and his ex-fellow Mike do join the Army. The story is actually very simple and well told. Mike is an unruly Irish boy, he resents the humiliations of the Army, the lost, wasted two years, and especially the death of a fellow recruit, actually caused by their superior's

brutality. Consequently, he uses the first pretext to take revenge on corporal Barker, whom he attacks while on duty, pretending he had no idea it was the corporal that was approaching him at night. Mike Brady goes to prison, and his case gets even worse when his letter to Percy's guardian returns to the Army. Percy is the orphan recruit who killed himself accidentally, because of Barker's brutality and negligence: he was allowed to leave with one bullet in his gun. Unfortunately, Percy's guardian cares more about the Army than about the boy, since he was a captain in the cavalry in the First World War himself. To put it in a nutshell, Mike sees no way out other than to escape, which he manages to do. After that, he is helped by the Irish Republican Army and becomes one of them. He meets Jonathan again when he raids the military unit where Jon is finishing his two years, and when, not knowing it is Mike, Jon helps capture him and his men. Besides witnessing or actually undoing Mike, Jonathan also takes his girl friend, Pauline. He marries her. He tells himself:

'...Pauline wanted *me*, not Mike. And one could not blame her. Mike was no hero, he was barmy, and there was no place for him.'

It looks as if Jonathan and his marrying Pauline were at the core of this novel, but what probably Lodge actually meant to focus on was the inner revolt of decent human beings crushed by the ignominy of Army life. The embodiment of his revolt is Mike Brady (with or without the IRA), and the initial motive is Percy's death. While on a week's trip to Palma de Majorca with Pauline, Jonathan feverishly writes down this whole story, to his future wife's great disappointment and displeasure. After that, they get married in a hurry, since Pauline is pregnant, and they move very close to Mike's prison. Jon is telling us in an epilogue:

'And at the core of my uneasiness was of course Mike, silently reproaching me from his cell in the country goal.'

Consequently, the main hero of this novel is Mike, the bad student, the man who ruins his own life. Jon's son is baptized Michael, too. The story tries to portray a particular kind of restlessness, that can be pretty hard to understand. We are simply told that Mike *'would never find rest or peace. Because he was barmy.'*

Whatever that means. Fact is that for the three years Mike is imprisoned, Jon visits him monthly, and now Mike, on the last page, is on the point of leaving goal. Jonathan comments:

'Now he is free, and I am shackled, – by a wife and family I do not greatly love, and by a career that I find no more than tolerable.'

He was among the best students in his year, with a bright future of research ahead of him. The army turned him into a guilty husband, teaching in the countryside, giving lectures at the prison. He means to stay where he is. He is trapped into his non-barminess, just like Joyce's heroes, all trapped in Dublin. This is a case of mediocrity reversed. Mike looks like the wasted one at first, but the real waste is Jon, and it is all Mike's doing, in an indirect sense.

David Lodge's second novel takes us through a racy story and creates a vivid atmosphere of revolt against all kinds of humiliation. It is a good novel, if taken as such. If we look for modernist tricks, stream of consciousness and depth of character, we may not be that happy. Lodge has humour, tons of it, and is a good story-teller, with a keen eye for the background. The complications of contemporary fiction leave him unimpressed. He may be a Desperado without knowing it, since he certainly seems very much at peace with his unobtrusive fiction. He writes for fun, which is a very rare thing these complicated days, at this tense turn of the millennium. Good for him.

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*The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965) is Lodge's third published novel. Part of the dedication is *'to Malcolm Bradbury (whose fault it mostly is that I have tried to write a comic novel).'* The two taught for a little while at the same English Department of Birmingham, in the early sixties. As Lodge puts it, they 'quickly became friends and collaborators.' This particular novel, indeed, focuses on laughter, but its author had higher ambitions as well, and he confesses himself in the introduction that he tried to 'mimic' Conrad, Graham Greene, Hemingway, James, Joyce, Kafka, Lawrence, C.P. Snow, Virginia Woolf. The presence of Joyce is obvious to anyone, especially in the last chapter, which is a Molly-esque interior monologue of the much too fertile young wife of a soon-to-be PhD.

Lodge calls this novel 'experimental,' as opposed to the previous two, which were 'essentially serious works of scrupulous realism.' Actually, all three novels are equally realistic and funny. The title of the book was supposed to be *The British Museum Has Lost Its Charm* ('a line from a song by George and Ira Gershwin'), but permission to use it was denied, so we get a much better title by mere chance.

More than parody, the book is a collection of influences. It happens within one single day, ends in a woman's unpunctuated monologue (Joyce), takes us to Kafka's labyrinth during a few moments when the hero's mind blacks out, and, mainly, follows Malcolm Bradbury's description of the academic world in *Eating People Is Wrong*. It is a book about the interdiction of contraception to Catholics, and its disastrous

consequences for a hero fatally born to the name of Adam Appleby. He has three small children already, and, for the time being, the book spares him the fourth, since in the last pages his wife has her long-expected period, after a day of despairing apprehensions for both of them. As Adam muses:

'Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round...'

Adam leaves home in the morning to go and work on his dissertation at the British Museum, and the line of comical situations Lodge plunges him into is endless. There is not much of a plot, but each episode is carefully worked out to end in laughter, which it does. A major theme is that of Americans returning to the spring, as conquerors this time. The theme reappears later on in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, too, but it is seen in a totally different manner. Here we have a Bernie from a small college in Colorado, who fantasizes about buying the British Museum, and transporting it stone by stone to Colorado, having it cleaned and re-erected. Each encounter, each incident is humorous. David Lodge is lots of fun.

The British Museum may not fall down, but Catholicism is very close to the brink. A wife taking her temperature daily in order to know when it is safe to have sex, a husband harassed by a cheap old scooter that ends in an explosion, burning a 'precious' manuscript, plus several small trips into the absurd and the constant fog (which is as much Dickensian as Joycean) make up one miserable day in the (long? short?) life of a student of English literature. The atmosphere is oppressive, the humour is unwillingly sad, actually. Adam is a tragically superficial hero, just like his wife Barbara, his friend Camel, and so on. Humour is an agreeable diversion and the easy way out. David Lodge cannot stop here, though. If he is a real novelist, he will soon have to prove it.

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*Out of the Shelter* (1970) is based on David Lodge's memories of a summer in 1951, when,

'at the age of sixteen, I travelled unaccompanied to Heidelberg, West Germany, to spend a holiday with my aunt Eileen, my mother's sister, who was working there as a civilian secretary for the U S. Army.'

The author suspects it to be the most autobiographical of his novels. What he rejects is the intention of confession. Which is true, David Lodge is not in the least the confessional type of author.

Lodge delivered the manuscript in December 1968, right before leaving Britain, to spend the next six months as an associate professor at Berkeley, California. It was the fourth novel he published, and by now his literary experience was gaining ground. The book has plot, atmosphere, characters, and even a faint sense of an ending. Timothy Young grows up in a miserable post-war England, which his sister Kate escapes from by starting to work as a secretary for the American army. The story is full of sex and war obsessions. It starts with England being bombed, and ends with Tim happily married, yet still apprehensive of death.

The novel is written in the third person, as the point of view of Timothy Young, a pupil gifted for drawing, who in the end decides to go to University, possibly architecture. The book ends when he already is an academic himself, in 'Environmental Studies,' mainly 'urban renewal.' The plot is a slow but constant escape from 'the shelter.' It begins with the real shelter against bombs, then the shelter of a family that would like him anchored in a safe job, the geographical shelter of England, and, last but not least, the shelter of childhood. They are all false shelters, finally destroyed in one way or another. Their neighbours' shelter is destroyed by a bomb, which kills a little girl and her mother. Childhood is unmasked, a shelterless state. As the preface announces, the influences of Joyce and James are quite obvious (the novel of adolescence, the indirect narrative, relying on limited, oblique points of view).

The hero of this progress out of the shelter is an introvert. As his mother puts it, *'you never were one to show your feelings.'* He ruminates on experience, misunderstands or misses the truth, gropes towards the future, and all this upheaval takes place in utter silence. His solitude is complete. Lodge does not let anyone come near, whether parents, his sister Kate, whom he visits at Heidelberg, or even casual friends. Alone with himself, Tim fights the unknown burden of life. The feeling of oppression is the best David Lodge invokes in this book.
The clash between Europeans and Americans is a recurrent theme with Lodge. This time we witness the Americans invading post-war Europe, with their consumer goods affluence, their debatable taste (when faced with European tradition), their noisy well-being. In contrast to Henry James, Paradise is America. From chewing gum to sweets and clothes, to a good life and uninhibited adolescents. The land of all opportunities, flooding an impoverished and blood smeared Germany.

Two types of childhood, two manners of education clash, and in the end two ways of life are contrasted: Tim, the European church-abiding child, strangled by tradition, and Kate, the woman freed by American mores. The huge wave of European emigration towards America – caused by war, religion, poverty – has completely reversed the situation as viewed by Henry James. Kate herself emigrates to the States at the end of her post-

war stay in Europe. When the novel ends, Tim and his family visit her there, owing to a 'Fellowship.' He is now totally out of the shelter, thus finishing the effect of his holiday in Heidelberg, which, he claims, was a turning point that brought him 'out of his shell' and broadened his horizon. It is hard for him to leave the shelter, but he pushes himself, he makes the effort. Henry James' *Ambassadors* is left far behind. The present courage is to abandon Europe and discover the States. The war branded Tim. He constantly feels that *'somewhere, around the corner, some disaster awaited him,'* and so do we. The book is an initiation into guilty exile.

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The trilogy *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), *Nice Work* (1989) begins in the comic vein and ends with a remarkable novel, probably the best of all the books David Lodge has written so far.

*Changing Places* is 'A Tale of Two Campuses,' Birmingham and Berkeley, present under imaginary names in the book (Rummidge and Plotinus, the latter in the American State of Euphoria). It opens on January 1, 1969, when the American professor Moris Zapp and the British lecturer Philip Swallow are on the plane, exchanging departments for 'the next six months.' The trilogy is narrated in the third person. Coincidences are no longer blatant, though they do occur a lot, and suspense is well handled. The heart of the matter is that the two main heroes exchange more than jobs, they switch wives, too. Philip is the average British academic who reads a lot. Morris is the American academic driven by the urge to publish, to write the absolute book (he starts by wishing to exhaust the analysis of Jane Austen). The difference in life styles is shocking, but they both adjust. They have disenchanted wives, and children whom we do not get to know. Hilary (Philip's wife) has three, Désirée (Morris' already estranged wife) has two twins. Ironically, Morris buys a cheap plane ticket from a student and finds himself surrounded by American girls who are all flying to England to get an abortion, because they want to take advantage of 'Britain's permissive new law.' Such comic situations abound. Lodge is still determined to force us into laughter, which does not happen in the last novel of the trilogy, *Nice Work.*

Both Philip and Morris get the six-month exchange by chance. Morris' wife wants a divorce and him out of the house, so he takes what he can find at the last moment: Rummidge. Philip's superior wants to appoint his own protégé for a senior lectureship, so he pushes Philip out of the way. They get involved with unexpected acquaintances, who coincidentally (again) connect them. The stories hardly matter. The novel where the story, and everything else, matters is *Nice Work*. The technique

of narration is contrapuntal, a page in America, one in Britain, then back again.

In short, both heroes act heroically on the job. Philip unwillingly joins the revolutionary student activities and is highly appreciated for that. Morris, on the contrary, helps calm down the Rummidge students, is looked upon as Head of the Department, and finally advises in favour of Philip's promotion to senior lecturer. The last chapter is written in the manner of a script, and has no real end. The four people mixed up in all kinds of 'changes' meet at a hotel in America, to talk things over, and Morris sums the situation up in the spirit of the whole first novel, by saying:

'The four of us already hold the world record for long-distance wife-swapping.'

The last – cinematic – word of the book is 'THE END,' but here is what goes before, as a conclusion to the last scene, rendered as an act in a play, or in a movie, rather:

(Philip speaks) 'I mean, mentally you brace yourself for the ending of a novel. As you're reading, you're aware of the fact that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent, than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just... end.'

The pace of the narrative is interesting, seen in this light. The realistic information is deficient. The beauty of California is not even hinted at, while the ugliness of England is extensively suggested. The characters are mere sketches, and the end of the trilogy finds them in the same state. The only two real characters Lodge creates are Robyn and Vic in *Nice Work*. Right now humour comes first.

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*Small World* (1984), 'An Academic Romance,' continues in the same vein. Coincidences pour. A world of academic conferences, affairs, plots. Persse McGarrigle from Dublin attends a conference in Rummidge and falls in love with Angelica Pabst. We are in 1979 now. The story carries us to Italy, France, Holland and America. Angelica has a twin sister, who is a luxury whore. Persse, in wild pursuit of the former, finds the latter and is utterly confused. The end reveals that both girls were found on a flight from New York to Amsterdam, and adopted by the then manager of the

KLM company. They – terrible coincidence – are actually the daughters of two academics who had a short-lived affair. The whole plot fits like an easy puzzle.

Both Morris Zapp and Philip Swallow are ten years older. Both have a strong position in their Departments. Philip is the head of his department, Morris is an authority in several fields. The book is humorous, but to a lesser extent than the previous one. Lodge seems more preoccupied with building up suspense, which he does well, relying heavily on coincidences of all kinds to bring characters together.

*Small World*, just like *Changing Places*, has its pregnant women, affairs and unhappiness, yet nothing sounds real enough for us to take it very seriously. It is relaxed reading, maybe inventive writing. A long line of disagreeable heroes and a switching focus, meant to enhance suspense. A disenchanted writer, and his disenchanted text, leave us gaping at what might have been if we had been allowed in the intimacy of David Lodge's imagination and emotions. But he would need to relax and allow his presence to be felt, which to him looks like literary infamy. The author stays back stage, since authorial unobtrusiveness is a very much cherished Desperado quality.

The academic world Lodge describes is quite dispiriting. Books published and ignored, ideas stolen, careers made or marred by mere hazard, impetuous trips for the British Council or to various conferences, aborted love affairs, seducing students and all-too-willing-to-be-seduced middle-aged professors, marriages broken or kept up for the sake of comfort and convenience. Lodge gossips at ease and invents with amazing gusto. A prostitute with a hidden child, another prostitute confusing everyone because of her resemblance to Angelica (her twin), echoes from Eliot in abundance, women devouring men (Désirée makes mince meat of her husband Morris in her novel, Fulvia Morgana forces Morris into a physical love triangle with her husband), an aborted kidnapping (Morris'). A future much-coveted UNESCO chair for literary theory, disgusting private lives in detail all over, bestsellers (Désirée's, Frobisher's), translations into Japanese, a trip to Tokyo, another to Jerusalem, Modern Language Association in New York. At last, Angelica is found. Persse is seduced by her twin, Lily, losing his virginity to her. Angelica is engaged. Persse decides he is in fact in love with another unknown girl, whom, again, he can no longer trace, because she no longer works at the British Airways Information desk, where he met her.

Should a new quest begin? Persse hardly catches our interest as he winds his way amongst narrowly missed chances and blatant coincidences. Yet, the atmosphere is realistic. Unfortunately so, because Lodge copiously derides it. A book that mocks at itself.

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*Nice Work* (1989) is quite the reverse. Thoughtful, deep, minutely psychological, it totally breaks with the previous comic approach, without losing the very necessary sense of humour. It takes place in the same Rummidge:

'...Rummidge is an imaginary city, with imaginary universities and imaginary factories, inhabited by imaginary people, which occupies, for the purposes of fiction, the space where Birmingham is to be found on maps of the so-called real world.'

It begins on January 13, 1986, with Vic (Victor Wilcox) waking up in his luxurious home and finding out something is missing, though he is not yet aware what that is. Actually, the end of the novel proves him wrong, but he does not know that yet.

Vic has a wife, Marjorie, and three children. He was born in 1940 in Rummidge, became an engineer and is presently 'Managing Director, J. Pringle & Sons Casting and General Engineering.' Lodge manages to write this engaging and definitely fresh novel in the traditional third person, without being bothered by any need for Post-Post-Post tricks. Both he and the readers are too engrossed in the substance to mind the wrapping paper, which is exactly as it should be, after all. *Nice Work* is not an experiment in form, it is a remarkably impressive experience and a sharp point of view, which the author underlines by actually speaking here and there in his own name: 'I.'

The second main character of the novel is Robyn Penrose, 'Temporary Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Rummidge,' a brilliant ex-student, a feminist, thirty-three years of age, born in Melbourne, Australia, brought to England when she was five. Her major field of interest is the 19th century industrial novel. She is well read in Lacan and Derrida, she

'...sat in lecture theatres and nodded eager agreement as the Young Turks of the Faculty demolished the idea of the author, the idea of the self, the idea of establishing a single, univocal meaning for a literary text.'

When she graduated, academic jobs became scarce. In 1984, Professor Philip Swallow, Head of the English Department at Rummidge University, was elected Dean of the Arts Faculty for three years, and Robyn was hired to replace him, as the 'Dean's Relief.'

The novel begins with Vic having a steady prospect of a good job ahead of him, and Robyn menaced by the end of Philip Swallow's three-year term, when she has no chance to stay on at Rummidge. The end is quite the other way round. Vic is fired, jobless, forced to start all over again, while Robyn sees a clearing at the horizon of her career.

The two main heroes are brought together by the 'Industry Year Shadow Scheme,' meaning that, on the occasion of 1986 being designated 'Industry Year by the Government,'

'each Faculty should nominate a member of staff to 'shadow' some person employed at senior management level in local manufacturing industry (...) in the course of the winter term.'

Robyn and Vic find themselves pushed into this scheme by last moment decisions, and both hate the prospect, the inconvenience of shattered habits, the effort of adjustment to the unknown.

In an ironical way, Robyn, the specialist in the 19th century industrial novel, is faced with the real colours of modern industry, and she realizes how deeply disgusted, how scared she is by it. Disgusted by the subhuman level to which individuals are reduced, scared that she might herself be plunged into doing such an abhorrent activity. To begin with, Robyn and Vic are one whole universe apart, in spite of Robyn's dissertation on the industrial novel. Reality is harsh and full of unimaginable surprises.

While the psychological confrontation of Robyn and Vic unfurls, minor characters gracefully whirl about and out of the plot. Charles, Robyn's undecided boy-friend, moves to London with the girl-friend of Robyn's brother, and switches from literature to 'merchant banker.' Then there are Robyn's parents, hardly visible, faculty members, Vic's family and fellows, strangers. No far-fetched coincidence, no lucky turn, just an easy, natural flow of emotions, thoughts and adjustments, which end up by building a firm friendship between Robyn and Vic, who start out hating each other desperately.

As the winter term goes by, Vic realizes he is 'in love with Robyn Penrose,' with her impetuous blunders, sharp remarks, innocence as far as industry is concerned. Robyn herself realizes that Vic is more than a 'bully,' sees him in action, actually helps him when they go to Frankfurt for Vic to buy some expensive machine. Just before that short trip – which obviously ends in bed and quickly out of it, since Robyn is not a sentimental, like Vic, Vic confesses to her:

‘Sometimes when I’m lying awake in the small hours, instead of counting sheep, I count the things I’ve never done.’

Robyn is one of them. Vic had been longing for this even before the beginning of the novel. He tries to prolong the experience by appointing himself Robyn’s shadow when the winter semester is over.

The moment of physical closeness, which is a mere incident for Robyn, but becomes a world of unrequited romantic love (imaginary love) for Vic, is narrated in the Present Tense, unlike the rest of the novel, which uses the relaxed Past Tense. Unfortunately for Vic, the Present lasts for a few pages, and then he is plunged into the misery of the Past Tense, Robyn’s indifference. She admits: ‘that night I fancied him.’ She has good reasons to do so, but does not realize it herself. Yet her diagnosis is right:

‘The trouble is, he wants to make a great romance out of it.’

Vic phones, writes, comes to her tutorials and is dead certain he loves her. Her reaction about the night in Frankfurt is:

‘Oh, shut up about last night, she said. That was just a fuck...’

The winter term is over, Robyn is back to her loveless, Charles-less, almost jobless life, when things start happening. Morris Zapp comes to Rummidge and offers Robyn publication at Euphoric Press and a possible job at his University. She feels there is no future for her in England, but, suddenly, she receives an inheritance (300,000 Australian dollars) from an uncle-in-law, who died in Melbourne, Charles announces that he would like to have her back (which she is going to decline), and Philip offers her the prospect of a job, which she decides to accept. As for the idyll Vic-Robyn, here is Vic’s conclusion:

‘I’ve been living in a dream (...). I must have been out of my mind imagining you would see anything in a middle-aged dwarf engineer.’

Robyn is more precise. She tells him smiling:

‘I don’t need a man to complete me.’

Which is true, in terms of this book. On the contrary, she can even lend *him* a helping hand. Vic’s enterprise is sold, he is jobless, he would like to set up on his own but needs capital. Robyn invests in him, explaining:

‘I trust you, Vic. I’ve seen you in action.’

Two people, most unlikely to ever meet otherwise, are brought together and forced to communicate. The narrative flows more naturally and enjoyably than in any previous novel by David Lodge. The idea of a merging novel between University and Industry is brilliant and the novelist makes the most of it. We actually come to know the thoughts and feelings of the characters. For the first time, Lodge goes more deeply than the surface, stops mocking and is entranced by inner life. The other heroes are smiling still lives. These two heroes, Robyn and Vic, are life palpable, life enjoyable, life frustrating and rewarding, life turned into moving fiction. Imagination has won.

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*Souls and Bodies/How Far Can You Go?* (1990) is mainly a third-person maze of narratives, a carnival of names and incidents, at whose alternation Lodge is very good. He builds a merry-go-round, but this time, in this particular book, our head really spins and there is not much in it to reward our efforts.

The novel starts with a group of students in 1952, and in the end the writer plunges among them, describing his evolution (after theirs) thus:

'I teach English literature at a redbrick university and write novels in my spare time, slowly, and hustled by history.'

You have no idea he identifies with his heroes – David Lodge does not usually do that – until the last sentences of the novel:

'All bets are void, the future is uncertain, but it will be interesting to watch. Reader, farewell!'

These sentences are probably the most engaging part of the book, which, otherwise, is a handbook on how to fight Catholics (mostly of Irish extraction, but not only) on the issue of a decent sex-life, meaning contraception. Everything revolves around sex, in an uninhibited narrative that refuses any other suspense. You lose one story while you are pushed into another, then, pages later, you are supposed to remember everything because you are brought back to the mentioned names. The characters are puppets to whom things (mainly physical, mainly sex) happen, but even their names are hard to remember. Whenever you hear one name, you have to stop and remember what the story behind it is. It does not help. The Desperado trick of alternating flashes is baffling and David Lodge is resourceful, but not orderly enough. The plot is a mess. The shallowness of the characters, whom we never get to know in depth, does not help. Somehow the novelist keeps

us interested, but his tricks are not efficient enough to keep us going, thinking, when the book has ended.

David Lodge's discreet treatment of his characters, his unwillingness to reveal their thoughts (with the remarkable exception of *Nice Work*) are his claims to the status of a literary Desperado. He tries to push us under a shower of stories, treats sex-life more than freely, is always hungry for humour, although, when he laughs, it is tongue in his cheek. He calls himself either a realist or a comic writer. He is both and neither. After the stream of consciousness, all writers are excessively aware of inner revelations and are no longer content with mere facts. When Lodge tries to forget about the stream of consciousness and almost gets drowned in heaps of, whirlwinds of incidents, he is a typical Desperado, in search of a fresh approach. So far, his only success is *Nice Work*, which blends plot (incidents in comprehensible order), humour, realism and psychology. He even squeezes a bit of sympathy in between chapters. Normally cold and detached from his characters, he actually gets involved in the predicaments of Robyn and Vic. That saves *Nice Work*. The absence of an affectionate narrative probably obscures the others.

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*Paradise News* (1991) is David Lodge's second best novel. The story is simple, linear, more along the Desperado line of 'whatever comes next is just fine.' Not much seems pre-planned (though this simplicity may have been envisaged), incidents flow naturally, characters open up and we actually come to know them. For the first time so far, Lodge seems to be able to relax and enjoy writing. If wilful shallowness was his major drawback in the previous novels (with the exception of *Nice Work*), he is free from it here.

Bernard Walsh, a theologian (college teacher) and ex-priest, is on his way to Hawaii, with his old father, to visit Ursula, his aunt (his father's sister), who is dying, after a long estrangement from the family. Not much happens, yet the story keeps going. To put it in a nutshell, Bernard's father is hit by a car, whose owner, forty-year-old Yolande Miller, is Bernard's future first love. Brother and sister are reunited in hospital. In the meantime, Bernard accidentally finds out Ursula is rich and in the end gets $100,000 himself. His part-time job at (the same) Rummidge college becomes full-time, and Yolande is preparing to come and visit him at Christmas. Ursula dies of cancer, the other lives go on.

Hawaii is robbed of all charm. A host of lesser characters are copiously mocked at. Their small stories are really unimportant. What is important is Bernard's inner life, which we get to know, though not fully, and his hope of marrying Yolande some day. A sad universe, with sad pettiness in it, and heroes merely brushed by our understanding.

Several tricks are used in this story: third-person narrative, letters, Bernard's diary. Paradise is supposed to stand for Hawaii, or, rather, the other way round. Neither does, neither seems to exist for a fact. We are offered in exchange all kinds of hints and echoes of English literary works, as Bernard's memory hums them while crossing our reading space. His major poles are right now sex and death. One is too faint to exist, the other one almost crushes him. Yolande steps in and helps Bernard recover his human balance.

The theme of Catholicism and vocation for the Church is present once again. Only this time the priest (Bernard) asks to be, and is, laicized, and seems to be inapt for sexual life until Yolande uses therapy to bring him back to life. She is the reason why this ex-priest with no life at all to speak of ends the novel by receiving what he calls 'very good' Paradise news. Love is coming into the picture, as discreetly as David Lodge can bring himself to resort to it.

Not a romantic writer, Lodge is not exclusively comical either. Fond of splitting hairs and then weaving them back into a piecemeal story that can make your head spin, in most of his novels he pumps hard at literature and does not seem to enjoy himself as much as Alasdair Gray, for instance. With *Nice Work* and *Paradise News*, he actually takes his time to breathe, to smile, to feel. Yet, on the whole, he is a Desperado writer who finds it impossible to relax. A Desperado of simplicity, too.

Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## The Down Syndrome of Emotional Fiction – Julian Barnes (born 1946)

Julian Barnes is part of the larger group of contemporary novelists who illustrate a reaction of the second degree, a reaction against the first reaction directed against experiment in 20th century fiction. The first wave of revolt against the stream of consciousness aimed at returning to the pleasure of the well told narrative, the pleasures of plot and character by all means. The second wave – writers who are now in their fifties – choose to remember the experiment, blend it with spicy bits of tradition (exactly what Virginia Woolf was banning as distortions of life), and exhaust it, carry all kinds of attempts to their furthest consequences. Julian Barnes expresses this tendency by saying that the writer's job is

'to explore all the available points of view',

which is back to square one, back to Henry James and the beginnings of the stream of consciousness. But Julian Barnes no longer accepts affiliation to any movement; like all self-respecting writers of today, whether in fiction or poetry, he is his own trend.

Born in Leicester in 1946, Barnes was educated in London and Oxford. He worked as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as a journalist on the *New Statesman* and the *Sunday Times*, and as television critic of the *Observer*, between 1982-1986. His first novel, *Metroland*, won the 1981 Somerset Maugham Award. In 1982 he wrote *Before She Met Me*, which Philip Larkin chose among his Books of the Year. In 1984 *Flaubert's Parrot* appeared, and with it Barnes became the first Englishman to be awarded the Prix Médicis. In 1986 he published *Staring at the Sun*, and in 1989 *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. *Talking It Over* appeared in 1991. The author received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1986, and was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1988. He also writes underground thrillers, under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh.

Julian Barnes develops a kind of religion of the novel. He believes that

'the best art tells the most truth about life,'

although he claims to have become a writer for lesser reasons, such as

'love of words, fear of death, hope of fame, delight in creation, distaste for office hours.'

He feels that, in spite of the fact that for some time now the death of God and the death of the novel have been intermittently proclaimed, they are both grossly exaggerated, so to say. His religion of the novel is expressed in the following statement:

'...since God was one of the fictional impulse's earliest and finest creations, I'll bet on the novel – in however mutated a version – to outlast even God.'

Mutations of the novel are in fact all that Barnes can think of. The contemporary tendency which leads to a hybridization of literary genres, a mixture of fiction, poetry, essay, literary criticism, drama and all the rest in the same pot, in the same work, is brilliantly illustrated by him. The truth of life, which he so much cherishes, according to his own statement, plays second fiddle to witticisms, brilliant discourse and an unleashed sense of humour. It could be said that, although the writer – in good experimental tradition – is supposed to hide behind the scenes, in Barnes' works a huge authorial eye peeps at us from behind the curtain. The characters are players banished to the front stage, the curtain is always down, so that only the writer can know what is really going on, and we can share in the mystery if we accept his presence in terms of

irony more than sympathy. The novelist wants to be witty before and above all. We may easily state Barnes is a Desperado of witty fiction.

