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British Writing in the 1980s

Fiction of the decade

When William Golding was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983, one of the panel of judges, in an exceptional breach with tradition, publicly dissented from the decision. Far from being a figure of world standing, Golding was, he suggested, a minor talent. With the completion of Golding's magnificently vivid and profound *Rites of Passage* trilogy, he may have grounds to reconsider his judgement, but his words at the time touched directly upon one of the deepest anxieties of younger British writers and critics. In articles and discussions, they wondered aloud if British fiction—the fiction of Golding, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and Kingsley Amis—had become dangerously isolated from the mainstream of world literature and regretted the price they were paying for the creative triviality and loss of nerve which Al Alvarez and George Steiner claimed was characteristic of British intellectual life. Was British fiction destined to be in some profound and intractable way a literature of minor talents?

When considering the fiction of the past decade, it is important to recall such preoccupations. Because British society has been so completely divided and transformed by the politics and values of Thatcherism, there is a strong temptation to see its fiction exclusively in terms of a response to them. Of course, many novelists have reflected the fiercely ideological battles of the past decade and have depicted its heroes and villains. Who has satirised liberal values more sharply and surprisingly than Doris Lessing in *The Good Terrorist* and *The Fifth Child*? Who has defended them more eloquently than Ian McEwan in *The Child in Time*? Who has caught with greater brio the licence of private greed, the terrifying vacuity of life as lifestyle, or the amoral excess and delirium of the period than Martin Amis in *Money: A Suicide Note* and *London Fields*?

Yet the significance of the decade lies in the conscious and surprisingly successful attempt by younger novelists to revive the English novel by introducing formal innovation and ambitious subject matter. The excitement which greeted D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* at the beginning of the decade showed clearly that there was a large audience eager and able to respond to demanding and difficult new fiction. What made these works exciting was not simply their confident presentation of non-British experience, their questioning of the relationship between fact and fiction, their clever parodies, their exploration of the links between eroticism, religion and violence, or even their central focus

on the question of interpretation. (Thomas' novel included an invented but seemingly authentic Freudian case history, although his representation of a woman's erotic imagination has caused hostile comment from some women critics.) They were exciting because they interrogated, as much recent structuralist and poststructuralist theory has done, the continuing commitment of the Western liberal tradition to concepts of reason, progress, history and even art itself, while at the same time they gave voice to the victims of history, to the powerless and oppressed. The British novel had belatedly become postmodernist and had done so with a political vigour and insistence which did not diminish during the decade.

The most obvious feature of the British fiction of the decade has been its critical, even polemical drive. For the new novelists have challenged traditional narrative forms and invented or reinvented new ones in order to continue the radical interrogation of the Western tradition and to commemorate or empower those it has silenced: women, the poor, ethnic and regional minorities. Angela Carter (who is rightly regarded as one of the most talented and important novelists of her generation), Michèle Roberts and Jeanette Winterson have, for instance, created new feminist fables and myths to replace those Christian and patriarchal ones which have for them repressed the body and robbed women of identity and authority. In *The Wild Girl*, Roberts provides a fifth (and feminist) gospel, while Carter in *Nights at the Circus*, which takes the birth of the present century as its theme, and Winterson in *The Passion*, which embraces the modern, Napoleonic era, celebrate independent women with superabundant magical gifts.

In *Pig Earth*, (a work published in 1979, but framing his essays and other writings in the 1980s), the Marxist novelist and art critic John Berger has recorded the life and tales of the French peasant community in which he has chosen to live. His task has been not only to retrieve a certain mode of existence threatened with extinction by capitalist development but also to reflect upon the essential function of memory and of recollection in human affairs. His project has also inspired a powerful reconsideration of the Marxist tradition, of its utopian drive which Berger finds identical to the modernising zeal of capitalism itself. Postmodernism in Berger's case has entailed a far-reaching examination of the political and cultural ideals of Modernism and has led to the paradoxical exposition of a Marxist critique of centralisation and to a renewed emphasis upon the values of a particular locality and a particular place.

