

‘Soliloquies of suffering and consolation’: Fiction as elegy and refusal

Lecture on the Novel in English
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Abstract: Susan Stewart has said that in ‘writing soliloquies of suffering and consolation ... elegists have discovered ... a powerful means of addressing the tensions between grief’s inchoate emotion and social rituals of mourning.’ Using work by Graham Swift, Adam Thorpe and Michael Bracewell, I will argue that such elegies have informed one important strand of British fiction over the last thirty years, where the growth of ‘cultural totalitarianism’ (cf. Jonathan Franzen) has engendered, on the one hand, a primal impulse to preserve individual integrity against societal control, and on the other, a profound grief for the consequent loss of communal and ritual life, as well as for the land itself, which has suffered significant degradation and damage over the same period, damage catalogued by a number of important eco-critical observers, with specific reference to Graham Harvey.

Keywords: British fiction, eco-criticism, grief, community, Graham Swift, Adam Thorpe, Michael Bracewell, Graham Harvey.

I

When Princess Diana died, on 31 August 1997, an astonishing and, initially at least, spontaneous outburst of public grief was unloosed in these islands. As the fatal crash occurred in the Pont de l’Alma tunnel, I was visiting friends in Orkney, and so began the week reasonably far from the madding crowd; the sad events of that Paris night did, of course, register in Stromness and Kirkwall but, overall, the public response was more respectful than excessive: measured, thoughtful, humane, considered. Six days on, however, when I flew in to Glasgow I found George Square literally carpeted with floral tributes and, as I continued my homeward journey to Fife, I was struck by an almost palpable, and near-universal sense of grief. Two days later, on a trip through

England ending in London, it became clear that, the denser the area of population in which I found myself, the more urgent, and the more puzzling, that grief became. By that time, of course, our politicians, not to mention the most narcissistic echelon of the celebrity class and, of course, The Media (it seems to have become accepted, or even de rigueur, to lump all of our press outlets together, good, bad and ugly) had jumped in to capitalise on the public mood, a mood at once powerful and lacking in focus, but even if these factors had not been present, the grief expressed in that massive, utterly sincere (though, in the end, short-lived) display—or, as I later came to see it, this *performance*—of communal, but not official, mourning could not be denied.

At the same time, that *public* grief was becoming denatured. In some quarters, it was even becoming muddled and tawdry and I, like many others, began to doubt that it was all about this woman who, as decent and kind as she surely was, did not seem sufficiently commanding, or sufficiently complex, as a public figure, to invoke such strong feelings amongst so many. At the same time, we could all see that this grief was genuine and, though nobody asked then and few ask now what its true roots might be, I was convinced that it had deep and authentic roots in *something*. A real loss, pertinent to all; a national tragedy for which the death of an English Rose¹ became symbolic and, at some private level, synchronous with the loss of a greater soul. The soul of the country, the soul of the land, some essential Britishness that, worn down by twenty years of a dog-eat-dog morality, was finally beginning to crumble, like our sea coasts, or the tilth of our over-farmed soil.

It is my contention, here, that we—all of us, whether we took part in that performance, or not—have long been afflicted by a keen sense of loss, but its nature is such that it does not allow for the kind of public performance that we need to heal it (as would be the case with a royal personage, or even a certain type of celebrity). For me, and many others, this sense of loss is predicated on the knowledge, both formal and experiential, that, since the Second World War and especially since an era of entirely cynical deregulation was initiated during the Thatcher era, this land—Britain, my home lands, my habitat—has been and continues to be ruthlessly degraded, denatured and even, in a meaningful sense, destroyed. I could say, simply, that I am grieving for the earth itself, and that this grief is exacerbated by being denied a communal performance of mourning worthy of its seriousness, mostly because it does not suit the politically powerful to admit that this degradation is going on and is, in some cases, permanent. There is even more to this, however, than the land alone. I, and

¹Some of us may, perhaps, recall the new lyrics Bernie Taupin wrote for Elton John's 'Candle in the Wind', where Princess Diana is described as 'England's rose ... the grace that placed itself / where lives were torn apart' and (with a nod to William Blake) a near-Christ-like figure whose 'footsteps will always fall here, / among England's greenest hills.' The song concludes with a mourning cry from 'a country lost without your soul'.

many others, privately grieve for *us*—for a people that has become similarly denatured, greedier, more venial, less spontaneous and, at the same time, more anxious and hideously more susceptible to our machinery. According to the accepted environmental/climate change narrative, we are, moreover, supposed to accept that we are all equally guilty in the desecration of this land, just as all media outlets would seem to be equally guilty of degrading the quality of public debate. Thus we are both sinned against *and* sinning: though it goes without saying that those who sin most manage to persuade themselves that they are the least culpable of all. As one developer said to me a few years back, at a public meeting over a project that has now effectively destroyed the lone nature reserve in my nook of East Fife: 'I have no problem sleeping at night.' Well, of course he didn't.