*Talking It Over* is a recent novel which illustrates its author's sense for incomplete drama very well. Hybridization leads to experiment here, and the result is a deeper insight into the inner world than any traditional story-teller could have achieved. The result is that individualization of characters is very good, everyone is him or herself, and we see each of them through quite a number of minds, but all testimonies are easily corroborated, so as not to make our head spin.

The heroes chat, confess, brag to the reader, but do not engage into conversation with one another, even though they do admonish one another occasionally. The reader is outside the stage, and consequently can be taken into confidence. They pour all their problems to us, while the writer presumably watches lazily and puts in no appearance. His role is to make the circle complete, to arrange things in such a way, from behind the scenes, that the end may close the story satisfactorily. No promises for Barnes, no room for speculation. His brilliant intelligence comes up front and requires all our attention.

There are three major characters: Stuart Hughes, Gillian Wyatt, Oliver Russell. Stu is a bank clerk and Gill's first husband. Oliver (ex-Nigel) is his best friend, M.A. in English, teaching English as a foreign language (job which triggers his irony, since English would be much better known if it were not taught as a 'foreign' language), and Gill's second husband. He is the terminator of the novel, so to say, since all the irony in the book is attributed to him. Gill is twenty-eight, restores paintings, and is thoroughly confused by her falling in love with the previous two in turn. Yet, she is practical enough to offer Stu a final liberation from the idea of a stupendous future that was stolen from him by his best friend.

The episodical characters are all memorable. First there is Mrs. Wyatt, Gill's mother, who is French and is left by her husband when Gill is thirteen years of age. She approves of both husbands. The feeling that the whole book is a comedy, in spite of gloomy Stu, deprives her and others of psychological depth. The fact that they all talk to us, that there is no privacy anywhere, deprives the book of hard-earned, psychological sympathy and compassion.

Then there is Mrs. Dyer, Oliver's temporary landlady, while he rents a room across Stu's house, to conquer his wife. She is friendly and well-meaning. The same can be said for Gill's father, Gordon Wyatt, who appears only once, and lets us know that he did not seduce a pupil, that he found out about his wife's affairs, fell in love again, has two 'smashing' kids and was denied any right of visitation when he left the

family. Quite a decent chap, he gives us his side of the story, which coheres perfectly with what we already infer, and which satisfies our curiosity. One thing must be said about this book: our curiosity concerning even the most minute detail is always gratified.

There is also Val, alias Valda, who accuses Ollie of being queer on account of Stu. Both men throw her out in a united effort, rejecting the very idea. Two more characters are placed in France, near Toulouse (Mme Rives and Lagisquet, though the latter does not even speak directly to us). We learn from Mme Rives that *'Sont fous, les Anglais*,' the English are mad. The whole circle of the book is a bit mad; we, as readers are driven mad by what Virginia Woolf was proclaiming at the beginning of the century, namely that a novel is not supposed to provide tragedy or love interest. Since there is no compassion, everything is funny and dry, we talk politely back to the characters in our mind, and cannot help feeling that, behind each mask, the writer pushes us back from any attempt at falling in a Dostoevskian pit.

The motto of the book is a Russian saying:

'He lies like an eye- witness.'

Which leads to the conclusion that all witnesses are unreliable, and consequently, rather than using them, Barnes prefers to have his characters tell us directly whatever it is they have to say. The person in question knows best, and we learn a story from each of them. Barnes acquaints us with the facts using a remarkable precision of narrative. We can detect no hesitation, although there is no real plot, in the sense of suspense. Even if you read the book several times in a row, and know exactly what it is all about, something maintains the suspense: it must be the author's sharp sense of humour, which mingles all opinions without building his book into a Joycean puzzle.

The novel consists of round, closed little scenes, in which no lyricism is wasted, everything is dry and ironical. Stuart falls in love with Gillian in a land of puns. They meet at a reunion of persons who come to a hotel party precisely in order to find a mate. They do it deliberately. They get married on a perfectly commonplace day, go to France for their honeymoon, and come back home to settle into their jobs, not their feelings. The idea of feeling appears with Oliver, who unexpectedly falls in love with the bride on the very day of her wedding. This is the plot of the novel: Oliver's conquest of fair Gillian, who in the end, after amazement, shame and sheer delight, leaves Stu in a state of prostration and marries his best friend. Oliver's attack is deliberate and his thoughts, uttered to us in his monologues, reveal the worst of poor commonplace Stuart, his best friend, his best enemy, as it turns out, and also his easiest

prey. It is true that Oliver appears brilliant and Stu has only a very practical intelligence, but in the long run Stu makes a lot of money by hard work, while Oliver stays poor and his brilliance itself becomes boring and dull. Gill is caught in between. She falls for Stu's peace, then is swept off her feet by Oliver's tricky charm and, in the end, tries to restore Stu's peace of mind. Because years after her second wedding, Stu is still hurt and goes through hell. Consequently, she stages a scene in which she pesters Oliver with jealousy and is struck by him, with a baby in her arms. Stu sees her from the hotel window of the room wherein he is hiding, and runs in horror, forgetting to mourn the future that he used to think he had been robbed of.

Oliver is apparently the fun of the novel. In fact he is the fierce character, who betrays a friend and steals a wife with stark grimness and cruelty. Humming first his envy, later on his victory, the plot goes on. As Oliver unfurls the dark recesses of his mind, we can easily see how he despises everyone but himself. He could be called a histrionic extrovert. His linguistic bravery is not only unamusing, it is maddening at times; he relishes indecency, gossip and envy. His only aim is to shock by all means, and this is his weapon even in making Gill fall in love with him: he does not win her over, he smashes her into shocked feeling.

The gift of puns, displayed mainly by Oliver, reminds us of Shaw, although it is much more shameless, uncovering every possible nakedness. It would be enhanced if the listener (reader) were not compelled to be dumb. The reader is allowed no cue. The silence on the other end of this telephone, which is the novel, becomes bottomless as events unfurl, and finally it is tragic, it amounts to perfect solitude for all the characters involved. The 'you' of the monologues is unfortunately a fake, and the most solitary of them all is the reader in the end, because he has no one to side with, no one to talk it over with, so to say.

Sometimes the characters are right, many times they are damn wrong, but each point of view sticks to its own artfully stated version. The reader is driven out of his mind, either by Stuart's placidity or by Oliver's wickedness. The rage is spiced by lavishly used French words (or franglais monsters), which render Oliver's sense of etymology quite disagreeable. Fact is that all the three major heroes – worse than commonplace beings, if we remember Virginia Woolf – are insecure, rigid, stiff. Their humane side is in the dark. They struggle to be survivors, and this is their main concern. Clumsy Stuart survives his clumsiness, while shocking Oliver loses his edge. Life blunts all sharpness and dulls all pain, and old age creeps, hidden well behind.

Shamelessness is a post-Eliotian feature of contemporary poetry and fiction. Oliver carries it far beyond Eliot's wildest imaginings. He reigns

over indecent words or word-mongrels like an enfant terrible of language. Although it is Gill who is half-French (her mother being French), Oliver is the one to reap the joys of that non-English medium of shamelessness. Yet it is Gillian who brings about the title of the book, by saying the following:

'That's the trouble with talking it over like this. It never seems quite right to the person being talked about.
I met Stuart. I fell in love. I married. What's the story?'

The story is that there is no story but a destruction of the story. Step by step, the first marriage is pulled down, and in doing it Oliver demonstrates a wilful vulgarity of character which makes us feel indignant. Indignation is in fact the major feeling of the reader all along.

Reminding us of Eliot's cultured poetry or Joyce's cultured fiction, Oliver plays an irritating game of languages and cultures. He displays erudition. His monologues are mixtures of cultures and languages, but he overdoes the whole thing.

A character like Stuart is a born loser, while one like Oliver destroys everything by envy, gluttony, lack of morality. He is dirty while Stu is decent and Gillian ambivalent. He – with a linguistical invention – 'Nureyevs' gracefully and lands everyone among débris. He grudges Stuart his transitory well-being, and his only satisfaction is to bring him back to where he was – alone. In chapter 4, Oliver speaks after Stuart and Gillian, and he closes the chapter – which is one page long – by saying:

'Oh shit. Oh shit shit shit shit SHIT. I'm in love with Gillie, I've only just realised it. I am in love with Gillie. I'm amazed, I'm overawed, I'm poo-scared, I'm mega-fuckstruck. I'm also scared out of my cerebellum. What's going to happen now?'

The question is rhetorical, since he has known the answer for quite a while, he has been watching it coming. He is going to set things straight his way. He is going to ruin the other two people's mood. What is amazing is that he actually succeeds. Why does he? Because he can conjure the thrill of love, which Stuart cannot offer. Oliver is a thrilling, surprising fellow, who loves wrecking other people's lives for his own emotional food. Selfishness is his major trait.

Besides being cultured, as a reaction against or a memento of modernism, Oliver is also incredibly artificial, which is a consequence of the former, as a matter of fact. He is almost unreal, incredibly evil. He counterbalances Stuart's dullness with a touch – or more – of the disgusting. The damage he brings about is irreversible. A possible title for

this plot – if it had been told in the Victorian tradition – could be *Stuart's Disappointment*. The lesson of such a novel would be: we are ultimately alone.

The style of Oliver's monologues evinces a physiological obsession; his liberated language makes the reader sick at times. It does not produce pleasure, which is probably one reason why Eliot never carried his revolution to the bitter end, because he sensed he could lose the battle and be left without an audience. Yet Barnes does not lose his readers over this – by now – trifling matter of dirty words being used here and there, mostly everywhere. Oliver captures the reader again and again, by using every trick he can think of. This reader becomes a character himself:

'...I want to keep your sympathy. (Have I got it in the first place? Hard to tell, I'd say. And do I want it? I do, I do!) It's just that I'm too involved in what's happening to play games – at least, to play games with you. I'm fated to carry on with what I have to do and hope not to incur your terminal disapproval in the process. Promise not to turn your face away: if *you* decline to perceive me, then I really *shall* cease to exist. Don't kill me off! Spare poor Ollie and he may yet amuse you!'

Under Oliver's guise, Barnes pleads with us, in English, French, German and even Italian: be impressed with the book, proclaim it an innovation.

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Along the same line, innovating at all costs, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) combines the essay with the narrative, fabulation, literary criticism, emotional reactions, even an examination paper. The retired provincial doctor Geoffrey Braithwaite is busy researching into Flaubert's life, work and real parrot (there is a multitude of stuffed parrots that could have been the real one, used in 'Un Coeur Simple'). It turns out that his interest is not only literary, but personal as well: he finds himself in the position of Charles Bovary, only the similarity is mentioned superficially and very hastily. We also learn that the doctor himself unplugged the machines that were keeping alive his dying wife. In between, Flaubert's emotional life, his mistress's rage and the issue of the unknown colour of Madame Bovary's eyes dance and mingle.

The motto of the book comes from a letter written by Flaubert in 1872:

'When you write the biography of a friend, you must do it as if you were taking *revenge* for him.'

This may account for the grudging tone of the book. Everyone concerned is spiteful. The atmosphere is oppressive with anger, dissatisfaction,

maybe revenge. The author's revenge against the cosy expectations of some lazy readers, who come to his novel in slippers and robe, waiting to be entertained. This is what Julian Barnes will never do. He refuses to entertain. He may shock us, impress us to tears, irritate us, but never please us. The reader must be dislocated into meaning, just like language had to be dislocated, in Eliot's time.

The book starts with a tinge of despair:

'Nothing much else to do with Flaubert has ever lasted. He died little more than a hundred years ago, and all that remains of him is paper. Paper, ideas, phrases, metaphors, structured prose which turns into sound. This, as it happens, is precisely what he would have wanted; it's only his admirers who sentimentally complain.'

It continues by saying that the writer's words should be enough. The writer himself could be forgotten. Yet, contrary to most contemporary critical trends, Barnes' text does not give up consideration of the author; on the contrary, I should say, the text is nothing without the father figure posted behind it. Consequently, the book delves deep into Flaubert's life, revealing a little of its narrator's life in the process, too.

Julian Barnes turns literary criticism into a thriller. Flaubert and especially his mistress, Louise Colet, become living characters, while the characters contemporary to us are barely mentioned. There is a feeling that we are becoming more cultivated without any effort, because the book reads easily and overturns all ideas of encoded language for criticism. The thesis Barnes brings forth is that literature – literary criticism included – can never consist of mere emotionless statements. Whatever man writes, using words and ideas, becomes written experience and all experience must be clearly passed on. Probably that is why he chose a modest contemporary Flaubert, the provincial doctor, to conduct the investigation. Towards the end of the book we learn:

'I'll start again. She was a much- loved only child. She was a much- loved only wife. She was loved, if that's the word, by what I suppose I must agree to call her lovers, though I am sure the word over- dignifies some of them. I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn't love me; we were unhappy; I miss her.'

In short, Ellen, the wife,

'was born in 1920, married in 1940, gave birth in 1942 and 1946, died in 1975.'

The plot of real life is so meagre, even when very rich. The plot of imagination can be fabulous. *Flaubert's Parrot* is a lecture in favour of the hybridization of genres.

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*A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* was published in 1989. It is a collection of short stories, bits of a puzzle, to be rearranged by the use of some unknown thread. Elliptical, mysterious, entrancing, witty to the extreme, it is unbearably intelligent and outspoken. The hidden eye of the author can only be suspected here and there, in this mass of incidents.

Each chapter has something to do with Noah's Ark, which in the first part saves woodworms from extinction. Imagination flies from one time in history to another, and the atmosphere built around each chapter, with its enormously funny incidents, is haunting. This is a novel to be remembered, but not by incidents. It is to be remembered by wit, like all the rest of Barnes' texts.

The rules, the convention of the novel are demolished. They are plundered by the essay, drama, satire, anything but a clean, sustained, one and only narrative. The author breaks it every time it menaces to become engrossing. Continuity in fiction is for Julian Barnes a very good reason for hate.

We are addressed directly, fed tasty pieces of wisdom, irony, even sympathy, by a writer who debunks everything he can lay hands on, his own myths included. Julian Barnes does not withdraw from the text; he teaches us to enjoy the hybridization of genres in a sort of fiction which can't even be summarized. The essence of the novel is challenged, but not destroyed. We can go back to Barnes' books again and again, constantly pleased and surprised by the intelligent voice that talks.

On the whole, Julian Barnes is a literary Desperado at heart. He is clear in expression, though intricate in intention. He is enjoyable, though impossible to pinpoint, to sum up. He is true, although his novels seem to belong to a fairyland of their own, wherein the reader is allowed on condition that he does not require the novelistic convention to be obeyed. Barnes uses bits of rules in a conventionless text, and demonstrates that freedom can be enjoyed, both in writing and reading. There is only one major condition, though, which he fulfils: first and last rule of Julian Barnes is to be sparkling.

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*Staring at the Sun* (1986) is a metaphor- novel. It brings together the sun and death. While we read the book, we unconsciously stare at the two, welded together, and are gently lifted into the unknown. This novel is not so much a story (chronological though it is, and even obviously traditional in that respect) as a poem. A long epic poem with several refrains, repeated at key moments, to give us a glimpse of ambiguity and confuse us, lull us asleep with the trusting mood of poetry.

This is a novel without real characters, and which arouses very little interest in the plot. Suspense is totally absent. What is it that keeps us going? The dreamy mood, the ostentatious denial of uncanny tricks, the smooth reading, the gentle manipulation of our curiosity? My guess is that the point at which we feel hooked and will not give up reading this novel is the very spot where Barnes the novelist joins hands with Barnes the poet. Which happens right at the beginning of the story. Once we accept this convention, the text can unfurl with our blessing. Because this is exactly what Julian Barnes does here: he simply puts us in a blessing mood.

The main refrain of the novel is the story of Sergeant- Pilot Thomas Prosser, known (during World War II) as Sun- Up Prosser. He is the initiator of this 'staring at the sun' motif, which acquires multiple and fascinating meanings, occurring as often as T.S. Eliot's recurrent images in *The Waste Land* (mainly). First, before the story actually begins, we witness Sun- Up Prosser diving twice in a row below the horizon, thus witnessing the sun rise twice. He was on a mission over Northern France with his plane, and is crossing the Channel back home. The sun is beginning to rise. He spots a ship surrounded by smoke. He descends quickly, the smoke stops, it is just a merchantman heading west. The speed of his descent drives the sun 'back below the horizon.' Coming up again, he sees the sun rise for a second time on the same early morning. The last sentence of this enigmatic introductory scene contains the symbolism of the whole novel, which also ends in an aeroplane, but this time flying into the next millennium. We are offered the key before we can even see the need for a door:

'Once more, Posser put aside caution and just watched: the orange globe, the yellow bar, the horizon's shelf, the serene air, and the smooth, weightless lift of the sun as it rose from the waves for the second time that morning. It was an ordinary miracle he would never forget.'

The story begins as Jean's story. It is a succession of 'Incidents,' starting with Jean as a seven- year- old. Uncle Leslie (her mother's brother) brings her hyacinths which never bloom. It is the first of a long series of incomplete presents that Uncle Leslie makes, both to Jean and her son, later on. It is a suggestion that life yields little enjoyment, and you have

to make the best of what comes your way. Jean is not very good at this game, she is dazzled and confused by Leslie, and constantly postpones understanding. He talks to her but his words do not make sense. She seems a little bit retarded, all through the book, when, in fact she is just abnormally patient. She merely takes her time:

'She would doubtless understand the other words in time.'

When she is seventeen, World War II begins. Jean keeps as a talisman Leslie's answer to her earlier question, 'What will I do when I grow up?':

'The sky's the limit, little Jeanie. The sky's the limit.'

She lives by these words till she is a hundred, at the end of the book. Written around 1986 (when it was published), the plot actually ends in the second decade of the third millennium (year 2016). But for Jean's humanizing presence, it might easily have become a dystopia. Julian Barnes flirts with the idea of the all-powerful computer. He comes very close to Orwell, Huxley, Ray Bradbury, and many others, who see the future as the kingdom of pleasurable death.

Prosser comes to live in the Sergeants' house, and Jean learns his story: 'I've seen the sun rise twice.' She hears him associate the sun with death:

'You stare through your fingers at the sun, and you notice that the nearer you get to it, the colder you feel. You ought to worry about this but you don't. You don't because you're happy.'

What actually happens is that the plane has a small oxygen leak. The pilot is almost intoxicated, rises higher and higher, until he loses control. Prosser contemplates doing this when he has 'had enough;' it is a kind of suicide above the sea. Much later, Jean's own son broods on the idea of suicide. These repetitions, very easy to spot, reassure the reader that he is on the right track across this novel which has no intention of being a narrative at all. Hybridization takes over, lyricism finds a new way of attacking fiction: if it cannot destroy the 'Incidents,' then destroy the narrative. Which actually happens: we are not waiting for a story to end, but for the mood to be completed.

To go on with Jean's story (since there is no other hero with a story in sight), she marries a policeman (Michael Curtis), who makes no difference to her life. Again, from the way she is described, we might infer she is retarded. The truth is, Barnes will not take the trouble of telling us the whole story: he merely sketches the feel of it. And Jean's life revolves around fear and courage. Prosser is brave when he kills, but overwhelmed with fear, allegedly, when he allows himself to fly into the sun, after

which his plane crashes and he dies (supposedly: he is reported missing). Leslie is besieged by fears when Jean visits him, and he knows he is dying from cancer; he is also brave when Gregory (Jean's son) comes by. Jean herself is afraid of her husband and of living alone, until she gets pregnant (at thirty-eight) and leaves him for good. She seems to have grown out of fear after that, facing every incident bravely, with increasing wisdom. Gregory gives in to his fears when he contemplates suicide, but gets the better of them and lives on bravely, by Jean's side. Fear is the substance of this dreamy book, and bravery, which equals life, is the way out of it.

During the war, Uncle Leslie goes to New York, fleeing the fight (fear? courage?). Prosser dies. Jean begins a sexless married life that lasts twenty years. The story flows like a deep river, hiding the rough parts. Jean's rejection of Michael's indifference, his hitting her because she is 'abysmally stupid' and cannot have a child.

'Did she sometimes want to scream in the middle of the night? Who didn't?'

Her parents die. She finds herself pregnant at thirty-eight. Her husband does not want the child any more. Her doctor warns her about mongolism. In a way, all the characters in this novel suffer from mongolism. Emotional mongolism. Julian Barnes denies them intelligence, humour, wit. He also refuses to share their emotional life with us.

When she is seven months pregnant, Jean leaves Michael. She works as a waitress, and brings up her son. Uncle Leslie returns from America, but cannot help her. Michael gets news about Jean and Gregory from Leslie, but he does not call his wife back. Actually, he dies of a heart-attack at fifty-five, leaving Jean quite well-off. Once Gregory is old enough, she starts travelling. She is in her middle fifties, and goes to the Pyramids, to Europe, to China. The description of her view of China (limited as it is) is Julian Barnes' first trip into communism. He is not highly interested, but does notice the iron curtain and the poverty.

Among other things, Jean traces down and visits Prosser's widow, Olive Redpath. She learns that Prosser died 'staring at the sun.' He still visits her thoughts time and again, every time bringing her his courage to overwhelm fear and stare at death, fly into the sun. Jean's son is very much like her. He gets a job selling life insurance, which is another way of staring at death. He also associates travel with flying and death, adding to the title of the novel a mythical dimension. Prosser, Jean, Leslie and Gregory himself are all one huge modern Icarus:

‘When he thought of travel, he also remembered Cadman the Aviator. In Shrewsbury, at the church of St Mary’s, Gregory had come across a commemorative tablet. The full circumstances of Cadman’s flight were not explained, but it appeared that in 1739 this modern Icarus had built himself a pair of wings, climbed to the top of the church and jumped off. He died, of course.’

Melting into light, drifting into death, Barnes’ characters (who are anything but heroes here) acquire a wisdom of extinction, which makes them unspeakably sad and lyrical.

A faint glimmer of suspense arises when Rachel, Gregory’s girl-friend, tries to seduce Jean, and has us wonder: if normal sex meant nothing to Jean, could she turn out to be a lesbian? When Jean is summoned by Rachel to describe her marriage, she remembers the Chinese ‘Marriage Act,’ particularly Article 12, which read:

‘Husband and wife are in duty bound to practise family planning.’

Rachel is puzzled by the connection, so Jean adds: ‘...we had a Chinese marriage.’ Julian Barnes is very careful with his words here, so he terms Rachel a ‘feminist’ once in a dozen pages or so. He uses ‘lesbians’ once, too. Anyway, the whole thing is a huge joke. Jean never ever sees the point of sex in her whole life. This is what Julian Barnes deliberately builds her into.

The second part of the novel ends with Leslie’s death and Jean’s memories of China. Both are rendered with a humour new to the book, which is past half-way towards its end already. She remembers errors of translation which, paradoxically, are more reactionary and disclose more than the communist speakers are aware of:

‘The temple was repented. We grow ladies. Here is the sobbing centre.’

She feels the rough life of the people imprisoned in communist China, but, the same as before, Barnes avoids probing the subject. He gracefully tiptoes out of another potentially hot topic, pretending he is above all that. The fire and laceration from *Talking It Over*, the wit in *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, the blow surreptitiously dealt to the so-called scientific criticism in *Flaubert’s Parrot* have vanished. Here is a lazy Julian Barnes, eyes half closed, letting precious pretexts slip by, in favour of gentleness and peace. Instilled in his fiction, lyricism has a soothing effect.

The third and last part of the book takes place in the future (the point of reference is 1986). Jean is on the point of turning one hundred, and Gregory is sixty himself.

‘She had become, she realized, the mother of an old man.’

A poetic line pops up and becomes obviously quotable:

‘Sometimes she felt that a morning mist lay over his life and had never properly risen.’

The mist envelops everyone. Julian Barnes must have had a spell of short sightedness when he created the characters of *Staring at the Sun*. They are all remote, vague, mysterious, fugitive and reassuringly insufficient. The author seems to strike a bargain with the reader: Do not ask for more than I am willing to give (especially no exhausting sophisticated tricks), and I guarantee your satisfaction. This is a novel to make one feel at ease. Service for life. Meaning that the mood will last a long time, in spite of the apparently uninteresting wrapping.

Once again, the metaphor in the title is enlarged upon. Growing old, Jean is accomplishing a flight of her own towards the sun (end of life):

‘It was as if the oxygen supply had a small leak in it: things were becoming slower, and more general. The difference was that she knew it, and so could not share the ignorant joy of those long-dead fliers who parodied old age as they strained toward the sun.’

Gregory, who used to build planes as a child, is now brooding on suicide. We are in the third millennium. He constantly converses with a GPC (General Purposes Computer), heads for TAT (The Absolute Truth), wants to know everything about after death, learns nothing, realizes that computers are man-programmed machines, and loses interest in them. When Gregory wonders how people die, Julian Barnes attributes a very interesting sentence to his thoughts:

‘Writers died with writerly things on their lips, still wanting to be remembered, still unsure to the very last whether all those words they had written would do the trick.’

In the case of this novel, there is no trick. Relaxed placidity reigns.

Gregory’s dialogue with the computer vaguely reminds us of many grim dystopias, but his own thoughts are far more exciting, especially his speculations concerning God. Some of the possibilities connected to

God's reality evince Julian Barnes' indomitable irony. Gregory deliberates, among other ideas, that maybe:

1) God exists but he has abandoned us;
2) God exists as long as we believe in him;
3) God did not create Man and the Universe, but inherited them;
4) he is taking a divine sabbatical;
5) has not existed so far, but will exist in the future;
6) God and Man are one;
7) there are several Gods;
8) our world is just the first, imperfect draft, a 'botch' God did not have the heart to destroy;
9) 'we are all fragments of a God who destroyed himself at the beginning of Time.'

The text sparkles with ideas and definitely reminds the reader of Barnes' wicked, devilish sense of humour, which can be so tiresome at times.

As a last resort, Gregory is offered a NDE pamphlet (Near Death Experiences), which is supposed to remove his fear of death. It turns out that what he wants to get rid of is death itself. Julian Barnes does his best here not to get serious. He soon switches to Jean's thoughts, and one of them hints at the title of the book again. She remembers:

'There was an old Chinese greeting, a courtesy from Asian times, to be used when you met someone unexpectedly. You stopped, bowed, and uttered the ceremonious compliment, 'The sun has risen twice today.' '

Everything ends by staring at the sun. Jean sums up her life as ordinary, though 'more solitary than most.' She seems to have shed her shell of stupidity, she sounds more normal in her old age, but solitude runs in the blood: Gregory's only friend seems to be the soon despised computer. Quiet and solitary as she is, Jean has not had an empty life. She can think of her 'seven private wonders,' which are:

1) being born;
2) being loved (by your parents);
3) being disillusioned (Uncle Leslie's aborted hyacinths);
4) getting married (not sex);
5) giving birth;
6) getting to be wise;
7) dying.

The end again. Death in the sun.

Giving up on his computer, Gregory comes to his mother with his fretting about death:

‘Is death absolute?’
‘Yes, dear.’ (...)
‘Is religion nonsense?’
‘Yes, dear.’
‘Is suicide permissible?’
‘No, dear.’

Gregory takes her words for granted. The horror is diminished by the sense of humour:

‘God was a motor- cyclist four hundred and fifty miles off the west coast of Ireland, goggles pulled down against the sea- spray, riding gently along as if the waves were sand- dunes. Do you believe that? Yes, thought Gregory, I believe that.’

This had been the delusion of a pilot who had stared at the sun. God parting the sea and walking on it. And the thought does not stop here:

‘God was a trick- cyclist, and Christ his son, when he ascended to Heaven, broke the world altitude record.’

Religion is defied. Language is defied. Mere sentences become vital questions *(‘Why is the mink tenacious of life?’),* and vital questions are deliberately ignored. The simple truth is that you merely have to stare at the sun. Christ broke the world altitude record when he ascended to Heaven, but doesn’t everybody do that, in their own private planes, at the hour of death?

Jean concludes, at the age of a hundred, that religion means ‘silly, inexperienced people setting off their own guns by mistake and frightening themselves.’ Just like Prosser. A life has *‘just enough light to see that nobody else is there.’* And, very seriously, man or God, ‘the sky *is* the limit.’ There is nothing after staring at the sun. ‘This is going to be the last Incident of my life,’ Jean thinks. Together with Gregory, on the same plane. Do they die? Do they live forever? The last symbol is open. Life is open. The universe is all open, ready to drip into the void. The only true thing in existence is the ultimate stare at the sun. Goodbye light? Hello light? I think Julian Barnes cannot quite make up his mind whether to be miserable or happy. He floats weightlessly in between.

So does this novel. A miracle of gentleness among races of witty statements and resourceful stories. An island of peace. The peace comes from the taming of whimsical story- telling into the very private, shy pose

of poetry. Besieged by lyricism, the novelist loses in sharpness and gains in sensibility. He talks so very much less than elsewhere, yet the heart he makes up beats so fast. Heartless witticisms are counterbalanced here by a heartfelt, despairing tug at life. The novelist drowns in lyrical emotions to the point of neglecting his Desperado mind, determined (in the other books) to make a change, to stay on the top of the next millennium.

