



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

37 | Autumn 2001
Varia

The malign vision in William Trevor's fiction

Andrew Parkin



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/589>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2001

Number of pages: 81-96

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Andrew Parkin, « The malign vision in William Trevor's fiction », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 37 | Autumn 2001, Online since 30 September 2008, connection on 14 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/589>

This text was automatically generated on 14 November 2019.

© All rights reserved

The malign vision in William Trevor's fiction

Andrew Parkin

- 1 This essay -assuming a Shakespearean allusion- could have been called "Domestic Malice"; or taking its cue respectively from soap opera or pulp fiction, "The Mischievous and the Malign" or "The Malign and the Malicious". Trevor's fiction, in fact, explores some of the same territory as popular novels do, though its landmarks are the ruined lives of tragedy. Trevor tells stories, offering fictional "realities" in a clear, matter-of-fact style. He does not burden the reader with philosophizing speculation or arguments for a particular political point of view. Newspaper reviewers and literary prize committees praise his work and, more recently, he has been recognized by academic critics. Some recent examples are Michael W. Thomas (1999), whose essay "Worlds of Their Own: A Host of Trevor's Obsessives" appeared in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, my own essays (1997 and 1995 respectively), "Reading Trevor, Reading Turgenev" in *The CUHK Journal of the Humanities* and "The Outsider in the Novels of William Trevor" in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, and Ian Sansom (1999) "New Fiction: Reading Trevor" in *Salmagundi*. Richard Bonoccorso published two pieces on Trevor in 1996 and 1997 respectively. More substantially, Kristin Morrison published a book, *William Trevor* (1993), as have Suzanne Paulson with *William Trevor: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1993), and Dolores MacKenna, with *William Trevor, The Writer and His Work* (1999). My purpose here, though, is not to review previous critical works. I am more interested in continuing to record my own experience of reading Trevor. Since previously I have written about his novels, I am now looking mainly at Trevor's copious harvest of short fiction, including the fairly recent collection, *After Rain* (1996) and the even more recent novel, *Death in Summer* (1998).
- 2 I take my first cue from Trevor's racy review of P. G. Wodehouse in *The Spectator* (1993). Trevor, acknowledging Wodehouse's mastery, notes with approval the "edge" that time has not blunted, the deliberately broad -not merely highbrow- appeal, and Wodehouse's own estimate that "...he belonged well below the salt, 'among the scurvy knaves and scallions'. If he does, it's the place to be." Praising the B.B.C.'s *Wodehouse*

Playhouse television series, Trevor nevertheless reminds us that “To know Wodehouse, to savour him, he must be read. His artistry and craftsmanship belong on the page, and what he leaves to the imagination is left deliberately.” (*Spectator* : 50). Trevor usefully recalls also that Wodehouse insisted “...that he had no message, being content to leave ‘all that kind of thing’ to the sombre boys and the swells. Yet he continues to survive, while all around him messages are forgotten.” (*Spectator*: 51). Such remarks apply just as well to Trevor’s own work as a fiction writer.

- 3 Trevor’s exploration of the malign aspects of human existence runs obsessively through a body of fiction peopled, as Thomas (1999) argues persuasively, with characters who are “obsessives”. What I call the “malign vision” in Trevor’s work appears in several forms. Trevor himself uses the words “malice” and “malicious” in his short story “Sunday Drinks” which appears in *The Collected Stories* (1993): “Marcus Stire arrived then, lanky and malicious... His malice was perceptive, and he didn’t much exaggerate. He had a way of detecting trouble, and of accurately piecing together the fragments that came his way.” (*The Collected Stories*: 856, 857). The harm that can be done by the perceptively malicious ranges from mere teasing to the murderous destruction of lives. Marcus Stire simply mentions to Jessica that another woman’s smile “...covers a multitude of sins. What awful frauds people are! ... Suburban middle age... It’s like a minefield.” (*The Collected Stories*: 857). As Jessica listens to his gossip about other people, his callous laughter at their predicaments and treacheries, she is mesmerized by his drawling voice and the gestures of his ringed fingers, and, trapped, she wonders what he says about her own marriage and her registered drug addict son. As she crumples, losing her psychological balance, she cannot evade what the end of the story reveals, the horror that has wrecked her and her husband’s previous happiness, their son’s form of “accidental suicide” (*The Collected Stories*: 859). Marcus Stire has worked on her casually, smilingly, with “...the malevolence in the eyes that were piercing...now.” (*The Collected Stories*: 857). Malcolm, Jessica’s husband, taking her home, assesses the damage: “Easily, Malcolm imagined Marcus Stire’s drawling tones and the sharpness of his eye, *like a splinter of glass* [my italics]. He knew now how Jessica had been upset...” (*The Collected Stories* : 859). Malcolm’s reading of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) gets a mention in the final paragraph of the story. Dickens’ last (and unfinished) novel opens with a man awakening from a dream induced by opium. In Trevor’s story, we have encountered Jessica’s son having a drug-induced dream. Stire takes some inspiration from the sinister John Jasper, Edwin Drood’s uncle.
- 4 The adult Torrridge who walks purposefully into the story “Torrridge” is to a large extent the result of schoolboy teasing. He relishes the merciless revenge he exacts on the three families of the men who, first as boys and then as men, made him a legendary figure of fun. Torrridge is both clever and subtle, these qualities captured in his smile:

