

## Seven: Clinging To The Yesterdays

*On the streets the women click — they are ticking through their time... It happened, but now this is happening. Like the vanished Vera the past is dead and gone. The future could go this way, that way. The future's futures have never looked so rocky. Don't put money on it. Take my advice and stick to the present. It's the real stuff, the only stuff, it's all there is, the present, the panting present.*

*Martin Amis. Money, 194*

*He had been reborn into the knowledge of death; and the inescapability of change, of things-never-the-same, of no-way-back, made him afraid. When you lose the past you're naked in front of contemptuous Azrael, the death-angel. Hold on if you can, he told himself. Cling to the yesterdays. Leave your nail-marks in the grey slope as you slide.*

*Salman Rushdie. The Satanic Verses<sup>103</sup>*

In Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Claudia Hampton remembers herself at fourteen asking her teacher “‘Why is it a good thing to learn about history?’” and receiving the standard answer: “‘Because that is how you can understand why England became a great nation.’” The teacher, Miss Lavenham, had probably “‘never heard of the Whig interpretation of

history, and wouldn't have known what it meant, but breeding will out," Claudia reflects many years later.<sup>104</sup> "Breeding" is exactly right, for the Whig theory of history — or, more vaguely, the idea that history from Magna Carta onwards is simply the triumphal march of Progress with England firmly in the vanguard, and that things will continue this way — is not so much a specific and arguable theory as something bred in the bone, not an "interpretation" of "history" but rather the nature of Time itself. In the depths of the English Civil War, it was abundantly clear to John Milton that God had chosen the English nation "before any other, that out of her, as out of Sion, should be proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of reformation to all Europe;"<sup>105</sup> In the darkest hours of World War II it was equally evident to G.M Trevelyan that just as, in the Renaissance, it was "Britain alone of the great national states [that] successfully held out [and] turned back the tide of despotism," so now "she faces danger, even alone, with her old courage: whether she stands or falls, the world's hope of peace and freedom rests on her."<sup>106</sup>

One of the most striking features of life in England in the last quarter-century has been Time's strange failure to behave in its accustomed manner. It is not, of course, the first time in this century that Progress has seemed to halt and Time itself to do strange things. One has only to think of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos* or Virginia Woolf's novels to realise that Modernism, whatever else it may have been, was a profound interrogation of Time's Arrow — a questioning that had begun before the Great War (Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was published in 1899) but that became

increasingly cogent as a result of it. Yet for the generation that endured the Great Depression and survived the Second World War, it seemed axiomatic that things would go on getting better and better: as one of Graham Swift's characters muses, "It's only right that she should look better than her mother ever did when she was eighteen, because the world gets better, yes it does, it's meant to get better, it's no one's fault they're born too soon."<sup>107</sup> In the 1970's, however, the forward march of Progress was widely perceived to have been halted by economic decline and political and cultural upheaval, and by 1995 — fifty years after victory over Nazi Germany — Britain saw herself cheated of the just rewards of her defiance of the "tides of despotism."

By Lyndsay Griffiths, LONDON, May 8 [1995] (Reuter) — As the victorious Allies on Monday marked the war they fought so hard to win, Britain reflected on the peace it lost in the decades following World War Two. Fifty years ago, Britain lost its famous reserve for one day and became a nation where stranger kissed stranger in a mammoth street party to celebrate victory over Nazi Germany. The young dived headlong into fountains and jumped on top of double-decker buses; the old toasted a "bulldog" nation that had achieved its second world war victory in less than 30 years.

Little did the bouncing Britain of 50 years ago suspect that despite all the sacrifice, lives lost and buildings bombed, the end of the war marked a turning point where the country began to slip into decades of national and international decline. For once the

party ended, Britain came down with a horrible hangover as the country began to lose faith in itself, in its institutions and its place on the world stage....

The country that had once ruled an empire envied the world over was exhausted by the war. Many believe the nation sat back after 1945, failing to continue the wartime spirit in peacetime. Overseas, Britain shrank into the small island it had always been, its clout finally cut down closer to its actual size. The far-flung empire shrank rapidly.... To this day, many Britons resent the Germans' peacetime success and long for a lost England—an England that existed before the war but imbued with the wartime spirit.