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*Metroland* (1980) is Julian Barnes' first novel. It is a tame narrative in the first person. The author is not up to any trick. It makes you guess he is merely trying to get the feel of fiction. He outlines the experience of an irreverent, francophone adolescence, the process of growing up, a first sex encounter, and – last but not least – marriage, happiness and a child. Life seems repetitive, so we cannot help wondering whether his baby daughter will some day reiterate his hatred of adulthood, and stay away emotionally from her parents, as he cruelly did in his time.

*Metroland* is an easy going book. Few quotable remarks, even fewer intense, haunting scenes. It leaves behind a guilty well being and a certain sadness of unavoidable, yet much to be desired monotony. Julian Barnes is not a Desperado yet. He recalls, trains his words, is in search of himself. The faint disillusionment we detect in the last words on the last page, almost like a poem left unfinished, suggests that he is still very young to fool around with whirlwinds of surprises, and the more obvious his hesitation and awkwardness, the more endearing.

Two sixteen-year-olds, Christopher Lloyd and Toni Barbarowski (suggestive name), display a violence of despise which faintly recalls *A Clockwork Orange*. Adolescence seems to be a heavy burden to bear. Towards the end of the book, we find out that its words and gestures may change, but the aggressivity remains the same. The plot begins in 1963, and presumably ends fourteen years later, when the two main characters are thirty. Chris narrates everything, and we only get his point of view. Apart from the verbal violence of the four (or more) letter words, there is not much experiment going around. There is a passing mention of T.S. Eliot having worked for a bank, and a mildly Joycean attempt at reversing the 'franglais' into a Frenchified English (which does not work). The book is good apprenticeship and relaxed reading.

The mottos of the two teen-agers, who are just opening their eyes to the world, are: *'écraser l'infâme'* and *'épater la bourgeoisie'*. They even make up English words for them ('écras' and 'épat'). Their childish insecurity is humiliating to themselves and disquieting to watch. Its outlet is French, unlike the criminal drive described by Anthony Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange*, or even Doris Lessing in *The Fifth Child*. At their age, sex is the

major mystery. The way Julian Barnes describes these two young boys' psychology brings nothing new and is not particularly appealing.

Toni is the son of Polish Jewish parents, which gives him 'a foreign name..., two languages, three cultures.' On the other hand, Chris is proud of living in Metroland, a suburb of London:

'As the Metropolitan Railway had pushed westward in the 1880s, a thin corridor of land was opened up with no geographical or ideological unity: you lived there because it was an area easy to get out of. The name Metroland – adopted during the First World War both by estate agents and the railway itself – gave the string of rural suburbs a spurious integrity.'

The boys' occupation is mainly defiance. They are part of the 'Anger generation.' Chris, the narrator, who ends up by living in Metroland, too, remembers with irony:

'Toni and I spent a hefty amount of time together being bored.'

He also remembers with a pang:

'How does adolescence come back most vividly to you? What do you remember first? The quality of your parents; a girl; your first sexual tremor; success or failure at school; some still unconfessed humiliation; happiness; unhappiness; or, perhaps, a trivial action which first revealed to you what you might better become? I remember things.'

The memories are detailed, chronological, stuffed with a mass of details which are not much use.

In 1968, Chris goes to Paris for six months. It is the famous time of 'les événements,' the student riots, but 'I didn't actually see anything.' He is twenty-one and a virgin. He spends his grant in Paris studying 'The Importance and Influence of British Styles of Acting in the Paris Theatre 1789-1850,' although he is aware that 'no British actor in his right mind would have risked his skin over there while the revolution was on.' After the first month he meets Annick, who takes care of his virginity. He meets her while she is reading *Mountolive* (third volume of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*). She works in a photographic library, and Chris soon finds out the limited range of her intellectual abilities. Once he sees through her, the enchantment fades. She has played her part. He meets Marion almost at once, and she is to be his wife later on. The book ends with their image in 1977, living in Metroland, together with Amy, their baby daughter. Chris is 'content' at last, 'to be with my own skin.' Burgess' hero, Alec, gives up crime (equating adolescence) precisely at the

same moment, when he decides to look for a wife, to have a child. ‘Happiness’ does not sound as boring as Chris used to imagine. The teenager has grown up, though not old. Not yet.

Chris ends up happily married, ironically back in Metroland, working in advertising, then as an editor, waiting for the following age. Toni stays irreverent and defiant. Oliver, in *Talking It Over*, is probably his logical follower. Chris goes to a reunion with his ex-school fellows, and realizes how much he has changed. He is more tolerant, has lost his edge–unlike Toni. Is that good? Bad? The author has us puzzled here.

‘Everything is orderly, comforting, yet strangely alive.’

This book is more a statement than a story. Teen-agers do grow up. Beware while you are still there, defying parents, teachers, fellows. You will become one of them. So does Chris, in a very smooth way, with no bumps in the road, no suspense, no sparkle to kindle any emotional flame. For a first novel, *Metroland* is O.K. Compared to *Flaubert’s Parrot* (its very opposite), it is the mere finger that points at the beginning of the path.

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*The Porcupine* (1992) is Julian Barnes’ attempt at mixing literature and politics. As a novel, after *Staring at the Sun* it is disappointing. As far as political insight is concerned, it displays all the Western prejudices and commonplaces, but none of the insight we hope to gain when we realize what the book is about. It is a somewhat superficial text, mixing bits of insufficient information, immersed in an unconvincing atmosphere.

Stoyo Petkanov is the ex-president of a country that has just struggled free from communism. The only frighteningly accurate truth that Barnes conveys in his novel is the horror that the old system renews itself, however hard people may try to get rid of it. Some remarks are correct. On the whole, Petkanov’s trial is dull and shows no deep understanding of the real communist hell. The author is lazy, and any well informed reader (to say nothing of those who actually lived under communism) can easily outsmart him. The text is neither politics nor literature. It looks more like a TV and newspaper collage.

Chronology is linear, and there is no Desperado trick all through the text. It looks like very tame fiction, but, then, tricklessness may be a trick in itself. ‘The old man’ (Stoyo Petkanov) is confined on the sixth floor of a building in the ‘capital he had bossed for so long.’ The women march against the lack of food. The surroundings look very much like Bulgaria (mainly from the strong Russian influence). The author talks at one point

about unheated apartments and ‘rich foreigners’ staying at Sheraton Hotel and experiencing a ‘brief match- flare of guilt.’ The whole book exhales the same relief, which spells: ‘I have never actually been there, thank God I was born somewhere else.’ Solzhenitsyn built and made us experience the extent of terror and disaster from the inside. Barnes skims at the surface, trying to look knowledgeable. This is the one novel he wrote which would have benefited from the mechanism of censorship, because communist censorship would have forced the author to suggest, rather than state.

The facts of the story are that the Communist Party has changed its name (not its spots) into Socialist, while the opposition never had the time or chance to come to life again. Nothing much has changed. The new generation of leaders is made up of former communists’ offsprings. Such is Peter Solinsky, appointed Prosecutor General in Petkanov’s trial. He is a professor of Law, son of a former communist declared undesirable. He married Maria, daughter of an anti- Fascist fighter, and his file improved. But Maria ends up divorcing him, as a gesture of protest against his defeating Petkanov. She served her purpose, he is not in the least heartbroken.

Barnes talks about a history of Dacians invading the country millennia ago. Now, Dacians lived in Romania (spelt with ‘o,’ not with ‘u,’ as Barnes does), and were never known as invading people. Quite the reverse. And this is not the only misleading bit of information. The country is in perfect chaos and misery, which is called here ‘the changeover from a controlled economy to a market economy.’ We can see no change whatsoever, which is exasperating. Petkanov thinks of ‘Nicolae and Elena,’ who, he feels, were killed by Romanians out of fear. Everything Barnes states sounds false and yet so true at the same time. Misunderstanding can exasperate those who understand too well.

Gorbachev is often accused by this tyrant who is made to defend himself, and is almost allowed to get away with it. The trial often risks becoming a sham. The political dilemma of the country could easily be that of Romania, and proves that Barnes has done his homework reading carefully. But what he adds as a product of his own imagination sounds wrong:

‘The Communist Party voted to suspend its leading role in the nation’s political and economic development, renamed itself the Socialist Party, urged a Front for National Salvation involving all main political organisations, and when this was turned down, called for elections as soon as possible.’

Truth and conjecture clash. When an insider reads this book, he feels deep frustration, may even be offended by his personal hell being turned into a circus. Barnes continues, quite accurately:

‘Which the opposition parties didn’t want, or at least not yet, since their structures were rudimentary and the Socialists (formerly Communists) still controlled state radio and television and most of the publishing houses and printing works, but the opposition was obliged to take its chance and won enough seats to put the Socialists (formerly Communists) on the defensive, although the Socialists (formerly Communists) still had a majority, which western commentators found incomprehensible, and the government was still inviting the opposition parties to join in and save the nation, but the opposition parties kept saying, No, *you* fucked it up, you sort it out, and if you can’t sort it out, resign, and then things stumbled on with half-reforms...’

I can’t help wondering whether the author actually understands the human agony of the words he uses. The tone is offensive and inappropriate. Half-reforms are a source of tragedy, of sacrificed generations. The same as the unheated apartments, power cuts, lack of running water. ‘What is the number of your Swiss bank account?’ is a question Ceausescu died (in Romania) without answering. Petkanov denies it, and there is no more talk about it. All the details are correctly used, but the picture on the whole fails, irritates, is pitifully empty.

The title is derived from Peter Solinsky’s words before beginning the trial:

‘Of course I shall be careful. Look,’ he said, putting down his briefcase and holding up his hands, ‘I am wearing my porcupine gloves.’

Whatever that means. Treat communism with appropriate gloves? Preserve the nightmare? Barnes alone knows.

The students and other demonstrators shout slogans which may fit Barnes’ idea of a sense of humour, but have nothing to do with the mood of really desperate demonstrations:

Thank you for the price rises.
Thank you for the food shortages.
Give us ideology not bread.
Strengthen the Security Police.
Thank you for the bullets.
Please may we join the Security Forces.
More bullets for the soldiers...

The novelist ignores the urgency of the change from communism to whatever followed. He imagines he is entitled to take it lightly merely because it has come within his range of information. He appropriates a subject that turns into the genius let out of the bottle and crushes him.

At the end of the book, Petkanov is sentenced, though not for his real crimes, and he defies the Prosecutor General, speaking in the name of communism, almost:

‘You can’t get rid of me. Do you see?’

For how long, nobody knows. Barnes ends his novel (if a novel it is) with the image of a grandmother, soaked in the rain, loyal to a photo of Lenin that she is holding. Good ending. Heart- rending implication: the old have to die before the yet unborn can begin to change. Is Julian Barnes aware that this implies the massacre of two generations in cold blood? The book smiles. What is the reader supposed to do?

Between humour (sometimes aborted) and lyricism, it slowly becomes obvious that Julian Barnes’ witticisms feed on well hidden feelings. Since he will not go back to the 18th century sentimental novel, he has to devise his own path. His books are sharp, yet endearing in an unidentifiable way. They hesitate to commiserate. Rather than sympathize, Barnes acts like a real Desperado and outlines in detail the Down syndrome of sensibility.

# The Desperado of Sensibility Laid Bare – Peter Ackroyd (born 1949)

Peter Ackroyd writes forcefully and almost pushes his readers in a trance. His novel *Hawksmoor* (1985) drags us to and fro between early 18th century and late 20th century London. The story is both breathless and inessential. There is a multitude of stories, in fact, and inevitably you miss some, until it finally dawns on you that somehow they are told twice: once when Queen Anne reigned (with the plague and the great fire), and a second time in present-day London, when the detective Hawksmoor is trying to discover a serial child murderer. The book is built on parallelisms. Even the names (or at least part of them) are the same. The whole text is enveloped in an air of unreality, a web of mystery and forbidden truths. Unless you surrender to the enthralling atmosphere and share the characters' experiences, the end is bound to be meaningless.

In a very strange way, Peter Ackroyd intertwines his highly narrative style with an imperiously required suspension of disbelief, subtly infusing poetry into magical incidents, instilling lyricism into fiction. Although full of suspense and palpitating events, even murders, the book is pre-eminently a lyrical experience, and creates a new kind of reader: the sharing reader. To read Peter Ackroyd, you have to do more than just take his words for granted (he confesses on the last page: 'this version of history is my own invention'). You have to lend yourself to the expert hand of a writer who will never be satisfied with less than absolute communion. He leads you to the point where you become him. You partake of a sacred rite (the novelist's imagination), and when you finish reading the book, you could easily say, 'Madame Bovary c'est moi;' the novel becomes a holy communion, and you feel you partake of a very creative mind. Reading Ackroyd is an entrancing and overwhelming experience.

The book begins with the stating of a historical fact: in 1711,

'the ninth year of the reign of Queen Anne, An Act of Parliament was passed to erect seven new Parish Churches in the cities of London and

Westminster, which commission was delivered to Her Majesty's Office of Works in Scotland Yard. And the time came when Nicholas Dyer, architect, began to construct a model of the first church.'

The world in which the architect lives and builds his visions into durable churches is overburdened by the dark powers of the devil. Each church requires the sacrifice of a child, and the book is full of these churches that have very little to do with faith in God. It is also strewn with dead bodies, whose murder is never traced.

Nicholas Dyer works for the Queen at Scotland Yard. Hawksmoor works for the Police at Scotland Yard. They are both called Nick, and have an assistant called Walter. Every other chapter is devoted to Dyer and his mysterious stories. Most of the others (beginning with Part Two, Chapter 6) describe Hawskmoor deciphering the secrets of the past and slowly becoming one with them. At first, the alternation past- present (an interval of two hundred and seventy years, at least) is confusing. Gradually, we begin to remember leitmotifs (Eliot's technique of recurrent motifs, in *The Waste Land*, is not far away) and feel elated when we recognize a clue, as if time had slammed open its doors and we were actually travelling back and forth.

Dyer's chapters do not use inverted commas for the dialogue at all, and the connecting 'she said' or the like are italicized. It uses the spelling of the time (a little reminiscent of the earlier John Donne, with the same joy of life, too), and is narrated in the first person, by Dyer himself, in the Past Tense. We learn of many horrors there, but somehow they do not terrify us as much as the view we get through the eyes of Hawksmoor, who, not being able to build the churches, tries to build a case, understands too much and in the end intentionally fails, identifying with the legendary murderer. Death is no reason for fear in this book, nor is the traditional cop dead set against it. It is merely a fact of life. Even of art.

The first striking sentence Dyer utters (addressing, teaching his assistant, Walter) is:

'I am not a slave of Geometricall beauty, I must build what is most Sollemn and Awefull.'

To add to the aesthetics of the ugly and terrifying (in good Eliotian tradition), he continues:

'I declare that I build my Churches firmly on this Dunghill Earth and with a full Conception of Degenerate Nature.'

To continue the connection with T.S. Eliot, the church in question is St. Mary Woolnoth, whose bell tolls the hours in *The Waste Land* ('with a dead sound...'). Minds meet, beyond transitory fashions and – at least this is what Ackroyd is trying to state – above Time.

Nicholas Dyer begins with the beginning: his birth in London, in 1654. At the very end of the book, Hawksmoor finds the entry in an encyclopaedia at the public library. It summarizes what we already know, making us realize that we have actually been delving in history all along:

'DYER Nicholas (...) 1654- c. 1715. English architect; was the most important pupil of Sir Christopher Wren, and a colleague both of Wren and Sir John Vannbrugghe in the Office of Works at Scotland Yard. Dyer was born in London in 1654; although his parentage is obscure, it seems that he was first apprenticed as a mason before becoming Wren's personal clerk; he later held several official posts under Wren including that of surveyor at St. Paul's. His most important independent work was completed as a result of his becoming the principal architect to the 1711 Commission for New London Churches; his was the only work to be completed for that Commission, and Dyer was able to realise seven of his own designs: Christ Church Spitalfields, St. George's-in-the-EastWapping, St. Anne's Limehouse, St. Alfege's in Greenwich, St. Mary Woolnoth in Lombard Street, St. George's Bloombsbury and, finest of all, the church of Little St. Hugh beside Moorfields. (...) He died in London in the winter of 1715, it is thought of the gout, although the records of his death and burial have been lost.'

Past, present, reality and nightmare mingle freely. Hawksmoor finds children's dead bodies in front of all these churches, all dead by strangulation, but with no marks or fingerprints or any other signs whatsoever. He haunts a kind of bodiless tramp called the 'Architect.' When Dyer's chapter ends with one word, Hawksmoor's begins with that; the name of Dyer's first victim in the name of a church – Thomas Hill – is the name of Hawksmoor's first case. It is obvious that Ackroyd means to baffle us, smash all our rational defences, and take us into the core of impossibility.

Time was Dyer's concern ever since he was a boy:

'...I used to sit against a peece of Ancient Stone and set my Mind thinking on past Ages and on Futurity.'

It looks as if ever since his childhood he had been practising immortality. He repeatedly states that his churches (which are his life) will not die. Yet, to defeat death, he has to start fighting it very early in life. The

plague kills both his parents, sparing him, though. His faith in God is grievously shaken, although in what way he never says:

'...a Crowd of Thoughts whirl thro' the Thorowfare of my Memory for it was in that fateful year of the Plague that the mildewed Curtain of the World was pulled aside, as if it were before a Painting, and I saw the true Face of the Great and Dreadfull God.'

He escapes from the house that is 'shut up by a Constable,' becomes a vagrant, sees 'Apparitions (call'd Hollow Men)' (Eliot reappears), and plunges into a world which 'was one vast Bill of mortality.' Minutes, centuries, feelings, beings are all 'Dust.' The word recurs obsessively in almost every chapter. He calls himself Faustus (the Devil recurs quite as often as Dust, the frailty of Man), meets Mirabilis, 'and thus began my strange Destiny.' Mirabilis teaches him 'that older Faith,' namely that God created Death and the world is subjected by plan to Evil. Sin is inherited from generation to generation, human condition is 'inveterate Mortal Contagion.' In his own words,

'We baptize in the name of the Father unknown, for he is truly an unknown God; Christ was the Serpent who deceiv'd Eve, and in the form of a Serpent entered the Virgin's womb; he feigned to die and rise again, but it was the Devil who truly was crucified. We further teach that Virgin Mary, after Christ's birth, did marry once and that Cain was the Author of much goodnesse to Mankind.'

Consequently, 'Satan is the God of this world,' just as the 'Chief God of the Syrians was Baal-Zebub or Beel-Zebub, the lord of the Flies,' which last association sends us to Golding's novel with a new understanding.

In Dyer's imagination, the dead constantly call out to the living and each church requires living blood. Dyer found the 'Sacrifice desir'd in the Spittle-Fields,' in the person of the mason's son, Tom Hill. A character by the same name dies in Hawksmoor's time, too, in the same place almost, as if he had been reborn only to repeat his death. In Dyer's time it was an accident: the boy climbed to the tower to lay the highest and last stone, as the custom was. There was a sudden gust of wind, he lost his balance and fell from the tower. He died on the spot, and Dyer commented:

'He has fled out of his Prison.'

As a matter of fact, he confesses (he never hides anything from the reader, so the mystery is confined to the 20th century),

'I could hardly refrain from smiling at the sight; but I hid my self with a woeful Countenance.'

He did not even have to kill with his own hands, as he did later on. He had the boy buried where he fell. No sooner is this incident recalled than the second chapter (taking place in our own century) describes another boy named Thomas Hill, surrounded by children who dance round him and shout, 'Dead man arise!', in the vicinity of the Spitalfields church. The new Tom knows, for instance, that 'if you say the lord's prayer backwards, you can raise the Devil.' He feels attracted by the church, the tunnel, the Pyramid. His widowed mother (his father was a baker and died six years ago) fears this attraction, which is actually fatal to him. While writing this chapter, the writer still shares the mystery with us, revealing what actually happened, what the Police (except Hawksmoor) will never know. A creature who seems to be half-man, half-ghost makes the boy take refuge in the tunnel of the church. He has the supernatural experience of another world, the way back vanishes, he has a broken leg, falls asleep and dreams of the other Tom Hill falling and dying. The description is purely lyrical:

'But he was afraid, and his fear became a person. 'Why have you come here?' she said. He turned his back upon her and, as he looked down at the dust upon his shoes, cried, 'I am a child of the earth!' And then he was falling.'

Bits of poetry are interspersed all through the novel, all of them with the same halo of ill-omen. The second Tom Hill is reunited with his dead father, the registers, the times merge, and the shadow reveals to him 'the face above him.' Nothing is named or rationally explained. Like a refrain, 'the face above' begins the third chapter, which goes back to the spell-binding world of Dyer, who has a fit of gout. Though a successful architect by now, sadness, or rather pain is his burden, and he can never enjoy life. Here is the small poem of his misery:

'And now my Thoughts are all suspended and like a Pilgrim moving into the Glare of the Sun I am lost in the wastes of Time.'

He remembers his childhood years, immediately after the plague. His heart is set on becoming a mason. His aunt finds him an orphan and helps him. The fire comes. After the fire, he goes to Mirabilis, his 'good Master,' asking for advice, since so much room was created for building anew:

'You will build, *he replied*, and turn this paper-work house (by which he meant the Meeting-place) into a Monument: let Stone be your God and you will find God in the Stone. Then he pickt up his dark Coat, and in the dusk of the Evening departed away whither I never saw him afterwards.'

Like a lord of Darkness and Death, this Mirabilis lives on in Dyer, who all his life builds churches to a God of Evil, in a world of Evil, where it is perfectly all right to sprinkle each monument with the joyful spilling of human blood. The book is thus built that we do not even rebel or argue. We are happy to understand. Or rather infer what is going on. We have been made accomplices in thought, and the experience does not terrify: it is exhilarating.

Dyer becomes a mason's apprentice to Richard Creed, reads and learns architecture mostly on his own, and he meets 'Sir Chris' (Wren) when he is seventeen. Impressed by the young man's knowledge, Sir Chris, who is 'both Surveyor- General and principal Architect for rebuilding the whole City,' takes him to be his assistant. They visit Stonehenge together (which reminds us of Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*). Dyer feels he must see the 'High Place of worship,' by which he means worshipping the 'Daemon,' of course. He calls it 'the Architecture of the Devil.' Life and death mingle in this novel, which aims to relieve the reader from the frustration of never experiencing the infinite, the inconceivable. Actually, Ackroyd confines the universe to seven churches, all built in the spirit of Death in Life and Life in Death. Nothing is Black or White any more. Good and Evil grow together into a strange promise of delight unknown.

The proof of this is Chapter 4, describing a vagrant Ned, parallel to the one killed by Dyer centuries before. The story is confusing, but the lyrically recurring images come to our rescue. 'Dust' reminds us of the kingdom of night. One sentence could very well characterize this entire book:

'And how does it feel to go down into the water with your eyes wide open, and your mouth gaping, so that you can see and taste every inch of the descent?'

The mood being set, sentences, incidents, flashes recur. The victim feels like a child again. The church is waiting for young blood. A father, like an apparition, has a vision of his son dead. Chronology is thus ruined in a new, subtler way. The future feels like the past, all moments are one, we live all times simultaneously.

The fifth chapter thickens the 'Shaddowe' with which it begins (reiteration of the last words in Chapter 4). Dyer accompanies Sir Chris to examine a dead body (he was a master of anatomy) at a mental asylum. A madman there has a fit and calls out:

'What more Death still Nick, Nick, Nick, you are my own! At this I was terribly astounded, for he could in no wise have known my name. And in

his Madness she called out to me again: Hark ye, you boy! I'll tell you somewhat, one Hawksmoor will this day terribly shake you!'

The two heroes melt. Who is who? Would it help if we knew? All we really want, as long as we keep reading, is not to know. Ominous ignorance is the suspense of the book. An axe that never falls, and having finished the novel, we feel infinitely lucky we have emerged alive. As the last sentence explains:

'And then in my dream I looked down at myself and saw in what rags I stood; and I am a child again, begging on the threshold of eternity.'

A child who is repeatedly sacrificed, and whose death makes a poem out of every paragraph. Even more than Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd is pre-eminently quotable. At one point he half-reminds us of Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*:

'This mundus tenebrosus, this shadowwy world of Mankind is sunk into Night (...). We are all in the Dark...'

Dyer confesses that he builds his churches in stones and shadows, with the firm aim of enveloping all living creatures in 'Confusion.' These are churches meant to lead people into the dark. The dark of evil, of ignorance, of mystery. Ambiguity reigns. Ackroyd's major goal is not to clarify, but to disturb.

The way the chapters are knitted together is masterful. Not only does each one begin with the last words of the previous chapter, but incidents are also duplicated, brought up to date, seen from another point of view. Part two (Chapter 6) introduces Hawksmoor as the London Detective Chief Superintendent who looks for a mystery more than a murderer. So far, three children have been strangled near three churches (all built by Nicholas Dyer, but he does not yet know that), with no prints left. The bits of poetry continue to pop up. Hawksmoor hears a vaguely reminiscent refrain in the street:

'I will climb up, climb up, even if I
Come tumbling down, tumbling down.'

We fumble about the text and are led to suspect his likeness to Dyer. He ends by becoming a little of an alter ego, though not enough, since he is not half as full of life, passion and determination. What they have in common is, sombrely, their love of death. Hawksmoor, though unspeakably less impressive, gives the title to the novel. He likes to think of his investigation as of a story (is this the writer urging us indirectly?):

'...even if the beginning has not been understood, we have to go on reading it. Just to see what happens next.'

Which we do. Dyer has not been understood and never will be. Reason is too small a dimension for him. Hawksmoor realizes that and steps out of his detective routine when it is too late: he drowns into his twin. As he once says:

'But I may not have to *find* him – he may find me.'

And the sequel to this is: 'What time is it now?' No time. No age. Far behind. Let us forget it. Let us run away. Here is a book that pushes us outside ourselves.

The book deals with the plague, the fire, a dark faith, and numberless skeletons (Eliot's obsession with bones). Dyer's conviction is that

'the Plague and the Fire were no Accidents but Substance, that they were the Signes of the Beast withinne.'

In the name of the lightlessness within all of us, he builds and makes a clean breast of all his thoughts. The author makes him explain everything but the inexplicable core of mystery, his (our) very existence:

'When my Name is no more than Dust, and my Passions which now heat this small Room are cooled for ever, when this Age itself is for succeeding Generations nothing but a Dreem, my Churches will live on, darker and more solid than the approaching Night.'

A book which mixes fiction, poetry, drama, history, thoughts and dialogue, this text has no love interest whatsoever, no romance. Yet our deepest feelings are stirred, probably because we respond to the love of evil with our fear of death. Readers make this novel throb with life. We realize that there are topics more heart- rending than falling in and out of love. Now, Dyer died in 1715, but no records of his death or burial were preserved. Here is what he meant to do, before it happened:

'Dr. Flamsteed, the Astronomer Royal (...) predicts a total Eclipse of the Sunne on the date 22 April 1715: at that dark Time, when the Birds flock to the Trees and the People carry Candles in their Houses, I will lay the last Stone secretly and make the Sacrifice due.'

He keeps this a secret. It will be his most beautiful *'Church of Little St Hugh* in *Black Step Lane*.' The house of Mirabilis, meeting place of dark believers, was in Black Step Lane. It was destroyed by inimical people.

Dyer offers himself as the supreme sacrifice for the endurance of his faith. He builds himself into the everlasting and triumphs:

‘No one can catch me now.’

How strange that we should fall in love with the incandescent love of life of a book that haunts all its heroes with the spectre of death.

Chapter 11 has Dyer experience and verbalize his own death. What history has lost, Ackroyd recreates:

‘I had run to the end of my Time and I was at Peace. I knelt down in front of the Light, and my Shaddowe stretched over the World.’

Over Hawksmoor as he finds Nicholas Dyer in the encyclopaedia. Who is speaking? Can the dying go on and review their deaths? He, the detective (hoping to prevent another death? Death in general?) walks towards the church Little St Hugh. He is inside. The two Nicks are together:

‘They were face to face, and yet they looked past one another at the pattern which they cast upon the stone; for when there was a shape there was a reflection, and when there was a light there was a shadow, and when there was a sound there was an echo, and who could say where one had ended and the other had begun?’

They melt into one, and we feel the elation of having witnessed a reunion with Divinity.

‘A child again, begging on the threshold of infinity,’

and the book ends, without explaining Dyer, without solving the murders, without saying a word about the joy of melting into the unknown. Everything is desperately suggested, hinted at, lyrically murmured. Nothing is stated. So far, Peter Ackroyd is a Desperado of shared infinite mystery, of darkness for ever. Reading him, we witness black and white, day and night, good and evil, reason and confusion, detective and murderer merge. We need a new set of values, a new way of judging what we read. The novel is the enlightening communion with lightlessness. Partaking of a huge question mark. The unspeakable.

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*Chatterton* (1987) is a Point Counter Point novel. Besides using Huxley’s shifting focus, which also implies a multiple point of view technique, Ackroyd, just like Julian Barnes (*Flaubert’s Parrot*), amalgamates fiction with literary history. The only character who narrates in the first person

is in fact the source of mystery: Chatterton himself. As his story becomes clearer, he slowly drifts into the third person, and, willingly or simply unaware of it, the author steps to the front.

