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Post-millennial Literature: Key figures and contexts

Leigh Wilson

Literary critics face particular obstacles in thinking about and interpreting the novels with which they share a period. As Robert Eaglestone has noted, because the archive from which literary critics of the contemporary choose is constantly expanding, because we lack the perspective which retrospect brings, our criteria of selection tend to be based on subjects we have already chosen: ‘we choose the themes...and then find books that explore these themes’ (Eaglestone 2013: 1095). However, it is possible to see that the selection of themes and the subsequent claims made have reached something of a critical consensus in contemporary literary studies. For many critics, the contemporary novel has rejected a postmodern playfulness that draws attention to textuality and exhibits a skepticism about the nature of representation. Instead, it attempts to reattach itself to what is usually called ‘the real’ (see for example Boxall 2013 and 2015 and Vermeulen 2015) and a new seriousness in narrowing the gap between fictional representation and the world around it (see Konstantinou 2016). Even those critics who see a continuation of some of the claims of postmodernist thought argue that these are being forced into relation with a more recent desire for the ‘real’. For Daniel Lea, the contemporary novel is involved in a ‘striving to marry the desire for the real with the legacy of postmodernism’s fascination with the simulacral’ (Lea 2012: 461; see also Lea 2016). These claims about a ‘return to the real’ have very often involved too a reassessment of the contemporary British novel’s engagement with the conventions of realism. For many critics, novels since 2000 have acknowledged that no easy return to a classic realism

is possible. Instead they argue that what many do is challenge the ‘simple opposition’ between realism and experiment (Gasiorek and James 2012: 617; see also James 2012). In this chapter, I will not be suggesting that this reading of the post-millennial novel is mistaken. Writers themselves – in interviews, articles and essays – are articulating their aims and concerns in such terms (see, for example, Shields 2010; O’Hagan 2011; McEwan 2013; Kunzru 2014; Cusk 2014). Rather, I want to suggest that parallel to a desire for a return the ‘real’ there runs an anxious awareness of the limits of the novel in achieving such a return.

The history of the relation between the fictionality of the novel and its ability to represent and crucially to shape the world is key in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

Anderson’s argument is that two printed forms – the novel and the daily newspaper – both of which came into being in the eighteenth century in Europe, were intimately related to the idea of nation as it developed in the same period. The precise relation between these printed forms and the nation is not always clear in Anderson’s work, and has been the subject of debate, but what the link between them grants Anderson is the revelation that the nation, like the newspaper and the novel, is a fiction. The nation has to be imagined by those who would make up its members, and this imagining is both an analogue of and made possible by the fictive elements of the novel and the newspaper (Anderson 2006: 24ff.). While the importance of the fictive nature of these forms for Anderson has been less commented on than other aspects of his argument, it suggests a more nuanced way of thinking about the contemporary novel’s ability to represent the ‘real’. For Anderson the novel is fictional in two key ways. First, the primary characteristic of books, in contrast to other commodities, is

their existence as discrete objects, and therefore their characteristic fiction is that what they contain is both bounded and cohered into some kind of unity (34-5). It is the case that, since the late 1990s, technology has made very different forms of fictional narrative acts possible beyond the conventional form of the book, but the digital novel -- in the form of either a straightforward ebook or in terms of novels which utilize the flexibility of the digital to stretch the link between novel and book -- have not really yet taken off, and remain a tiny part of the market in comparison to conventional books (see Thompson 2012: 314-15). So the novel still largely shares this particular fiction of coherence with all books, but, and this is the second element of the novel's fictionality, it is augmented by something which brings further coherence in place of the spatial arrangement of the newspaper page -- the narrator. The narrator of the novel, in Anderson's later gloss, is able to 'represent synchronically [a] bounded, intrahistorical society-with-a-future' beyond the ability of any actual human being to do so (Anderson 1998: 334). It is this which produces what Anderson calls in *Imagined Communities* the 'meanwhile' of the novel (2006: 24); the novel's ability, that is, through the coherence of its physical form and the coherence of its narrative act, to represent and to assert the 'real' of the world as one of coherence and connection. In *Imagined Communities* and in later works, Anderson, like many critics who have developed his argument, deviates from this insight into the effects of the novel's key form to discussion of the way that the content of novels links them to ideas of nation. However, some critics have kept this question of form to the forefront. For Timothy Brennan, in an influential chapter of Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, it is the novel as a 'composite but clearly bordered work of art', rather than any specific contents, which constitutes its link to

the creation of nation (Brennan 1995: 172). Jonathan Culler's reconsideration of the implications of Anderson's argument for literary critics too makes this point: 'The most important feature of the novel for Anderson's claim seems to be a narrative technique' (Culler 1999: 22).