If such men were more inclined to reflection, it might be useful to point out to them that this year marks the the twentieth anniversary of Graham Harvey's *The Killing of the Countryside*,² a book that, more than any other, catalogues the damage done to the land, and explains exactly how we in Britain lost our place in the world, whether it be the child's realm of birds and butterflies, or the grown-up's sense of belonging to the earth itself, or at least to some English garden, of no particular historical importance, that he or she stumbled upon during a day's outing. Harvey shows how that world was destroyed by a tragic combination of ill-considered subsidies, and the rapacious machinery of Big Finance,³ pledged as it is (even bound by law) to make as much money for shareholders as can be squeezed from the system, no matter the consequences. Closely researched, elegantly written and passionate about the fabric of rural life, *The Killing of the Countryside* exposed the folly of a runaway subsidy system and the many harms it had caused, from environmental degradation to loss of habitat to rural unemployment—and, crucially, it reminded us that this approach was not a product of the EU, but had been introduced in Britain just after the war. It should have put us on track for a massive re-think about farming, but it didn't. What it did do was to remind us of just how much had been lost, all across the land. In this passage, Harvey is speaking of the chalk lands around Salisbury:

[T]he farmers of the plain have transformed this landscape on a scale that would have seemed unthinkable even a generation ago. Without public consultation they have obliterated a living heritage thousands of years old. Nor is the destruction confined to chalk downland. Across the length and breadth of Britain the countryside has been reconstructed in the sole interests of intensive agriculture. The very essence of a nation is drained away, yet it seems scarcely a voice is raised in protest.

²Harvey (1997).

³This is shorthand, I know. But where would we be without some shorthand?

Why the silence? Partly, I think, it has to do with a continuing myth of progress. We have to use modern methods, they say, to feed the world (actually, a fair part of the crops produced in many of these areas went to waste, because of over-production of the most generously subsidised items or [on occasion] because it had to be declared unfit for human consumption. Meanwhile, much of the world remains hungry). Also, to complain about the modernisation of anything is to be seen as Luddite, anti-progress and a victim of *nostalgia*, a condition described repeatedly as a ‘social disease’, and ruthlessly treated as such, across the USA and Europe in the 19th century.⁴ To be nostalgic is to become the grandmother who says she remembers the day when the gardens were full of butterflies, instead of just a few, or the old man who remembers peregrine falcons in the old quarry from which they have long disappeared (poisoned by the developer, perhaps, who wants to make the place into a waste-processing plant). For the technocrats, it was a smart move: destroy or steal the land we called home, then pathologise any and all objections. A similar step was taken when Nicholas Ridley, Baron Ridley of Liddesdale, popularised the term NIMBY (not in my back yard) to demonise the victims of ‘developments’ to which he was (mostly) immune.⁵ Of course, nostalgia, like melancholy, is problematic. It tends to turn in upon itself, it can end up finding damage and degradation everywhere and it can obscure our critical faculties—but that is only the case when what is called nostalgia is *purely* nostalgia, just as it is only the case when melancholy is certifiably melancholy and not, say, justified mourning for an actual loss. At the root of the argument which follows I want to suggest that what we have been living through, privately, almost clandestinely, is a state of justifiable mourning for what has been destroyed or taken from us—from the land, from memory, from the best of our traditions, and from our sense of belonging—and we have been obliged to do so without the requisite public performance of communal grief for those losses. I believe that some novelists (and other artists, it goes without saying) have taken it upon themselves to create appropriate elegies that, while they do not, *cannot*, enact the necessary public ceremony, do offer us a model for consolation, and also, more importantly, for an informed refusal of the lies that we have been sold. Chief amongst these is the lie that production = progress. To produce, is not, of course, a sin, but ‘production’, here, actually means *profit* and everybody knows by now that profit is not shared. The third source of our grief is that we knew that this would be the case. I mean, surely, after all this time, do we really need to be told that only the rich get rich?

⁴Preferred treatments included stomach purging and leeching. In studies conducted on patients during the US Civil War, it was concluded that soldiers from the city, and/or men who had their own trades were less susceptible than those from the country. See Boym (2001).

⁵Though not entirely. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2000000.stm. Such is our contempt for the land that even the privileged can be at risk.

II

These days, an expressed love of the land is de rigueur, in business as much as in literary circles, especially amongst the grant-seeking classes (developers, for example, talk the green and pleasant talk just as readily as any poet petitioning for a bursary). Yet I seem to recall a time when a stated interest in birds, or bees, or climate change for that matter, was less remunerative. When I started writing (putting out rather inept little poems with great big titles like 'Green' or even 'Dark Green'), the response of my peers, such as it was, couldn't help but bring back the experience of carrying a particularly beautiful or terrifying object to school for Miss Conway's legendary Nature Table: the extraordinary redness of an autumn leaf, the Jackson Pollock in-the-round of a cold plover's egg and even, on one occasion, a cow's eye (donated, I should say, by one of the slaughter-men at the abattoir I passed every day on my way to school). I bore them all to Miss Conway's classroom proudly, only to shrink back in self-rebuke and shame as my classmates crowded in to mock my find. Here, no doubt, lies the Ur-sentiment of that old phrase, pearls before swine, and any adult can tell you that it is unwise to let your enthusiasms show. To a solitary and proverbially sensitive child, however, the lesson that it is not done to express wonder *publicly*, or to find something beautiful *publicly*, whether 'in nature' or elsewhere, leaves something of a scar. These days, of course, now that some kind of stakes are involved, the mockery is not confined to children: let the wrong kind of person express native awe, or an appreciation of things green, and he (it seems males are the guiltier sex here) is soon treated to a moral homily on his intrusiveness as 'lone enraptured male'⁶—as if to be lone and enraptured were the property of a class, or a gender. Perhaps unabashed nature lovers might counter here with Seamus Heaney's more generous (and for me, more accurate) term, 'one of the venerators',⁷ but the new territorialists of wonder aren't having it, and I am sure any *kleine Geschichten für Naturfreude* I might venture here will seem equally reprehensible to those who care to compete in such things.