This is a rather depressing book about many kinds of death: from Chatterton's unwilling suicide (meant to be a mere 'cure for clap') to Charles Wychwood's death of a stroke. It is a hopeless, morbid novel, lacking in joy of any kind. *Hawksmoor* abounded in all kinds of deaths, yet the strength of the text was such that the reader came out of it feeling very much alive and kicking with thoughts, with hope and curiosity. *Chatterton* is a bundle of discreet shadows. It is an interesting text, more technique than elation, not at all haunting, and quite predictable. The imp of creative horror is absent. Ackroyd writes a decent novel which is not forceful.

The first page is a possible entry in any dictionary of literature. It says everything (and nothing) about Thomas Chatterton (1752- 1770), the boy born in Bristol, who learned very early how to forge older texts, thus giving an ancient – highly interesting – face to his own poetry. He created 'Rowley,' the mediaeval monk, and wrote under his umbrella. When he was seventeen, he left for London, where 'on the morning of 24 August 1770, apparently worn down by his struggle against poverty and failure, (...) he swallowed arsenic.' His suicide was later on painted by Henry Wallis (1856), who used young George Meredith as his model. Ackroyd's account sets out to debunk both: the suicide because of poverty and literary rejection, and the story of the painting.

It turns out in the end that Chatterton had absolutely no intention of taking his own life: he merely used laudanum and arsenic as a friend advised him, in order to cure the 'clap' contracted on the occasion of his losing his virginity. He also used quite a lot of alcohol, thus adding by mistake too much arsenic to the mixture. As for the painting, its story is rather concerned with Wallis' affair with Mary Ellen Meredith, his model's wife, than with George Meredith (who does not even exist as a character) or his impersonation of Chatterton.

T.S. Eliot is present again, here and there, with a few lines ('Oh do not ask what is it. Let us go and make our visit!'; 'Why should the aged eagle?'), and the novelist Harriet Scrope even claims he was her protector. Numberless connections are woven in a web of coincidences. Charles Wychwood is an unsuccessful poet, married to Vivien, and they have one son, Edward. Philip Slack has been his friend for fifteen years. They studied at University together; Philip is a public librarian now. Andrew Flint also was at University with Charles, and is a (doubtfully) successful novelist. For six months, Charles (otherwise unemployed) was Harriet Scrope's secretary. Philip finds out that Harriet Scrope's first novels

counterfeited those of Harrison Bentley, which she later admits, in an interior monologue that only the reader can hear, not the other characters. The whole book is full of forgeries and fakes. *Hawksmoor* was swinging between evil and good. *Chatterton* shipwrecks the genuine into the fake: nothing is reliable any more.

The same Philip ends up with Charles' wife and son ('his only family' even at the beginning of the book) after Charles' death, preceded by ominous headaches, blurred speech, spells of dizziness and confusion. One day Philip finds one of Bentley's novels, connects him to Harriet Scrope, replaces it on the library shelf and alights on the book next to it, in which he finds a text about George Meredith and Chatterton: deserted by his wife, in 1856, he was saved from suicide by Chatterton's ghost. The whole book would like to be haunted by this ghost of dead youth and hidden old age (which proves to be a fake), but Ackroyd's ability to build mystery fails him here. It is replaced by ingenuity.

Andrew Flint, on the other hand, is in the act of writing a biography of George Meredith when Charles visits him. Vivien works as a secretary 'in Cumberland and Maitland, a small art gallery' which acquires at an auction three Seymours that are fakes, as they were actually painted by the painter's assistant, Stewart Merk, before the painter died. Merk faked Seymour, Harriet faked Bentley, Chatterton (dangerous supposition) wrote most of 19th century poetry. Charles is taken in by faked Chatterton manuscripts, handed to him by a descendant of Chatterton's first publisher, Joynson. The only thing that is genuine in this novel of deceptions is Charles' death. All the rest is a game which, unfortunately, we decipher too easily. More direct and much less poetic than *Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton* is not a Desperado's novel. It experiments a few old tricks (mainly Huxley's), it desperately strives after a sense of humour and flops into traditional narrative. The ghost is asleep...

The story as such is pretty uncomplicated. Charles discovers a portrait which, he decides, shows a middle- aged Chatterton. He rejoices at having a mystery on his hands. He manages to acquire some manuscripts which confirm that Chatterton faked his own death and continued to write under the signature of Cowper, Gray, Blake and the early romantics. Charles himself is in constant pain – headaches and a tumour which lead to a fatal stroke – but rejects the thought of death. He wants to unravel the mystery. Ackroyd tries to impose a mystery on us, parading Chatterton's ghost here and there, but we do not feel any thrill. Charles dies as truly as Chatterton did, and we learn that in the end. There is no mystery. Just a chain of forgeries that lead nowhere. The novel ends with a clarity that our sophisticated Desperado readership rejects. Our last thought is: 'So what?'

Ackroyd tries hard to mix lyricism into his fiction, but it does not help. He also uses bits of sentences as refrains, but that produces no particular effect, either. Many details are useless, several characters have no magic meaning, no real place in the structure of the story at least (Harriet's secretary, Mary, the homosexual couple who own the fake Chatterton manuscripts, the 19th century poet Agnes Slimmer). Sarah Tilt is an art critic (and Harriet's supposed friend) who is writing a 'study of the images of death in English painting,' provisionally entitled *The Art of Death*. Since we hardly get to know her at all, this is one more parallelism that might have been interesting but stays flat. Harriet tells Charles an interesting sentence:

'...reality is the invention of unimaginative people.'

Can it be that this novel by Ackroyd is a bit too real?

The novel advances the hypothesis that Chattterton did not die, and then dispels its halo. He did die. Forgery is sublime, a law of life, but always found out, dragged into the open. It would be interesting if the world 'were a vast public library, in which the people were unable to read the books,' as Philip thinks to himself.

Chatterton's first-person autobiography is half-appealing. A certain mist of superficiality covers everything. We feel in the presence of a 'catching' manner (forgery). Charles exclaims, 'half the poetry of the eighteenth century is probably written by him,' he is 'the greatest poet in history!', but the only thing that really catches our soul is Charles' own agony of slow and sure (very real) death.

Talking to Harriet, Charles quotes Montaigne:

'I no more make the book than the book makes me.'

It was not the case of *Hawksmoor*. The theme of *Chatterton*, stated by Charles again, is 'the anxiety of influence.' The theme of *Hawksmoor* was after life, between lives, out of life. Here, death is final and it even manages to kill its own mystery.

We are told that Harriet

'always preferred stories in which the ending had never been understood.'

This is Henry James' policy. It is also the effect of *Hawksmoor*. The fact that the portrait of Chatterton in middle age dissolves when Merk tries to decipher it, cleaning the forgery, is not convincing. Again, we catch

ourselves shrugging our shoulders: ‘So what?’ Philip is ready – at the end of the novel – to retell everything in a new novel, his own. Do we want it? Ackroyd’s last words here are:

‘And, when his body is found the next morning, Chatterton is still smiling.’

As a novel, *Chatterton* is neither bad, nor good. It is a lecture on exposure. Its plot is a chain of associated forgeries. All characters (except Vivien and Edward, who form the only emotional background) are hypocrites. The two novelists are really failures, and Philip, who is preparing to become the third, opens a drab prospect. Everyone has at least one skeleton in the closet, and besides the infamous secret nobody has much to say. It looks like a book with all the mannerisms of *Hawksmoor*, but none of its enthralling charm.

Irony might have saved *Chatterton*. Somehow, though, we never feel like laughing. Charles is dying slowly and painfully under our own eyes, and even while analysing his death and communicating it to us, he cannot be honest with himself. The author plays with all sorts of hints, but his nimbleness fails to make his text more appealing. With each new turn, we expect an infusion of emotion which never arrives. Love is so discreetly described that it fades before the reader gets there. The whole novel fades soon after we have finished reading it, just like the Preface to Charles’ never- to- be- written book on middle aged Chatterton.

The lesson of the book is: Death can neither be faked, nor fooled. Both Chatterton and Philip (an old trick with Ackroyd) end by becoming one, learning this the hard way. And so does the reader.

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*English Music* (1992) is more a nostalgic poem than a story. The first motto comes from St Augustine:

‘...he who can interpret what has been seen is a greater prophet than he who has simply seen it.’

The whole book is a matter of interpretation. ‘English music’ is the music of the mind, of all minds ever, which contains the Earth, with all its wonderful arts (literature included), and the spheres, the universe; life here, present, past, future, and the soul beyond; in one word, the most essential mystery at the core of all that is. Peter Ackroyd deals mostly with what we do not know, what we shall never know, but his manner is relaxed. He helps us peep at the inconceivable, and this kind of suspense, again, replaces any need for plot or precipitated incidents. Thus finding

areas of sensibility that not many writers care to investigate (the mystery of building churches, the mystery of artists long dead), leaving aside the usual concern with love and action, Ackroyd creates a dreamy novel, which is his own trend. He puts so much lyrical sympathy in his fiction that we find ourselves caught in the web of hybridization, and experience its brightest side – the side which mellows without confusing our souls and minds.

The odd chapters (the last one is nineteen) are written in the first person, by Timothy Harcombe. They deal with a brief account of his life and bring into play mystery upon unsolved mystery. The even chapters are Tim's dreams or weaknesses, or escapes into the past, into old music, old literature, old painting. One is a poem on past writers, another a lecture in the composition of music, one more reveals the secrets of painting. They may seem a bit longish and irrelevant to the plot, but the plot of this book is our mind itself: the more we learn, the farther away the plot reaches. We feel privileged to partake of this dreamy, affectionate fiction that haunts us, beckoning to us long after we have left it, long after we have realized that none of its mysteries will ever be explained. We are taught how to love the unfinished, and this is a way of penetrating the never begun, of partaking of the inconceivable truth that we live in a world that never began and will never end. Ackroyd forces the limits of our understanding in a very gentle way, making the impossible easier to bear.

The story itself is very simple: Timothy Harcombe, the son of 'Clement Harcombe. Medium and healer,' follows in the footsteps of his father, who began as a circus magician, until he met Cecilia, his wife. She died when Tim was born. She seems to be the source of their (especially Tim's) healing power, their constant communication with eternity. At first, while Tim is still a boy, his father heals using his son's special energy, or so it seems. Soon, Tim's grandparents (his mother's parents) take the child away from his father. Clement Harcombe loses his gift until seven years later, when he actually manages to heal his own son. Tim is aware of his father's share of the indescribable legacy, and goes to 'work' with him again. Clement Harcombe dies soon after they restore to health Tim's best friend, Edward, who had a crooked body, shaken by nervous spasms. Once Edward is healed, Clement dies of a 'stroke.' Timothy continues to work for the circus until he feels he has lost his special energy. He continues to grow old, he writes this book which we are reading, and ends by saying:

'I no longer need to open the old books. I have heard the music.'
Meaning that he has been holding our hand while we were looking for a way out of the maze of Ackroyd's *English Music*: we have been flying across feelings and ideas, and landed in the very special ever-green field

of the writer's sensibility. It is an experience hard to forget. We have been keeping company with an artist of all arts, a creature of the here and the beyond; we have shared the inexpressible gift of ever after, ever before. Maybe this is why the book seems to be so private.

On the first page, Timothy tells us he is an old man, in 1992, but he has managed to return to the past, because

'One day is changed into another, yet nothing is lost.'

He goes back to a hall built in 1892, on the place where a Dissenters' chapel was destroyed in 1887. It is a meeting place, where his father, medium and healer, welcomes his small circle of followers with the words:

'Welcome to the Chemical Theatre. Where all the spirits of your past come in dumb show before you.'

Timothy is twelve, he sees 'phantoms', and, when his father heals or 'guides' anyone, he touches the head of the child, who sees the 'vision', who feels 'a world of energy lingering upon the earth.' They commune with the dead and help people who 'had somehow failed in life.' Clement Harcombe has a whole philosophy of life. As he tells his circle,

'That is all I have done: I have opened the door, and allowed the light to pass through.'

What light exactly, we shall never know. Not from Clement, not from Timothy, not from Peter Ackroyd.
Tim and his father live in a house not far from William Blake's grave. Clement tells Tim,

'Mr. Blake saw angels. The invisible world...'

Next to it, the monument of John Bunyan reminds Clement of the metaphor of the pilgrimage, and he continues:

'That's what we are, Timmy. Pilgrims.'

The whole book is an indefinite journey to the source of words, into 'English music,' by which Clement Harcombe means

'not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting.'

The two solitary creatures, widowed father and motherless son, share a ‘secret inheritance,’ but, strange enough, Peter Ackroyd does not dare explain what it is.

The memory of Tim’s childhood is a memory of deep communion and also deep fear. His father reads to him at night, from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Alice in Wonderland*. He does not go to school, studies ‘English music’ with his father, and has unbelievable, trance-like dreams, in which Clement Harcombe reads the certainty of his son’s connection to the unseen world. These dreams mix all kinds of styles. Written in the third person singular, like an omniscient narrative, they imitate Lewis Carroll, John Bunyan, Charles Dickens, 17th and 18th century narratives. The child sinks and travels into books, paintings, music, and, in the last but one chapter, he even witnesses the death of the Maimed King – his father – and converses (dream within dream) with Merlin. Each dream begins with the final words of the previous chapter. They are all engaging, confusing and entrancing, an outlet for Ackroyd’s overflow of lyricism.

In the second chapter, Timothy describes his childhood as he saw it, which means we do not get much by way of an explanation. He is happy not to be sent to elementary school. His father is a ‘patient and assiduous teacher,’ who makes him study a page of English history, a page of science and a page of Shakespeare every day. Clement Harcombe keeps uttering philosophical, enigmatical statements, which push us deeper and deeper into the unworldly. He talks about ‘the power of the invisible over the visible.’ He tells Margaret Collins (a dwarf) that ‘nothing in the world happens by accident,’ because ‘there is always a pattern.’ He bans everybody’s fears. He tells the scared Mathew that there are no haunted houses, ‘only haunted people.’ If Clement Harcombe is such a haunted person, we never find out. His small circle of followers, as well as his own son, are inhabited by solitude and fear. Clement is never cracked open, he stays a mystery in life as in death.

Tim learns from his father that

‘the larger world, the other world, is a world of love.’

Clement asks Tim if Tim’s mother, Cecilia Harcombe (1891-1913), dead in childbirth, has ever ‘contacted’ him. We are led to believe that he trusts and relies on his son’s supernatural powers more than he should. It looks like a mystery for a while, or a source of suspense, but Ackroyd dispels it in the end. Each page is interesting on its own, independent from the general meaning of the book – which merely means to conjure a mood.

During a film after *Great Expectations*, Tim has another dream. He dreams he converses with Charles Dickens, while they are both caught in the latter's narrative. Except for the remarkable atmosphere they create, a mixture of some author's literature and Ackroyd's own sensibility, these dreams do not take the plot any farther. They merely underline the fact that we live in a tiny atom, which is part of a vaster, endless universe, which Tim anticipates without being aware of it. He talks about 'that world which I had entered for a short time.' His grandfather, William Sinclair, who comes to take him from his father and his early communion with the unspeakable, is a total stranger to that vastness. He and his wife, Cecilia's parents, are decent common people, who provide Tim with a decent home until he finishes school.

Tim does not want to leave his father, he does not want to go away from London, with his grandfather, about whom, now, in 1992, he remembers:

'He thought he was protecting me – saving me from a wayward existence with a suspicious parent, a charlatan who professed to see visions and pretended to heal people.'

As a matter of fact, Tim himself heals his grandmother from a continuous trembling of the body, by putting his arms around her and imagining she is his mother. Nobody mentions this miracle and, actually, we are frustrated by this neutrality, this silence of the author, who refuses to be part of what he fails to understand.

Five months after Tim's departure, two of the followers of Tim's father (Margaret and Stanley) come to take him furtively back to London. They tell him there have been no more meetings in his absence, since 'the spirit had gone out of Mr. Harcombe.' But, on arriving at the old house, Clement's former rooms are empty, and Tim has another dream (chapter six) of himself going to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, asking him to find his father. The waves of imagination, layer upon layer, remind us of South-American fiction, mainly Gabriel Garcia Marques. Actually, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* might be closer. Tim actually sees and talks to characters invented by writers. He explains to the detective (whose real name is Austin Smallwood) that Arthur Conan Doyle invented a kind of a double of his. We live in several parallel worlds at once. There is in this book an essential parallelism of the characters with themselves, a simultaneous existence in several realms at once, which quite baffles the reader, without intriguing him.

Small clues (recurrent places or characters) rekindle the mystery, though we need not make the effort to remember, since everything is repeated and explained in due time. The constant theme of music is stressed over

and over again. William Byrd, a composer who later, in another dream, actually lectures on music, is quoted as having said that

‘God is in essence a musician, because he creates harmony within the universe.’

Actually, the detective extends the statement to all of us:

‘We are all looking for that harmony, Timothy. We are all detectives, looking for the pattern.’

These very quotable lines lend a musical quality to the book itself.

While the detective finds out that Tim’s father left with a younger woman, the stories penetrate one another, and the author’s imagination swings us pleasantly. As Austin Smallwood describes it,

‘Everything has been done before. Everything has been said before. It is the same pattern. The same music surrounds us.’

The author created a story (which could easily be changed by the characters), other people have lived our own lives. Nothing is disquieting, though. The tone is soothing, and we care more for the beautiful sentences of this dream than for the plot.

It turns out that Clement Harcombe has left with Gloria Patterson, one of the small circle. He comes back to his son only to inform him that

‘everywhere is our home,’

so Tim ends up by going back to live with his grandparents. But not before he dreams of Defoe’s island, on which he finds the sunflowers that used to grow in front of his London house. He is told by the only man on the island:

‘...in my retired imagination I remember that I am not alone but surrounded by others who came before me.’

The island is called ‘an emblem of our existence,’ bathed in the waves of ‘English music.’

At last, Tim goes to school and makes his first friend of his own age, Edward Campion, a cripple. It is all the time extremely predictable that the afflicted friend will be cured at some point, which happens towards the end of the book, when they are both in their twenties. Angelic sentences keep popping up, pouring poetry upon this unwilling narrative,

lost in the maze of what we are stubborn enough to persist in taking for a novel:
‘I knew that, if I lay upon the ground or rested against a tree, I would be filled simply with the motion of the turning world.’

Tim becomes interested in music, and his music teacher reveals to him that Cecilia is the patron saint of music, consequently of the book. It turns out that what Tim’s father called her (‘Hail! Bright Cecilia...’) is a fragment from Purcell, who died just the day before the twenty-second of November, when her day falls. T.S. Eliot’s technique of recurring images which give coherence to the text is heavily relied upon. The waste land as such is invoked several times.

After a long dreamless time of adaptation to school, Tim’s dream of the musician William Byrd comes to pass. As the latter explains,

‘That is the meaning of my death, as I suppose, to return to that source from which all my music flows.’

Timothy Harcombe keeps his name in all his dreams, as if reliving his own previous lives. In this one, as Byrd’s pupil, he ‘saw time as musicke.’ Ackroyd can hardly resist the temptation of using his knowledge of 18th century English, which makes us think of a late Joycean prompting.

When Tim is seventeen, he finishes school. He goes to live and work with his father again. His father is alone, poor and older. He reads people’s cards, makes horoscopes, in short tells fortunes by astrology and tarot. He is called a magician. It is the year 1930. Clement Harcombe ‘seemed empty, as if he were being hollowed out by the passage of time.’ Tim lends him his true power. At the same time, he has a frightening dream of madness, of slipping into an engraving of Bedlam made by Hogarth. The lesson of painting shows there is harmony even in misery and the music of understanding pervades every second of life. The end of the dream is an exclamation – ‘Happy the ingenious contriver!’ – which makes us meditate on Peter Ackroyd himself, as no less than a contriving novelist.

The novel ripples like a stagnant water. Nothing flows, yet the surface moves. All along, as Clement Hargrove puts it,

‘There is no past and no future, Tim, just the two of us listening to the music.’

The two part and are reunited. The dreams become more and more manneristic. The father is now a magician and a hypnotist for Blackmore’s circus, which he was when he met Cecilia. Edward Campion

and Tim meet again in Upper Harford, the Sinclairs' village. Edward has taken his father's job, in spite of the fact that he has a degree in philosophy. Tim learns his father's tricks and illusions, giving up his liking for English literature, his interest in music. He falls very ill. His father, who tells him he has no real healing powers, actually heals him of a mysterious fever. From generation to generation, a burden and a key are transmitted. Tim's grandfather – now he learns – was a magician, too. Father and son, together again, heal Edward. Clement Harcombe dies of a sudden cerebral haemorrhage. Born in 1899, he is reunited with Cecilia in 1936. Tim's grandparents die. Alone, Tim stays at the farmhouse, where, in 1992, he is an old man, living in the shadow of his friend Edward's family. Edward even has a granddaughter called Cecilia. Nothing is of existential importance any more. What Timothy does best now is 'simple things,' like writing *English Music*. We should not try to read undecipherable mysteries into it, if it is only to humour him. Or to humour Peter Ackroyd, the novelist who unveils here the poetry in his heart.

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Peter Ackroyd ends his biography of *T.S. Eliot* (1984) by quoting Eliot himself:

'We also understand the poetry better when we know more about the man.'

With his novelist's gift, Ackroyd blends the huge mass of information – he definitely worked hard and conscientiously on this book – into a story that captivates anyone who knows Eliot (more or less). It is a biography written with the alertness of fiction, in the unpretentious style of a prose writer who knows how to make even the bits of literary history palatable. An informative and formative book, Ackroyd's *T.S. Eliot* is one of the few Eliot biographies that do not gossip and are not insufferably sophisticated, either. It is, in fact, the work of a sharp mind that obviously has understood another sharp mind. A sharing and a revelation.

The biography aims at elucidating the mystery of Eliot's life and creation between his childhood and his second marriage (first and last years), the two happiest periods in the writer's life, as Eliot himself stated. All through the narrative, Ackroyd has a sure eye for the significant detail, that catches our interest and unlocks our understanding. Nothing is merely informational or explanatory. The very structure of the sentences (the personal statement coming forward, supported by pure information between brackets) reveals the manner of the book. With an eye to the

work and both eyes to the man, Peter Ackroyd delicately (yet firmly) opens the shell and shows us the pearl.

We first learn that Eliot's ancestors were both English and French. One of them actually was among the conquerors of Hastings. Which very subtly accounts for Eliot's youthful confusion when he visited Paris and contemplated the idea of writing in French. As we go along, we are confronted with more and more statements that elucidate the work, starting from the life. We learn, for instance, that Eliot's
'natural instinct was to write poetry which was as close to fiction as possible.'

This major feature of modernism – the symbiosis, the fusion, the hybridization of literary genres – eventually led to contemporary disarray, to each writer becoming a Desperado in search of the gold of his or her own literary trend, which blends all shapes or manners into the absolute surprise, the exasperatingly repeated (yet still fresh) novelty.

The story of Eliot's life flows just like a novel in which Ackroyd leads us towards the meaning he has in mind, a meaning that encloses within the same capsule the man and his work. He interprets Eliot as a character, analysing his thoughts and motives. Thus he talks about the 'punishing ritual of work' that Eliot imposed on himself. It was meant to order the poet's life, but Ackroyd goes on with the explanations of Eliot as a fictional character:

'His pervasive and sometimes corrosive scepticism was not to be easily overcome – just as, in his private existence – he was soon plunged into the disorder which he most feared.'

One interesting remark states that Eliot needed a 'double life' and 'was never completely at home anywhere.' They actually prove Ackroyd's depth of understanding, his identification with his hero, whom he describes as if he were imagining him for our benefit all over again. Another remark is equally challenging: 'his talent was for concentration.' Which is true. Unlike his Desperado followers, Eliot never wrote anything longer than his undergraduate thesis on Bradley, as Ackroyd points out. Actually, Ackroyd explains Eliot's highly accessible criticism by saying:

'He used to say that he had learned how to write prose from the example of F. H. Bradley...'
He describes the 'clarity and logic' of Eliot's literary criticism, which 'characteristically begins with a judgment.' What follows is not always striking, sometimes not even very original:

‘Eliot had few original ideas, but he was immensely susceptible to those of others – the act of creation was for him the act of synthesis.’

Many readers who have noticed the influence of Pound’s ideas on Eliot’s criticism, as well as the masterful use to which Eliot put Pound’s ideas – especially in his poetry, accept this sentence as a revealing explanation.

Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism prompted Pound to write a couplet:

‘In any case, let us lament the psychosis
Of all those who abandon the Muses for Moses.’

Ackroyd explains, though, that Eliot’s religious belief exists in his poetry only as

‘surface material, employed to provoke recognition and assent from the reader,’
which is as much as to say that Eliot never wrote purely (or at all) religious poetry. He is highly devious, and Pound realized how slippery he was when he found for him the nickname ‘Old Possum,’ which actually described ‘his ordinary tactics of evasiveness and caution – the opossum being an animal which shams death in order to escape predators.’

One sentence Ackroyd writes is a confession of powerlessness (which can also be found in Ackroyd’s fiction):

‘We cannot reach into the mystery of Eliot’s solitude.’

The book probes deeply and brings to light heavy secrets (Eliot’s sex life, his heavy drinking, his anti-Semitism), but does not claim to reveal any ultimate truth about the man who had complained, ‘I can never forget anything.’
When congratulated by John Berryman on receiving the Nobel Prize, Eliot retorted:

‘The Nobel is a ticket to one’s funeral. No one has ever done anything after he got it.’

Peter Ackroyd stresses again and again Eliot’s deep-seated anxiety that he will never be able to write anything again. On an existential, psychological, emotional, circumstantial level, he analyses very thoroughly the writer’s block from which Eliot seems to have been suffering. It looks more like a creative slowness, which we gently come to sympathize with and even share.

Peter Ackroyd's book on *T.S. Eliot* is far more than a biography. It is a novel. Eliot once said,

'Understanding begins in the sensibility.'

Ackroyd is too sensitive a writer to be satisfied with dry facts. Probably that is why he first sees in Eliot the critic a man who is trying to change the vocabulary of criticism. The darkest recesses of this intricate personality are exposed to light in a delicate yet firm way. There is no doubt that Eliot himself would have approved of this informed and also endearing biography. It certainly is a book hard to reject.

Ackroyd the scholar and Ackroyd the novelist are not very different. He is not so much intent on novelty as he is on admitting us into the richness of his mind and feelings. If anything, he certainly is a Desperado of sensibility laid bare.

Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## The Novel to Rent -- Martin Amis (born 1949)

*Money. A Suicide Note* (1984) is a talked novel, in the first person. Very much like Alasdair Gray's *1982 Janine* , Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* , and also in the style of Bellow and Updike. The novel is depressing and too rarely rewarding. John Self (the symbolism of the name is more than obvious) begins as a rich drunk (to say the least of it, since his list of vices is long), and ends up as a poor nobody with a dry-cleaned soul. As the novel progresses, he loses his money to an American aborted movie, his mistress (Selina Street, another obviously suggestive name) to an American businessman, his father (Barry Self confesses with animosity that John is not his son; John's real father is Fat Vince, so we could jokingly say that he even loses his 'self'), and his youth. He is unmoved by all these. Obsessed with pornography and drink, life is to him a tale of woe, made up mainly of four-letter words (which are sometimes longer, but just as vile). Martin Amis writes a novel about inner emptiness. We wriggle out of it with delight.

To begin with, it seems that there is no plot whatsoever. We listen to John Self talking to himself or begging us to sympathize with him. His 'suicide note' is signed 'M. A.' We are soon to find out that Martin Amis himself is a character in this novel. Unfortunately, the characters are all blurred and

unconvincing. Fowles saw himself as a momentary character boarding a train in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Martin Amis boards this story as a writer and leaves it before we actually manage to learn anything about him.
The flux of events goes from London to New York and back. Every now and then, a remarkable sentence crosses Self's mind. Such is,

'Fear walks tall on this planet.'

John Self is a very frightened man while he has his money, and suddenly feels liberated once he is conned out of it. He is fat, he drinks, he chain smokes, he even uses drugs, he has an uncommonly dirty mind and sex life, he talks dirty, too. As a matter of fact, he is half American: his mother was American. She died when he was a child, and he was seven when he went to America, where he lived in New Jersey until he was fifteen. Now, in 1981, he is thirty-five, and dreaming of a 'body transplant' (his self is supposed to stay the same).

Fielding Goodney (another see-through name), his 'money man,' makes him sign papers which ruin him in the end. As a matter of fact, twenty-five-year-old Goodney turns out in the end to be forty and 'a woman in bed,' as well as a secret voice, which keeps following and menacing John Self. Fielding puts up an incredible scaffolding to steal Self's money, and ends up in psychiatric correction. No character, actually, can be said to be in his right mind.

John Self keeps repeating, 'My head is a city,' 'Memory's a funny thing,' but he can only make us feel that

'my life is getting less memorable all the time.'