In *Imagined Communities*, it is for Anderson the 'old-fashioned novel' (25) that produces the simultaneity of place and time necessary to the creation of the 'meanwhile'. However, critics continue to use the implications of Anderson's 'meanwhile' to think about novels very far from the 'old fashioned' (see, for example, Bal 2003 and Barnard 2009). For these critics, contemporary novelists are continuing the important role of coherent imagining ascribed to them by Anderson. They acknowledge of course the pressures that the post-millennial world exerts on such a role. The world since the millennium has seen the destructive rise of populist nationalisms, numerous acts of genocide, the challenge to the nation-state from supra national forces, whether of global capital or religious fundamentalism, migration, the speedy rise in the power and effects of digital technology, and the planetary scale of climate change. If Anderson's 'meanwhile' is predicated on an act of fictional telling which, however intricate and self-aware, remains coherent through the object of the book and the very act of telling, the forces listed above are predicated precisely on an undoing of these. In other words, the forces which many critics have seen as ending postmodernism and as returning the novel to the 'real' are the very forces which also threaten the form of the novel. In the rest of this chapter I will suggest a variety of ways that these challenges to the form of the novel from the post-millennial world, while pushing novelists towards the representation of various types of 'real', have also been a significant challenge to the narrative acts which constitute the form.

The 'We' of *On Beauty*

Anderson's 'meanwhile' is crucially linked to the construction of a 'we'. Readers of novels and members of nations are able to share a plural yet unified subject position with those distant and unknown through the cohering work of the novel. Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) is alive to the ethical questions that surround the 'we' in the post-millennial world, but through the novel's narrative acts it clearly attempts such a coherence. As she makes clear in her acknowledgements, Smith attempts this through a rewriting of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) (Smith 2005a: vii). Both novels represent their contemporary social milieu as riven with divisions – of class, wealth, education, ethnicity, politics, gender – through the interactions of two families, the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels in *Howards End*, the Belseys and the Kipps in *On Beauty*. The epigraph to Forster's novel urges us famously to 'only connect', and for both Forster and Smith the novel is a place in which not just to represent division but to enact a connection and shared collectivity that is at the heart of Anderson's 'meanwhile'. It is noticeable, however, that an analogue for the primary act of connection achieved in Forster's novel – the marriage between Henry Wilcox and Margaret Schlegel – is missing from *On Beauty*. This does not mean, though, that the achievement of such a connection is eschewed in *On Beauty*. Rather, the aspect of Forster's novel it repeats is the particular form of Forster's narrator: third person, insistent, prone to making what Frank Kermode has called 'announcements' (Kermode 2005: n.p.). It is, though, precisely in this repetition that *On Beauty*'s struggles with the 'we' can be most clearly seen.

On Beauty is set mostly on the campus of a liberal arts college on the east coast of the United States. Its protagonists are a couple – Howard Belsey, white and British, who teaches at the college, and Kiki Simmonds, an African-American nurse. The novel follows them and their children through scenarios which are produced in particular by the divisive legacies of colonialism, but the narrator from the beginning is a vehicle for connection and coherence. The opening scenes all deal with Howard and Kiki's eldest son, Jerome – who is in London living with and working for Howard's nemesis, Montague Kipps – and his brief affair with Kipps' daughter, Victoria. Chapter 4 ends with the awkwardness of Howard's trip to London to persuade Jerome against marrying Victoria. Despite these divisions, the narrator tells us at the beginning of chapter 5: 'We must now jump nine months forward, and back across the Atlantic' (42). This narratorial 'we' articulates exactly the temporal and spatial connection across division and difference that is implied in Anderson's 'meanwhile', and explicitly claims the 'meanwhile' not just within a nation but between nations.

Elsewhere, however, assertions by the narrator of 'truths' supposedly acknowledged by us all begin to reveal the problematic nature of the 'real' and of the narrator's creation of the 'meanwhile'. Some of these assertions are clearly ventriloquisms of a character's belief as is usual in free indirect discourse, but the claims are always left unchallenged by either the narrator or the events of the novel. Chapter 4, for example, begins: 'When it comes to the weather, New Englanders are delusional' (27). The next sentence is explicitly about Howard's own experience, but utterly confirms rather than in any way ironizing the preceding general claim. Frank Kermode, in his review of the novel, does justify such techniques as ironic acts of ventriloquism which serve to challenge or destabilise their truth claims (Kermode 2005: n.p.). Dorothy

Hale, extending his claim, argues that such assertions in *On Beauty* are Smith's way of working out the tensions between her assertion of the voice of the author and the novel's ethical desire to acknowledge and represent the experiences and voices of others (Hale 2012: 820; see also Smith 2005b). The 'we' claims of the narrator avoid the danger of drowning out the other, Hale claims, because they 'potentially emanate from three different enunciatory scenarios'. They are the views 'issued by an omniscient narrator who expresses the opinions of the author', they ventriloquize a character, as Kermode argues, and they bring 'a poetic quality that stands out from the rest of the prose' (840). However, what is key about all these aphorisms – whether they are ventriloquized or not – is that they are meant to be shared, by the narrator, the character and the reader. Near the end of the novel, Kiki, who has throughout been deciding on whether or not to leave Howard after learning of his adultery, is sorting through her children's old belongings in the storeroom. She packs things no longer needed in bin bags as she thinks about her family and her marriage. The bags split: 'She had packed them too heavy. The greatest lie ever told about love is that it sets you free' (424). That characters we are supposed to identify and sympathise with, such as Kiki, have banal thoughts does not undermine or ironise the thought within the narrative economy of *On Beauty*. The banality is the point. It is what *can* be shared.