And yet. There is a romance I cannot quite surrender, in spite of sniggering criticism and the vanishing of the land—a land that, for someone who flitted mid-boyhood from coal-town Scotland to steel-town Northamptonshire, must be called Britain, a romance of the given earth that, in extremis, I allow myself to recall as a garden, somewhere in the English West Midlands, a place I once found by purest chance. It was a long, hot summer. A friend and I parked her car at the end of a deep lane, where the woods opened out to grass and limestone, the only buildings immediately on the green a few houses and a recently abandoned Post Office, its windows

⁶Jamie (2008).

⁷Heaney (1984).

powdered with soot and dust. Opposite, set back a few metres from the square, the shipwreck of a church stood—is it only the English who know that whatever deity still subsists in our time, it only takes up residence when the church is disused or empty?—and a few metres further still, just off to one side along a narrow gravel path, there was a garden.

Needless to say, my friend and I spent the afternoon there, and it was one of the happiest afternoons I can recall; but I will not describe the place, or give directions, or name it. I am superstitious that way. Besides, though I go back to that place, in my mind's eye, at times of difficulty, it is a private matter, a story that speaks only to me, whereas what I am concerned with here is a more public, communal matter—or rather, with the substitution of private (or quasi-private) *enactments* for communal, fully *performed* ceremonies of mourning. One of our problems over the last fifty years, and certainly since the 1980s, is that we have withdrawn into our own places, our own personal tabernacles and gardens, to mourn alone. Nothing wrong with that in itself, maybe. But what we have lost, what we have had taken from us, is the ability to mourn together, as a community, as a society. To return to the Susan Stewart review that gives this essay its title:

More often writing soliloquies of suffering and consolation than collective songs like the dirge, elegists have discovered that lyric sequences can provide a powerful means of addressing the tensions between grief's inchoate emotion and social rituals of mourning

adding that,

How deeply we might comprehend formal expressions of grief, and whether such comprehension leads to understanding and sympathy, remain open questions. Recent prose memoirs ... trace a mourner's growing self-knowledge as her life is changed and the dead come into clearer, often disconcerting, perspective. These narrative accounts of traumatic loss necessarily repeat and encompass it, acknowledging, if not an afterlife, at least an aftermath.

The outcome of this artistic process may be, not just a personal resolution of grief, but the public, or semi-public performance of 'the tension—famously explained by Freud—between melancholia, an endless process of painful repetition, and mourning, with its gradual movement toward closure.'⁸ That last term comes more easily to North Americans than it does to us, perhaps, and I tend to replace it, for my own purposes, by an out-and-out commitment, not just to the idea of closure, but also to that difficult process, healing. I have, of course, wrenched Stewart's words from their origin as a poetry review into a somewhat alien context, but I think they more than

⁸ Stewart (2011).

bear that. With all this in mind, I want to speak now, not of elegy for the individual, but for the land (or even, in a sense, for pastoral itself) and in prose moreover. I want to consider three novels, either published or conceived in the 1980s that, first, perform distinct elegies for the land (for the earth itself, for our sense of belonging, for history) and, second, carry us forward into the first stage of a healing process, that is, towards the mourner's 'growing self-knowledge as her life is changed and the dead come into clearer, often disconcerting, perspective.' That self-knowledge implies, I think, a new sense of belonging, and with it, a refusal to collaborate further with the processes that undermined that sense of belonging, and vitally degraded what we had once considered home, whether by replacing the green and pleasant land with dark, Satanic mills, or redesigning the local pub (horse brasses, sepia photographs of peasant women, ornate pumps spewing out steely industrial lager, etc) to look and feel more 'authentic'.

III

First published in 1992, Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton*⁹ is the kind of book that is impossible to summarise, without doing it real injustice. For my purposes, however, the publisher's description may suffice:

At the heart of this novel lies the fictional village of Ulverton. It is the fixed point in a book that spans three hundred years. Different voices tell [its] story: one of Cromwell's soldiers staggers home to find his wife remarried, and promptly disappears, an eighteenth century farmer carries on an affair with a maid under his wife's nose, a mother writes to her imprisoned son, a 1980s property developer discovers a soldier's skeleton, dated to the time of Cromwell. ... Told through diaries, sermons, letters, drunken pub conversations and film scripts, this is a masterful novel that reconstructs the unrecorded history of England.

I would happily discuss the diverse narrative techniques of this book for hours (it is surprising, still, to remember that it was the fiction debut of a highly talented poet), but I want to concentrate, now, on the first chapter, in which the aforementioned 'Cromwell's soldier' (he is called Gabby by the supposed 'author' of this chapter, of which more later) returns to Ulverton to find his wife has married another man, one 'Thomas Walters' (please make a mental note of that surname). That none of these characters is 'real' is something we will not learn until the closing pages of the book but, as William, the old shepherd who is this chapter's purported narrator remarks, 'Whether a man has done a thing or no, I know when he believes he has, and that is all

⁹Thorpe (1992).

the same in the end.’ In short order, Gabby disappears, and Willie suspects foul play, but says nothing.