“The man beside her smiled his brittle, malevolent smile at her, as if in sympathy.”
(*The Collected Stories*: 610).
- 5 Torrridge turns the farcical schoolboy humour and the latent/overt homosexual antics of the single sex school into a jagged weapon of revenge capable of puncturing the comfort zones of three marriages. He relishes the irony of the contrast between his adult presence, with its devastating power, and the image of him as a naïve schoolboy butt of wittier companions. The malefactors —whether homosexual or heterosexual, male or female— in Trevor’s work not only wish ill on others, or malign people in their absence, but also perpetrate ingeniously, if compulsively, their varieties of mischief on the deserving and the undeserving alike. They deface people and vandalize households

as graffiti vandals indiscriminately deface walls and doors and windows, whether ugly or beautiful. Ironically, such vandalism may result from political correctness, as in the authoritarian school teacher's despicable treatment of old Mrs. Malby in "Broken Homes." The malcontents use their imaginations as powerful instruments for evil. They are children of Satan; Iago is probably their finest literary template. Their maleficence suggests some malformation of nature. In Trevor's canon, mothers, of course, can be malevolent. "Death in Jerusalem", for instance, dramatizes the fearful possessiveness that can infect a mother's love.

- 6 In other stories, extremes of criminality appear. In the farcically humorous "The Teddy-bears' Picnic" a group of adults preserve, by repeating every so often, their childhood game of having a picnic, each bringing his or her teddy bear. Edwin, Deborah's husband, cannot credit that she and other adults in her circle of friends would indulge in such a thing. By the end of the story Edwin's grown-up persona has ironically reverted to childhood frustration and anger. He has reluctantly gone along to the teddy bears' picnic but gets horribly drunk and, in a moment of viciousness, he murders the harmless old man whose garden is the setting for the picnic. In another piece, "Autumn Sunshine", Trevor shows the cowardice of murderous hatreds working in the person of the rebarbative Harold, Deirdre Moran's friend, who comes to stay with her at her widower father's protestant rectory in Ireland. Harold's name might recall the battle of Hastings for readers attuned to the ironies of fiction; Trevor tells us that "Fascinated by Ireland, Harold hated his own country." (*The Collected Stories*: 843). His leftist ideas and versions of history, however, have not made him more humane than he might otherwise have been. Instead, Trevor portrays a man consumed by bitterness, anger, and malice, probably as a result of a disfiguring birthmark:

Harold would have delighted in the vengeance exacted on an innocent man. Harold wanted to inflict pain, to cause suffering and destruction. The end justified the means for Harold, even if the end was an artificial one, a pettiness grandly dressed up... Harold was the same kind of man as Sergeant James [perpetrator of an atrocity against local Irish villagers in the rising of 1798] had been: it didn't matter that they were on different sides. Sergeant James had maybe borne an affliction also, a humped back or a withered arm. He had ravaged a country that existed then for its spoils, and his most celebrated crime was neatly at hand so that another Englishman could make matters worse by attempting to make amends. (*The Collected Stories*: 848, 849)