This assumption of shared experience and assertion of collectivity is familiar from Smith's first and most famous novel, *White Teeth* (2000). Dominic Head has noted that the earlier novel 'is artfully constructed as the definitive representation of twentieth-century British multiculturalism' (Head 2003: 106). In the years between the two novels, of course, the world changed. The difficulties these changes presented

to Smith's favoured form of narrative construction, to its attempt to construct the 'we' of the 'meanwhile', is made visible in *On Beauty*.¹ If the overall effect of the narrative position of *On Beauty* is to assert a shared belief and experience through the repetition of things most likely to be shared, the contemporary impossibility of such an assertion is illustrated through scenes early in the novel where the 'real' of the post-millennial world intervenes. As can be seen in Anderson's later work on the novel and nation, the 'meanwhile' of the novel, its gathering, cohering function, is often represented thematically through the staging of a party and formally through the way such events are heard of and spoken about (Anderson 1998: 227). Near the beginning of *On Beauty*, Howard and Kiki throw a party to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary. Earlier, as they invite people, the date of the party is never revealed to the reader,, but when Kiki mentions it to her invitees it produces in them 'that tiny, involuntary shudder with which Kiki had, in recent years, become familiar' (68). At the party itself Howard too is faced with reactions to its date.

'Strange date for it, though,' he heard somebody say. And then the usual response: 'Oh, I think it's a wonderful date for a party. You know it's their actual anniversary, so And if we don't reclaim the day, you know....then it's like they've won. It's a reclaiming, absolutely.' This was the most popular conversation of the night. Howard had had it himself at least four times since the clock struck ten and the wine had really kicked in. Before that no one liked to mention it. (107; ellipses in original)

The party, it gradually dawns on the reader, takes place on 11 September, as had the Belseys' wedding thirty years before. The novel is set in 2003. The awkwardness

around and therefore attention given to the date of the party is an indication of how important it is as a frame for the novel's own act of narration but also how it blocks the narrator's ability to make 'announcements' that are easily shared. The overheard party conversation produces 'we' truth claims from the guests of the same order as those of the narrator, but the usually loquacious narrator is silent about them, both in its own terms and in terms of any acts of ventriloquising. Neither Howard nor Kiki express an opinion about either the shudders or the conversations of their guests. Even more crucially, in clear contrast to the rest of the novel, in which the narrator never fails to inform, share and include, at this point the reader is held at arm's length. While in *On Beauty*, as in many, many novels through the history of the European novel, a party acts as an attempt to literalise the 'meanwhile' of the novel form as such – from the picnic on Box Hill in *Emma* (1815) to the party at the end of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) -- the date of Howard and Kiki's party brings awkwardness not just to the guests but to the narrator's position and the coherence of the novel.

The 'Meanwhile' and Digital Technology

Mieke Bal has argued that the possible obsolescence of the novel (and the newspaper) is due in part to the fact that 'if any medium works by means of "meanwhile", it is the Internet, that enemy of the novel' (Bal 2003: 183). The meanwhile of the internet does not, however, work to fortify the nation-state: 'Instead, arguably it mitigates, perhaps even destroys, it. As a result new imagined communities emerge based on all manner of communities. No generalizations about what "meanwhile" connects seem possible at this time' (183-4). Scepticism about the nature of this new 'meanwhile' has also been recently voiced by the novelist and essayist John Lanchester. In a *London Review of Books* article, he has argued

that the ‘filter bubbles’ of social media mean that ‘[o]ur conception of “we” is becoming narrower’, and that the subsequent fragmentation is directly responsible for the phenomena of ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’ which, he argues, ‘were made possible by the retreat from a general agora of public debate into separate ideological bunkers’ (Lanchester 2017: 5).² While cultural work and theoretical positions designated as postmodern celebrated the demise of a grand ‘meanwhile’ and replaced it with numerous smaller ones, the internet, according to Lanchester, shows that this might lead not to positive multiplicity but to a destructive fragmentation. If the narrator is the central producer of the ‘meanwhile’ of the novel, the possible challenge to the creation of the ‘meanwhile’ that comes from digital technology, and any possible resistance, must be looked for then in the narrative acts of post-millennial novels.

David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten* (1999) consists of interlocking stories – nine, plus one at the end which reprises all those preceding it – set in various locations around the world. The chapter titles name these locations – ‘Okinawa’, ‘Tokyo’, ‘Hong Kong’, and so on. All are narrated in the first person (apart from the ninth, ‘Night Train’, which consists entirely of dialogue) by a wide variety of characters who ostensibly have little to do with one another. Unlike Mitchell’s later novel, *Cloud Atlas* (2004), in which individual chapters are temporally, spatially and generically very different but are connected through a clear patterning, the narrators of *Ghostwritten* are separated by place, culture and language in a way that is not easily cohered and would seem to strain the construction of the ‘meanwhile’. However, rather than asserting the breakdown of narrative coherence and the celebration of multiple stories against the grand narratives, Rita Barnard, in her consideration of *Ghostwritten*, has described the novel’s mode as that of the ‘hyperlink’ which produces ‘a kind of synthetic or sutured

omniscience that transcends any single individual's experience and spans *Ghostwritten's* disjunct mise-en-scenes' (Barnard 2009: 209, 212). This is an indication of the importance of digital technology for the narrative coherence of Mitchell's novel. However, its particular use of the 'hyperlink' does not only makes possible a new kind of omniscience; it also threatens the place of the novel as the preeminent form of the construction of the 'meanwhile'. In Mitchell's novel the 'meanwhile', as well as being an effect of formal construction, is a character who represents a globalised digital technology as both saviour and nemesis.