A fine introduction to a novel in which, as time goes by, expressions of sincere belief trump any and all factual considerations (and an indication, from the start, of how prophetic *Ulverton* was, preceding as it did both Tony Blair’s ‘I am right because I am sincere’ approach to truth, and Fox News’ ‘I am right because your facts, being yours and not mine, can have no possible validity’, two stages in a process that, from the 1980s onward, has been both continuous and inevitable (I say inevitable, because the 1980s was a time, not only of financial and environmental, but also of dialogical deregulation). As Jürgen Habermas remarks:

The concept of reaching an understanding suggests a rationally motivated agreement among participants that is measured against criticisable validity claims. The validity claims (propositional truth, normative rightness, and subjective truthfulness) characterise different categories of a knowledge embodied in symbolic expressions.¹⁰

However, what our politicians, PR-folks and some in the media have done, since the 1980s in particular, is to sacrifice both the ‘propositional truth’ and the ‘normative rightness’ elements of public discourse, so elevating ‘subjective truthfulness’ to the position of sole validity criterion—and, by extension, of decision making. The most obvious example: we went to war in Iraq, not because Saddam Hussein had WMD (weapons of mass destruction), and not because of any clear social or moral imperative, but because Blair and Bush sincerely believed we should do so and, in their sincere conviction, decided that to mislead the public about WMD and Iraq’s involvement in international terrorism was justifiable, under the circumstances.

I digress, but only a little. For, having introduced not just the narrative seed, but also the main philosophical question of the novel, in this first chapter (that is, what is history, to whom does it belong and how do we use it), Thorpe offers us a powerful final section—written as a documentary TV script, entitled *A Year in the Life: Clive’s Seasons*—in which sincere belief, manipulation of ‘truth’ and questions of authenticity and authorship combine to raise any number of thorny and urgent moral and political questions.

The chapter, innocently titled, ‘Here: 1988’, follows Clive Walters (we are not visibly led to the belief, but do assume, that he is a descendant of that Thomas Walters mentioned in the first chapter, a drunkard for certain, and possibly a murderer), as he pursues the second phase of a controversial property development in Ulverton, a place he claims to treasure, not only because (his first words on screen) his ‘family came from round here’ but also because ‘it’s beautiful and there’s a history’. So beautiful, in fact, and so redolent of history, that he aims to destroy not only the character

¹⁰ Habermas (1984).

of the village, but also of the local pub, (the 'New Inn', which has been at the centre of the novel throughout) bringing in bogus architectural styles and facsimile materiel, ('Romany Spartan, yep. For the en-suite. And Greensward for the lower toilet and Crinkle Tan for the upstairs.'). While conceding that 'you know, we developers have er, a little bit of a bad name', Clive relies on a 'subjective truthfulness' approach in his attempts to overcome opposition from the Ulverton Preservation Society and a sceptical planning sub-committee, mingling Blair-like sincerity of feeling, 'That's who I am. Sentimental I suppose', with sops to the politicians (the scheme will at least appear to include a few examples of that now notorious sub-category of semi-rural planning 'affordable housing'), and the usual developers' jargon that not only imposes false criteria of appropriateness and authenticity upon, but also derives as much as it can from, the very culture it is destroying. (At one point, local historian, Raymond Duckett, describes his home place in terms of local names and local knowledge, 'All the green fields had their em their own names you know. The Gore. Gumbledon Acres. Apple Dean. Whitesheet Haw. Brambleberry Piece. Top and er, Bottom Field. Little Hangy ... old word for sticky. Not hanging. A whole—whole way of life. Knowledge ... that's what is under threat! That old knowledge'—and we know he is right, just as we know that those delicious, rustic names will be preserved in the names of the streets and avenues and courts that paved them over.)

Time passes and, as the locals are effectively barred from the freshly renamed pub (it is now the 'Never Fear'), Clive Walters' victory seems assured—and if this were the case, it would make both novel and purported documentary depressingly realistic. However, in order to raise our hopes so that he can kick them back into touch on the final page, Adam Thorpe offers us a *deus ex machina* figure, one Adam (or possibly Alan) Thorpe, 'Local Author and Performer', the real and only begetter of Ulverton's first chapter, which turns out to be a complete fiction that he has placed in the the local paper, *The Wessex Nave* (a fine piece of wordplay, there), suggesting that the site of Clive Walters' second development, Little Hangy, is cursed (by the memory of poor Gabby's brutal murder at the hands of Clive's evil ancestor). It seems that Thorpe has come to believe that he can only fight fire with fire and, fortunately for Ulverton, this fictional 'author' has a gift for 'subjective truthfulness' all of his own:

Yes, I've heard that Mr Walters isn't very pleased—I've received a ... letter from him, saying so, in no uncertain terms. But, er, I don't regret using his name. The oldest stone in—in the graveyard here, that's legible. 1689. That's where I er, took it from. Er, I'm doing a whole series of stories on shepherds. I've done a lot of research, a lot of local research, and er, all my stories are based on fact and er, using local legends and so on.

This interview is, of course, more revealing in what it does not tell than what it does. Thorpe says he does not regret using Walters' name, but he says nothing about the

effect his lie (and this fiction is a lie, though one might also argue that it is so in the way that Jean Cocteau claims all fictions to be: *un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité*) on Clive's business and, of course, he is being amusingly disingenuous, tongue firmly in cheek, when he talks about 'based on fact' and the use of local legends. Yet how can we seriously debate any of these points? This is how all public relations is done now, up to and including the national level.¹¹ However, Clive is not done yet. He—and most of us—know that, for the developer, there is always another chance:

bloody awful year. ... For Clive. But there'll be another. Eh? Ups and downs. Another year. Yep. That's how, what you got—have to think. Another year. There's always that. Another year.