Outside the Marxist tradition, Bruce Chatwin's *On the Black Hill* and *The Songlines* have explored in rural Wales and in Aboriginal Australia the destructive impact of modernisation, while in *Lanark* (a

novel whose parodic complexity recalls Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) the Scots writer Alasdair Gray has reclaimed the voices of the regions ignored by the centralising cultural and political powers of the United Kingdom. Above all, in *The Satanic Verses* Salman Rushdie, who has dominated the end of the decade as he dominated its beginning, although for dramatically different reasons, has provided a complex political, cultural and personal allegory of the destructive struggle for a centre in a fragmented, multiracial era when all such centres have lost their absolute authority. Rushdie's fate, like that of his novel since its publication, has confirmed only too powerfully the effects of which it speaks.

The postmodern novel in the decade has not, of course, been exclusively devoted to such questions. A number of writers have used playful and self-reflexive techniques to parody and thereby to question the English literary tradition. Graham Swift's *Waterland* draws upon the techniques of the nineteenth-century novel in order to test the continuing validity and explanatory power of such techniques when confronted by late twentieth-century experiences and fears, particularly of nuclear destruction. Maggie Gee, in *The Burning Book*, similarly reflects upon the form of the family novel, with its commitment to certain coherences and continuities, against the background of nuclear holocaust. If stories satisfy the need for an understandable past and an understandable future, what function do they have when the present and the future now exist within the permanent shadow of nuclear apocalypse?

Julian Barnes and Peter Ackroyd have also examined our need for fictions, even when we know that they are false, but with a humour which makes the melancholy underlying their work all the sharper. In *Staring at the Sun* and *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, Barnes reflects upon the frameworks through which we make sense of our lives, while in *Flaubert's Parrot*, he focusses upon the act of reading itself. Part-fiction, part-essay, his text combines wit and sophistication with a genuine compassion as if to balance its French and English elements. In *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*, Ackroyd shows how his characters look for patterns of order to give their lives meaning while, at the same time, he undercuts them by suggesting the inherent randomness of existence. Any individual life, he suggests, like any work of art, is made up of fragments, echoes, and borrowed guises. Human beings, like their works of art, are parodic, and as if to escape from knowledge of this, they endow human lives, relationships and art itself with a power of originality which they cannot bear.

There were, of course, many novelists who remained essentially within the realist tradition. James Kelman renewed social realism in

his descriptions of Glaswegian working-class life, Beryl Bainbridge and Ian McEwan created an unsettlingly grotesque realism to evoke sexual fantasy and horror, while Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge and William Boyd developed a characteristically English blend of comic realism. Penelope Lively, Anita Brookner and Margaret Drabble (whose work has caught well the losses and compromises of the decade) recorded the ever-ambiguous bonds of human relationship. Most striking amongst these was the Japanese-born Kazuo Ishiguro, who brought an unusual elegance and detachment to his portraits of individuals and societies. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, set in Japan, and *The Remains of the Day*, set in England, he examined the codes of honour and service by which Japanese and British society had once been bound. He writes of British society with an insight which his status as an outsider gives him, matched only by V.S. Naipaul, whose *The Enigma of Arrival* is one of the finest and most haunting descriptions not only of the homelessness of the writer caught between cultures but also of the emptiness of certain aspects of English life by which he had once been fascinated.

Drama in the decade

The originality and diversity of fiction in the decade has not been matched by its drama. Edward Bond and Harold Pinter both produced new work, but it seemed a repetition of earlier styles and ideas. Caryl Churchill and Pam Gems created an explicitly feminist theatre, David Edgar and Howard Brenton continued the tradition of thought-provoking and politically committed drama, Howard Barker kept alive the spirit of the avant-garde, but a great deal of the energy and enthusiasm which had been present in the theatre of the 1970s was directed towards film and television drama. Paradoxically, the playwrights who wrote most interestingly were those who had hitherto been considered somewhat lightweight, Willy Russell, Alan Bennett and Alan Ayckbourn. Few writers have caught more tellingly the loneliness of ordinary men and women trapped by the reticences of English social life than Alan Bennett in his monologues for television, *Talking Heads*, while in Ayckbourn's increasingly ambitious and dark social comedies, we see how a certain malice, even evil, lurks below the surface of contemporary middle-class existence. Claims that Ayckbourn is a twentieth-century Molière or an English Chekhov may be exaggerated, but his recent work is a major achievement. By raising profound issues within an entertaining and often comic format, he has successfully overcome the dilemma which has beset and defeated his more overtly political contemporaries of bringing serious theatre to the widest possible audience.