The multiple stories in the novel are intricately interwoven: the narrators of each chapter appear as minor characters in others. Indeed, the structure of Mitchell's novel, while describable as one of hyperlinks, is also a repetition of episode 10 of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), 'Wandering Rocks'. What is different in Mitchell's novel, however, are the implications of his version of this structure for the 'meanwhile'. In 'Wandering Rocks', the various stories are held together by time and space – they occur simultaneously between 3pm and 4pm on the streets of Dublin on 16 June 1904 – but also, beyond this, the stories are held together by a narrative position that mimics the 'mechanical eye' the film camera. From above, it pans Dublin. It is significant of course that in *Ulysses*, at the moment of modernist re-evaluation, the 'meanwhile' of the novel could also not be taken for granted – it needed the extra-literary terms and tropes of film in order to work. In *Ghostwritten* the ability of the novel to provide the 'meanwhile' is even less secure. The 'mechanical eye' is literalised in the world of the novel in its attempt to reassert the possibility of authoritative narration and the connectivity of the 'meanwhile'. It is turned into a character whose first person narration is able to connect and cohere.

One of the voices involved in the dialogues that constitute chapter 9, 'Night Train', is an AI who has been programmed with four laws – versions of the three laws of robotics developed by the science fiction writer Isaac Asimov in the 1940s (Asimov 1942) – which mean that it cannot harm humans and must actively work to protect them. While the AI is not the single narrator of this story (the story's narrator is a kind of recording machine, more akin to the camera eye of 'Wandering Rocks'), it is a kind of narrator of the world. The AI moves through 'ultrawave transmission' and uses satellites to view events all around the globe; it enters computer programmes and internet sites in order to carry out its global duties (Mitchell 1999: 389-90, 397-8). Its ability to see and know all is supposed to enable the world to operate coherently and to achieve justice (386ff.).

The AI calls a late night phone-in show on a New York radio station, Night Train FM, and the DJ, who it is using as a kind of confessor, names it Zookeeper. It is in the conversations between the DJ and Zookeeper that the threat of such an achievement of coherence becomes clear. 'Night Train' ends with the DJ signing off his show after a night in which the world has celebrated the aversion of nuclear disaster which the reader knows was down to the AI's intervention. Unbeknownst to the DJ, however, his conversation with the AI during the night has convinced it to let a comet destroy the world as the only way for it to keep all of its four laws. The narrative coherence made possible by the AI's omniscience is finally the cause of apocalypse.

The structure of *Ghostwritten* is in the end ambiguous about the desirability of coherence, however. The narrative of the novel is circular – chapter 10 returns to the

topic and narrator of chapter 1, and the final words take us back to the novel's beginning – so appearing to alleviate anxieties about apocalyptic endings and to achieve a formal coherence, but the present of the final chapter is before the events of 'Night Train'. Within the present of 'Night Train', though, the continuing existence of the familiar tugs against the knowledge of impending disaster. As the sun rises over New York, the DJ signs off his show with much narrative irony, yet the possibility of the familiar and safe remains: 'The stars are going out over Staten Island, and Night Train FM is pulling in to a new morning' (429).

Cohering narratives abound in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015), but in the end the novel's own narrative form eschews safe spaces either of circularity or the familiarity of Staten Island. McCarthy's first-person narrator, known only as 'U', is an anthropologist who works for a shady corporation – 'the Company' – whose work involves the construction of narrative fictions (McCarthy 2016: 16, 55). U's hero is the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work he sees as a kind of supranational novel, taking the detail of human culture and linking it to a larger system which lies 'behind not just a single tribe but also the larger one of all humanity' (35). At the opening of the novel, the Company begins work on a project for an even shadier client, Koob-Sassen.³ Although the exact nature of the project is kept mysterious by the narrator, his descriptions of it show that it has much in common with the internet as a kind of supernarrative: 'Koob-Sassen involved many hook-ups, interfaces, transpositions... It was a project formed of many other projects, linked to many other projects' (15). At the same time, the narrator compiles numerous dossiers – on oil spills, on the deaths of parachutists, on shark attacks (40) – which he believes will eventually cohere and unite into the 'Great Report' that the Company

wishes him to write: ‘the Book. The First and Last Word on our age’ (70). **Or Nicola Barker bit here, as H(A)PPY is also about relation between random and narrative, and role of digital technology in that?**

Anthropology, the Koob-Sassen Project and the ‘Great Report’ all stand in for another cohering narrative not actually mentioned in McCarthy’s novel – that of the novel itself. U’s anxiety about the unwritten ‘Great Report’ articulates questions about the possible form and shape of any novel that attempts to take on and respond to the realities of the contemporary world: ‘It was all a question of form. What fluid, morphing hybrid could I come up with to be equal to that task? What medium, or media, would it inhabit? Would it tell a story? If so, how, and about what, or whom? If not, how would it all congeal, around what cohere?’ (90). U comes to realize that the ‘Great Report’ is ‘*unwritable*’; it is ‘unplottable, unframeable, unrealizable’ (145; emphasis in original), but then worries that it is not so much unwritable as already written. The cohering narrative of Zookeeper in *Ghostwritten* morphs into the existing possibilities of the internet itself. It is the internet that is the ‘fluid, morphing hybrid’ which connects and coheres:

that tabulates and cross-indexes what we buy with who we know, and what they buy, or like, and with the other objects that are bought or liked by others who we don’t know but with whom we cohabit a shared buying- or liking-pattern.
(153)