As a summary of a crucial aspect of the national mood — or of what Raymond Williams has called a “structure of feeling” — this wire story would have been widely accepted. Yet although the Whig theory of history, the unquestioning and unquestioned assumption of Progress, clearly seemed no longer tenable, over a wide spectrum of political opinion it covertly persisted as the very ground and horizon of historical thinking. For a common response to Britain's perceived problems was to continue to believe that the locomotive of English history had indeed been headed along the lines of Progress, but that at some point up the line, unseen by anyone at the time, a switch had been thrown and the national train had been diverted down a branch line and eventually into a dusty, unused siding. But just who had thrown the switch, and where? Was it the trade unions, whose blind and stupid greed had made train tickets too expensive and forced the train to be withdrawn from service for lack of buyers? Was it the owners and their shareholders,

who had rendered the train uncompetitively slow for express service by frittering away ticket revenues instead of reinvesting them in a modern, efficient engine? Was it the immigrants, who had overcrowded the train and placed such a burden on the locomotive power that it had to be shunted aside to make way for the Bullet Train and the Orient Express? Had it really happened after World War II, or was the country only now waking up to something that took place a century ago, when the company's owners switched the train to the soon-to-be-closed branch-line of the Empire as a lazy alternative to the effort and expense of competing with the rapidly accelerating expresses of Europe and North America? Or had it happened not once but many times, as something deep within class-ridden British culture prompted successive generations of industrial and commercial pioneers to divert the train from the main line of rugged entrepreneurship so that it could transport them to the country houses and the green pastures of the leisured aristocrats they could now afford to emulate?

Historical explanation is the province of the novel no less than of other and more narrowly "historical" kinds of writing. As Malcolm Bradbury has remarked, "Certainly exploring past and recent history, at a time when its progress seemed either ambiguous or disastrous, and many of the progressive dreams of the earlier part of the century had plainly died, [became] a central theme of Eighties fiction. Indeed by the beginning of the Nineties, it came to seem that no novel would do unless it somehow went back to wartime, the end of Empire, or the age of the Edwardian wonderland before the twentieth century went so wrong."<sup>108</sup> Many of these novelistic time-travellings, like the different

versions of what happened to the locomotive of historical progress, were attempts to pinpoint some moment in the past, some emblematic event, which would account for the present state of things. There is a whole genre which would map England's historical decline in terms of the rise to power of a "new man," a Kenneth Widmerpool (Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*) or a Leslie Titmuss (John Mortimer's *Paradise Postponed*), and the moment of the emergence of this rough beast is variously specified as anywhere from "the autumn before the outbreak of what used to be called the Great War" (Isabel Colegate's *The Shooting Party*<sup>109</sup>) to the eruption into national prominence of "Thatcherite Man" in the late 1970s.<sup>110</sup>

But these novels are more persuasive as representations or emblems of the "spirit of the age" than as plausible explanations of how it came to be that way. As we have seen in the case of Powell's Widmerpool, an individual character in a realistic novel — however representative he may seem to be — is unlikely to be able to bear the full burden of historical explanation. A representative figure functions as a locus in which economic and socio-political forces are manifested, and we may understand such a figure as a synecdoche, as one instance of a larger agglomeration of individuals whose actions, passions and beliefs all combine to make our society what it is. Yet however deeply we may believe in methodological individualism — in the proposition that "all institutions, behavioral patterns and social processes can in principle be explained in terms of individuals only: their actions, properties, and relations"<sup>111</sup> — we must always remember that the results of collective action cannot *simply* be explained in terms of the

motives, beliefs and even the actions of any single member of that collectivity, for the actual result of a large number of individuals' actions, like a traffic jam, may well be quite different from what any individual agent intended or anticipated. Mrs. Thatcher, in other words, may well have been right in holding that there is no such thing as society, only individuals, but historical explanation that restricts itself to that vocabulary will — depending on its political colouring — either become an old-fashioned chronicle of the deeds of the “great,” or will risk plummeting into some variety of conspiracy-theory. The traditional, realistic novel faces the same quandary, the situation that one of Salman Rushdie's characters is describing when she advises her daughter to: “Study history.... In this century history stopped paying attention to the old psychological orientation of reality. I mean, these days character isn't destiny any more. Economics is destiny. Ideology is destiny. Bombs are destiny. What does a famine, a gas chamber, a grenade care how you lived your life? Crisis comes, death comes, and your pathetic individual self doesn't have a thing to do with it, only to suffer the effects” (*The Satanic Verses* 432).