Some readers might see these remarks, at the fictional documentary's close, as Clive putting a brave face on a hopeless situation, but that seems to me a mistake. In reality (under the appeals system, and by other means, such as redrafting of existing proposals to look like new ones) the developer always gets another chance to pursue his or her schemes, while the preservation society, or the concerned environmental group, or the locals who just want to live in accord with their surroundings only get one. If they win, all they have achieved is a stay of execution; if they lose, they have lost. Not only that, the basis for individual objections in rural areas cannot be concern for a local bird species or a specific woodland, or for the loss of what various characters in the fictional documentary describe as 'wisdom', 'the old skills' or the wilful desecration of 'My bit of England, forever part of me ...', it can only be predicated on 'loss of amenity' and similarly vague and selfish-seeming (NIMBY) concerns. Those who are sensitive to local beauty and history, those who love birds and woodlands, those who simply want their children to grow up in an area where they can see birds and trees and meet people who have 'the old skills' are doomed to fight an eternal rear-guard action, in which loss of habitat is more common than preservation—and this is one of the things that many of us mourn, as John Clare mourned Langley Bush and Cowper Green and Crossberry Way. In short, many of us have good cause to believe that Enclosure, supposedly a historical event, never ended and in fact continues today—and that is a cause for a grief which is not only not enacted publicly, but is also pretty much ignored. Why? Because it is nothing but nostalgia, a NIMBY rejection of progress and, in a society based on money and not much else, progress, (as 'development') is king. At the same time, because the field of battle is defined by those who favour 'development' over environment, the fight is always reduced to the level of

¹¹ Or, as Sharon Krossa, writer and academic technology consultant, remarked of the film *Braveheart*, 'The events aren't accurate, the dates aren't accurate, the characters aren't accurate, the names aren't accurate, the clothes aren't accurate—in short, just about nothing is accurate.' Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braveheart>

petty squabbling. The most noble arguments are interdicted. The 'author', Adam (or possibly Alan) Thorpe, recognises this. Arguably, it takes a poet's gifts to write about the real world in a just way—and the greatest test of an elegy is its justness. *Ulverton* may conclude with a Pyrrhic victory—and for a writer, a victory based upon the sacrifice of truth, no matter how expedient, is still a Pyrrhic one—but it is also an elegy, not just for the land, but for the betrayal of communal life that any lie commits, even when that lie is part of a desperate stratagem to save something, at least, from those who would take it all.

IV

The element of soliloquy in the final chapter of *Ulverton* reveals the extent of the wider society's failure to take account of its citizens' views and of what is best for the land when big money is at stake, whether that money is in the hands of developers or agribusiness. Anyone who has fought for the environment in this country (through the official channels, at least) knows that the main so-called 'stakeholders' with regard to a planning decision are the developers, on one side, and anyone whose financial interests they might harm (along with a range of centrally controlled expert bodies whose remit is easily managed) on the other. In most cases, those who must live with the changes are ignored. True, the process now allows for a token period of 'public consultation', but those on the ground know that, barring a well-organised and *very* well-resourced oppositional force, any sufficiently connected developer is almost certain to get his or her way.

Thorpe exposes this beautifully in the tiny soliloquies delivered to camera by those who have no recognised stake in the future of *Ulverton*: the locals at the New Inn, for example, or an incoming mother—a Londoner, of course—seeking space and a different way of life for her children. The quality of these brief, often desultory soliloquies is either plaintive, or defensively dismissive. (The position of the less-deceived is easier to manage if, having recognised the enemy's unfair advantage, one gives up before the battle even starts: at least one salves a little pride from not being seen to fall for such scams as 'local consultation' or 'affordable housing'.) In both cases, however, they are deeply poignant. These asides express the despair, masked with wry and self-deprecating humour, of people who know that they haven't a chance—that, even if they were to win this time, history tells us that the enemy will keep coming back with a slightly altered plan and will eventually triumph.

To move from these soliloquies to Graham Swift's *Waterland*¹², in which one tragic historian offers up a book-length soliloquy of suffering, is like moving from a slow

¹²Swift (1983).

local drizzle into a downpour. In spite of its growing recognition as an English classic, there is still much to be said about this novel—not least the irony that it was a Londoner, whose only knowledge of East Anglia at that time came from a handful of short visits, who gave us this most beautifully rendered regional novel, a book that triumphantly fulfils Mary Austin's ideal:

Art, considered as the expression of any people as a whole, is the response they make in various mediums to the impact that the totality of their experience makes upon them, and there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment. It orders and determines all the direct, practical ways of his getting up and lying down, of staying in and going out, of housing and clothing and food-getting; it arranges by its progressions of seed times and harvest, its rain and wind and burning suns, the rhythms of his work and amusements. It is the thing always before his eye, always at his ear, always underfoot. Slowly or sharply it forces upon him behaviour patterns such as earliest become the habit of his blood, the unconscious factor of adjustment in all his mechanisms. Of all the responses of his psyche, none pass so soon and surely as these into that field of consciousness from which all invention and creative effort of every sort proceed.¹³

I mention the regional novel because—though I am sure none of these authors would accept the mantle—the books I am considering here are, in their different ways, excellent examples of the genre. The trouble is that the word 'regional' has come to be seen as a limitation, a label for work that does not live up to the high demands of cosmopolitan fiction. Yet I would tend to argue that this is actually the opposite of the real situation; as Austin points out, the regional novel addresses the *totality* of our experience, something that the Hampstead adultery novel, or the latest slew of sly, fey or research-based *confezione* do not. It would be rewarding to consider the issue further in the light of Swift's masterpiece, but my concern here must be to focus in on one central strand of *Waterland*: that is, the question of history and its supposed opposite, progress.