- 7 Trevor leaves us to speculate on whether Harold's knowledge as an electrician will be put to sinister uses later. Irish history and the "troubles" that continue into the twenty-first century are dealt with further in other stories: the sufferings of the poor in the nineteenth century potato famine during the "hungry forties" in "The News from Ireland" is one example; another is the terrible awareness of the desensitizing of young people to violence by the news reporting of horror after horror that is the subject of "Attracta", a story whose fearsome brutalities take us down into the depths of human savagery.
- 8 Trevor depicts in many stories the cruelties that accompany and motivate heartless sexuality (see "The Forty-seventh Saturday"). This kind of sex has its counterparts in the denials or the failures of love or just sexual behaviour, as in "The Mark-2 Wife" or "O Fat White Woman", with its sadism, or the school environment evoked again -but to very different effect- in "The Grass Widows". The stories dealing with sexuality are remarkable for the range of their study of behaviour, from the pain and inadequacy of

the situations of "In Isfahan" to the superficialities of fashionable "sophistication" that cause the realities of distress in the wife-swapping of "Angels at the Ritz". If political and sectarian hatreds maintain the chain reaction of violence and malice in Irish political "troubles", religious and rural community *mores*, together with ignorance and male attempts to thwart the rules, may lead to the stifling of mature sexual fulfillment, as in "Teresa's Wedding". The bride, pregnant by a friend of her groom, has to marry someone; it matters little who it may be:

In no way did Teresa love him. She had been aware of that when Father Hogan had arranged the marriage, and even before that, when she'd told her mother that she'd thought she was pregnant and had then mentioned Artie Cornish's name. Artie Cornish was much the same as his friends: you could be walking along a road with Screw Doyle or Artie Cornish and you could hardly tell the difference... She'd said privately to Father Hogan that she didn't love him or feel anything for him one way or the other: Father Hogan had replied that in the circumstances all that line of talk was irrelevant. (*The Collected Stories*: 434, 435)

- 9 Ironically, Trevor also depicts illicit but genuine love between a visiting "summer" priest and a girl, Ellie, in "The Potato Dealer", a story from his collection *After Rain* (1996). Carrying the priest's child, Ellie cannot face having an abortion. She would even rebel against family and walk away from them in search of work in the towns if necessary. "Loving the father, Ellie already loved the child." (*After Rain*: 133). But she wants to avoid penury, because that would damage the child. She weds the potato dealer, Mulreavy, who goes along with this secretly unconsummated marriage in order to gain a stake in the family farm.
- 10 We have noted earlier the origins of adult nastiness in the malicious behaviour of children. Trevor's fiction exploits very popular genres of children's fiction: the school story and adventures at the seaside. In Trevor's novels, such as *The Old Boys* (1964) and *The Children of Dynmouth* (1976), we get the genres presented with biting insights into the malign aspects of child and adult behaviour. William, in Richmal Crompton's *Just William* series, is a boy whose exploits were chronicled for adults but quickly became children's reading. Whereas William brings disaster by the exaggeration of schoolboy mischief and by well-meaning attempts to help others or prevent further disaster, Trevor's children are complex victims and, sometimes, evil doers. William has a vivid fantasy life and imagination. All Trevor's wrong doers also have the ability to imagine detailed scenarios and predict events quite accurately. Yet where William's imagination is confined to more or less innocent games, Trevor's fictional children by contrast have ruthless, selfish, and destructive imaginations which prepare vicious or malicious actions. The mockery practised by Liz Jones in "Nice Day at School" is unrelenting and corrosive. Her remarks are crudely sexual or designed to destroy another girl's self-esteem, as when she approaches Eleanor:
- "You've got a moustache growing on you, ' Liz Jones said, coming up behind her and whispering into her hair." (*The Collected Stories*: 163)
- 11 After her day at the local comprehensive school, persecution by Liz Jones, and the clumsy groping of her person by a butcher's assistant, Denny Price, Eleanor goes home to the contemplation of the trapped and severely limited lives of her parents. The world being a nasty trap full of unpleasant people, her only ambition is escape to the self-sufficiency of a solitary life in a room of her own, as she imagines that Miss Whitehead, the French teacher, has done. This is a far cry from the jolly hockey sticks girls' books.

Beyond the malign aspects of the peer group, there is the pressure from the lower class social milieu in the story.