If a cohering narrative can no longer be written by human beings, whether anthropologists or novelists, then it cannot be read by them either: ‘Only another

piece of software could do that' (153). The truth of the world is beyond human telling, and narratives, when they exist, cannot be made to cohere meaningfully. The story U's girlfriend tells him about what happened to her in Genoa in 2001 when she was there as part of the anti-globalization protests is unassimilatable by him as meaningful narrative; it is, he says, 'just fucking weird' (203). Of course, while the 'Great Report' remains unwritten, *Satin Island* does exist as a novel, but as a novel whose structural coherence exists through the very form of the report – the novel is formed of numbered sections, in the way that a corporate report might be. An anxiety about the relation between this form and the form of the novel may be detected in McCarthy's (or the publisher's) choice of title. The full title of the novel is *Satin Island: A Novel*.

If *Ghostwritten*'s narrative form permanently defers apocalypse, and Staten Island remains as a safe haven, in *Satin Island* no such safe place remains. U has a dream about his Great Report which leaves him with two words, '*Satin Island*' (164; emphasis in original). He sees these as linked to a promise of 'significance' and ultimate meaning (204). In Manhattan for a conference, he discovers that, from a certain perspective, the sign for the ferry to Staten Island reads '*Satin Island*' (205). He decides to travel on the ferry in expectation of discovering 'something rich, strange and miraculous' (210). However, U is unable to make the journey when he realizes that both going and not going are in the end meaningless (213). As he watches the ferry he was to take disappear across the Upper Bay, the dazzle on the water produces 'a holocaust of light' which erases 'the departed ferry, Staten Island, all the other landmarks and most of the sky' (216), as if the end to all narratives engineered by the great narrator, deferred in *Ghostwritten*, has come about.

Responses to the challenge of digital technology, and to the challenge of the internet in particular, to the act of narration should not however be seen a gradual shift from Mitchell's drawing back from apocalypse to McCarthy's 'holocaust of light'. Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* (2017), for example, suggests that any response is determined more by different conceptions of the role and possibility of the novel than distance from the beginnings of the digital age. *H(A)PPY* is a post-apocalyptic dystopia set in a totalitarian society ruled by 'the System' where perfection and balance are achieved through the constant surveillance made possible by digital technology. Ever-present screens continuously relay an information stream comprised of an individual's thoughts, dreams, emotions, temperature, and so on, and all members of the society censor and control themselves constantly in response to this stream. Narration is a threat to the stasis demanded by the System. The novel's protagonist is a young woman, Mira A, whose obedience to the System is gradually undermined, and whose rebellion is enacted through a release of language arranged in narrative form. Because the control of words is key to both the System and to Mira A's rebellion, there is little attempt in the novel to construct a conventional story world or to worry about the relation between the 'real' world and the digital; rather, the struggle over language is written into the physical object of the book itself. The novel contains images, words coloured as if hyperlinks, blank pages and pages composed of a single repeated word mimicking a malfunctioning computer screen. Mira A's most crucial act of rebellion is to construct – mentally, in her information stream – a Cathedral of information and imagery into which she can retreat (Barker 2017: 253). The Cathedral is made up of words, symbols and equations and is the means for Mira A's escape into 'the Unknown', the world beyond the System where the latter's control does not reach, but neither does its management of hunger, hatred and pain. Not only is Mira A's own

final apocalyptic act – her escape from the System – an ambiguous move into narration, but the Cathedral itself is linked to the very technologies which make possible the System’s totalitarian control. As Mira A attempts to flee Kite – the novel’s main representative of the System – as he chases her through the Cathedral, he describes her creation as ‘[t]his giant, swarming edifice of contradictory words and empty echoes and meaningless quotations’ (261). But, of course, she has shaped this mass into something meaningful, a Cathedral. The modes of the internet – its construction through the symbolic -- both constitute the technologies of control within the System and the way of escape from it.

War, Terrorism and the ‘Meanwhile’ of Genre

In the years following the attacks by al Qaeda on Washington and New York in September 2001, many novels, in contrast to *On Beauty*’s refusal to name it, have directly addressed the effects of terrorism on the possibilities for the ‘meanwhile’ of the novel. These attempts to reshape the narrative possibilities of the novel have very often, however, led writers to question the ability of the literary novel to do just this, and to turn to the possibilities of genre instead. Martin Amis saw the attacks initially as a challenge to the role of the literary novel. They turned the novelist’s work in progress into ‘pitiable babble’ and following them ‘a feeling of gangrenous futility had infected the whole corpus’ of novels. Rather than the ‘pitiable babble’ of the literary novel, what brought coherence after the attacks was cliché: ‘actually we can live with “bitter cold” and “searing heat”.... We can live with cliché. What we have to do now, more testingly, is live with war’ (Amis 2002: n.p.). While Amis argues that eventually the claims of ‘literature’ reasserted themselves to counteract what he calls

the ‘stock response’ of religious belief – for him the cause of the terror attacks – in the years since the greatest effect on the British novel has been not so much a reassertion of the power of ‘literature’ against cliché, but a move towards the conventions of genre in order to maintain the ‘meanwhile’ of the novel. Whereas postmodernist novelists of the 1980s and 1990s incorporated genre conventions into their novels in order to fragment them, novelists since 2000 have rather moved towards the writing of genre, but it is a move that is often troubled and anxious.⁴