For those unfamiliar with the book, *Waterland* concerns the history of two East Anglian families, the Cricks and the Atkinsons, separated by social class and wealth, but linked by a tragic secret. The narrator, a history teacher named Tom Crick, is about to be forced into retirement and, though he has personal grief of his own to contend with, we feel that, more than anything else, it is the age in which he lives, an age that denies history any place in the education system, that Crick grieves for most. For some reason, this novel's place as an English masterpiece didn't come overnight, perhaps because some readers were discombobulated by the suspicion that it was mainly about eel migration or, possibly, the nicer points of land drainage. In fact, it treated so many of art's 'major themes' that it is hard to look back and think of it as

¹³ Austin (1996).

just one book. The tragic nature of childish curiosity, kinship, the play of water and land in East Anglia, the extremes—and the banal facts—of grief, all these and more are treated with astonishing skill in the pages of *Waterland*. However, I want to focus on Crick, and his view of history because, while the other losses this book deals with are familial or personal, the loss of history—the deliberate erasure of the subject from school syllabuses and from the communal consciousness—that became a hot topic in the Thatcher/Reagan era was, and continues to be, a matter for collective grief. The technocrats of the 1980s demanded that we sacrifice history so that progress could work more freely: history is bunk, they said, in a modern industrial society. Not only that, it might serve to temper our enthusiasm for the randomly new. As Crick points out:

There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It's progress if you can stop the world slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged, vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires.

Of course, *Waterland* is all about history—and specifically, the history of land reclamation, its temporary victories, and its return to the water. Reclamation, like maintenance, is work that is obliged to take the long view, and yields little or no quick profit, though it may pave the way for prosperity, as it does here for the great brewing family, the Atkinsons, who rise and fall, just as the water levels rise and fall, in what seems like a natural rhythm. (Their rise depends on the work of anonymous ditchers, meadmen and drainage workers, though, naturally, these workers will not share in the consequent wealth.) History, of course, teaches us how to understand, and even sometimes to predict Nature's rhythms, but Crick's boss, Lewis, and the one pupil the history teacher dangerously befriends, are both at pains to express their fashionable rejection of history's wise counsel and complexities. 'I want a future', the boy, Price, says. 'And you—you can stuff your past!' To have a future, in this boy's view, means to confine oneself to the here and now, not in the sense of Be (fully) Here (really) Now, but simply in that progressive sense of being prepared for whatever may come on the glorious journey into an ever-more prosperous and happy time ahead. Which never comes, of course, because as Crick says:

[O]nly animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. Man, man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right.

As with Clive Walters in *Ulverton*, what head-teacher Lewis and his ilk would do is to bulldoze those stories into the ground (for our own good, naturally) in the relentless and reckless onward pursuit of—what? It is difficult to tell in both these books what the antagonists *value*. Clive claims he doesn't think about money, that he doesn't see a piece of land and start calculating the profit—yet throughout his many soliloquies to the documentary maker's camera, money is *all* he ever talks about. Lewis, for his part, is an acolyte of an emergent school of thought for which looking back, taking stock or doubting are cardinal sins and the only permissible mental state is a prescribed optimism. He is, of course, right in thinking that any serious study of history precludes such silly optimism, and he is happy that it—and Crick—are to be scrubbed from the curriculum. What he forgets, however, is that humans need stories to live well, with others and with nature, and that, when the progressives bulldoze their way through what they think of as the redundant past, what they are really doing is stealing from others a set of narratives, and a way of life, that is, for them, the vivid present, that is: *tradition*. This is why progressives always get tradition so wrong: they think it pertains to the past; but in reality, tradition always operates in the present. How would it not? At the same time, what Lewis is concealing, or may not even be aware of in himself, is the proto-fascist tendency that guides mediocre people to take upon themselves extraordinary authority (a common sight in British society). For now, but not for much longer, Crick is there to question his intentions:

Children, beware the paternal instinct whenever it appears in your officially approved and professionally trained mentors. In what direction is it working, whose welfare is it serving? This desire to protect and provide, this desire to point the way; this desire to hold sway amongst children.

He sounds, of course, like Cassandra. Soon, however, he—and his history—will be gone.¹⁴

¹⁴ A recent study pointed out that, 'The view that too little British history is taught in secondary schools in England is a myth. Pupils in the schools visited studied a considerable amount of British history and knew a great deal about the particular topics covered.' However, the study went on to say that, 'Although pupils in primary schools generally had good knowledge of particular topics and episodes in history, their chronological understanding and their ability to make links across the knowledge they had gained were weaker.' It is not difficult to extrapolate from this and other studies a notion, at the very least, that history teaching has become ahistorical, in that it works with very specific topic areas, often cross-curricular, while failing to convey a sense of history as such, or to apply it to our own daily experiences. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413714/History_for_all.pdf