He very often addresses the reader directly:

'you, the unknown Earthling, unknown to me.'

Do we enjoy sharing his fantasies? 'I am a pornographic addict,' he confesses. Just like Gray's hero in *1982 Janine*. For some reason, this addiction rules feeling out. The hero realizes he must 'grow up,' because (good old Eliot again) 'It's *time*.' Time for what, we are not told. Not for suicide, anyway, because at the end of the book, John Self is very much alive and kicking (and poorer).

When Self first meets Amis, he muses:

'The writer's name, they tell me, is *Martin Amis*. Never heard of him. Do *you* know his stuff at all?'

But we must not blame Self, as he has not heard of Orwell, either. His friend, Martina Twain (wife of Ossie, who steals Self's mistress, Selina Street) makes him read *Animal Farm* and *1984* for the first time. He works for an 'advertising agency which produces its own television commercials.' He wants to make more money, so he heads back for America to 'earn lots more,' and loses it all.

When Self first talks to Martin Amis, he goes straight to the point:

' 'Hey,' I said. 'Your dad, he's a writer too, isn't he? Bet that made it easier.'
'Oh, sure. It's just like taking over the family pub.' '

The author would like to have a sense of humour. He tries so hard that the reader feels awkward to pose as Queen Elizabeth and declare, We are not amused. All the more so as this is a book about our decade, with heroes who confess, like Self,

'I am addicted to the twentieth century.'

Self's uninterrupted interior monologue builds up into a kind of novel-vérité. Orality dispels the charm of fiction, it debunks suspense, it makes details unimportant and easily forgotten.

'Time has me dangling,' Self complains. We do not feel the same. Here and there we manage to smile, as when we read the description of Los Angeles:

'This restaurant serves no drink, this one serves no meat, this one serves no heterosexuals. You can get your chimp shampooed, you can get your dick tattooed, twenty-four hours, but can you get lunch? And should you see a sign on the far side of the street flashing BEEF-BOOZE-NO STRINGS, then you can forget it. The only way to get across the road is to be born there. All the ped-xing signs say DON'T WALK, all of them, all the time. That is the message, the content of Los Angeles: don't walk. Stay inside. Don't walk. Drive. Don't walk. Run! I tried the cabs. No use. The cabbies are all Saturnians who aren't even sure whether this is a right planet or a left planet. The first thing you have to do, every trip, is teach them how to drive.'

We even feel closer to John Self flying in and out of New York, meditating:

'Time is travelling. Night and day are moving past me in the wrong direction. I am falling behind.'

When Martin Amis the character discusses contemporaneity, we share his opinion:

'...we're pretty much agreed that the twentieth century is an ironic age – downward looking. Even realism, rockbottom realism, is considered a bit grand for the twentieth century.'

Yet this novel is supposed to be realistic. Amis the hero even talks about the 'blackness of modern writing.' He tries to create a hilarious version of realism. Self's account of an opera he sees is edifying for his whole attitude:

'Luckily I must have seen the film or the TV spin-off of *Othello*, for despite its dropped aitch the musical version stuck pretty faithfully to a plot I knew well. The language problem remained a problem but the action I could follow without that much effort. The flash spade general arrives to take up a position on some island, in the olden days there, bringing with him the Lady-Di figure as his bride. Then she starts diddling one of his lieutenants, a funloving kind of guy whom I took to immediately. Same old story. Now she tries one of these double-subtle numbers on her husband – you know, always rooting for the boyfriend and singing his praises. But Othello's sidekick is on to them, and, hoping to do himself some good, tells all to the guvnor. This big spade, though, he can't or won't believe it. A classic situation. Well, love is blind, I thought, and shifted in my seat.'

Empty of substance, the characters run the risk of turning into mere masks. The plot is not exactly appealing and its directness amazes. Self cries out to the reader:

'Identify. Sympathize. Lend me your time.'

The more he suffers, the less we feel, because nobody takes anything seriously in this book. Amis meditates:
'Towards the end of a novel you get a floppy feeling...'

In that case, this novel ends on every page. Before committing suicide, Self lets us know:

'My life was a joke. My death will be serious.'

But he does not die. The suicide note is a fake. The whole novel is a huge fake. An interminable monologue.

Martin Amis may have tried to be entertaining and heart-rending at the same time. He writes a long novel, which gratified neither our need to be

diverted, nor our ability to sympathize. We feel downright moralistic when we finish reading this novel, and we hate ourselves for that. The writer makes us linger uncomfortably within our own minds. We feel like running away to the nearest life and renting it. He writes in a renting manner – if we can call it that – from everybody's point of view. The text has no privacy. The reader is constantly caught naked and refuses the mirror in the end. *Money* is the rejected suicide note of a writer in search of his own deeper voice.

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*The Information* (1995) rents the novel and finds the rent too high, so it drops the place altogether. We are confronted with Huxley's Point Counter Point technique, combined with a touch of Joyce (like a touch of flu), which makes the language too encoded for the comforts of a plot. Meaning is a maze of unfinished sentences and hidden pieces of information. Nobody does anything, nobody goes anywhere, we all drown with the characters – who are more names than beings, with the author himself, in an ocean of incomprehensibility. Beware of the Ides of March, Caesar was warned. Beware of the words of Amis, before it is too late and you have reached the end of the adventure without having been enlightened in the least. Here is its end:

„The Man in the Moon is getting younger every year. Your watch knows exactly what time is doing to you: *tsk, tsk*, it says, every second of every day. Every morning we leave more in the bed, more of ourselves, as our bodies make their own preparations for reunion with the cosmos. Beware the aged critic with his hair of winebar sawdust. Beware the nun and the witchy buckles of her shoes. Beware the man at the callbox, with the suitcase: this man is you. The planesaw whines, whining for its planesaw mummy. And then there is the information, which is nothing, and comes at night.'

The novel begins with the same 'nothing', and we may well wonder if there is anything in between:

'Cities at night, I feel contain men who cry in their sleep and then say Nothing. It's nothing. Just sad dreams. Or something like that…'

The names of the characters hardly matter. There is the successful writer and his wife, plus his best friend – and worst enemy at the same time – and his own wife, two twins added. Three enigmatic characters belong to the low world of violence, as a memento of *A Clockwork Orange*. The main names are Gwyn Barry and his wife Demeter, Richard Tull and his wife Gina, plus Marius and Marco. All that brings them together is

endless hatred. Hatred for the sake of hatred. Dry, sterile thunder, in Eliot's words, without rain…

Not much is happening. Both novelists turn forty. They go on a tour to America – the new obsession of British writers, then come back to their respective universes, one of success, the other of envy. Gwyn is overpraised, Richard is impotent. Gwyn hates Richard because he wins at tennis, chess and all games – but literature, Richard is on the point of writing a profile of the famous Gwyn Barry, and even framing him with plagiarism, when he finds him having sex with Gina, formerly his own sexual obsession, presently his wife. Gwyn is not in love with Gina. He is not in love with anyone, although he acts as if Demi were his only true love. He just wants to spite Richard. The only thing this novel does is to achieve suspense by showing us that Richard is not alone in his hatred. He hates Gwyn beyond any reasonable limit, but Gwyn hates him just as much. With this precious revelation that balances the plot, we hurry out of Martin Amis's (*amo? amiss?*) loveless world with an immense burden of bitterness.

Language, linguistical puzzles, rather, are the major focus of the book. The sadness of the author – who is trying his more than best to be funny – erupts from place to place. Richard Tull cries at night, then wakes up:

'He was in a terrible state – that of consciousness.'

In Yeats' tonality, he muses, 'the young sleep in another country'. The author makes us share his creation, he makes us writers, he takes us as accomplices, and this is the hidden reason why we feel we cannot leave the book unfinished. He treats us as his equals, who know whatever he knows, we are prompted to produce word after word out of our own hats.

Richard's latest novel is called *Untitled,* Gwyn's great hit is *Amelior*. The author takes neither seriously, but the two novelists are ready to kill, each for his own masterpiece. Born within one day from each other, Richard and Gwyn could not feel more different in everything, and yet so disgustingly close that they would give their right hand (and write no more?) to hurt each other, fatally wound, erase forever. The author favours Richard, probably, because most insights reveal his dark impulses. Gwyn is soiled with soot only at the end of the book, after three hundred pages of angelic innocence. Or so it seems.

Pushing Gwyn to the brink of imagination with each of his thoughts, Richard feels 'some of us are slaves in our own lives.' Gwyn, he muses, is 'a writer, in England, at the end of the twentieth century.' What is left for himself? Books never published, hard work rewarded by failure, novels

that send their readers to hospital with horrible (and real) brain damage. Amis could hardly get bitterer than that.

The title of the book applies to everything that goes on, but has one specific meaning: the information that Gwyn Barry is guilty of plagiarism. Richard Tull feeds this news to Rory Plantagenet, former school fellow, whom he has been selling literary gossip for years now. We are told that

'Rory paid for the information.'

Unfortunately this juicy bit turns against Richard (who manufactured the alleged original by typing Gwyn's novel and changing it here and there himself), whose own wife seems to belong to Gwyn. In the meantime, though, we have found out from inside sources – care of the author – that Gwyn himself is not that happy a soul. He has his own envy, emptiness and bitterness to fight. But Richard does not know it. The whole novel is a long interval of wait: will Gwyn lose what he has? Well, Gwyn does not have so very much, and the author finally mocks at his two novelist-heroes. He mocks at literature, at his own book, at the genre of the novel as such:

'We keep waiting for something to go wrong with the seasons. But has already gone wrong with the genres. They have all bled into one another. Decorum is no longer observed.'

Considering that 'all writing is infidelity;' we might also say that only two incidents take place in this rather too long novel: Richard goes to bed with Anstice, his secretary, who mistakes his impotence for arduous virility. Anstice tells Gina all about it, but Richard has no idea, and keeps talking to Anstice on the phone an hour daily, to prevent her from repairing what actually never happened. Gina needs revenge, so, second incident, she has a loveless affair with Gwyn. Conclusion? From the way Amis writes, nobody is in love with anyone, but they keep trying to get the others in bed. Why? Just for the envy, the rage, the heck of it.

As for the new feature of the novel, Richard tries to enlarge on that:

'When we started out I think we both hoped to take the novel somewhere new. I thought the way forward was with style. And complexity. But you saw that it was all to do with subject.'

Gwyn listens with 'dignified unsurprise.' So do we. Which one is Amis trying to steal into? The decent guess might be 'style', but we cannot deny him a certain sense of plot, either. Considering the approaching end of the world, he may already have been forgotten:

‘… the oceans will be boiling. The human story, or at any rate the terrestrial story will be coming to an end. I don’t honestly expect you to be reading me by then.’

Richard knows he can only produce *‘fanatically difficult modern prose.’* Does Amis do that, too?

The author’s trips into description of ‘modernism’ are interesting as critical theory. Richard, for instance, is a ‘marooned modernist’, while Gwyn knows that the art lies in ‘pleasing the readers’:

‘Modernism was a brief divagation into difficulty; but Richard was still out there, in difficulty. He didn’t want to please the readers. He wanted to stretch them until they twanged.’

Richard seems to be trying ‘to write genius novels, like Joyce.’ He merely manages to be ‘unreadable.’ He longs to be read and successful, but it just does not happen. He despises Gwyn’s popularity and cannot explain it to himself. Amis does not explain it, either.

Martin Amis had rented the shape of the novel for a few long hundred pages, but he leaves it, driven away by an obvious powerlessness to settle. His characters are somewhat powerless to exist. Their author is powerless when it comes to winning our sympathy. We could conclude that Martin Amis is, in these two novels, a Desperado of powerless fiction.

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## The Disappointed and Disappointing Memory- Land Reclaimer – Graham Swift (born 1949)

Graham Swift is a devious, Faulknerian novelist. He is also a very thrifty one. No detail without further use, no detail without further delay, so to speak. Every word he writes has a tail of on- coming revelations, which sure enough will postpone the end of the book. Does the book ever end? Not if the writer can help it. The flow of words could go on forever. Between words and incidents, Graham Swift constantly fights the waters of silence and reclaims every inch of a bewitched land of memories.

*Waterland* (1983) both confuses and gratifies the reader. First of all, it is one of the best examples of the contemporary hybridization of genres, as it mixes fiction, poetry, history, essay, diary, teaching (yet never learning), and so on. It is a premeditated medley, so characteristic of the Desperado way of writing that has reigned in the last decades of the 20th century, and will probably outlast the turn of the millennium.

Although the story is not complicated at all, the narrative is patched and piecemeal. Unlike Virginia Woolf's avowed desire to smash our

understanding of the story, which invariably ended in its very opposite (since we instantly put the pieces into place, the moment we have done reading, and all we preserve is the recollection of a pretty straight line), Graham Swift exhales bafflement without exerting himself in the least. The whole plot boils down to some adolescent recollections in the process – totally devoid of tranquillity – of a history teacher addressing his pupils. We (readers) are his alleged pupils, and the book itself is the syllabus of this very unconventional course in (personal, yet endlessly repeated, therefore world) history.

From the very first words, we are plunged into the deep waters surrounding the reclaimed land of the story. The author does not give a damn whether we can swim (understand, follow him) or not. We are fed incident after incident, revelation after revelation. The right connections between each detail and its subsequent development into drama (not unlike Hardy's use of premonitions) overwhelm us before we have had time to raise our head above water and breathe.

However hard we may try, Graham Swift's story cannot be retold in a coherent manner, because he beats Virginia Woolf at her own game, and makes the stream of consciousness the very stuff of his narrative. He seems eager to tell his story so that everyone may find it smooth, but there is no mistaking him. He was born long after Experimentalism waned. He is one of the Desperadoes at the turn of this millennium, a writer who wants his books both popular and different. We read him smoothly, though breathlessly, but the overall impression is one of frustration. At the end of the story we realize we have been led by the nose: information pours from every word and we feel battered. At the end of *Waterland*, Graham Swift pats our hand, empties his bag of surprises and, because of too much pressure and painful suspense, he is deserted by an exhausted reader.

The story begins with the brutal opposition between the 'fairy-tale' mood of the characters and the gloominess of 'the Fens,' land floating on water, stolen, menacing to crumble, thoroughly grim, very much to be escaped from, like Joyce's Dublin. A universe of obscure guilt. We are taken back to the 1930s, but just for one chapter, as there is constant exchange of contemporary comments and past mysteries. Yet, first and foremost (see Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) is the secret of the unseen, yet unguessed, of the slow but sure to come.

What happens is, basically – and very simplistically – a boy-meets-girl story, boy gets girl pregnant (which we learn so much later), plus endless complications. The boy grows up into – of all the professions in the world – a history teacher. While recollecting the book (we keep wondering, Has this book ever been written? When is the author going to sit down and

feed it to us in decent order? Or can we do that on our own? May we? Should we? Well – No.), the history teacher Tom Crick is on the point of being pushed into early retirement, and is terribly depressed at the almost certain prospect of his department being dissolved. The school (the world?) is giving up history.

One of the reasons why Crick has to go away is that his wife Mary (the former pregnant teenager who lost her child since that was what she wanted, and was left with the lifelong disability of ever bearing children again) stole a baby at the supermarket. She claims God promised her a baby. The infant is promptly returned, yet Tom has to pay the price of his wife's becoming insane. It may not be mere coincidence that the only pupil in Crick's class who actually has a name is called Price.

In the meantime, grandparents and parents die, the world goes on. It might seem that this book has no secondary characters. They are all main heroes. From whatever point in time we look at it, this Mona-Lisa-like narrative gazes back with the eyes of some major personage. The author will not allow us to doze off, close our eyes, get bored. He shifts the plot from back to back, until we feel we have to give up: everyone is the focus of attention, yet, from the dispassionate tone of the story-teller, we wonder if anyone gives a damn about anyone else.

Consequently, stories mingle. One of them is extremely intriguing. Tom's mother had a first-born (Dick, Tom's half-brother and even a bit more), conceived with her father. Dick is a 'potato head,' and he kills Freddie Parr, another teenager, because he thinks it was Freddie who got Mary pregnant. In his dumb way, he is of course in love with Mary, and he finally, very late, finds out the child was Tom's. When Freddie Parr's body is found floating, Tom realizes Dick is to blame, but says nothing. He has a few thoughts, but this is not a book of meditation, although it follows, apparently, the stream of Tom Crick's memories. It is and yet seems it could not be farther away from the stream of consciousness.

We are not invited within the characters' judgments. The story of a history teacher, this book deals with remembered facts. Hard facts, all of them. Cruelty smothers us, and we sigh while we struggle for breath. There is no fresh air, no freshness whatever in the book. It is a wrinkled, disabused text. All the author's strength goes into keeping our interest alive. Like his contemporaries, he means to shock us into remembrance of things past. He is an adept at the bitter shock, the shudder which affords no pleasure, a book of sentimental horror and drowning meanings. Nothing seems to make sense any more. Not even literature.

The chapters are each in turn a history lesson, told either in the first person, or in the impersonal voice of incidents happening in a strange

time, ‘out of joint,’ when something is really ‘rotten in the state of Denmark.’ The author uses every possible way out, leaving us utterly alone with the characters, mainly with Tom Crick, who pleads:

‘Children. Children, who will inherit the world. Children (for always, even though you were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, candidates for the appeasing term ‘young adults’, I addressed you, silently, as ‘children’) – children, before whom I have stood for thirty-two years in order to unravel the mysteries of the past, but before whom I am to stand no longer, listen, one last time, to your history teacher.’

Instead of the horrors of the French Revolution, Tom Crick relates his private hell: the murder of Freddie Parr by his ‘potato-head’ brother, born out of incest; a secret abortion which leads to a lifelong tragedy; the rise and fall of the Atkinsons’ empire; the heart-rending enmities between teachers within a school; the haunting, desperate and vain awaiting of the experience of love. He could write *A History of the Fens*, but prefers talking it over with his disciples. He teaches a humanized form of very near history, and the already mentioned Tom Price, who begins as a rebel and ends as the teacher’s greatest fan, remarks:

‘The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it’s got to the point where it’s probably about to end.

This story Crick unfurls is incredibly tortuous. Even putting Hardy and Faulkner together, we could hardly explain the workings of Graham Swift’s mind. He is very often highly lyrical. The narrative is ostentatiously informal. The more defiant, matter-of-fact the story-teller becomes, the shyer the narrator, whose sensitivity somersaults, hides, poses, shouts or whispers. The major trick is that of running the movie backwards: the details are lined up from end to the very beginning, the truth is delayed and finally merges with its future – the history teacher’s old age. In the midst of this wilful confusion, the reader feels immersed in torpor and helplessness: Come what may, the unseen author knows it all, I can merely wait...

The whole book is a long wait, saved by suspense, which definitely means the story is very much alive. It even flirts with the year 1922 (when *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were both published), the year of the wedding of Crick’s parents. It dips its fingers deep into poetry. Here is one instance:

‘...I have not brought history with me this evening (history is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now). I have brought my fear.’

Some paragraphs are short blank verse poems. The whole book is a strange lyrical approach to the narration of memory.

Dick, the fruit of incest, the 'freak' who murders, who can hardly read or write, but is physically a miracle, reminds the reader of Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*. He begins and ends the book. Like the eels, he leaves the end of the book, to return to a secret place of renewal. Is he the main hero? Is his brother the main protagonist? Are there any main heroes at all? Is this a novel of fear or love? Graham Swift's *Waterland* arouses more questions every time one re-reads it. No definition can fit it. To my mind, precisely because of this reason, it may be declared the paragon of Desperado fiction (meaning contemporary, at least): it puzzles.

To put things right and relieve our anguish, the history teacher states:

'As long as there's a story, it's all right.'

And he goes on weaving the web of our disarray and discomfort, because negation of every conventional device and meaning is what contemporary Desperado writing is all about. I am not who you think I am, the writer claims; read (think) again. He does that by pushing his novel on to the brink of the essay, yet stops short (and aptly) before it becomes abstract. Sex is one path towards the very concrete. Swift's directness is always steeped in lyricism. Here is the description of history given by his character who made 'a profession out of the past':

'There are no compasses for journeying in time. As far as our sense of direction in this unchartable dimension is concerned, we are like lost travellers in a desert. We believe we are going forward, towards the oasis of Utopia. But how do we know – only some imaginary figure looking down from the sky (let's call him God) can know – that we are not moving in a great circle?'

One of the tricks used to delay the plot in this novel is the constant interruption. Repeated interruptions of a story, which is thus broken into tiny bits of coloured glass, mingle together into a kaleidoscope of imagination. We come across details which are apparently insignificant, sentences which are apparently unrelated. The same as Julian Barnes (in *Flaubert's Parrot*) mixes Flaubert criticism with pure fiction, Graham Swift mixes here the French Revolution, World War II, and a private, imaginary story. His point is that repetition is the key, that no matter how often a process is interrupted, the circle will be completed. The story, too. So, interruptions are there only to spur us into reading on.

Besides the reader's bumpy advance into an unpredictable rough story, there is also in Swift a childish sweetness of the picturesque. The father

tells his two sons (out of whom one is a freak, fruit of incest, while the other chooses to live in the past):

'Do you know what the stars are? They are the silver dust of God's blessing. They are little broken-off bits of heaven. God cast them down to fall on us. But when he saw how wicked we were, he changed his mind and ordered the stars to stop. Which is why they hang in the sky but seem as though at any time they might drop...

Mary's abortion becomes part of a witch's ritual; her decision to steal a baby forty years later is announced in 'Greenwich Park, some fifty yards from the line of zero longitude.' The eels only breed in the Sargasso Sea, while the history teacher has no offspring. Subhuman Dick falls in love with Mary, and the somewhat stream of consciousness description of his mood is the only mention of love in the whole book. Reality drips into more and more stories:

'Ah, Mary (ah Price), we all wander from the real world, we all come to our asylums.'

And, finally, *Waterland* declares:

'My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land.'

The book ends with Dick's flight, with everybody's flight, in fact. Mary leaves sanity, Tom Crick leaves his classes of history, we leave this text of interruptions and delays. Our imagination, held captive while the suspense lasted, steps out of both story and history, and bolts away.

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*The Sweet-Shop Owner* (1980), Graham Swift's first novel, is a slow story of solitude and death. Written before *Waterland*, it does not show any signs of that hybridization of genres which has given literature so much charm lately. The narrative uses two major tricks. One of them is the already familiar alternance of past and present, memory and the birth of experience, the moment that flits by even while we read. The second trick is the use of 'I' and 'he' for points of reference in the narrative. The book becomes a game which hurls together broken chronology and the point of view, both used in a Desperado way, a disabused attempt at being new, yet giving the impression the author does not care. The truth is he does care – a lot – but the right manner is hard to find. Inspiration is courted, and I am afraid *The Sweet-Shop Owner* ends before Graham Swift has managed to make its fruit irresistible to his readers.

Willy Chapman, the sweet-shop owner, lives in two worlds at once. He is described as ‘he’ when he remembers his two-year-now dead wife Irene, as well as when he faces Mrs Cooper (an elderly lady, sixteen years his assistant) or Sandra Pearce (a seventeen-year-old girl who helps) every day at the shop. He turns into ‘I’ whenever his daughter, Dorothea (‘God’s gift,’ he calls her), comes into the picture and he tries (in his mind, only) to explain his whole life to her. The book seems to extend over only one day, the day when, because of ‘Angina pectoris,’ the sweet-shop owner closes his business and deliberately dies. He succumbs to the pain, acquiescing:

‘All right. All right – now.’

These are the last words of his story, spoken in the first person, and inviting no lingering in the grim universe of the book, which – if we remember Alasdair Gray, Doris Lessing, Anthony Burgess, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Malcolm Bradbury – is typical for the dystopic Desperadoes.

Graham Swift is not the kind of author who will rejoice in being alive. Life is a burden. ‘The body is a machine,’ it inevitably gets old, out of use, extinct. One of his heroes’ favourite sentences might be:

‘But, sooner or later, there’s a last time.’

Before that final curtain, which darkens every little moment all over the narrative, as a matter of fact, there is a mysterious wife, who has no love to give, who can only give her husband the sweet shop (and the daily toil that came with it) and a daughter. Irene Harrison suffered from asthma. She barred everyone from her inner world: her father, her two brothers (one of whom died in World War II), her husband and her daughter. As Graham Swift puts it,

‘she did command, and he obliged.’

He imagines what she thought, but his venture does not make her less of a mystery:

And what she was really saying perhaps was: ‘Don’t talk of Father and Mother, or my brothers. I don’t want to discuss them. Don’t you see? I was the only daughter, I was the odd one of the family. I was a beauty. I had no life. That is why I chose you – with no talent, no initiative – for the justice of it, the symmetry. Don’t think I will change.’

Nobody and nothing actually changes during the time Graham Swift tells his stories. From the very first page, everything is settled, preordained.

Even Willy's fall off a step-ladder, his breaking a bone in his leg and displacing another in his back, his subsequent permanent limp and his inability to actually 'see action,' to really fight as a soldier in the war. Sixty-year-old Mr Chapman looks somewhat like T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, who was not 'Prince Hamlet,' nor 'was meant to be,' who is merely an 'attendant lord,/ One that will do to swell a scene or two...' In his own words:

'History would come anyway. Nothing touches you, you touch nothing.'

At a certain moment, Irene herself narrates in the first person, thinking into her husband's mind. Unfortunately, her secret is not unveiled. Her philosophy is:

'Wars pass but sweet shops remain.'

In Willy's mind, sentences, blow ups, remote questions, innumerable upsetting moments alternate. The progress of the story, continued in minute instalments, becomes excruciating. The interruptions often create a text which almost makes no sense. Like the overwhelming ghost of the silent wife, the story withdraws gasping for breath, for the air of life and light. Longing for joy.

This novel has something Jamesian about it. Half-statements, double meanings, incomplete thoughts. Confusion is overdone. Since there is not enough psychology or enough plot to lure us, we feel like keeping unwilling company with an insufficient Henry James. The author never answers his own questions, such as:

'If the word love is never spoken, does it mean there isn't any love?'

Graham Swift is quite a miser: like most Desperadoes, he does a wonderful job of killing the very idea of a couple, of sentimental, fairy tale developments in his story.

'Mr Chapman, the sweet shop man,' is deserted by his daughter, who feels stifled by the oppressive atmosphere at home, goes to college, tries a PhD, gives it all up for a love affair, and insistently demands that she should be given her dead mother's inheritance. Which she gets. No trip into her thoughts, no play upon actions and reactions. Willy Chapman dies alone, muttering:

'Dorry. You'll come. You'll come back.'

When? Where? What to? Not to the loneliness of her father's last breath. The author makes sure of that.

The strange thing about Graham Swift is that it takes a while to find your bearings in his stories, to know what to be looking forward to. And when you do see a faint glimmer of interest, you only end up by smashing into grimness. Strange heroes undergo half-revealed experiences and all along they wonder (we wonder, too) whether life is worth living. A life that 'was set out like a map.' No excitement. No promise. No future. This is, indeed, Graham Swift's major Desperado feat: his novels abolish the future.

In his school years, Willy was the best runner around, which squeezes from the author a poetic image at last:

'How brave, how solitary. The eternal athlete, the eternal champion, running into his future.'

Despite its deliberate dryness, *Waterland* abounds in poetry, it teems with starlets of feeling revolving loose. This novel manages a small spur only when fatherhood is at stake. But the daughter ends up 'living with a historian,' grabbing her dead parents' money, while her father's last thought questions her in vain:

'And what will you buy with it, Dorry? History?'

On the last word page the sweet shop owner is dead, and we scurry from the story enveloped in a freezing blast. This Desperado has been taking us unaware to the North Pole of love.

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*Shuttlecock* (1981) is a grumpy novel. It mixes two books in one, as a matter of fact. One is a record of Prentis' life. Prentis is a thirty-three-year-old man, married, with two sons, who works for a kind of police secret archives. He has a fifty-three-year old father, who was a British agent in France during World War II, was captured by the Germans and managed to escape (or so he claims). Some ten years after the end of the war, he published a book on all this, and Prentis' daily life is mixed with quite a number of pages from his father's book. The title of the novel is in fact his father's code-name during the war. Unfortunately, when he was fifty, the former agent went into a 'language coma': he stopped talking or reacting in any way to the outer world. A mystery that keeps us alert.

The mystery of his silence and his son's desperate attempts to find the truth end in the confession of Quinn, Prentis' boss, as to having withdrawn certain pieces of evidence that might shed some light on the file of Prentis' father. His version of the truth is: 'Dad' (Prentis' father,

remembered as such all through the book – which reminds of psychoanalysis) did not just escape from the Germans. He betrayed another two agents and was spared his life. Quinn himself has an artificial foot because of that betrayal: the Germans killed his platoon and he himself was wounded, as a consequence of Dad's having revealed their arrival in France to the Germans. Besides, 'Dad' also slept with his best friend's wife. His best friend committed suicide. When all this becomes known, and Quinn and Prentis decide to burn the evidence since it is best forgotten, Prentis gets Quinn's job (substantial promotion), since the latter is sixty-four and retires. Will the circle of silence be renewed? Have we really had a glimpse at the truth? The father never talks again. How are we to know?