- 12 In the later work, "Child's Play", Trevor brilliantly shows two children, Gerard and Rebecca, coping with the divorce of their respective parents. After the acrimonious divorces, Gerard's mother marries Rebecca's father, both of them the guilty parties, and it is with them that both children live. At the beginning of the story, Trevor refers to the "Two years of passionate quarrelling, arguing, and agreeing...of final insults and rejection" as "a peepshow" the children viewed. (*After Rain*: 53). The children cope with the situation by playing a rerun of this peepshow, a game they call "marriage and divorce". (*After Rain*: 54). Trevor lightly sketches in a half-page the kind of scene the children witnessed and then shifts the point of view to that of the children themselves, playing their game of –and incidentally learning how to become– quarrelling adults. He comments:

Such scenes, seeming like the end of everything that mattered, were later surveyed from the unemotional safety of the new companionship. Regret was exorcized, sore places healed ; harshness was the saviour. From information supplied by television a world of sin and romance was put together in the empty attic room. 'Think of that child ! ' Rebecca mimicked, and Gerard adopted his father's grimace the time he called his mother a vicious bitch. It was fun because the erring couple were so virtuous now. (*After Rain*: 55)

- 13 Trevor develops a first rate peepshow, his plain, factual commentary being the perfect foil for the scenes the children remember from life and steal from television and old films. The peepshow is a funny, satirical, and lively view of collapsed relationships, incompletely rendered by the children who can only mumble when they deal with things for which they do not know the words. Trevor breaks it up with brief glimpses of the "reality" behind the *guignol*. Rebecca's mother (innocent party) had demanded to know where the sexual encounters had taken place. Rebecca had eavesdropped. Trevor's factual comment, without emotion, but with a telling use of verbs, gives a dimension of great sadness and poignancy, "A hotel was mentioned, and finally a hired room. 'How sordid!' Rebecca's mother cried, then weeping overcame her and Rebecca crept away." (*After Rain*: 57). The story closes with the peepshow coming to an end because Rebecca must return to her mother's care when the erring partners are having another child:

"The easy companionship that had allowed them to sip cocktails and sign the register of the Hotel Grand Splendide had been theirs by chance, a gift thrown out from other people's circumstances. Helplessness was their natural state." (*After Rain*: 65).

- 14 In Trevor's territory, cruelty is also a "natural state". In another story of childhood and broken marriage, "Mrs. Silly", "Michael couldn't remember a time when his father had been there." (*The Collected Stories*: 400). Trevor charts the cruel, devastating shame of an adolescent who knows that his mother appears immensely stupid to his peers at boarding school, and thinks she seems so, too, as far as the staff are concerned. His mother, in the straightened circumstances of being now a single parent is a foil to the man-of-the-world father with his Alfa Romeo car and new, sophisticated wife. Her visit to the school for the confirmation service is the scene of an accident, when she slips on something, falls to the floor and gets soaked with tea. Michael's schoolmates, Tichbourne and Carson, find this excruciatingly funny, later on amusing themselves by imitating the fall. Michael cannot bring himself to admit that his clumsy, poor relative

is his mother. He pretends she is a distant aunt. " 'God it was funny, ' Carson said, and Tichbourne did his imitation, and Michael laughed with his friends." But later, in the dormitory, "In the dark, he whispered to her in his mind. He said he was sorry, he said he loved her better than anyone." (*The Collected Stories*: 418, 419). The potency of childhood experience persisting into adulthood recurs in Trevor's stories. In "The Death of Peggy Meehan" a boy of seven sees a film about a love triangle in which one of the rival women dies in a car accident. When the boy narrator is going on a picnic with two girls he knows, he thinks it would be better if there were just one. Peggy falls to her death when the rear door she is leaning against in her father's car suddenly becomes unlatched. The narrator is convinced his wicked thoughts have sparked the accident. He is haunted by the dead girl. He grows to love her and wishes he could make love to her, even in her ghostly state. As a child he naturally led a double life, ordinary on the outside and full of wicked thoughts inside. As an adult he seems eccentric, the result of his loneliness as the late-arrival only child of parents too old and puritanical to be normal parents. He admits people might attribute to him a morbid imagination. He cannot shake off his love for a ghost and feels that God is punishing him:

"I live for her, live hopelessly, for I know I can never possess her as I wish to. I have a carnal desire for a shadow, which in turn is His mockery of me: His fitting punishment for my wickedest thought of all." (*The Collected Stories*: 399).