In James Meeks’ *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008) the competing claims of the literary and genre fiction in representing war and terror are part of the plot, but the novel’s own narrating acts reveal how difficult this question is for the contemporary novel. The protagonist, Adam Kellas, is a British journalist who has reported from Afghanistan during its invasion by the US and its allies following the 9/11 attacks. Roger Luckhurst has argued that Kellas’ job as a journalist is key in ‘marking a sense of crisis about the ethics of fictional representations of the violence of modern war’ (Luckhurst 2012: 720). However, for Kellas, and for Meek’s novel, the key contrast is not between journalism and fiction but between the literary novel and genre fiction. One of the central plots in the ‘present’ of the novel is about Kellas’ travel to the US to sign a contract with the publisher of his thriller, *Rogue Eagle Rising*, about a war in the future between the US and Europe. Kellas has begun this novel after setting aside his aims to write more serious fiction, and throughout Meek’s novel *Rogue Eagle Rising* is contrasted with the novel, *The Book of Form*, written by Kellas’ best friend, Pat M’Gurgan. *The Book of Form* is described as a poet’s novel and is the winner of a prestigious literary prize: ‘It was dazzling, lovely, like exquisitely tooled, streamlined, burnished parts of a flying machine that hadn’t been put together because they’d

never been designed to be, couldn't fit, and would never fly' (Meek 2009: 34-5). The title of M'Gurgan's novel and this description of it suggest that novels which interest themselves in questions of form are as useful in representing the truth of the contemporary world as flying machines that cannot fly.

If the poet's novel is beautiful but useless, Kellas has no illusions about the clichéd nature of his thriller, however. Despite their clichés, though, what the conventions of the thriller do facilitate is a 'meanwhile'. Thrillers generally both use coherent and seamless realist conventions – including a unified narrative voice – and rely too on the assumption that the world is an ordered or organized place, even if the originators of that order are the CIA, the Illuminati or an international criminal organization.

Kellas is fully aware of this in his own novel, and of its problems. His aim in writing the novel had been to commit an act of 'deliberate misimagining' (114), to write a novel that successfully managed a 'meanwhile' through the justification of cliché by sincerity. His aim is: 'To take a real, complicated country, in this case, the United States, and to simplify it to a set of caricatures so blatant, and so crude, that few readers would doubt his sincerity. A naïve entertainer, but sincere' (114).

Kellas finally discovers – when he reaches the nadir at the end of his 'descent' – the consequences of such a novelistic lie. In New York he discovers from his editor that his publisher has been taken over by a French industrial conglomerate which no longer wants to publish his novel. Now penniless and jobless, Kellas leaves New York for a journey on a Greyhound bus to Virginia to find a fellow journalist, Astrid, with whom he had an affair in Afghanistan. During the trip he reads his now rejected novel to his fellow passenger, Lloyd, who by his own account is 'not a great reader'

(190), but whose naïve responses make visible the gap between the conventions of the thriller and lived experience. Kellas justifies his novel to the skeptical Lloyd through a distancing of it from the real world: 'It's a thriller. It's fiction. It's entertainment' (191). Lloyd, however, refuses to be mollified and collapses back the distance between the novelistic and the real: 'My sister's best friend is in Kuwait right now with the Marines. That ain't much of an entertainment' (191).

If neither the literary novel nor the thriller are adequate to represent the truth of the world through a credible 'meanwhile', a scene at the heart of the novel suggests what might be. Against the novel's traditional use of the party to assert the 'meanwhile', as we seen however problematically in *On Beauty*, Meek uses a party to question the form's ability to represent a coherent picture of the contemporary world. Kellas attends a dinner party in Camden, north London. The hosts and guests represent politics, the media, the arts, science and finance, a good sweep of the power of London. The tensions begin when, trying to smooth over a disagreement between Kellas and another guest, Liam, the host, claims of his house: 'This is no man's land. There has to be one of those so we aren't killing each other and screaming at each other all the time' (94). Kellas' response is to ask 'who's we?' (94). The traditional function of the party as a literalised 'meanwhile', bringing the disparate and the diverse into some kind of coherence, begins to crumble. The climax of the scene occurs when Kellas is asked by Liam what Afghanistan is really like. Kellas tells Liam that he will show him. He destroys his hosts' kitchen, smashing crockery, pictures and furniture, finally shouting into the terrified face of their young daughter: 'THAT'S WHAT IT'S LIKE!' (111). In this scene, where the question of the

representation of war and terror is central, the party cannot constitute the 'meanwhile'; indeed its destruction questions the role and ethics of the 'meanwhile'.