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I was in my early teens when I first began to experience the sense of loss that I am trying to characterise here, a complex set of emotions, full and partial memories and elements of fantasy, forensics, nightmare and homespun narrative that, for want of a better term, I have come to designate as grief for the land. I felt this grief, even then, not only for things that had vanished into the past, but for what was being discarded in my own lifetime, essential things that I could feel haemorrhaging away while we all went about the daily business of societal life, accompanied by the clamour of sales talk. As time passed, I felt more and more involved, more and more complicit, even as I suffered losses of place, of the other animals, of any accord on what was worthy of pursuit (art and philosophy had to be 'accessible' or it was deemed repugnantly elitist) and even of certain textures and subtleties of language. Beloved images, images that meant something to me and might have meant something to my children, lines of poetry and phrases of music, ideas in their richness and complexity (or breath-taking simplicity) were clouded by their appropriation into commerce, via advertising—the list goes on. I am not talking about a bourgeois aesthetic here, or of a class-based value system; I am talking about the essentials of a humanism. This wasn't a matter of fashion, shifting tastes or 'new thinking'; it was existential.

And the novel? I thought of the modern British novel, then, as too complicit with the social mainstream (a problem highlighted in 1994 during the controversy over James Kelman's Booker Prize victory for *How Late It Was, How Late*, when Rabbi Julia Neuberger complained: 'I'm really unhappy. Kelman is deeply inaccessible for a lot of people. I am implacably opposed to the book. I feel outmanoeuvred'¹⁵ [my italics]) and much of what I encounter in today's soft-lit scene seems intent on continuing that trend. Yes, there is darkness in some of this work, but it's only film-noir, and there is social engagement, but not so much as to propose a new way of ordering the systems by which we operate day to day. Maybe I was just unlucky in my choices for too long, but I have to confess that I was lured away by the more daring and far more searching work of certain American writers (Andre Dubus, Shirley Jackson, the incomparable Don DeLillo, to begin with, then by writers like Keith Banner, say, or Steven Sherrill, whose present situation seems rather precarious, in the recent flood of clever, tricky US fiction) and I took solace in European fiction, as well as the great Japanese masters: Natsume Sōseki, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Yukio Mishima, Kenzaburō Ōe and especially Yasunari Kawabata, whose mastery of the *mono no aware*—'beauty in sadness'—mode was not only very seductive to someone of my inclinations at that

¹⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/highly-literary-and-deeply-vulgar-if-james-kelmans-booker-novel-is-rude-it-is-in-good-company-argues-1442639.html>

time, but also seemed to reveal what I thought was a necessary truth: viz. that when a condition seems incurable, the artist's duty is to make of it a possible virtue. If Freud is right and melancholy is destined forever to repeat itself (and perhaps we could say the same for nostalgia) then might not the repetition become ever more precise, ever more beautiful, thus proposing a new way of proceeding?

But then—and I admit that I missed it at the time—I came to believe, by way of a surprising source, that *mono no aware* is the luxury of a certain class, available only to those who can afford, or are sufficiently dispossessed by the rise of mediocrity, to accept a consequent loss of community. In short, just as *mono no aware* emerged fully as aesthetic mode during a period when Japanese life was crashing into crass, 'Westernised' commercialisation, my own pose, built on this and other essentially defeatist ways of seeing, was a response to the rise, in Britain, of a twinned anti-intellectualism and reductionism fostered by American attitudes to money and culture, culminating in what Jonathan Franzen diagnoses as 'cultural totalitarianism'.¹⁶ The source of this new position, if it can be called anything so grand, was a re-reading of the work of Michael Bracewell, who dedicated an astonishingly perceptive sensibility to the novel for some dozen or so years (c.1988 to c.2001) before moving—on?—to work in cultural criticism and art history. Perhaps, one day, the novelist will return, but for now, to my mind at least, Bracewell, in works like *Divine Concepts of Physical Beauty* (1989), *The Conclave*¹⁷ (1992) and *Perfect Tense* (2001), has for some time been arguably the most under-appreciated of our living fiction writers.

His first novel, *Missing Margate*,¹⁸ was published in 1988. Few works of fiction would be worse served by a brief précis, but it should be noted, for reference, that the plot revolves around an architect named Max de Winter, whose beloved wife, Rebecca, has recently left him.¹⁹ As the book opens, Max is being courted by the editors of trendy new magazine, *Designate*, who want to use his acknowledged talent, his glamorous-couple lifestyle and his youth as a hook for a fashion feature. Max, however, has become deeply unhappy with his fame, and with the way life in London, a

¹⁶ Franzen (2002).

¹⁷ 'It's still one of my favourite pieces of work though because it's one of the only books from that period which was about its time rather than of its time. I still think it stands up as a kind of anatomy of a new middle class standpoint. There really were young people at that time thinking in terms of how near am I to somewhere where I can buy a bottle of Perrier water at eleven o'clock at night. I was interested in that state of banality. I was asking where the moral centre of that mind was.' (Michael Bracewell, interviewed by *3 AM Magazine*, London 2001, http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/sep2001_interview_bracewell.html).

¹⁸ Bracewell (1988).