But in a time in which Progress itself is no longer a credible fiction, the problem the traditional novel faces in its attempt to write history is not simply that it is restricted to the province of individual experience, but also that it is wedded to the idea of time as linear, to the concept of “plot” as cause-and-effect sequence by which the protagonist progresses to that closure which is both the resolution and the transcendence of initial (and initiating) problems and enigmas. As has often been pointed out, it is no accident

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that the novel arises as a genre in the eighteenth century, for its form encapsulates an Enlightenment faith in temporal progression as evolutionary and teleological, the corollary of which is a concept of historiography as literally a *rationalization* of the present — as the step-by-step deduction of the present from the past that it has irreversibly transcended. When the idea of Progress no longer seems self-evident, the traditional novel's inherent theory of history will come to seem irrelevant at best and, at worst, just plain wrong.

At the very beginning of the novelistic enterprise, before the idea of Progress had become enshrined as “common sense,” doubting voices were to be heard: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* mocks the attempt to deduce the present from the past by purely rational means, insisting that the indiscriminate rehearsal of antecedent circumstances, unless it is governed by some principle of selection not supplied by those circumstances themselves, will inevitably dissolve coherent and significant narration in a welter of digression. This is why Powell's *Dance To The Music Of Time*, predicated as it initially is on “getting it right” merely at the level of micro-event, resolves not into significant history but into “gossip,” which even a desperate resort to myth cannot rescue from the truly despairing bonfire of the vanities that provides the only appropriate culmination. Yet another doubting voice present from the very inception of the bourgeois novel spoke in the tongue of the Gothic romance which, at its most powerful, articulated for its hungry readers their suspicions that the past had not really been transcended but could erupt into the present in the form of ghosts and other supernatural emanations from another time.

It is true that the gothic novel frequently provided a *dénouement* in which the supernatural was finally explained away as mere illusion but, like the rakehell's death-bed repentance which cannot abolish the deeds for which it purportedly atones, such "rational" resolutions could not fully negate the imaginative experience of the uncanny they ostensibly re- (or dis-) solved. Leslie Fiedler has pointed out that

Implicit in the gothic novel from the beginning is a final way of redeeming it that is precisely opposite in its implications to the device of the explained supernatural [the pretence "that there were at last no ghosts, only wax images behind translucent black curtains"], a way of proving not that its terror is less true than it seems but more true. There *is* a place in men's lives where pictures do in fact bleed, ghosts gibber and shriek, maidens run forever through mysterious landscapes from nameless foes; that place is, of course, the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them. This world the dogmatic optimism and shallow psychology of the Age of Reason had denied; and yet this world it is the final, perhaps the essential, purpose of the gothic romance to assert.<sup>112</sup>

If the function of the gothic novel is to undermine the optimism that is founded on a belief in Reason, it is hardly surprising that the form should experience a remarkable resurgence in the 1980's, at a moment when the concept of Progress underwritten and guaranteed by Reason seemed belied by all that was happening in England.

As Enlightenment rationality came to constitute the horizon of respectable thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gothic novels persisted principally as a less-than-respectable sub-genre. Although there are some signal exceptions, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the gothic was by-and-large denied admission into the hallowed halls of English Literature and exiled to its outer courts, not far from the penny dreadful and the low-budget film studio which churned out a steady stream of adaptations of *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. In the 1980's, however, it moved decisively into the mainstream, as Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* captured the Guardian Fiction Award and became the Whitbread Novel of the Year, while novels such as Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* won both critical and popular acclaim. Such works explicitly position themselves as critiques of Enlightenment Reason and Progress, and their critiques involve the very nature of Time itself. "But now the Work of Time unravells,"<sup>113</sup> says *Hawksmoor*'s eighteenth-century architect, Nicholas Dyer, whose dark vision of a wholly other mode of temporality is opposed to the Enlightenment empiricism of Sir Christopher Wren:

He [Wren] liked to destroy Antient things: sad and wretched Stuff, he called it, and he us'd to say that Men are weary of the Reliques of Antiquity. He spoke in their stead of Sensible Knowledge, of the Experimentall Learning and of real Truths: but I took these for nothing but Fopperies. This is our Time, *said he*, and we must lay its Foundacions with our own Hands; but when he used such words I was seiz'd with this Reflection: and how do we conclude what Time is our own? (55)