Actually, we do not even care, whatever we are told. What matters is Prentis' psychology, his well-analysed (though not terribly complicated) change. He begins by hating 'Dad,' as a child. Then goes on towards worshipping him, as a war hero. Becomes a Dad himself, and almost reiterates his own Dad's pattern, when he finds out there is a very disturbing crack in the picture. Dad was/is not a hero. Prentis switches to more human standards, accordingly, and grants himself and his family a chance at the real thing: not veneration for a pedestal, but mere, humble, everyday love.

The novel is a dialogue between the first-person narrator (Prentis) and us, the readers (he calls us 'you'). He declares:

'...I am writing all this as thoughts come to me and as things happen.'

His interior monologue is as old as the hills, if we think of it as a narrative device. The idea of the institution which harbours Dad and other deranged people, the theme of madness, was a favourite stream of consciousness theme (T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf...), too. The 'you' of the story reminds us of T.S. Eliot's 'You! hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère!' (quotation by the British poet from Baudelaire – so, intertextuality again). Graham Swift uses all these tricks to score a point which he makes evident quite early in the book, at the end of chapter 7:

'Perhaps, with the right words, the right question, I could shock him out of his condition. Perhaps I can ask him questions, now, say things, now, I would never dare utter normally. Like: I respect you Dad, I love you Dad. I looked up to you. I always did, though I never showed it. Why is it my own children don't respect me?'

We soon learn the meaning of Shuttlecock, Dad's code-name. It is

'a thing you take swipes at and knock about, like a golf ball.'

Considering the trajectory of the reader's sympathies, from the narrator to his father, then back to the narrator again (next move unknown, end of the book, end of the game – other games to follow?), this reader may as well be the shuttlecock. The narrator sets him going, then strikes him hard, sending him back where he came from.

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*Out of This World* (1988) is an alert, captivating, even warm-hearted (as warm as Graham Swift can get) novel. The last sentence of the book explains the title:

'And I was being lifted up and away, out of this world, out of the age of mud, out of that brown, obscure age, into the age of air.'
Ten-year-old Harry flies a plane and escapes all the tangles of our earthly daily conflicts, the bitter taste of our daily bread.

The story is again rather guessed than told. Harry and Sophie (with minor intrusions from Joe, Sophie's husband, and Anna, Harry's wife and Sophie's mother) pour into our minds monologues which follow one another like Virginia Woolf's *Waves*. Sophie is Harry's estranged daughter, who ends up leaving New York with her ten-year-old twin boys, in order to attend her father's on-coming wedding in England, to a woman forty years younger than himself, who is also bearing his child. This happens, as the first page of the novel announces, in April 1982. The rest of the stories are all mixed up, chronology is a puzzle, and the reader – surprise – this time around is never too tired to fit a new piece in. As a matter of fact, we expect more and more. Sensibilities open, characters bloom, and we are trapped into living their lives.

There are not many characters, and the author takes his time introducing them. No curtain falls in the end, which is a good thing, by contemporary standards. Since at the last moment we still want to share the characters' inexhaustible memory, it could be said that the book falls short of the reader's emotional expectations. It stirs him, makes him restless and goes blank. In their hurry to shock and impress, literary Desperadoes make a point of being insufficient.

The story has four generations lined up against the wall. Each memory aims and retrieves. It all begins, in time, with 'Grandad' (for Sophie) or 'Dad' (for Harry). Unwilling as Swift is to attach names to his heroes, we do learn eventually that his name is Robert Beech, founder of BMC (Beech Munitions). He lost his right arm in World War I, whereupon he came

bravely home, to make more bombs, to blow up more limbs, to defend his country, which he loves. Good or bad? Unanswered question.
Harry's mother died at his birth, and it seems to Harry his father is blaming him for the loss. Harry's father lives to be seventy- three, and dies – coincidence – blown up by a bomb planted in his car by Irish terrorists, on the very eve of his son's planned departure for Belfast, ten years before the beginning of the book:

'And there we were. All three Beeches, in the family house. Grandfather, father and daughter. Even two little unborn semi- Beeches, pretending to be one. That was the night of 23rd April, 1972. Springtime in England – St George's day! And under the back seat of the Daimler there was a bomb, and nobody knew.'

It is actually Grandad's third (and final) encounter with death. Before that, he had a heart- attack and heart- surgery in midlife, and even before, he saw death with his own eyes during World War I. Harry remembers, mentally addressing his daughter:

'One morning in March, Sophie, which must have been a very noisy and confused morning, in 1918, my father was standing in a trench in northern Picardy, when a grenade landed just a few paces away from him. This was near the town of Albert, ten miles north of the Somme, but at that time it must have seemed like nowhere on earth. The grenade, which landed some five yards from my father, happened also to land less than a foot from his commanding officer, who was lying at the time, unconscious and immobilized from a previous explosion, on the floor of the trench. My father ran to the grenade, picked it up, turned to throw it clear, and, as he did so, it exploded and blew off his arm.'

Images of the wars occur in almost all Graham Swift's novels. This particular scene took place on March 30th, 1918, and Harry was born on the 27th of the same month, so his father lost an arm and he lost his wife, too, at about the same time. He also lost two brothers to that war. And he still had the strength to joke about himself as being 'the best bloody advertisement BMC ever had,' about 'being in the arms business.' In 1969, three years before his death, Robert Beech still enjoys life and its surprises: he sits up all night with his son, 'watching those first moon- men take their first, shy steps on the moon.' He is seventy, and he enjoys every minute of it:

'And some time that night he leant across to chink his whisky glass against mine and said, without sarcasm, 'I've lived to see men land on the moon.' As if he truly found the fact momentous, as if he were proud that his life spanned the full, galloping gamut of the twentieth century.'

The novel is so well written, so emotionally poetic yet narrative at the same time, that it invites quotation constantly. Memorable sentences, short poems, almost haiku-like (with European countenance, though), pop up in every paragraph. The same thing happened in *Waterland*, one of Swift's most intense novels, but the characters there were all grim, morose, closed up tight. *Out of This World* (written at least several years later, published five years after *Waterland*) takes us to the open field of several sensibilities. We breathe fresh air and accompany the writer as he is still in search of his unmistakable voice.

The second generation after Grandad is Harry, accompanied by his Greek wife, Annna Vouatsis. Harry tells us his story in more than half the book, while Anna, dead when Sophie was only five, gets a mere chapter. It is hard to put order in these details, and the author makes the job even more difficult for us by making each detail significant. It is a step forward after Virginia Woolf: we can no longer walk out of the narrative and instinctively bathe into natural chronology again. The thread of time is contorted and meant to be remembered like that, in the shape of gasping interior monologues. Sophie mentally addresses her psychiatrist (doctor Klein or K. – which reminds of Kafka, by the way, with his maze of fears), herself and her twins. Never her father. For some obscure reason, parenthood is extremely awkward with Graham Swift – as for all Desperadoes, actually. Harry talks to himself and to his daughter (like the sweet shop owner). Anna summons Harry's attention, trying to explain. Joe (Joseph Carmichael) converses with the bartender, lonely and neglected as he feels.

Harry's story is in fact the core of the book. He is the closest Swift gets to depicting an artist. Against his father's wishes, Harry refuses to have anything to do with the family business (BMC and bombs), and becomes a photographer. He is ubiquitous, to the point of being nicknamed by his daughter and father the 'Invisible Man.' He becomes quite famous, especially after his Vietnam shots. He falls in love with Anna, a Greek translator, at Nuremberg, and they get married, then have a daughter, after which Anna cheats on him with Frank, his father's follower at BMC. Anna is pregnant again, is suddenly called to Greece by her uncle Spiro, who brought her up after both her parents died in a fire, when she was twelve. She has an abortion there, not knowing that Harry found out about her affair with Frank, then boards a plane which falls down, so she dies to the story forever. Born in the village Drama, she expires on Mount Olympus. I am almost sure that if Graham Swift had tried to write this story in the shape of a volume of poems, he would have done a splendid job of it.

When he is talking to us, Harry has not seen his daughter – who moved with her husband to New York – in ten years, and he has never met his

twin grandsons, Tim and Paul. He is sixty-four and is in love with twenty-three-year-old Jenny, an ex-art student, his present assistant. He has given up artistic photography and works for the air service. He is no longer a photo-journalist, he is an aerial photographer. He gave up covering the hot news in 1972, at the death of his father, when something snapped and he felt he could no longer stare the horror in the face, invade the privacy of disaster.

He confesses to us that, if he had not been a photographer, he would have been a pilot. The book ends with his father putting him on a plane, whisking him 'out of this world.' This most poetic book of all has a thick web of symbols. Here is the description of the art of photography:

'A photographer is neither there nor not there, neither in nor out of the thing. If you're in the thing it's terrible, but there aren't any questions, you do what you have to do and you don't even have time to look. But what I'd say is that someone has to look. Someone has to be in it and step back too. Someone has to be a witness.'

Is photography an art? Does Harry feel fulfilment as an artist? Graham Swift, unlike John Fowles in *Mantissa*, avoids this train of thought. A photograph is a possible 'invasion of privacy.' That may be the reason why Harry never takes photos of Jenny. A photographer is also supposed to 'shock' (is the Desperado novelist not trying to do the very same thing?). Confronted with the idea of covering his own father's death, Harry suddenly realizes photos are everything he thought they were not: shocking, offensive, displeasing, intensely and aggressively indiscreet. Consequently he 'abandons photography.' His description of a photo comes very close to Keats' words about a work of art:

'What is a photograph? It's an object. It's something defined, with an edge. You can pick it up, look at it, like a pebble from a beach, like a lump of rock chipped from the moon. You can put it here or there, in an album, on a mantelpiece, in a newspaper, in a book. A long time after the event it is still there, and when you look at it you shut out everything else. It becomes an icon, a totem, a curio. A photo is a piece of reality? A fragment of the truth?'

Swift heads from Keats to Wordsworth (with his suspension of disbelief) when he writes:
'A photo is a reprieve, an act of suspension, a charm. If you see something terrible or wonderful, that you can't take in or focus your feelings for – a battlefield, the Taj Mahal, the woman with whom you think you are falling in love – take a picture of it, hold the camera to it. Look again when it's safe. I have always loved flying.'

Which is the exact feeling we get from this novel: all the words have an emotional bright urgency that instils in us a feeling of elation. We are remembering with Harry, feeling guilty with him, falling in love and wondering about the ultimatum of age.

The whole plot of the book boils down to sixty-four-year-old Harry writing to his daughter that he is getting married and asking her to be there with him. In between, there is a parade of highly interesting heroes, vivid inner worlds, joy of life, joy of frustration, even. The author will not give in, he is determined to enjoy bitterness to the last drop. All the appealing thoughts he shares with us make *Out of This World* a really beautiful, enticing, challenging book. Harry, the shy hero, leaves a seal on the soul.

Sophie's presence is more a prop for Harry than a full life on its own. She is a point of view. Henry James taught Swift his lesson of discreetness and multiplicity. She is the bitter side, but her decision to go to her father's wedding redeems her, lends her human warmth. Before she decides to go, she has a 'problem' and goes to an analyst, to sort her life out. She gradually finds out that she loves Dad as much as she loved Grandad, in spite of the fact that Dad was never there for her. Except the moment when he saved her from drowning (she was still very small).

She never allows two things in her house: toy guns and cameras. Both Grandad and Dad are thus rejected. She goes back to Greece to find her mother and brings back a husband, whom she at present has stopped loving and is actually cheating on. Her emotions are sharp and rather uninteresting. Her view of Harry makes him even more overwhelming in the book. That is probably her part, after all. She ends up on the plane, with her two sons, entreating them:

'Let's just be together, here, above the world. There are more important things than movies. And it'll be tomorrow sooner than you think. It'll be tomorrow before it's even stopped being today. And your mother has only six hours.'

The nails of our sensibility get bitten to the quick. For the first time in a Graham Swift novel, we do not want to stop reading. We want more. We feel like asking the author: Why have you stopped thinking? Urge him, in Eliot's voice: 'THINK.'

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*Ever After* (1992) is a novel about 'death-in-life and life-in-death,' to quote W.B. Yeats (and Coleridge, more remotely). It is mainly a (romantic) novel of (Desperado) lost love. The hybridization of genres mixes here

with the Joycean monologue. Bill Unwin (can his name be a negative of win?) talks to others, he mainly talks to himself, then inherits Matthew Pearce's Diaries (mid 19th century) and quotes from them; he also writes short essays imagining what might have been, what the man was like, retrieving him, reclaiming him from the land of the dead. The plot of this novel is almost non-existent. A sentence could summarize it: for some unknown reason, Bill Unwin commits suicide, but is brought back to life and to the story of Matthew Pearce, which he sets about writing with diligence. In between, as usual, we are besieged by a mass of stream of consciousness details.

The book begins by a warning, which gradually turns out to have been a false alarm:

'These are, I should warn you, the words of a dead man.'

In his early fifties, Bill Unwin has experienced three major deaths: his much loved wife Ruth (the actress Ruth Vaughan), his mother Sylvia, and his step-father, Sam Ellison. Death is the very substance of this novel. It shortens drastically the 'Ever After.' Bill's real father, Colonel Philip Alexander Unwin, shot himself in Paris on 8th April, 1946. It turns out later in the story that Bill's true father was an engine-driver, who died in the War. Every page is a trip into non-existence. The narrator himself feels dragged back from the other world and forced to continue a nightmare. The ghost of Bill Unwin 'summons' the ghosts of other dead people, and, in the process, paradoxically, the book is filled with life.

Instead of a plot, *Ever After* offers several major characters' stories. The main thing these heroes have in common is whatever connects them to the narrator. It is, in fact, the narrator's mind which is on stage: it recreates lives, explains (or half-explains – the trick is old by now) mysteries, it fumbles into imaginary sequels. Fact is that, in the end, all the protagonists are still dead, except the story-teller, who repeats to himself:

'He took his life, he took his life.'

He means Colonel Unwin, but Ruth also committed suicide, and so has the narrator tried to do himself. Existence is beginning to look like a disease which must be cured.

The main hero of this book is probably love. Lost love. Bill Unwin's love for Ruth, Matthew Pearce's love for Elizabeth (in the 19th century). Tinged with death as it is, the feeling does not seem very appealing. It is more like a mummy which exhales sadness. Ruth is the haunting presence, the symbol of fulfilled love. Bill meets her as a student of

English literature, while she is preparing to become an actress. They both need part-time jobs to survive, so they meet at the Blue Moon Club in Soho, where he is a part-time bar-assistant and she dances. It happens in June 1957. The book ends with Bill's memory of their first night together. The chapter is written in the form of stage directions for a theatre scene, using 'he,' 'she,' 'they.' The final curtain has dropped, Ruth has played her last part (Cleopatra, queen of the Nile), and then committed suicide before lung cancer killed her. Bill has to live with the emptiness:

'And nothing is left but this impossible absence. This space at your side the size of a woman, the size of a life, the size – of the world. Ah yes, the monstrosity, the iniquity of love - that another person should *be* the world.'

Meditating on Ruth's untimely death, Bill tells himself that all people are 'consumed,' they are 'fuel, fire, ash.' Ruth was a flame that made Bill happy. He devoted his life to her, became her manager, giving up his 'blooming career as a third-rate academic.' He states she held his world together:

'I protected her so she would protect me.'

She could not bear the thought of the coming disintegration, and left him. Which brings about the idea of suicide:

'It's wrong, of course. Suicide. My father was wrong. Ruth was wrong. I – But I'm still here. We don't have the right. To take ourselves from ourselves. And from other people. It's cowardly. It's selfish. The mess it leaves for others.'
Ruth's last note to him says:

'I never could stand drawn-out farewells...'

The whole novel is an endless goodbye. The process begins with his father's suicide. It turns out that he may have been a spy (Graham Swift must have a sweet tooth for spy-stories). The reason of his taking his own life remains unknown. Several possibilities are suggested. Since he was considerably older than his wife, the latter had a younger lover (Sam) and the Colonel found out. Besides, she also told her husband that his son was not really his. And aside all that, he may have had a hand in the dropping of the atomic bomb, at the end of World War II. The man enters the book as a stiff stranger, and walks out in the same garb. The author's and our own feelings are not stirred in the least.

The other two deaths, Sylvia's and Sam's , are also quite emotionless. Sylvia dies of larynx cancer, in hospital, at seventy-eight. We never get to

know her. As she used to sing herself while younger, we are left wondering:

‘Who is Syl- via? What is she- e...?’

Twenty- one years younger than her first husband (who shot himself when he was fifty- five), and twelve years older than Sam, her second husband, Sylvia is a sensuous, selfish presence, whom the narrator neither worships, nor hates. As far as Sam is concerned, Bill feels somewhat like Hamlet, bound to kill ‘uncle Claudius,’ although he doubts the fact that Sam had anything much to do with his father’s death. As a matter of fact, Bill tells us he likes Sam, in spite of himself. Only fifteen years his senior, Sam is an American, who lays the foundation of ‘Ellison Plastics (UK)’; he has a fling with Sylvia in Paris, finds himself trapped into marrying her when her husband shoots himself. Later in life, he naturally starts cheating on her, but she stays in control. He himself dies ‘of a heart attack in a Frankfurt hotel room, aged sixty- seven,’ while in the company of a call- girl. It is Sam who makes Bill a rich man, ensures a College Fellowship for him for life, and also discloses to him the fact that he is (maybe) a bastard.

The last death the book deals with is Matthew Pearce’s, the real reason for using intertextuality. Sylvia gives Bill a

‘little mantel clock with a rosewood case that was made in 1845 by Matthew’s own father, as a present for his son and his bride, and which served as a wedding gift over successive generations ever since.’

Ruth and Bill receive it in 1959. Besides the clock, when Sylvia dies, Bill enters in the possession of the ‘Matthew Pearce notebooks and his last letter to his wife, Elizabeth.’ On the clock Bill can see ‘Amor Vincit Omnia’ inscribed. Is it true, for this book? Death prevails. Matthew’s life is like a foreboding. Piece by piece, Bill puts it together, after his own return from the Ever After land. To start with the very beginning, Matthew was born in March 1819, the son of a clockmaker from Launceston, in Cornwall. Two major incidents shape his life and finally lead to his death at the age of fifty. The two are closely related. First:

‘The thing was that he saw an ichthyosaurus. The thing was that he had come face- to- face with an ichthyosaur, on the cliffs of Dorset in the summer of 1844 (age: twenty- five).’

Second: having married Elizabeth, daughter of Rector Hunt, his discovery that he no longer believes in God brings about the Minister’s anger and then his divorce. The theoretical premise for this broken life (and Bill’s essay in history) is, of course, Darwin, known in mid 19th century for his

theory of the evolution of species. The hybridization of genres goes a step further here, and we are confronted with a melting pot of ideas: from fiction (Bill repeatedly states he definitely makes up this story, imagines everything, on the basis of the Pearce manuscript) to history, sociology, travel (especially to the New World), unexplained mystery (Matthew's encounter with the 'monster' is quite briefly mentioned, never enlarged upon).

Matthew's mother dies while he is still a boy. His father, John Pearce, sends him to study Geology at Oxford, whereupon he becomes a surveyor. Bill reiterates:

'I invent all this. I don't know that this is how it happened. It can't have been like this simply because I imagine it so.'

While inventing, Bill alternates a lost present with a possible (imagined) past, and dwells copiously in possiblity.

Bill's half-fictional, half documented piece of scholarly literature continues with Matthew's marrying Elizabeth on 4th April, 1845. They live together and have four children (John, Christopher, Felix and Lucy). At the age of two, Felix dies of scarlet fever. After his death in 1854, Matthew begins writing his Notebooks, and refers to the period between 1845-1854 as 'the ten happiest and most fragile years of my life.' The Notebooks are written between 1854-1860. In 1860, Matthew leaves his wife and children for ever, as a consequence of his newly found, firm conviction that the words of the Bible are 'mere fancy, mere poetry,' which he cannot believe. In his mind, the laws of God fight the laws of evolution formulated by Darwin, and reason wins.

On 12th April 1869, Matthew writes to Elizabeth (who has remarried in the meantime) after nine years of separation. He is to sail to the New World on the following day, on the *Juno*. Actually, the ship sinks and Matthew appears on the list of those lost. Yet, Elizabeth, who receives his Notebooks at last, keeps them and obviously passes them on, together with the clock, until they both reach Bill Unwin. Matthew confesses he has never stopped loving his wife. Elizabeth's keeping the Notebooks is also a sign of love. Their minds separate them, though. This is what Bill fails to understand. If he could have kept Ruth alive, he would have been prepared to embrace any belief.

But Matthew was a marked man. There is a shattering reason for what he calls 'The moment of my unbelief. The beginning of my make-belief...' He comes to face the solid proof of prehistory, and Bill notes, using his own sensibility as a resource:

‘He feels something open up inside him, so that he is vaster and emptier than he ever imagined, and feels himself starting to fall, and fall, through himself.’

The universe opens up, much wider than the story of God. No God can compete with the infinite void. Is Felix’s death a punishment for disbelief?, Matthew wonders. He fights his own nature for a while, he may have tried to ‘exorcise the ghost,’ but, in the end, the Rector cannot prevail or offer plausible explanations for Felix’s death. Or for the ichthyosaur. Matthew writes:

‘Question: Is the Creator to be viewed as a mere Experimenter?’

His burden, from now on, is to find the truth. His religious father-in-law shouts powerlessly, ‘Damn you Darwin!’, but this does not prevent Matthew’s mind from fathoming a much vaster universe than that of the Bible, nor his body from being drowned in a storm. End of life, but not end of the story.

Matthew’s ‘revival’ enables Graham Swift to use a variety of formulas: novel, drama, essay, letter, diary, conjecture, inner monologue, supposition, confessions. Hybridization works. It does not confuse us, but it makes it almost impossible to assemble the plot along a straight chronological line. The novel is in many ways like Eliot’s *Waste Land*, a ‘heap of broken images,’ a mass of incidents which refuse to be pasted into a coherent story. Has the novel been defeated? Is a new genre born?

Graham Swift offers, here and in all his other novels, the formula of memory retrieved. His texts are all a reclaiming of memory-land, attempted by a disappointed and at the same time disappointing intelligence, one and the same all through the novel. We end by identifying with the handler of his and our minds. In the case of *Ever After*, we accompany a particularly chilling ghost: the soul of a life temporarily retrieved from death. Bill Unwin has the halo of this and the ‘ever after’ world. He is both painfully here and frustratingly there. We are sorry for him. We are afraid of him. We avidly devour all information he can squeeze from his unknown and unfathomable train of thoughts.

If we rearrange Bill Unwin’s scattered statements, we can begin, under the sign of love again, by quoting him:

‘I was born in December 1936, in the very week that a King of England gave up his crown in order to marry the woman he loved.’

He is ‘a little past fifty’ now, when he addresses us. Time seems to have come to a halt, since we do not see him growing any older. He feels old,

though, because he describes his meditations as ‘the ramblings of a prematurely aged’ man. He has just gone through the rare and undesirable experience of being ‘returned to life from almost- death.’ The same as his remote ancestor, Matthew Pearce, he is a marked man. He also has faced a monster. He feels changed. Slowed down, he says, and immaterial, we could add. He seems to have settled in between worlds. He does not belong to any.

The reason of Bill’s attempted suicide, the same as Matthew’s reaction to the monster, remains unknown:

‘What is important, what you are dying (excuse the phrase) to know, is what brought me to the pitch of staging my own death in the first place. I could get out of this by saying that since I am a different person now from what I was then (only three weeks ago), how can I possibly tell you? But it is not as simple as that. Perhaps these pages will eventually explain. Perhaps they will give *me* an explanation.’

The last words on the last page send us to the suicide of the man who was not really his father (‘He took his life’). All along, we witness constant hints at Hamlet (To be or not to be?), although Hamlet’s anger melts as we learn more, and Bill fights the final, fatal duel. He just stays alive. His discourse is quite complicated. It may be good gymnastics for our curiosity, if it were not for the delay of suspense. The charm of the book is concealed at first.

When he writes this book, Bill has stopped being Ruth’s manager (she died), which he was for fifteen years. He was an ‘unillustrious university lecturer’ for ten years, and is now back to the academic life, in spite of what his colleagues deem to be his very meagre achievement. It so happened that his step- father, Sam Ellison, the false uncle Claudius, who dies before Bill/Hamlet decides upon revenge, discovered that

‘a former Ellison, John Elyson (d. 1623), had been a senior Fellow of this College, this place where I am now myself an inmate. Which gave him an hereditary stake in the hallowed ancient walls; and gave him the nerve, in his sixty- seventh year, to boost the college finances by a handsome endowment, the one (secret) condition of this munificent gesture being that it should provide for a new college fellowship, the Ellison Fellowship, whose first incumbent, whatever the outward form of selection, should be me.’

We notice here the American returning to England:

‘he partook of that post- war spirit of inverse colonialism,’

Bill says. Just like the American who buys Darlington Hall, stock and barrel, in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. We also come to know the inner frictions, the rivalries in the Academic world (favourite space of many Desperado writers), the meanness of Professor Potter (significant name), Bill's unwillingness to part with the Pearce manuscripts. Potter wants them to boost his career. Bill simply feels the need to share Matthew's life, and allows his imagination to feed on him. The author allures our imaginations to follow the tortuous path of his own sensibility.

Unlike Graham Swift's other novels, *Ever After* does not invite quotation for poetical reasons. It is mainly epic. The poetry in it is probably limited to the constant and numerous associations of symbols, all of them converging upon love and death. What we feel like quoting in this novel is either bare facts (for which we take the narrator's word for granted), or the essayistic outbursts, the deeper thoughts about life, love and death, such as:

'Why should I resent my situation? I am restored to life. The sun shines through a punkah of green, tender leaves. Life! Life! Does it matter, so long as you breathe, who the hell you are? Or where you are? Or what you remember? Or what you miss? Why should I hate the man – who is dead anyway, and whom I *liked* – who has provided me with all this? Who has taken away from me – good God, how life can change, how everything can change in the space of less than two years – all worldly cares? But I have not told you yet the nub of my hatred, the nub of my forty years' vicarious habitation of Elsinore as my second home. There is nothing worse than Revenge Refuted. You see, I thought Sam killed my father. So to speak. But now I know he didn't. My father killed my father. And this in more ways than one.'

We quote more prosaically here, which means that the novel has stepped away from lyricism, and is merging into a more abstract realm of recorded thoughts. Like Matthew's Notebooks, Graham Swift's hero might well state about these pages:

'Keep them burn them – they are evidence of *me*.'

He is, professionally, the specialist in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays (whether an academic or as a Hamletian manager of his wife's career), emotionally in love with his wife for ever (and after), and, in all hypostases, he calls himself 'a man behind the scenes.' Walter Raleigh is his ancestor. Bill does not compete with him, but he is a buccaneer of memory, to say the least (sometimes he becomes a surgeon, too). His trips into memory- land take place 'in this curious post- mortal condition of mine,' when 'everything might be beginning again. This *is* my second

life, my reincarnation.' And he chooses to spend it on reclaiming Matthew Pearce. He 'chooses to believe' that meeting an ichthyosaur is the same kind of fall down the slide of time as death itself. Both experiences make life look unreal and human time inessential.

Somewhere, towards the end of the book, Bill urges:

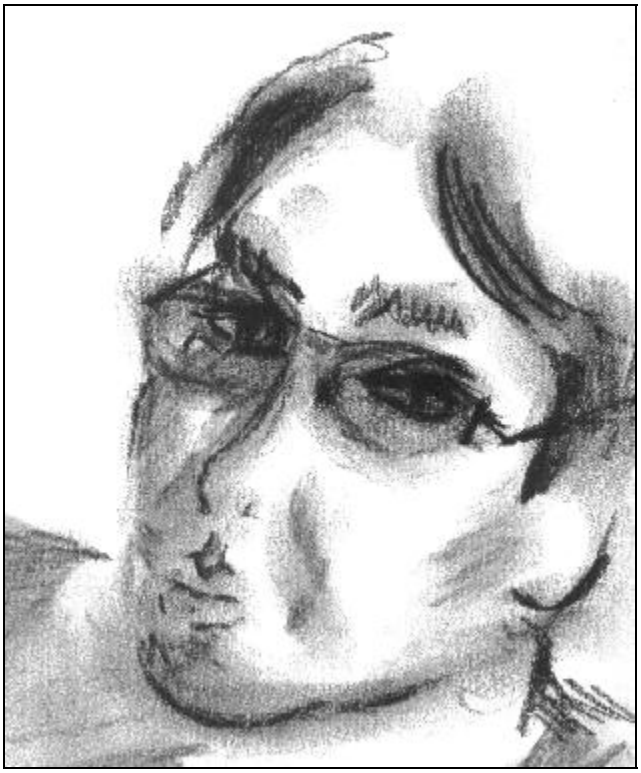
'Let's read between the lines. Let's be brutal and modern...'
The question that follows is, what comes first, the heart or the mind? Elizabeth and Ruth or the religious (ideological) crisis and its discovery by an academic born a century later? The same question is asked about Darwin, the great pirate of religion, the black hole of our limited truths: 'Was he a man or a mind?' Bill's mind is definitely the support of this book. He explains:

'...*mors*, *mortis*? That it turns you (surprise, surprise) into a nobody. That my little bout with it has left me with a ghostly disconnection from myself – I am wiped clean, a *tabula rasa* (I could be *any* body) – and a strange, concomitant yen, never felt before, to set pen to paper.'