The playwright of the 1980s, as Osborne (whom he much resem-

bles in eloquence and passion) was the playwright of the 1950s, is undoubtedly David Hare. In *Plenty*, which was later made into a memorable film, he focussed on the inertia of English social life, with its stuffy institutions and commonplace ambitions; but by the time of *The Secret Rapture*, he was anxious to retrieve certain traditional values from the vulgar amorality of the Thatcherite present. As his career develops, it seems that the source of Hare's radical criticism of contemporary life lies in part in a powerful nostalgia for such traditional values.

Poetry of the decade

The output of poetry during the decade has been prolific and the best new poets—Craig Raine, Andrew Motion, James Fenton and Blake Morrison—have been remarkably successful in creating a large audience for their work. The most important work, however, has been produced by poets reaching their maturity—Geoffrey Hill, the last great poet in the conservative and Christian tradition of Modernism associated with T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney (who is regarded by many as the finest and most important poet now writing in English, a fact recognised by his recent election to the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford) and Tony Harrison. Hill has remained a rigorous and a somewhat unyielding stylist, but in Heaney and Harrison the radical interrogation of the lyric form (which has introduced postmodernist preoccupations into English verse) has latterly been accompanied by a richness, compassion and warmth achieved in the course of middle age.

Although Heaney is now an Irish citizen, he was born in Northern Ireland. His work from the beginning has explored the ambiguous relationship which he feels, as a writer born into an Irish Catholic family, to the forms of the English lyric which he must use. His major work has been concerned with the equivocal nature of legacy and inheritance, with the conflicts between rootedness and exploration, but in *Station Island* and *The Haw Lantern*, a new intimacy has entered his work as he writes of memory, of his personal past, of the presence and prospect of death. We see a similar pattern in the work of the Scots poet Douglas Dunn, from an angry sense of cultural dis-possession in his early work to a maturer sense of self-possession in his most recent work. His poised and poignant volume *Elegies*, on the illness and death of his wife, is by any measure a major achievement.

Tony Harrison's work grows likewise out of the conflict he feels between his working-class origins and his middle-class accomplishments as poet and classical translator. More than any other English poet of his generation, he expresses anger at the divisions of class and traces the perpetuation of those divisions to the class-based opera-

tions of language itself. His major poem *V* contrasts the confident working-class culture of the past with the impoverished working-class culture of the present and through a range of idioms and discourses, dramatises the effects of linguistic power and powerlessness. Yet in his most recent verse, Harrison, like Heaney, has written of individual as well as communal loss and emphasises the importance of personal as well as collective memory.

The last decade is too close for any firm judgements to be made. What can be said is that it has been an extraordinarily productive one in which major works have been written. Certainly, the anxieties with which the decade opened have been to a large degree dispelled.

An Interview with Margaret Drabble

With the publication of her early novels in the sixties, Margaret Drabble added a new subject to English fiction: the confused attempts of young, middle-class, professional women to question and to break away from their inherited roles as daughters, wives and mothers, and their efforts to find their own individual identity. Through the seventies and eighties she has established herself as a leading English novelist, and the scope of her work has widened to include an increased social and political consciousness. Her 'panorama' or 'state of the nation' novels (*The Radiant Way* is probably the best example) involve themselves directly and critically with contemporary Britain, culminating in the (already much-quoted) description of England in her most recent novel *A Natural Curiosity*: "England's not a bad country. It's just a mean, cold, ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out post-imperial post-industrial slag-heap covered in polystyrene hamburger cartons. It's not a bad country at all. I love it."

But *A Natural Curiosity*, which is a sequel to *The Radiant Way*, also suggests an extension of Drabble's creative concerns beyond the social and political reality of Britain today. It deals with a darker, deeper and more complex reality in its search for the roots of violence and barbarism.

At the moment, Margaret Drabble is working on a new novel in which she intends to continue the story of one of the characters in *The Radiant Way* and *A Natural Curiosity* in a more international context.

Ulf Dantanus met her at her house in Hampstead in London.

Q. How did your career as a writer start? Did you have any aspirations to become a writer?