Ackroyd's answer is that all times are our own, because there is no Progress. "Yes, I have returned to the past," declares the narrator of one of his later novels, *English Music*: "I have made that journey. 'You can't go back,' you said when I told you of my intention. 'Those days are long gone.' But, as I explained at the time, that is not necessarily true. One day is changed into another, yet nothing is lost."<sup>14</sup> Another character in the same novel declares that "we live in time. But in the fallen world time simply recurs. The same events or situations happen again and again. The same people are born from generation to generation. The years and the centuries are part of a cycle. No wonder when you understand the pattern, you begin to feel a sense of futility and despair." (224) Ackroyd's narrator disagrees, not because he believes in Progress but because he has intuited eternity in and behind the phenomena disclosed by Time: "What was it Edward Champion told me once — that in the prospect of the unchanging hills and streams there is some inkling of eternity? Yet I feel the same about the old buildings and streets of Hackney; if I stared at them long enough, no doubt I would see eternity there.... Edward was wrong when he described the recurring cycles of history: they disappear as soon as you recognise them for what they are" (399).

In novels by Ackroyd and others, recognizing the recurring cycles of history for what they are involves making an end-run around the Enlightenment *philosophes* and imaginatively exploring the visions of their predecessors, Renaissance alchemists. The alchemists' Hermetic philosophy, anathematized by orthodox Christianity (despite its neo-Platonist borrowings) and banished as ignorant superstition by Enlightenment Science (despite

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Newton's long-running fascination with alchemy) is the informing principle of Nicholas Dyer's churches, which are designed on numerological principles drawn from "*Clavis Salomonis*, Niceron's *Thaumaturgis Opticus* where he speaks of Line and Distance, Cornelius Agrippa his *De Occultia philosophia* and Giordano Bruno his *De magia* and *De vinculis in genere* where he speaks of Hieroglyphs and the Raising of the Devilles" (45). In Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* the alchemical adept is celebrated as having transcended Time: "*Time was, Time is, and Time shall be, but here the Adept stands outside of time within the penetralium of mystery.*"<sup>115</sup> In Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* a twentieth-century devotee of the mysteries practised by that Elizabethan mage declares that the homunculus, the little man created by magic in a glass tube, "knows that contemporary science will develop so far that it will return to its origins, purified, and then expound the mysteries of the past. The doctrines of the alchemists and the astrologers. . . will then be revived within the great vision of quantum theory."<sup>116</sup> But the homunculus "has one great fear. If the cycle of the ages is not mastered by great scientists, then the end of time (which it prophesies for the year 2365) will be reversed. It knows then that the centuries will roll back and that humankind will return in stages to its beginning. The Victorian and Elizabethan periods will recur, and Rome will rise again before crumbling into the darkness of what we now call pre-history."

In 1980's England, one might have been forgiven for thinking not only that Time had stopped but that it had already begun its backward flow. Mrs. Thatcher had repeatedly called for a return to Victorian values, to rugged individualism and self-reliance as the

cornerstone of a society in which market forces should reign supreme, and her staunchest opponents would have maintained that the appearance of significant numbers of beggars in the streets, of the homeless huddled over improvised fires of rubbish under London's railway arches or sleeping in cardboard boxes in Lincoln's Inn Fields, were harbingers of the return of the dark days of nineteenth-century Manchester Liberalism. In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, which is as much about England and Englishness as it is about India or Arabia and Islam, a character says of his father, "I accuse him of inverting Time,"<sup>117</sup> but the novel in which the idea of time flowing in reverse reached its fullest expression is Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1992), in which a man's life is lived backwards in all its grotesque details. Amis' novel is neither set in England nor about England, and it has left more than one reader with the suspicion that its real mainspring is the opportunity for the display of technical virtuosity rather than any pressing social concerns, although its subject is a doctor who helped perform the infamous medical experiments at Auschwitz\* ; but I doubt if such a book would have been written by an

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\* Malcolm Bradbury comments: "The moral passion is plain, and the desire to reverse guilt and restore innocence is evident; in this the book has the power of a moral satire. But it does remain an exercise, a virtuoso enterprise in postmodern technical skills, and in it the Holocaust becomes a trope, as indeed it has in a good deal of modern writing." (*The Modern British Novel*, 429). This seems to me to be exactly right.