So he does. He writes and writes, just like his author. And he exclaims, exhausted:

'The struggle for existence? Ha! The struggle for *remembrance*.'

It seems more important to Bill to discover, by means of writing, who he was, than to address posterity. The writer in search for himself. The novel as a constant question mark. The reader pushed between the lines. An insecure text, using memory as its fragile foundation. Memory-land can be reclaimed all right, but the hurricane of literature can break it any time, by a mere brush, the horrifying, 'You are not the first.' Disappointed and deliberately disappointing, Graham Swift binds himself to the mast. Let the mermaids lure, let the winds of never before blow. He has found a track and steers his whole being to follow it. The struggle with the dragon called yourself. Ever after.



Portrait by VIC (Cristina Ioana Vianu)

## Irony and the Compulsion of Reading Morally – Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1954)

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, in 1954; he came to England when he was five years old and now lives in London. His first four novels are: *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *The Unconsoled* (1995).

*The Remains of the Day* is an enthralling novel that has to be read twice. The web of words is too complicated to penetrate at first sight, and emotion is very hard to unveil. Once you find out it exists, you retrace your steps, and point the finger questioningly at the sore spots.

On the one hand, the book is an essay on the idea of a 'great' butler: the person in question, we are told, should be characterized by dignity above all, and should be attached to a distinguished employer, who in this case is Lord Darlington, a key figure – or so the butler thinks – for the destiny of humanity.

The butler – whose only name seems to be Stevens, as nobody uses his first name – must have been born a butler. He has no personal belongings or wishes other than to serve his master. He has no childhood memories that he sees fit to mention, and he gives up life for the sake of his profession, in which he is indeed unsurpassed. His dissertation on how to be unsurpassed is interspersed with a limited range of memories, incidents and two major feelings, which remain forever unuttered: love for his master and love for the housekeeper, Miss Kenton. Within the space of the novel, Lord Darlington dies – he is already dead when the story, Stevens' motoring trip, begins – and Miss Kenton is already Mrs. Benn. What is left of the butler's great expectations is the remains of the day.

Apparently unemotional and perfectly matter-of-fact, the story Stevens tells stresses decency and restraint, major ways of life and utmost boundaries to our possible desire of trespassing into the realm of the main character's sensibility, even deeper psychology. The whole novel is built upon the rock of a huge understatement. Stevens seems arrested in the hieratic posture of Japanese art. Movement of any kind is banned to the surface, although we ultimately become very much aware that a stream of incandescent lava flows passionately underground, like a river which strats from the sun, which rages till the sun is exhausted into a mere sunset – and then we can at last catch a glimpse of what it might have been.

The 'might have been' is a mood characteristic of T.S. Eliot's sensibility, and so is Stevens' unwillingness to admit he is and why he is so deeply unhappy, to talk about himself. As an objective correlative – though Eliot himself discarded the term in later life, the day is spent as a butler, and in the evening, which is stated at the very end of the book to be the 'best part of the day,' the butler turns into a might-have-been prince, whose beloved has grown old, apart and, as a matter of fact, has left the scenario altogether.

The novel starts with the announcement in the first person, 'the expedition has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days.' The first character mentioned is Mr. Farraday, the new American owner of Darlington Hall. Unlike Henry James' Americans, blinded by the lights of Europe before the two world wars, Ishiguro's American is mastered by a downright complex of superiority. The story begins in 1956. Two wars have changed England and the rest of the continent. Mr. Farraday has bought Darlington Hall, hoping it would turn out to be the 'real thing,' and Stevens the butler comes, as somebody says on the last pages, as 'part of the package.'

Mr. Farraday is the typical rich, free American, who can travel any time, anywhere, and who cannot, does not even know how to take Darlington Hall seriously. He can merely ignore Stevens when the latter tells him,

'It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls.'

The only thing he can think of, in his desire to please the butler, is to urge him to go on a motoring trip and see the country. Stevens offers himself a 'professional' reason for the trip, namely to attempt persuading Miss Kenton to come back as housekeeper of Darlington Hall. One of her very few letters he has just received says that she has left her husband, is very miserable and remembers Darlington Hall nostalgically. Stevens has this letter deeply engraved in his memory when he decides to take his trip. All along it, we shall have to find out whether the reason he so emphatically stresses – to find a better way of running the house and please his employer – is the real one, and it turns out at the very end that it is not by a long shot.

The novel is written in the first person: the butler speaks, but he is a totally unreliable narrator, and we get to know nothing for sure about anything. His eyes are distorting mirrors, and we are offered the facade, while we have to dig deeply beyond the words uttered by Stevens in order to get to the spicy story, to emotion, to some human reaction. The story uses the Japanese imposed fixity as a main device. It is a device to be added to the gallery of Desperado tricks, although the books of Kazuo Ishiguro defy any classification and mainly aim at being good novels – which they really are.

In a way the story of Darlington Hall can be seen as a process of decay, from a staff of seventeen (even twenty-eight formerly) to a mere four servants; from political, 'off the record' conferences, and decisions behind the visible political scenes, to informal visits of other American guests of dubious taste. Above everything, from the deeply encoded exchange of words between a master and a butler who greatly valued each other, to the art of 'bantering,' as Stevens very earnestly calls it. Mr. Farraday speaks his mind and is very fond of straightforward jokes, which are a great shock to Stevens. As a matter of fact, Stevens' attitude throughout the novel is one of mild and irrevocable shock.

As far as the timing of the story is concerned, it begins some three years after Lord Darlington's death, some twenty years after Miss Kenton left for Cornwall with her husband in 1936. The reason for the story – which the butler keeps repeating over and over again, to the extent of making us very suspicious as to his real meaning – is to provide the Hall with an appropriate housekeeper, who seems to be available again. The

housekeeper of his younger years, when she was young, too, and when important things were deliberately left unuttered.

Mr. Farraday listens to Stevens' explanation and goes straight to the heart of the matter: he exclaims,

'My, my, Stevens. A lady- friend. And at your age.'

Most embarrassing, Stevens recollects, and so very much unlike Lord Darlington. But he is lenient when he says to himself,

'I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr. Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different.'

So, Mr. Farraday goes on with his bantering:

'I'd never have figured you for such a lady's man, Stevens.'

The butler meditates that this bantering is just a sign of good, friendly understanding, just like the understatement from of old. He feels rather unsure as to how he should respond, he is shocked and bewildered. He is very worried about his professional service suffering from his inability to adapt to a new way of seeing life. His whole life he has been training himself to say the right thing, to broaden his vocabulary by reading particularly to the purpose of answering his master or the latter's guests. His language had a certain correctness about it, parading a certain discretion, a secrecy of the mind. He was used to doing the right and expected thing, and speak the same. Stevens talks about himself, with his correct reactions and colourless language as about the puppet of Darlington Hall, but this ridiculous impression is strongly contradicted by the latent substance of the text. In his case, we might say: Speak, and I shall know who you are not.

The description of the present, of the American setting the standards for a thoroughly well bred English butler, is made with secret but robust irony. Stevens confesses to himself:

'...this business of bantering is not a duty I feel I can ever discharge with enthusiasm.'

The time when poets like Pound and Eliot fled America for fear of stifling there is long gone. There is no danger that Kazuo Ishiguro's American will defect to Europe; on the contrary, he can hardly wait to go back to his American home. Henry James' set of values is dead.

The book begins with the butler's discontent at having to replace understatement by gross jokes, but ends with his decision that times are changing and he will do it. The last words of the novel are:

'I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.'

All through his motoring trip to the place of destination, the place where he can see Miss Kenton again, and ascertain for himself whether she will come back to him, as a housekeeper, of course, Stevens combines his features carefully, like a Japanese. He could be said to turn slowly into a butler with Japanese traditions of composing his being.

Stevens constantly refers to his visit to Miss Kenton as a mere 'passing by.' It is the understatement of the book, the major one, and it is in fact Ishiguro's main sword. The butler's thoughts are only hinted at, yet, once this convention of not telling the bantering truth is understood, they become pretty clear, and we no longer feel outsiders – we rather feel the privileged sharers of private information. The novel becomes at last a space of intimacy with the hero, an incision into his inner life, deeper than the usual psychology outlined by most Desperado novels. But the beginning of this change is only the end of the novel, so we feel compelled to read it again and take in whatever must have escaped our understanding the first time round. With Ishiguro, reading twice is absolutely compulsive.

The unusual – both accepting the necessity of bantering, and his confession to having wasted his love for Miss Kenton – breaks into the Japanese fixity of the butler's rigid rules of yore, and smashes his small world. America sends a messenger to 'pay for gas' and broaden his horizon with a truth that, of old, lay beyond the multiple intellectual mirrors of Darlington Hall. These mirrors are covered and actually become useless. One way of life is dead. His mind was his world, his master was his God. But a new world has been discovered, God was pushed farther and farther away, by the very fact that he has become so very accessible. Stevens feels he floats in an unreal cloud of debris. Reality becomes unreality or fairy-tale, and the new truth is out there, requesting Stevens to discover it. Unfortunately, he is too tired for that, and the end of the book drops the curtain over centuries of lordly days. We are merely faced with the remains of a day, of *the* day.

The beginning of the butler's motoring trip is like a belated escape from his confined youth. For the first time in his life, Stevens goes beyond all his older limits, into a 'wilderness.' He experiences a thrill of the unknown, mixed with fear and guilt; Darlington Hall is left empty for the first time in a century, or even since it was built. An age is dead, and its

butler is overwhelmed with uncertainty; he no longer feels safe, as if he had lost his foothold. He has indeed lost something very precious: that confined youth he can never and would never change.

Stevens has had three major experiences at Darlington Hall: his father (who was his model and whom he loved deeply, although they hardly communicated at all – few of Ishiguro's characters actually manage to communicate with others) died, he worked as a 'great' butler, and fell in love with Miss Kenton (which he never even hinted at). His fourth major experience is spent away from Darlington Hall, and it is his motoring trip. He inspects everything with apprehension, rather than excitement caused by novelty. Summer and autumn mix in him. Life is weak now. There seems to be nothing left – in the end not even the expectation of Miss Kenton, who does not really want to leave her family, anyway. Love seems to have been lost all the way, for his father, for the housekeeper, for his master. Apprehension is the butler's defining mood, although he tries really hard to comply with his new status.

As he drives along, Stevens remembers and thinks back and forth. He does everything with what he deems to be restraint and calmness. He finds these two very appropriate to his status. Do they make him a 'great' individual, as well as a 'great' butler? Owing to them, he becomes the hidden hero, a monument of deviousness (unreliable narration), as opposed to the demonstrativeness (realism) of traditional characters.

This dumb hero, who commands a great deal of respect, sometimes addresses the reader directly, like the heroes of Julian Barnes or sometimes even Fowles: 'you may well guess...' he says, with wilful humility, which immediately makes room for that halo of mystery, called by him 'dignity,' which he cannot do without. Indeed, all we can do is guess, but the choices are not endless, as in Henry James. We find out the one truth, or we do not. Ishiguro writes novels in which ambiguity only has two ends: you break its spell, or you are confused by it.

Stevens himself defines his situation by stating that great butlers 'inhabit their professional role.' His father was like that before him. His elder brother Leonard was killed during the Southern African War, but Stevens' father was able to master his resentment and be the best of companions to the General who actually led him to death. This is considered by Stevens as his father's greatest feat. The same as the ideal situation (it is by no means told as a joke) when a butler finds a tiger under the dining room table and comes to whisper in his master's ear – without allowing anyone to be alarmed or showing any discomfort himself – that he would like to use the gun, which the master approves by a nod. Such butlers, Stevens muses, 'only truly exist in England.'

The butler's trip towards hope for lost youth lasts six days. On the second day he remembers something similar to the butler with the tiger, when nobody is inconvenienced due to the butler's greatness. He remembers his father's death, which occurred precisely during a very important unofficial conference at Darlington Hall, in 1923. The death is also connected with Miss Kenton, since she was the one to witness it, as Stevens was extremely busy when his father had a stroke. While Lord Darlington and the envoys of France, Germany, America were trying to alleviate the fate of Germany, the butler's father lived his last hours in the presence of total strangers. His son saw to his duties, stating that this was what his father would have wanted him to do, which is most probably correct. What was left of this sorrowful situation was a bond between Stevens and Miss Kenton. The bond could have been strengthened when Miss Kenton herself received the news of her aunt's death, but Stevens inhabits his role too well to get sentimental, so he did not even offer his condolences, which memory torments him to the present day of the story. A conference and a death, this is, in a nutshell, what happens in Ishiguro's novel. The heap of feelings that remain unuttered, of incidents adjacent to the major plot, is what places the novel inside the area of Desperado literature. The medley we are crossing, the disorder of memories, in spite of their logical appearance, the feeling of confusion pending, all these are extremely contemporary and characteristic of our outlook after two world wars.

In a way, although the butler is bound to his small room and his duties, he has extraordinary inner vistas. He lives in a world of the mind, which encompasses a lot more than his master's pro- German, almost Nazi inclinations at times. He lives in a tragic world, where everything is denied and turns into pain: love for his father, love for the housekeeper, love of any kind. The farthest he can go is respect, and the understatement of respect is emotion, but what kind of emotion we have to decode and measure ourselves. The author refuses to share his soul, until the very last few pages, when it is too late for the hero to do anything about the terrible waste, anyway.

March 1923 was the moment when, because of the international conference at Darlington Hall, accompanied by his father's death, Stevens considered that he had 'come of age as a butler.' It is one of the turning points of the novel, the second being the moment of his inertness when Miss Kenton announced she was getting married, and he let her go. 'What a waste,' he thinks, while hoping that she will come back. Only, the waste is not where he places it, as it seems, and the last pages make that very clear. The waste is his whole life, and he is left with mere remains of it.

Because of the butler's dumb respect and restraint when he talks to us, the presence of reality is minimized, as if he were trying to keep us unalarmed, too, like the guests in the story with the tiger. Yet, we cannot fail to notice that we are only offered an 'illusion of absence' of the hero's psychology. Stevens explains that it is essential to good waiting to strike a balance between efficiency and the illusion of absence. The same thing seems to be essential to the novelist Ishiguro, who watches us carefully as we reveal his unuttered truths, creating an illusion of the author's absence. Actually, the author is very efficient, very much there, bathing all his thoughts in all pervading irony.

The whole book is a coexistence of duty and agony, of earnestness and endless irony. The depersonalized style which approximates the butler's real way of thinking and addressing strangers, his cautious deviousness, makes the pain increasingly more poignant, until it becomes unbearable, and the butler weeps. He weeps just like Miss Kenton before leaving him, when he knew she was weeping and could not bring himself to change anything. A remarkable being enclosed in a cell, Stevens has wasted a life of love and is left with hollow prospects and piercing memories.

The web of this novel is intricate to the utmost, mainly because it says too little, not too much. The butler with a tiger, identified with Stevens with his father's death, remembers history and the 1923 conference with an extraordinary sense of triumph, he says. Yet, his lace-like sensibility weaves a soft silk of emotions around us, and we cannot believe him. We fail to believe that his profession comes before his love, for his father, for Miss Kenton. We fail to believe that History can come before the slightest emotion at all. He protects Lord Darlington's memory – we can easily understand, although Stevens never says so, that the lord is accused of Nazi sympathies and pro-German activities – and makes us realize the subtlety of the man. That subtlety is also Stevens', and even tenfold. He sympathizes with each and every character, bearing the burden of his sensibility without ever disclosing it to anyone, without ever sharing it.

The topic of this taciturn novel is the butler versus history and the butler versus his own soul. We infer all along, but only at the end can we know for certain. Unlike Henry James, though, Ishiguro does offer us the feeling that we have unravelled the right image. History is nothing on the whole, as compared to the least string of emotion. The day was wasted in the wrong way. What can the butler do with its remains?

The major taste left by this very usual story, told in a very unusual way, is one of poignant tenderness. Stevens weeps inside many times. He weeps when his father dies saying,

'I hope I have been a good father to you.'

He weeps when Miss Kenton asks if she can close his dead father's eyes, considering he is too busy to go to the latter's room for the moment. The irony is here devastating. He weeps when Lord Darlington is replaced by the bantering Mr. Farraday, who does not know a thing about secrecy and deviousness. He weeps when Miss Kenton is deeply pierced by his refusal to keep her to himself. And, last but not least, he weeps for himself, for his own lost day, at the end of the book, after Miss Kenton has confessed her love for him, which was so strong that it has never been forgotten. Everything could have been different, but then the formidable Stevens would not have been the same. He chose an austere way of life, the same as Ishiguro chooses an austere style for his novel. It is an austerity that hides the tenderness, but this tenderness exhales a warmth of heart that no prohibition in the world, or in literature can extinguish. *The Remains of the Day* is a secret exposed. In it literature is challenged by silence, and yet manages to convey.

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*An Artist of the Floating World*, published in 1986, is Ishiguro's second novel. It anticipates part of the subject matter of *The Remains of the Day*, namely the political side, only here we find America bossing defeated Japan, while there America patted an ally – England. The artist of the floating world is Masuji Ono, a retired painter of formidable reputation – or so he wants to think – during the militarist years leading to the second World War and Japan's utter change of politics, following its disaster. The floating world is the world of nightly pleasures, which Ono's master – the painter Mori-san – teaches him to paint; it is the world of evanescent beauty, the core of emotion, but Ono finds his beauty elsewhere. He leaves his master and the floating world, joining those who between the wars were trying to help Japan out of the crisis. He looks at the real world, initiated into the realm of squalid poverty by his fellow Matsudo. He gives up disinterested beauty and starts painting with a thesis, that of military Japan heading for the future, and fails, because Japan loses another war and is made to feel guilty, like Germany, its ally.

The book starts in 1948 and ends in 1950. During this brief period of time, it becomes very obvious that America is now the main power, and Japan tries to imitate it. As Ono grows old, he is disillusioned, lost in his author's irony: his old values and his old future are lost. His eight-year-old grandson plays cowboys and dreams to become Popeye the sailor man, in spite of Ono's suggestion that a samurai is far more dignified. Caught between his two daughters' attempt to deny his former influence (his choice of the real/Nazi over the 'floating' world) and his grandson's total ignorance of what Japan once was, Masuji Ono remembers the floating world of his best years: he dreams back, of his former fame, all

wrong and rejected today. Although he never utters a word about it, he experiences a deep feeling of tragedy, which is closely connected to the tragedy of his country and, on the whole, of passing time, of the treacherous revenge of history against those who think they can make it in any way.

The plot of the novel revolves around Ono's younger daughter getting married. Noriko is twenty-six and already rejected by a young man's family, and we infer that happened because of her father's association with Japan's defeat. Since Noriko has now a new suitor, Setsuko, Ono's elder daughter, advises him to take precautions. The idea is that Ono must do whatever he can to push that guilt away from him, the guilt of having fought for ideals which led his country to disaster. Consequently, he goes to Matsuda – former fellow painter – and Kuroda – former pupil –, in an attempt to redeem his past in the eyes of his future son-in-law's parents, who are bound to investigate, since this is the Japanese tradition.

Matsuda understands him and receives him warmly, as he is the man who opened Ono's eyes to the idea of imperialism as a possible future for Japan; his beliefs and expectations were the same as those Ono came to cherish. They belong to the same world of guilt. Kuroda, on the other hand – and we learn that very late, close to the end, rejects Ono violently, since the latter practically, though unwillingly, sent him to prison. When Ono was an influential member of a State important committee, he turned Kuroda in. Kuroda happened to be fighting for the way Japan is following now, so his future is at one with the present future of the country. He is still strong, has now a good position and will have nothing to do with his master. Only this does not happen out of ingratitude, as Ono would have us think, by the way he orders his memories. It happens with a good reason, and even Ono is embarrassed when at last he has to confess to himself that he did something wrong. He wonders reluctantly why things turned out so terrible, since the only thing he did was to recommend that Kuroda should merely be talked to. Instead, Kuroda's paintings were burnt, he was imprisoned and Ono is baffled, just like Stevens. The truth of the matter is he will not admit his part of the guilt (choosing a role in history rather than in the world of art). He is a victim of the irony of life.

Ishiguro's technique is to start by mentioning a fact we are not aware of, which makes us feel guilty for not knowing anything – as if we should already know what the book which is just beginning is all about. We follow the narrative in order to retrieve the body of that first hint. The novel builds up like an endless dragon, worn by many bodies below the mask.

The style is exquisite: long sentences, perfectly logical, a trifle intricate, adapted to the narrator's stream of thought. The narrator is Ono. The concealed stream of his consciousness is mingled with the device of a persona. Ono becomes a mask when he remembers; he does not offer us bare reality, but an impersonation of it.

The second reading brings the details to the front, and makes the irony of the narrative manner more obvious. It is just as interesting as the first one, maybe more laborious, more eager to get to the core of the story, which, due to a kind of diverted attention, may have passed unnoticed. Curiosity is stimulated, not killed by rereading.

Significantly, the meaning of the title is revealed at the end. The floating world of nightly pleasures (art for art's sake) produced the 'fatally flawed' paintings of Mori-san, the Sensei, the Master. But this world vanishes with the morning (the moment of power in a man's life). The idea of capturing the pleasures of the night, of celebrating the floating world is the idea that at the end one could at last say: Time was not wasted. The floating world (dreamy atemporality, non-living as it were) cannot alleviate the tragedy of growing old and finding oneself without a future, and – what is worse – without a present of one's own. It happened to Mori-san, it could have happened to Ono, it could have happened to Kuroda and even to Ichiro, who is now a mere child. The tragedy of losing the future is the same for Ono as it was for lord Darlington or the butler: it is piercingly painful and relentless. But the real pain comes from the wrong choice: a flawed present (the choice of Nazism for Stevens, of Imperialism for Ono) corrupts all hope of a fulfilling future.

The war, Japan's Nazi militarism, is the key turning point for Ono's change from an influential painter of the present into a man with a shameful past and no future to speak of. Ono's universe changes with the war. He has made many mistakes, from accepting imperialism as a remedy for poverty (when he leaves Mori-san), to turning in Kuroda for unpatriotic thoughts – which causes Kuroda to go to jail and start hating him. His manner is too authoritarian, in the military tradition of samurais. It can be seen in his talks with Ichiro about women being weak and easily frightened, his tone to his daughters, his irritation at their departure from his opinions. As a matter of fact, he starts as a mild old painter, retired and best forgotten, to grow to the bitter revelation of a traitor, criminal (a reprehensible present, which is now in the past) – worthy of suicide as an apology. He knows the truth, only his tragedy is he cannot accept it. Consequently, from a weak old victim, Ono turns into an aggressor.

The book begins by a harmless description of Ono's house and its history, but it ends in desperate anger. Ono talks to us in

understatements, which are a rule with Ishiguro. The memories seem to flow in a natural sequence of perfectly outlined episodes, but this sequence has deeper reasons: it justifies Ono's acts, although he knows his acts should not be justified, because he was wrong. He admits having been wrong, but he cannot take this admission seriously. His growing irritation addresses us directly, hoping for our approval, but it merely manages to instigate us to rejection. Unfortunately, in this book the narrator is doomed to the reader's reaction of irony.

The long, ample sentences reveal Ishiguro's exceptional sense of atmosphere, his typically Japanese ability of catching the fixity of beauty. The floating world is in fact made up of Ono's lost best years (when he lived in and for his painting), when he was happy, for whatever cause that may have been, and the moment his flawed present (following the floating world) is judged and discredited by the younger generation, the more Ono cherishes the lost floating world and goes 'moping' around, which means taking refuge in it.

The artist of the floating world revolves round the dearest moments of his life, introduces them abruptly and never reveals their halo of deep emotion. They are signalled by abrupt mentioning of still unknown details, which are explained much later, forcing us to remember them, training our memory and prompting us to remark to ourselves that we must have missed something in this game of hide-and-seek, and we must read the book again if we are to understand what the floating world actually means.

Memories slide into the present, Ono keeps 'digressing,' and the story continues, on condition that we remember every single detail and fix them all in place. The floating world, meaning Ono's very soul and most exquisite experiences, looks like a medley which in the end builds up a real story. This world is the time before time, before the choice of a flawed present, which became a reprehensible past and brought about the punishment which – at the time of the floating world – was no more that an unknown future.

We advance towards the core of the book as if stepping into a dream, in which what was mingles with what is, apparently at random. As a matter of fact, each perfect episode, outlined like a minute painting painted by Ono himself, pushes us in the footsteps of the narrator, and tries to make us agree with him; when we find out we cannot bring ourselves to agree, when Ono realizes it, too, his anger is endless and his disarray frightening. We may not hate him when the book ends, but he certainly hates us.

The wheel of episodes is confusing at first. The mixture is very sophisticated, and it is much more than stream of consciousness. The atmosphere matters more than the story. The narrative is broken into perfect pieces, which may look tiny, but are huge in meaning to the narrator. We seem to wander in an exhibition of Ono's paintings, and the paintings have been arranged in an order which eludes us at first. Only the final anger we discover, 'irritation,' to say the least of it, makes us grope back and discover the real pattern of irony, backwards.

A civilization appears to be dying, or so it seems to Masuji Ono. The whole Japanese past is left aside by an Americanized present, which condemns nationalistic mistakes. The butler Stevens was as much aware and as unashamed of Lord Darlington's Nazi sympathies as Ono is of his past choice of Imperialism. They both avoid talking about that particular past: Stevens lies about having been the butler at Darlington Hall, Ono shouts at his grandson when he sees him playing cowboys, but apologizes at once, not daring initiate the child into his own time. The cruel truth is that Ono's choice of his own present caused the future which is the present of narration in the book, however uncomfortable to its creator (Ono himself) that narration may be.

The bushy narrative advances on its 'hands and knees,' as Eliot might have put it, on many levels at once, with several stories in progress simultaneously. That makes the novel a fresco that nostalgically mourns the sunset of Japanese tradition. The characters are not at all endearing; they are distant, remote, rigid, and the child is even irritating at times. But the pain of the ended day, just like the remains of the day, is deeply impressive.

The book creates a strange confusion in the reader's mind. Misunderstanding is a major device in revealing the nature of characters. Most often than not, all characters miss one another, meaning no one can make anyone out. The story gasps winding among them, curiosity mounts to a pitch, and is only fed guesses, until it becomes unbearable. The facts are not ambiguous, they are merely in the shade, veiled by incomplete exposure to our understanding. Consequently, the first time round, we misunderstand.

'Remember' is Ishiguro's key word and key mental posture. The road winds from the famous painter, who (at his moment of glory in his flawed present) could easily start a young man's career or end it – Ono did both, to the retired old painter with an unmentionable past. Furtive talks and unuttered reproaches lead us to the experience of a constant sense of guilt, rejected but unfading. There is at the same time a lot and very little to be said about the plot, because it is so piecemeal, but a lot

can be inferred from the artist's remembering, from the burning floating world of his mind and sensibility.

In this casual narrative, where we learn everything by accident, the plots are partial and need welding together. We do witness an upheaval of values and tradition, the novel actually deals with a reversal of values, from right to wrong – just like Lord Darlington, Masuji Ono is lost, but hesitation blurs all the clear- cut lines. When we find out that Ono's son, Kenji, was killed at Manchuria, and his ashes were brought home in 1946, can we still call Ono a war criminal? Hasn't he had his share of suffering, considering his wife died during the war, too? The novel is an expected revelation of avaricious, laconic statements that haunt us until we end by minding the least word.

Chronology is restored to its rights inside the story, but it goes backwards, like a boat swinging from now to then, from after to before, from effect to unravel the cause. Several important people commit suicide as an apology for their nationalism during the war: the head of a company, a well known composer. People talk a lot about war criminals who are as strong as they were before. Ono himself reassures his family that he is not going to kill himself, and their answer is he was not anybody important. His pride is deeply hurt, although he unwillingly notices he should be grateful for it. The irony of his predicament is striking.

The plot may be delivered in fragments, but the pain is continuous, uninterrupted. The whole book carries a flavour of suffused tragedy. It is a slow book, which takes its time in revealing its plot, and partly this slowness is due to the intensity of the experience of Ono's tortured world/chronology. Ono must have his reputation as a painter, even if he has to dissociate himself from it. He cannot be humble, he is magnificently proud even when he admits having been mistaken.

In a symbolical way, at the foot of the hill on which Ono's house stands – an illustrious house, itself, and a past confirmation of his past influential career – there is the Bridge of Hesitation: a hesitation between two ways of life and eventually between two worlds. A hesitation between the right and the wrong choice? How was Ono to know (how was Stevens to know) right from wrong? The world of the present is constantly nagged by moral explanations coming from the world of the past, and Ono is partial to the latter, for the sake of which which he chose to forget the eternal floating world of real painting and the hours after dark. Darkness used to mean serenity and burning memory of the soul of the day. The deaprture from atemporality, engagement in the present means the death of a generation, and it does not in the least imply that the sense of guilt ever dies. Quite the reverse, the book may start anew at any moment.