- 15 In Trevor's short stories and novels there are hardly any happy endings. People are cruel: they punish themselves, they punish others. Their sins are sexual, sometimes even amounting to murder. Sometimes suffering occurs simply because of fate, unavoidable circumstances. Cruelty is natural, as we have seen. In "The Time of Year", Valerie relives in imagination the death of the young man she loved. One Christmas he went into the sea and was swept away to his pointless death:

"She stood in the icy shallows and when she heard him shouting again she imagined he was still mocking her. She didn't even know he was struggling, she wasn't in the least aware of his death." (*The Collected Stories*: 804).

- 16 Her distress is made more acute by the facts that he died at Christmas and that it had been her idea to go for a dip. She feels separated from her peers by their normality and her own melancholy and bitterness. As the students listen to Tchaikovsky's music, Valerie imagines their futures leading inevitably to decrepitude and death. She finds some comfort in her own imagination and sensitivity:

She was as she wished to be. She paused in faint moonlight, repeating that to herself and then repeating it again. She did not quite add that the tragedy had made her what she was, that without it she would not possess her reflective introspection, or be sensitive to more than just the time of year. But the thought hovered with her as she moved towards the lights of the house, offering what appeared to be a hint of comfort. (*The Collected Stories*: 809)

- 17 The malevolence of fate may hone the imagination. In the last two sentences of the story here quoted the narrative voice goes further than Valerie in accepting that tragic fate can bring some advantage as well as suffering. And a slim hope for the future occurs in the image of the house lights, promise of humanity and life itself. Trevor's narrative voice suggests that the imagination may redeem us as well as being a weapon of the wicked. Here we might recall Alain de Botton's discussion of Marcel Proust's notion that suffering is a more effective teacher than a classroom lecturer:

...it may be enough that he has defined a relation between the degree of pain a person experiences and the profundity of thought they may have as a result... Only when plunged into grief do we have the Proustian incentive to confront difficult

truths, as we wail under the bedclothes, like branches in the autumn wind. (*How Proust Can Change Your Life*, 74-75)

- 18 The malignity and the strangeness of Trevor's situations are markers of his own imagination, the writer's imagination that cannot escape the obligation to make excursions into the imagined world in order to increase our awareness of the nature of reality itself. "In at the Birth" is an early story in which the Dutts, a childless couple, look after an old man on his death bed, employing a baby sitter when they go out for an evening, but cautioning her not to enter the child's room at the top of the house and never revealing to her the real nature of her charge. The story ends with the babysitter, Miss Efoss, an old maiden lady, replacing the old man as the new "child". The moment of shock, when the reader finds that the child does not exist, is balanced by the effort to understand the need to have children. But human behaviour and its motivation cannot always be explained. Miss Efoss remarks, "The older I become, Mr. Dutt, the more I realize that one understands very little. I believe one is not meant to understand. The best things are complex and mysterious. And must remain so." (*The Collected Stories*: 111).
- 19 That persons who inflict injury on others were often themselves victims of some distress or evil in the past, usually in childhood, is now a truism of sociological studies. Trevor's writing career has spanned decades of successive generations of youth gangs. His malefactors, though, tend to be "loners" of all ages and classes. Their pathology, their motives, their inner lives accord sometimes with the case studies of malicious youths to be found in T. R. Fyvel (1961) *Insecure Offenders*. Trevor reports clearly and with characteristically sharp, brief detail, the milieu and class of his malign characters. But he finds a crooked, quirky path for behaviour, sometimes leading back to childhood, to instinct, or even to God. In "Matilda's England", a wonderful trilogy of stories, the Reverend Throataway throws out to the uncomprehending children the idea that God is in everything, even repulsive insects and even in "...the worst things we did as well as our virtues" (*The Collected Stories*: 554). This links with and perhaps follows from, or perhaps explains, the notion that ends the first of the three stories in the trilogy, that cruelty is "natural".
- 20 Trevor's art, though, depends on the story teller's imagination that goes beyond the rational and the explanatory. Another popular genre he exploits is the ghost story. In "Mrs. Acland's Ghosts" the ghosts haunt Mrs. Acland, an only child, whose imagination creates a brother and sister who have died. This imagination, with its compensation mechanisms bringing a measure of relief or escape to the one who suffers, is also the writer's imagination. Trevor's particular fictional world, however malign, is a product of his own imagination. It encompasses the horrors of life and the malignity of human nature. When the psychiatrist explains Mrs. Acland's case, the power of her imagination and the children she created seem still extraordinarily real to Mr. Mockler:
 "...he felt it in his bones and it felt like the truth." (*The Collected Stories*: 512).
- 21 Trevor's story has made it real to us as well. Again, in "The Raising of Elvira Tremlett", Trevor celebrates the imagination and makes his readers recognize its power. A lonely child in Ireland imagines a woman whose name is on a tombstone until he conjures her into a compelling reality:
 "I began to imagine her, Elvira Tremlett of Tremlett Hall in the county of Dorset, England. I gave her her long hair and her smile and her elaborate earrings, and I felt I was giving her gifts. I gave her her clothes, wondering if I had got them right."
 " (*The Collected Stories*: 652).