However, Kellas's mimesis of destruction that is itself destructive is less happily transferred to the novel's own form. In chronological order, the events of the novel are as follows: Kellas spends time embedded with US troops during the invasion of 2001, returns to London unable any more to accept the banalities of bourgeois metropolitan life, destroys the dinner party, flies to New York to sign the book contract, then travels on to Virginia to find Astrid. We finally we see him and Astrid in Iraq in March 2003. This account of the events of the novel is, however, very hard for the reader to reconstruct when reading for the first time. The ordered simultaneity that the 'meanwhile' historically brought to the events of the novel and through that to the events of the world itself is shattered by the attempt, both by the novel and in the novel, to connect the world of British bourgeois 'reality' to the effects of US and UK political and military decisions in Afghanistan. More problematically, the ability of the novel finally to represent the 'real' of the world is made shaky by its own reversion to the worst aspects of genre. A review of the novel in the *Guardian* suggested that at end, as we see Kellas and Astrid in Iraq during the invasion in 2003, Meek returns to the bad writing of commercial thrillers as if to say that what happened there can only be written about in that way: 'It is as if Meek were saying: the modern Anglo-American wars are so stupid, you can only write stupidly about them' (Buchan 2008: n.p.).

Such narrative uncertainty of the effects of terror and war on the cohering possibilities of the 'meanwhile' of the novel can also be seen in different ways in two other post-

millennial novels, and again they circle around the question of the literary and genre. Glen Duncan's *A Day And A Night And A Day* (2009) draws on the conventions of the thriller to represent terror, but attempts in the end to work them into a literary novel.⁵ Its protagonist, Augustus Rose, has endured torture carried out by the US in north Africa through the processes of extraordinary rendition. However, Rose knows that the atrocious cannot be narrated, and the novel agrees by breaking off its account of this torture at the moment of maximum horror: 'It's the nature of horror: you've got to half-see it for it to work' (Duncan 2009: 35). However, the novel's mixing of thriller conventions with the literary novel's attention to the problem of representation of torture in particular, as Alice Bennett has noted, led to some disappointment among reviewers at the novel's 'half-seeing' and accusations of 'exhausted contempt for the kind of writing that seems to be called for' (Bennett 2013: 73). In comparison, if Duncan produced a thriller that did not tell enough because of its awareness of problems of representation in response to the atrocious, Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) is an intensely literary novel whose lyrical coherence sits uneasily with its narration of the most violent and destructive happenings. One of its protagonists, Marcus, is an English doctor who has lived in Afghanistan for decades. A description of his abilities as a perfumier show the novel as aligning itself to Salman Rushdie's variety of magical realism. We are told that his sense of smell was so accurate that 'he could discern a word written with colourless perfume on a sheet of paper' (Aslam 2009: 174). Further, the novel's structure, alternating between the novel's present, narrated in the present tense, and the past horrors experienced by the Afghan people under the Soviet occupation, the rule of the Taliban and following the US invasion in 2001, narrated in the past tense, reproduces a now conventional understanding of the relation between the past and the present where the use of retrospective narration

attempts to heal or overcome the past. Because of this, the novel cannot admit in the end that the act of telling is complicated and threatened by the horror it narrates.

While Duncan's thriller-ish novel explicitly discusses the relation between torture and language and refuses to narrate the horror of the former, Aslam's literary novel is still confident that violence can be beautifully and fully told. Marcus has lost both his daughter, Zameen, and his Afghan wife, Qatrina, also a doctor, the first to the Soviets and then to warlords, the latter to the Taliban. Just over half way through the novel we learn what had been Qatrina's ultimate fate. She is stoned by the Taliban for refusing to renounce either her husband or her medical knowledge. The public stoning does not actually kill her, and, injured following it, she is then thrown into a cell:

That was where she died several days after the stoning. A man at the mosque was sent to see her, to ask if she would beg Allah's forgiveness for a lifetime of sin. She wouldn't respond to him. But as she sat there she sometimes raised her burka and pursed her swollen lips and spat out something white into a corner. Maggots had developed in her nasal cavity and were dropping into her mouth.
(267)

In contrast to the reticence of Duncan's narrator and narrative, both totalitarian demand and horrible injury stop Qatrina's language, but not the linguistic facility of the narrator.

The Impossible 'Meanwhile': Narrating Climate Change

The difficult relation between the literary novel and genre fiction in the post-millennial world can be seen too in debates about the representation of the contemporary's most pressing 'real', climate change. Amitav Ghosh has recently argued that what he calls the 'serious novel' has failed to take this on, in part because the 'meanwhile' of the novel precludes the scale necessary in order to properly represent it (Ghosh 2016: 58-63).⁶ In addition, Ghosh worries that 'the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction' (7). Writing in response to Ghosh, McKenzie Wark too sees the relation between the novel and climate change as primarily a problem of genre, but for him the serious novel has already lost: 'science fiction has responded more strongly to the Anthropocene.... Serious fiction, like bourgeois culture, now seems rather unserious, indeed frivolous' (Wark 2017: n.p.).

However, both Ghosh's argument and Wark's response suggest that a consideration of the novel as a narrative act – rather than the details of its theme and content – has been ignored. Ghosh argues that even literary writers seriously involved in debates about and activism in response to climate change usually write about it only in the pages of nonfiction. As an example, Ghosh cites the British novelist Paul Kingsnorth, whose novel *The Wake* was published in 2015 and who before that was closely involved in activism against climate change. Ghosh argues that, despite this involvement, 'as of the time of writing [Kingsnorth] has yet to publish a novel in which climate change plays a major part' (8). However, such a charge can only be based on a very restricted idea of what novels are 'about', that is, of the relation between novels and the world in which they appear. Ghosh's argument is one which considers characters, events and themes as more important than the novel as a

narrative act. A consideration of *The Wake* as a narrative act suggests instead that this novel is in fact deeply invested in the possibilities of and problems surrounding the form's engagement with climate change.