English author except at a historical juncture in which Time itself appeared to be behaving strangely.

If *Time's Arrow* is something of a stunt, there are many other authors besides Ackroyd who felt liberated by poststructuralist critiques of rationality to play games — albeit serious games — with the past. For the English experience of Time's duplicity received its intellectual warrant from the postmodern revolution in thought. Jacques Derrida had argued that there is no such thing as perception, only interpretation; that all interpretations are as inescapably unstable as the linguistic structure that underpins them; and that *arche* and *telos* — the “beginning” and the “end” that frame and found all narratives, all concepts of history — are unstable metaphysical concepts rather than empirically-verifiable facts. Jean-François Lyotard had applied this critique to all the “master narratives” of Time spawned by the Enlightenment, declaring that any interpretation of history — Whig, Marxist, liberal-democratic or Scientific — in which Enlightenment Rationality guaranteed Progress and Emancipation had been discredited, along with any notion of transcendent Truth. Michel Foucault had also persuasively claimed that Progress is an illusion: cultures, past and present, are simply different discursive formations, different constructions of the world, and none of them is more “real” or “true” than another in any absolute sense. They succeed each other according to no teleology whatsoever, and not even according to any rational cause-and-effect continuity but by means of sudden ruptures or breaks. And In *Metahistory*, a study with direct implications for the novel, Hayden White examined influential nineteenth-century

histories and argued that the shapes they conferred on Time were themselves derived from the forms and figures of fiction.

Understandably, these poststructuralist/postmodernist arguments were more eagerly embraced by novelists than by historians, but by 1994 even some historians were willing to concede ground to the postmodernists:

The idea that the past is a plaything of the present, or, as postmodernist theory would have it, a 'metafiction', is only now beginning to impinge on the consciousness and disturb the tranquillity of professional historians. But it has been for some twenty years or more a commonplace of epistemological criticism, and a very mainspring of experimental work in literature and the arts.... The idea of playing with the past... is deeply offensive to the historian, while the attempt to suspend or abolish temporality seems to put the historian's vocation into question. Our practice presupposes the existence of an objectively verifiable body of knowledge, while a commonsense realism — showing the past 'as it was' — is not the least of our inheritances from the nineteenth-century revolution in historical scholarship.... Despite these cautions, we are in fact constantly reinterpreting the past in the light of the present, and indeed, like conservationists and restorationists in other spheres, reinventing it. The angle of vision is inescapably contemporary, however remote the object in view.... History is an argument about the past, as well as the record of it, and its terms are forever changing, sometimes under the influence of developments in adjacent fields of thought, sometimes — as with the sea-change in attitudes which followed the First

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World War — as a result of politics. Historical research, in the hands (quite often) of self-proclaimed revisionists, is continually putting old and established markers into question. Explanations, greeted at the time as ‘authoritative’, now appear as contrived or beside the point. The plot thickens with fresh characters and previously undeveloped motifs. Forgotten episodes are exhumed. Old stories are given a new twist.... Even when we are immersed in the minutiae of empirical research, we are continually having to abandon the world of hard, verifiable fact for the more pliable one of interpretation and conjecture....<sup>118</sup>

Paradoxically, it was just at the moment that History — in the sense of a true and accurate account of how it really was — had been declared impossible that the task of historiography seemed most urgent in a society that felt betrayed by the Whig version of Time to which it had unquestioningly subscribed. But if postmodernism had shown the door to History in the positivist conception of the historians, by the same gesture it had opened the door to imaginative constructions of the past made avowedly in the service of a present that needed a new cognitive map, a different sense of its location in time, now that the old one was proving so unreliable. The gothic was dusted off and placed into service; “magic realism,” in which Time is warped and natural laws suspended, was imported from the Americas; there was a resurgence of the “Romance” — “the attempt to connect a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away from us”, and one which eschews “a very minute fidelity... to the probable and ordinary course of man’s experience” in the definition by Nathaniel Hawthorne chosen as epigraph to A.S. Byatt’s

*Possession*; and even more stolidly traditional novelists sought imaginative links between the present and a variety of putative pasts.