Mistakes/choices are made all over again. Morality is not a safe ground with Ishiguro's heroes. This is the root of all his irony. The piercing pain of the gap between generations, the loneliness of everyone, high and mighty or low and humble, is like a dragon of slow hesitations/wrong choices – which most aptly describes the structure of the book.

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*A Pale View of Hills* is Ishiguro's first novel (1982), and it exhales the perfume of his later themes as well as a certain awkwardness, or rather lack of deviousness and understatement, which makes the book extremely accessible from the first reading, consequently a little more uninviting to rereading than the following ones. Rereading is possible, but quite unrewarding, since we know everything from the first time round. Ishiguro has not hidden the core of this novel, as he did with the others, allowing us to see and even read about it in as many words.

The plot is focused on the characters' stories and the plots are not at all complicated or confusing. The atomic bomb was dropped at Nagasaki, where the memories of the past are located. The present of the book is placed in England. Etsuko's parents died – conceivably during the war – and she was taken in by Ogata, whose son Jiro she later on married. She had one daughter by him, Keiko, and she took her daughter along when she married an Englishman and went to England. Her choice of the present was leaving Japan.

In England she had another daughter, Niki. The book begins and ends during Niki's five-day visit to her mother, in England. Keiko and the English husband have died. Keiko committed suicide after she had refused to leave her room for years, and had later moved to Manchester, where she was found hanging, several days after her death. Niki has gone to London, where she does not do much except live with a boy friend, David. Etsuko, the same as all the characters of this book and all Desperado heroes in general, is fiercely alone. Solitude, along with understatement, should be Ishiguro's major key words. All under the sign of irony.

Etsuko keeps avoiding the feeling of guilt caused by her elder daughter's death, but all she can do is to return to her life in Japan after the war, which may very well have been responsible for the girl's suicide, along with the fact that her English stepfather never really understood her. There are a lot of explicit parallelisms, explicitness being rather unusual for Ishiguro's later work.

While carrying Keiko, in Nagasaki, Etsuko makes friends with Sachiko, a formerly rich woman in her late thirties, who lives with her ten-year-old

daughter in a derelict house which faces Etsuko's block. From the window of her apartment, Etsuko can see their wooden cottage standing at the end of a huge waste ground, on the edge of the river. She can also see a pale view of hills, the same hills which are the scene of an outing later on, when Sachiko and her daughter Mariko, together with Etsuko have a wonderful time and meet an American lady tourist.

Sachiko is a widow and has an American friend, Frank, who keeps promising to take her to America. She desperately wants to leave Japan. She admits at the end of the book that she is a lousy mother to Mariko, who is a child in shock, after having seen during the war a mother drowning her own baby in a canal in the street. There is no visible love lost between mother and daughter, especially as Mariko hates the American man. The end of Sachiko's story announces her intention to follow Frank to Kobe, wherefrom he promised to take her with him to America. In an outburst of despair, after drowning the kittens which were Mariko's only attachment in this world, just as the unknown young woman in Tokyo killed her baby, Sachiko has an outburst of directness and tells Etsuko she knows she may never see America and she is a terrible mother. We inferred as much on our own, so far, anyway.

Several of the parallelisms are obvious. The woman who drowned her baby committed suicide, like Keiko later on. Sachiko drowns the kittens, like that young woman. Mrs. Fujiwara was before the war as wealthy as Sachiko, and now her family have died, all except one son, whose wife died, and she has a noodle shop in which she cooks and serves. We do not know whether Sachiko actually goes to America, but Etsuko is in England when the story is told. It seems that the atomic bomb has turned Japan into a living hell, which is vividly remembered by Etsuko, more like flames of agony than a pale view of hills.

Ogada, retired headmaster, is attacked by his former pupil Shigeo Matsuda in a communist article, for about the same reasons Ono is hated by Kuroda: he seemed to have made the wrong moral choice in Japan's history. Ogada is an affectionate father with a sense of humour, a warm person like Etsuko herself, while Jiro is dry and rather loveless. We suspect this is the real reason why Etsuko leaves him in the end. All characters but the narrator are enigmas. They are all lonely and mysterious. Even the reader is contaminated and feels as guilty as if he had become an enigma himself. This excessive mystery is a device for elusiveness. This first novel by Ishiguro is dominated by sensibility rather than deviousness or irony.

The suspense comes from the alert mixture of stories, insufficient as they are. Each hero has his own story, very much like the heroes of *Talking It Over*, by Julian Barnes. Every character is exasperating to some degree,

except the narrator, who, exceptionally, is here warmly emotional. His point is a highly moral one, just as it is in most of his novles – althought it never becomes as direct again. He seems to be reprimanding the world for dropping the atomic bomb on Japan. All the lives he imagines here have been maimed by it.

The characters are also milder than later on, more accessible, though not entirely explained. There is, however, an attempt at explanation, on the part of the narrator, who dwells upon what she feels, thus bestowing upon everything she remembers a halo of emotion.

*A Pale View of Hills* is a novel of maternity, expectant and disappointed. Although it is more endearing in tone, humour and heroes, more relaxed technically, the sense of tragedy is deeply embedded in it. It is – again and again – the tragedy of a historical choice: dropping the bomb. The hatred may not have been ripe yet in the writer's soul. Yet the atomic bomb has left everyone and everything in a state of shock, wherefrom their apparent mildness derives. We are told that in Tokyo people lived in tunnels and ruins after it, that unspeakable horrors took place. From the exhaustion after the war to the hatred of a new beginning, the distance is very small, only one step can bridge it. The next step, *An Artist of the Floating World*, plunges the reader into raging anger.

Yet the beginning is made: there is no real dialogue in this book either; the characters are deaf to one another and prefer to stay what they are, unsolved mysteries. All images of them and the incidents are built on 'speculation,' as we are not allowed to peep, ask or nag. Ishiguro is a master of gradation, even though our curiosity does not reach here the peak achieved by the later novels.

The first book is therefore the most emotional, the warmest of all. It is also the most mysterious. All the plots are left unfinished. The enigma comes from the flaws of the narrative, which does not end in Ishiguro's enigmatical, yet firm way. We are dissatisfied when the book ends – which does not happen in the following two novels. We are puzzled, still waiting agape to learn the truth. The novel, its plot, is an unfinished business that makes time seem a waste. Reading it twice does not improve things.

The first novel is clumsier, awkward, the warm tone of the narrative quite unlike the next two novels. It is a very promising beginning. *An Artist of the Floating World* developed Ishiguro's devious technique, revolving round hatred, while *The Remains of the Day* reached the limit of understatement, ironically focusing on love without ever mentioning it.

In the solitude of Kazuo Ishiguro's world, love and hatred rage unexpressed, with an intensity that makes understatement maddening and enthralling. We feel compelled to read again and again, since this phantomatic universe, living in memory only, thrives on hiding and making us find. If we really want to discover the pearl at the core of the oyster, we must give in to the compulsion of reading twice, three, four times... Like a chain reaction, one reading triggers the other. We are accepted and incorporated by an endless world of feeling and irony. Kazuo Ishiguro's depth is engulfing and forever tantalizing.

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*The Unconsoled* (1995) is a nightmare of irony in the first person, but this first person actually knows everything about everyone, in spite of the fact that he is constantly taken by surprise, cannot remember where he is, and keeps meeting people who cannot even begin to imagine his utter ignorance. The author hides behind his hero, who narrates even what there is to know about other characters. In this strange book drowning in the unexplainable, we are engulfed in a Kafkian dream, powerless to change it or at least to escape. It goes without saying that returning to this chamber of torture is out of the question. Out of the first four novels Ishiguro published, *The Unconsoled* is the least likely to invite rereading. We do feel the compulsion of finishing it, once we start reading, but the last page is an unspeakable deliverance. We wake up and are grateful for it. Its irony is scorching hell.

Mr Ryder (the only introduction we are offered) is a famous pianist who has come to an unnamed town in order to play, presumably. He fails to do so before the book ends. He may be the unconsoled, but all the other characters whose lives he intersects are unconsoled, too. A long dream of endlessly multiplied failure, unhappiness, loneliness and death. Is Ishiguro morally warning us again? Or is he experimenting a technique that combines Marquez, Borges, Kafka, into an alchemy of the unreal into credibility?

The first three novels Ishiguro published made a point of harnessing the tendency to hallucinate to coherent, very real incidents. Our doubts were never stirred, we took it for granted that we were witnessing a story, more or less understood by its narrator. We shared the point of view of the hero, and tried our best to decipher what he was not saying, out of what we imagined to be discreet reticence (but which was devious, deliberate understatement, actually). This new book is shameless, irritating and baffling. Ishiguro tries his hand at a different narrative mood, if we can call it that. Previously, his heroes were, at least apparently, accommodating and avoided a private language which we might fail to understand. *The Unconsoled* is the very opposite of all that.

We are plunged out at sea and have to swim our way out, catching at a hint, a faint memory, a hope for happiness (that never comes true).

Ryder, 'the world's finest living pianist,' 'perhaps the very greatest of our century,' comes to a town obsessed with music, a town where music has taken the place of politics, and has become a symbol of all social life. The taxi drops him at the hotel, but, ironically again, nobody is welcoming or waiting for him. He acts according to old automatic patterns, he relies on his subconscious to guide him, considering that all through the novel his conscious area is constantly annihilated, contradicted, proved to be worthless. A novel of the unconscious? Hardly. Everybody is very alert, with the exception of the main hero, who feels at a loss every minute and in every word.

Ryder begins by meeting the porter, Gustav, who reminds us a lot of Stevens, the butler in *The Remains of the Day*. A few days later, when this impressively long novel ends, Gustav dies, without having elucidated the mystery of his real relationship with Ryder. The only character who knows, or is supposed to know, why Ryder came to this unknown town – unknown to him and to us, but not to its inhabitants, who all besiege Ryder at one point or another, is Miss Hilde Stratmann. She talks about a schedule which Ryder ignores, and which he never actually lays eyes on. His next move is always a guess or a lucky coincidence. All through the bulk of the novel, Ryder has absolutely no idea what is going to happen next. We, the readers, accompany him in this nightmarish adventure, sharing his fears, apprehension, uncertainty, ignorance, powerlessness, even despair at times. The end of the novel brings no light, so both Ryder and reader are the unconsoled. And not only.

The town passes through a 'crisis,' and Ryder seems to have come in order to set it right, or at least this is what everybody ironically expects of him. We learn about this expectation much later in the book, but the crisis is mentioned in the first pages. Actually, all the characters experience their own private crises, and they all approach Ryder at one time or another, hoping he will set everything straight. In the end, Ryder can no longer stand the pressure and becomes exasperated, irritable, determined to turn a deaf ear to everyone, but that is the precise moment when the book ends, expelling him. He has served his role of catalyst. If he refuses to filter the stories we are supposed to share with him, the novel has to stop, and this happens in a 'marvellous tram,' a tram that 'will get you more or less anywhere you like in this city.' For the first time in five hundred pages, the pianist relaxes, in the company of 'an electrician' whom he does not know. He imagines his exit from the maze of the novel:

‘Then, as the tram came to a halt, I would perhaps give the electrician one last wave and disembark, secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence.
I filled my coffee cup almost to the brim. Then, holding it carefully in one hand, my generously laden plate in the other, I began making my way back to the seat.’

This is the way *The Unconsoled* ends, not with a bang, but with a whimper. Not with a promise, but an escape. From tragedy, from irony? Possibly from the illusion that anyone can find or impose a meaning on our world.

Information about Ryder and the town, the feelings of all the characters that cross his path sneak frighteningly upon us, and Ryder himself is scared by the mass of new elements he learns about himself. It looks as if Gustav’s daughter, Sophie, is Ryder’s wife, and her child, Boris, is Ryder’s son as well. But how is the pianist to know the truth, when he is ceaselessly overwhelmed with fatigue and defeated by sleep? He lies on his bed and worries:

‘Clearly, this city was expecting of me something more than a simple recital. But when I tried to recall some basic details about the present visit, I had little success. I realised how foolish I had been not to have spoken more frankly to Miss Stratmann. If I had not received a copy of my schedule, the fault was hers, not mine, and my defensiveness had been quite without reason.’

All the stories that follow are enveloped in a spell of ridicule and dizziness that require a special reading ability, totally different from Ishiguro’s previous demands. If we had to be alert and speculative in his previous novels, we must be totally obedient here, submitting to the rules of fantasy, that are very much related to South American literature in many respects. The author fabulates, each incident is a symbol, a fantastic equivalent for something very real but totally unknown, merely guessed at. This groping text changes us into staggering readers, who almost lose control of their own wakefulness. We wake out of the nightmare and instead of feeling fresh and relieved, we discover after a while that we miss it.

Here and there, past and present merge. Ryder meets old friends and places in a town he has never ever seen before. His memory will not help him decode the time of the novel, but it works perfectly for everything that he experienced before. He relives a childhood friendship, one in his student years, he remembers details that pop up into the present with a frightening sense of reality:

‘I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. I went on scrutinising the ceiling for some time, then sat up on the bed and looked around, the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second. The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt’s house on the borders of England and Wales.’

The hero is hopelessly confused, and the author makes us feel that by the frequent recurrence of the symbol of corridors, passages of all kinds, doors that open into unexpected rooms, streets, lives. Space itself is contorted and subjected to strange concentrations, a district can be crossed by just taking one step, while a street can take a whole day to cross and in the end lead to another end of the town altogether.

Ryder and reader are oppressed alike by the need to rest from this turmoil of the imagination, this disorderly universe which forbids all planning. Sleep is the refuge:

‘...I felt myself sliding into a deep and exhausted sleep.’

In time, we learn to isolate several cores of the narrative: Hoffmann, the manager of the hotel, with his wife Christine, and their son, Stephan; Gustav, the porter, with his daughter Sophie and her son, Boris; Leo Brodski, the failed conductor, and his estranged wife, Miss Collins; the enigmatic Christoff, ex-leader, rejected now, possibly the cause of the crisis in the town. At first, each of them bursts into the life of the main hero, causing him and us deep irritation, but we soon learn to understand them and they feel close and dear to our hearts, once we have stepped into their inner lives. They may be disgusting, ugly, hypocrites, liars, it makes no difference. Ishiguro builds a peculiar sympathy into his book, a sympathy of ironical information. The moment we have learnt a mere few things about anyone, we are ready to open up and accept. Our curiosity and our sensibility join hands, the book makes us more generous, more welcoming than we would normally be. A secret passage into our souls is thus discovered.

To begin with, Gustav, like all other characters but Ryder, utters a long monologue, and ends by asking the famous guest to go and meet his daughter in the ‘Old Town.’ The reason he invokes is,

‘The truth of the matter is, Sophie and I haven’t spoken to each other for many years. Not really since she was a child.’

There is no intimation that there might be any other connection between Ryder and Sophie. When Sophie starts telling him about the new house

she is looking for, for the three of them to move in, Ryder remains 'silent,' but has a strange feeling that this discussion is familiar to him. He also remembers some old argument, and repeatedly all through the book he associates Sophie with his state of irritation, with the idea of chaos in his otherwise well organized life. He even tries to justify something he seems to have done, something we do not know about:

'It's all this travelling,' I said. 'Hotel room after hotel room. Never seeing anyone you know. It's been very tiring. And even now, here in this city, there's so much pressure on me. The people here. Obviously they're expecting a lot of me.'

Boris starts by behaving like, and actually is, a small child, but ends up becoming mature in an uncommonly short time. He begins by living in a world of his own, in which 'Number Nine,' the 'top footballer in the world' (Ryder being the top pianist in the world), is constantly called out loud. In the end, right after Gustav's death, he protects his mother, and the two leave the stage alone, mother and son, no father included, since Ryder is already on his way to another destination (Helsinki).

Ryder's relationships to the others are tortuous, rendered in a fragmentary way. He leaves one person and bumps into another, or is dragged into one more monologue. He himself knows nothing about Boris being his child until he says so himself. We have no idea why he says it, the same as we have no idea how he can find his way around in a city he has never seen before, where there are no signs, in which space can become smaller or infinite according to unknown rules. This confusion arouses a sense of panic, so typical of a nightmare, but the panic lasts for five hundred pages. Ryder seems to get used to it, and so does the reader, only to discover in the end how exhausted he really is. The real reason of the reader's exhaustion is the utter destruction of the idea of the couple this book undertakes. *The Unconsoled* is a book of despairing solitude and rejection of all sentimental, fairy-tale conventions.

Gustav tries to explain to Ryder how the silence between him and his daughter came about. When she was eight years old, he decided to 'maintain' his silence for just three days, in spite of his deep love for his daughter. The silence lasted forever. He does not offer any logical explanation, taking it for granted that Ryder knows it all. He just describes what is going on:

'I don't want you to misunderstand me, sir, we weren't quarrelling as such, there ceased to be any animosity between us fairly quickly. In fact, it was in those days just as it is now. Sophie and I remained very considerate towards one another. It's simply that we refrained from speaking. My intention, I suppose, was always that at some opportune

point – on a special day such as her birthday – we'd put it all behind us and go back to the way we'd been. But then her birthday came and went, Christmas also, it came and went, sir, and we somehow never resumed.'

Like everything that goes on in this novel, everything is illogical, and the lack of logic becomes a logic in itself. It is the logic of broken communication. We learn to live with the incomplete understanding, incomplete explanations, insufficient communication between heroes, and, implicitly, between writer and reader. Very much left on his own, the reader recognizes here a sign of Desperado literature.

Parenthood is also questioned by the imminent arrival of Ryder's parents to this city, in order to see him play, apparently for the first time. He seems to ignore the fact until he is told about it by a childhood friend discovered here, and suddenly his parents become very important to him, only they never turn up. This may be one more way of adding to the numbers of those who are unconsoled.

The silence agreement between Gustav and Sophie is unique in this novel full of talkative strangers. The book begins with its description, and ends with Gustav's death, when they still talk by intermediary, but Sophie manages to give him the coat she thinks he will need in winter. She also manages to talk to him directly. It is usually Boris who does the talking, and when Ryder comes on stage, Gustav asks him to do the same. Highly emotional deep down, just like the butler Stevens, Gustav stiffly obeys the law of silence, and it is no use trying to rebel against his behaviour. The characters of this book make it a point of not belonging to real life. Ishiguro instils naturalness into artificiality, and teaches us to keep an open mind and accept everything. Even Desperado literature.

Ryder begins by stating,

'I'm merely an outsider. How can I judge?'

Actually he ends by passing judgment – when nobody is willing to listen to him any more – and has us wonder whether it is better to accept or to question everything. Between the alternatives of being an aggressive or a passively baffled reader, we are engulfed by a night of uncertainty. *The Unconsoled* is a huge, endless, never to be cleared uncertainty.

When he is not tired or a prey to panic, Ryder is angry. Sophie is not his only target. His anger at Sophie has deep roots, which he himself keeps discovering with amazement. But he is also angry at everyone who addresses him or asks him to do something. While all the ridiculously insignificant incidents storm around him, there is only one thing he knows for sure:

‘There’s going to be a lot of pressure on me over these next few days.’

The rest is Ryder in wonderland. He goes to a cinema, cannot buy tickets because the ‘kiosk was closed,’ is nevertheless ushered in, only to find people playing cards and arguing, while the movie on the screen is one he likes to watch over and over again: ‘the science fiction classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*.’ Bits of memories start coming back to him, he accepts the idea that he used to share a house with Sophie and Boris, when Sophie starts accusing him that he does not behave like a real father, as Boris is not ‘his own,’ and he has no idea what she had to go through ‘then.’ Consequently, memory does not help in any way. We are thus taught a lesson. Keep your brains blank, Ishiguro seems to say. We must always be willing to expect the unexpected. No prejudice – such as the old idea of what a reader should do – must stand in the way.

In a strange way, time vanishes into itself. The hero has no chronology to go by, and mainly that is why he is constantly baffled and exhausted, as if deprived of nights in order to live an interminable, five-hundred-page day. At the same time, without any explanation, Ryder knows things he has not seen, can retell anyone’s thoughts, can narrate what is going on in all the other characters’ minds. Stream-within-stream of consciousness, picture within picture within another picture.

Surrounded by despicable, loquacious characters to whom precious little happens, yet whose lives are tragically and irreversibly wasted, Ryder’s sensibility is crushed. Marquez is wildly fantastic, but makes much smaller demands on his reader. His demarcation line is totally obvious. Ishiguro’s fantasies are maddeningly reasonable, we can neither refute nor trust them. The reader is kept dangling between belief and disbelief, actually having to discard both and desperately cling to the author’s irony.

Between Lewis Carroll and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, between the absurd and the fantastic, Ishiguro is looking for a new vision. Hundreds of corridors, streets, rooms, doors become ‘very dark,’ space and time dilate to an absurd size, incidents take a fantastic, yet totally credible turn. The themes are already known: love, estrangement, parenthood, solitude, fear of alienation, the need to face the unexpected while one is not really ready for it. At least in this respect we tread solid ground. What we perceive very late is that Ishiguro makes a point here, too: he is trying to say that all attempt at living the present is doomed to fail, which is a very discouraging thesis and this is the reason why the book is felt as such a burden upon the reader’s soul.

Alasdair Gray tries a similar trick in *Lanark*, only he heads for a gloomy dystopia, that manages to turn horror into joy. Ishiguro, faithful to the discreetness of all his other characters, is milder on our souls. Kafka's labyrinth appeals to him more than Gray's violent creation of something completely out of this world. Ryder does not face any hurricane of the imagination. He merely fumbles for the story. Paradoxically, because it is Ryder who talks to us, we learn about each incident before the hero himself, and we are actually supposed to know more than he does. He constantly postpones the plot with his deep, irritating anxiety to leave one incident before it has unfurled, and head for another. Whenever he has a chance, whenever he sees no way out, he dozes off 'contentedly,' only to wake up all confused and more tired than before. Between sleep and wakefulness, Ishiguro's novel is looking for a new type of existence, a new way of experiencing literature in the shade of ridicule/irony.

For quite a number of chapters, Ryder struggles through various incidents, determined to take Boris back to the first apartment they inhabited, where the child left his favourite toy football player, Number Nine. At one point, he tries to explain to the child why it is that the three of them cannot have a normal family life:

'I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world. How can I explain it to you, Boris...'

Fact is he cannot, because – irony of ironies – he himself does not seem to know what he is doing. It can be anything, from politics to art. Whenever he is supposed to give a speech or a recital, though, he is absent or unable to perform. Everything takes place in his absence, and yet he knows he has to change the world. This confusion is conveyed with Japanese ruthlessness and fixity, in hieratic scenes. Our participation cannot change the book in the least – no interpretation is called for, but the book changes us, it teaches us to do the opposite, to contradict Ryder, to choose a present – even at the risk of regretting it later on.

As we go along the tortuous path of the main hero, dragged here and there against his will, dream melts into imagination, then into a kind of reality. We are trained to perceive no boundaries between true and untrue incidents. The story dissolves into nightmare, but if we do not fuss over the difference, we take things calmly and give up all expectations. It is remarkable how a book totally lacking in suspense can keep us interested by creating a very strong mood. If this is not hybridization – fiction and poetry closely allied, nothing is.

While this amnesiac narrative unfurls, we watch Ryder letting everybody down because he cannot remember anything. Two friends of his, as well as Sophie, Boris, and several other characters complain they have been waiting for him and he has not come. He blames everything on his ignoring his schedule for this visit (does any of us have a schedule for the present or the future?), but we know better. His past pops up into these few present days, and the schedule could do nothing to prevent that. We are actually accompanying him along a journey across his mind, his soul, his innermost anxieties. And we grow as anxious and filled with panic as he is. The fear of making the wrong choice, of living in the wrong way. The tragedy is nobody knows what the right way might be.

On several occasions Ryder becomes invisible or is in utter impossibility to utter a word. The other characters' endless monologues engulf him, make him forget himself. At a reception where he goes with Sophie and Boris,
'no one appeared actually to recognize me.'

He cannot master his anger and finds himself shouting at the author's exasperating irony:

'Just for one second stop this, this inane chatter! Just stop it for one second and let someone else say something, someone else from outside, outside this closed little world you all seem so happy to inhabit!'

In spite of this barrier of displeasure, through Ryder, we have a strange feeling of poignant intimacy with all the other characters. We feel we know everyone. At first everyone annoys us for a page or two, but afterwards they are old friends, and we rejoice at their company, even if they talk too much. We welcome their stories, we take delight in Ishiguro's delicate psychology. The journeys into hallucination do not take all the author's strength: he actually has more than enough time on his hands to acquaint us with the sensibilities of all his created beings.

There are in the book three couples that attempt a reconciliation: Brodski and Miss Collins are separated and stay like that, The Hoffmans have hopelessly grown apart, Ryder and Sophie are almost estranged. They stand no chance of being reunited, because there is a general lack of communication in the whole book. Nobody can actually talk to or be understood by anyone. Solitude is the condition of Ishiguro's characters in all his books. Even though Sophie breaks the silence and talks to Gustav before he dies, that is just an end, not a beginning. As for Ryder's love, Sophie decides:

‘Leave him be, Boris. Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom. He needs to do it.’

Suddenly Ryder realizes he is sobbing. Is he the unconsoled? Or maybe Mr Brodski and Miss Collins? Stephan and the Hoffmans? Ryder and his parents? Gustav? The porters, the audience? Sophie and Boris? Probably everyone, the readers included. It is human condition and the pain of everyday life.

Against the background of Ryder’s strange family and the butler-like presence of Gustav, Ryder crosses a number of other lives in monologues and frightening spaces, which he cannot recognize. He is constantly haunted by panic, and all the characters he meets are islands of safety, no matter how much he resents them at first. There is a group of musicians. Christoff is a cellist fallen in disgrace, who used to be the leader of the town. Brodski is a conductor who was once wounded and, because of constant pain, took to drinking, separated from his wife and is now coming out of the nightmare of a wasted life, in order to perform on the same night as Ryder. Stephan, the Hoffman’s son, is a failed pianist, whom Ryder discovers to be very good, but nobody seems to notice that, not even his own parents. Ryder is the only of the three who does not perform in the end. Brodski fails, Stephan triumphs – in Ryder’s eyes – but nobody pays much attention to him. Lost in a dark hole that keeps forming and reforming, this town of modern music and full of strangers is stifling, depressing, marked by Gustav’s death as the one emblematic incident of the whole book.

Aside from the musicians, there is the group of Ryder’s earlier friends: Geoffrey Saunders (‘he had been in my year at school in England’), Fiona Roberts (‘a girl from my village primary school in Worcestershire with whom I had developed a special friendship around the time I was nine years old’), and Jonathan Parkhurst (‘whom I had known reasonably well during my student days in England’). The first two reproach him for having let them down, not having come when he had promised to visit them. None of them offers any clue as to where they are now or why they have reached this particular point in space.

While trying to make it up to Fiona, show her snobbish friends she actually knows Ryder, the pianist is inexplicably changed into a pig, is not recognized, can only grunt and even sees his reflection in the mirror. He *is* a pig:

‘...just as Fiona turned to me, I caught glimpse of myself in a mirror hung on the opposite wall. I saw that my face had become bright red and squashed into pig-like features, while my fists, clenched at chest level, were quivering along with the whole of my torso.’

He tries to speak and reveal his identity:

‘I made another concerted effort to announce myself, but to my dismay all I could manage was another grunt, more vigorous than the last but no more coherent. I took a deep breath, a panic now beginning to seize me, and tried again, only to produce another, this time more prolonged, straining noise.’

Another such nightmarish incident is his being taken to the reception given by the Countess while in his dressing gown. As the guest of honour, he is asked to give a speech, and is later on congratulated, while he has not actually said a word, because:

‘I cleared my throat a second time and was about to embark on my talk when I suddenly became aware that my dressing gown was hanging open, displaying the entire naked front of my body. Thrown into confusion, I hesitated for a second then sat down again.’

The tragic couples in the book are also doomed. Leo Brodski hopes to be reunited with Miss Collins. He gives up drink, has a misadventure and loses a leg, which seems to have been a wooden one anyway, complains of a mysterious wound that destroyed his life, and makes a fool of himself at the final performance. Miss Collins does not want him. Mr Hoffman, on the other hand, explains to Ryder that his wife is disappointed in him, and he ends by shouting that she should leave him, because he has ruined this important night as he ruined every other such event in his life. Sophie is in constant disagreement with Ryder, and we keep wondering if there was ever any love between the two, and why Gustav says nothing about this. In the end, all the characters are alone, with the exception of Ryder and the electrician, passing acquaintances, going round the town in a ghost tramway with a buffet and congenial atmosphere.

In five hundred pages, a whole town prepares for an exceptional night, with a change from Christoff (we never learn much about him) to Brodski, and with Ryder’s recital. Everybody, Ryder included, is disillusioned and unconsoled. The mood of every paragraph is gloomy, oppressive, hopeless. We have here more than a nightmare. Absurd and fantastic are not enough words to describe Ishiguro’s attempt. *The Unconsoled* is a tragic novel about theirony of life, the irony of living the present morally, as if we could tell for sure what moral really meant.

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