The Wake is set at the time of the Norman invasion of England in 1066 and is narrated in the first person by Buccmaster, an Anglo-Saxon who has lost everything through Norman violence and who retreats, with a few others, into the great woods from where they carry out acts of insurgence against the Normans. Kingsnorth has made the telling of his novel as different from contemporary English as possible while retaining legibility through the creation of a pseudo Old English, what he calls a 'shadow tongue'. He uses no words in Buccmaster's telling that would not have been available to inhabitants of England in 1066. In one way, this is a kind of authenticity, an attempt at a link to the 'real' of an apocalyptic moment in the life of the country at the turn of the last millennium. However, the reader's struggle to read on beginning the novel, and the difficulties in reading acknowledged by the inclusion of paratextual material such as a preface and a glossary, challenges any idea that a 'return to the real' can be straightforward. If the 'shadow tongue' causes difficulty, this is complicated further by Buccmaster's role as narrator. What motivates Buccmaster is his connection to the old Anglo-Saxon gods. He rejects Christianity as a religion of 'the book' (Kingsnorth 2015: 68) and clings to the old beliefs which are rooted in the physical reality of the natural world. As a child, Buccmaster is shown a submerged forest by his grandfather, who too believes in the old gods, and who believes that the trees are the gods themselves:

he telt me that in the time before the crist angland was ham to a hus of gods
what was born of this ground and what lifd in it among the folc. and these gods
he saed was not lic the crist they was not ingenga gods bound about in lies and
words...these was gods of the treows and the water lic we is folc of them. (52)

At the heart of *The Wake* then are the relations between humans and the natural world. Buccmaster wishes to save England from the ‘ingenga’ Normans and to return to the old beliefs which produce a harmonious relation between the gods, the land and the people. However, it gradually becomes clear that Buccmaster is a liar and a bully. Indeed, he is a murderer whose actions in the past have produced results analogous to the Normans’ violent destruction. Buccmaster claims to ‘speak for’ the land, which he sees as a living being, but his act of narration is duplicitous. Kingnorth’s novel does not mention climate change, but its construction of the narrative act questions the establishing of a cohering ‘meanwhile’ between human beings and the natural world while at the same time producing a vision of the pre-Norman world – one of ‘blithe lif’ (194) – that is in many ways far preferable to the one brought in by the invaders. The novel articulates a yearning for a relation to the physical world other than that of late capitalism while at the same time acknowledging the problematic role of the narrative act in achieving this.

In all the novels discussed in this chapter we can see the powerful desire expressed in the post-millennial British novel to reconnect with a ‘real’ that was jettisoned by postmodernist epistemological skepticism. However, by paying attention to the narrative acts of the novels as understood through Anderson’s concept of the ‘meanwhile’, we can see too a remaining hesitancy and disquiet about the role of the

novel in such a reconnection. The post-millennial ‘real’ – shot through as it is with forces and challenges which threaten the coherence that is at stake in the ‘meanwhile’ – produces in the novels which yearn for it a formal conundrum that is both productive and fragmenting.

Notes

- 1 The way that the attacks on 9/11 led novelists to assert shared values and clichés about love can be found too in Ian McEwan’s article written days after the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’, *Guardian*, 15 September 2001; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosophyandsociety2>.
- 2 The terms ‘fake news’ and ‘post truth’ rose to prominence in public debate in 2016, and were made ‘words of the year’ by the Macquarie Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary respectively. See (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jan/25/fake-news-named-word-of-the-year-by-macquarie-dictionary>) and (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>).
- 3 It has been suggested that the project is named after the artist and friend of McCarthy’s, Hilary Skoob-Sassen, whose

mother, Saskia Sassen, is a Dutch-American sociologist whose books include *The Global City* and *Globalization and Its Discontents*.

- 4 Some examples include the historical fiction of Sarah Waters, David Peace's *Red Riding Quartet* (1999-2002), which are crime novels, Toby Litt's *Corpsing* (2000) and *Journey into Space* (2009), which are a crime novel and a science fiction novel respectively. Benedict Anderson argued in his later work that the fragmentation of the novel into genres in the twentieth century weakened the 'meanwhile' of the novel, see Anderson (1998: 335). For a challenge to this claim on grounds other than the one made here, see Culler (1999).
- 5 Like *Satin Island*, this novel too asserts its claims to being a novel in its title. While the subtitle 'A Novel' is used fairly frequently by US publishers, especially by publishers of genre fiction, both parodying it (as in the experimental novel by US novelist David Markson, *This Is Not A Novel*, from 2001), and appropriating it for a literary novel, as in *Satin Island*, draws attention to uncertainty around the limits of the form in the contemporary. Glen Duncan moved, after being dropped by his agent following the global economic crash of 2008, from writing novels with literary aspirations, such as *A Day and a Night and a Day*, to writing genre fiction (see for an account of this Bennett,

2013). As my analysis of the novel makes clear, however, *A Day and a Night and a Day*, while from Duncan's 'literary' period, contains a number of elements of the thriller.

- 6 On the question of scale in connection with the relations between human beings and the natural world, see Mark McGurl (2017).

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