¹⁹ References to Daphne du Maurier, British cinema and English culture pre WWII haunt the book throughout.

city he once loved, has become degraded at every level (a process in which his own feverishly-praised designs now seem to him to be implicated):

For Max, the loss of each building was a defeat—he had wanted his buildings to glorify the financial centre of the UK. He had wanted them to be architectural jewels in the crown of England, their design offsetting the virtues of a green and pleasant land, their aesthetic references intended to echo a proud historic legacy of English tradition. He had wanted to stay at New Manderley, his garden palace, safe in the knowledge that London carried on in his absence growing prosperous and noble within the buildings that he had designed before his thirty-second birthday. How pitifully naïve. A sickness chilled him and a dread of the work he had done and the role that it played in New England as the kinky dungeon of London Style City and the Money Brothel of Britain where all the young executives smelled of stale fish and the sweat of progressive greed.

To distract himself from this sense, not only of having failed, but also of having unwittingly collaborated with a known enemy, Max recalls and reinvents scenes from old British, especially wartime, films, his fantasies populated by stereotypical ‘Tommies’, temporarily home from the front:

He gave each of the Tommies a cold bottle of beer and he had one himself. ‘Yes,’ he said, with respectful warmth, ‘there’s a quality in England that will always shine, no matter what dirty tricks Johnny Banker may stoop to

and he remains convinced that what he has been complicit in losing, perhaps forever, is both irreplaceable and uniquely elegant:

In his dreams Max knew an older England. The pictures of faded postcards brought tears to his eyes as he travelled up and down the lift in Heal’s.

What Max is harking back to may well be a chimera—but it does belong to an age when English people could at least aspire to community, and to a sense of tradition and purpose—aspirations that the trolls at *Designate* do not even recognise and would only despise if they did. In many ways, *Missing Margate* foresees the crisis of identity and of confidence that gave the recent UKIP/BREXIT debacle its basic terms of reference. That the leaders were self-serving cynics might have been more obvious to more people had the feelings of loss and betrayal not run so deep; meanwhile, to argue that the sovereign England that seemed to be at risk had never existed was to miss the point (it is clear that England belongs, and has always belonged, to a very narrow class of persons whose historical and present ruthlessness is beyond question). It wasn’t what existed that people saw as under threat, it was a myth to live by, an idea of England, a narrative. When asked, many English people, especially city and suburb dwellers, will describe England in terms of its rural features (as a garden, as a bluebell wood, as the ‘wild’ Lake District) in spite of the fact that, since World War II, rural

Britain has been savagely degraded, polluted and given away to corporate landowners and other interests, many from overseas, keen to mop up its most basic resources, including its privatised water and even the soil itself, while its definitive culture has been overwhelmed by the totalitarianism of Hollywood, Silicon Valley and McDonald's.

Yet what Max has lost is both more specific and more essential. As the 1980s grind on, what he sees disappearing is an English aesthetic and, as *Missing Margate* slides towards its inevitable denouement, fantasy is not enough. Max comes to feel that he owes an honour debt to himself, and to the London—the Britain—he finds himself complicit in betraying. From this point on, he sets out on a path that will be seen by some as terrorism, as he destroys all but one of the buildings he has designed. That he is also destroying his own legacy is clear. That to complete his task he must destroy himself is never much in question. This, he feels, is the only option that remains to him:

There's a skip on every corner that I pass by and they're full of either builders' junk or *objets trouves*, depending on the postal district and my mood. Outside all the little houses and across all the waiting sites, beside dual carriageways and down dark alleys. Maybe they are the body bags of some authorised war, the collected dead of the mass gentrification of the future. Now that my war is finishing I can see the future as a city of catalogue design against a backdrop of ruins. *The strange thing is that after love there are fewer funnier topics than outraged dissent.* [my italics]

What is poignant here is that the losses Max is cataloguing are not funny at all. They are genuinely tragic, just as the desecration of the countryside in *Ulverton* and the loss of history in *Waterland* are tragic—not only because the damage done is probably irreversible, but also because the good men and women who witness the degradation are cast as the outsiders, the fogeys, the NIMBYs, who seem determined to stand, stubbornly in love with a mythical past, in the way of 'progress'—even though progress, for as long as anyone can remember, has simply been a synonym for profiteering.

It is clear, then, that Max is not victorious at the end of *Missing Margate*. To the general public, and to the authorities, he will be a madman; to the the staff of *Designate* he is an expensive inconvenience from which they are quick to move on. To the reader he has been, throughout, a kind of ghost, an escapee from a Daphne du Maurier world where such things still matter. Yet he is, nevertheless, strangely redeemed. He has eradicated the traces of his collaboration with a corrupted system and he has done so *as a performance*. Does 'society' care? Of course not. But then, 'society', that most ephemeral and inconstant of animals, has never really mattered—as Max realises, when he is finally reunited with Rebecca for his last act of vandalism:

What would Society have made of this meeting? There was always someone ready to comment, some rattler in the *Tatler*, some maggot. The City slept around them. They did not know whether it was indifference that surrounded them or the massive silence of an artificial intelligence that they had become too tired, or too confused, to find stupid.

What matters is that notice has been served, that a public *non serviam* has been delivered. Whether it is witnessed by many, or only a few, is not the point; what matters is that it has happened, or even that has been imagined (in this case, in the pages of a novel called *Missing Margate*). What matters most, however, is its contribution to a mounting refusal of a system of profit and privilege that betrays our land, our history and our deepest values, whether for cash in plain brown envelopes, ‘outside investment’ or government subsidy, a refusal that, in its elegance and economy, recalls the farewell note that Billy Name left for Andy Warhol in 1970, when he left The Factory for good, words that serve as the poignant epigraph to *Missing Margate*:

I AM NOT HERE ANY MORE
BUT I AM FINE

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