- 22 Such is also the writer's preoccupation. Creating an imagined companion is something lonely children often do. The child imagination develops its defences. But Elvira haunts the child, becoming a ghostly beloved. The process Trevor's child narrator describes in its details are the processes too of the writer's imagination working to create characters elaborated from fragments of reality.
- 23 The readability of Trevor's fiction, despite its determination to rip away the comfort of illusion and confront us with the malign face of humanity, largely rests in the ingenuities of his malign action, the unobtrusive style, and the sharp bursts of humour. The characters are so clearly *there*, from the farm labourers to the lower middle-class porter drinkers, the tradesmen, and the middle-class professional types. The dialogue is always sensitive to the cadences of Irish English and the accents of England itself. The settings and characters are so deftly, vividly, and economically evoked, that the horrors lying in wait for us are at once convincing and obscurely pleasing. The danger with such an imaginative world is that it will merely depress the reader. Trevor's work in *After Rain* and *Death in Summer* suggests that he is finding a measure of hope. It is a mistake to think that his fiction is nihilistic. The malign prey on innocents and the benign. These good people cannot be explained away either. They are solidly *there* in the benign imagination of Trevor's people and their worlds. As in life, evil may be done by just one or a few people but it affects the lives of more. The innocent are not totally unblemished, but luckily for human beings, the majority of us do little harm. It is the minority who do the major damage. In some of his work, Trevor allows his victims a measure of peace, though not necessarily happiness, after a catastrophe. In *After Rain*, "Marrying Damian" introduces a country doctor (the first person narrator), his wife Claire, and their daughter, Joanna, a social worker concerned with helping prisoners. The family thus plays a caring role, their work being to help other people in the community. Joanna, small, pretty, in her late twenties, has had relationships but remains unmarried, for as her father puts it:
- "Recidivists, penitents, old lags, one-time defaulters, drug pushers, muggers, burglars, rapists: these were her lovers. She found the good in them, and yet, when telling us about them, did not demand that we did too... often people are surprised at the intensity of her involvement, at the steel beneath so soft a surface. Neither Claire nor I ever say so, but there is something in our daughter that is remarkable."
(*After Rain* : 208).
- 24 When the narrator's childhood friend, Damian, returns to the neighbourhood after a life of wandering, scrounging and being a hippyish poet, the family accept him with good-natured tolerance. But the doctor and his wife watch with alarm Damian's charming of Joanna. At the beginning of the story, the five-year-old Joanna announces she is going to marry Damian. A few pages later, the adult Joanna repeats the announcement. The effect on her parents is then elaborated in a few terse pages:
- "In the night, believing me to be asleep, Claire wept." (*After Rain*: 210)
- 25 And then:
- " 'Are we being punished?' Claire asked, and I didn't know if we were or not, or why we should be punished, or what our sin was." (*After Rain*: 211).
- 26 They know that they will say nothing to dissuade Joanna from marrying someone who would be eighty-one when Joanna reached forty-seven. At the end of the story they do not reproach Damian for his lack of decency towards his women in the past, or for what

distress he now causes the narrator and his wife, and might cause their daughter in the future:

“Instead we conversed inconsequentially.” (*After Rain*: 213).

27 The doctor and his wife will worry but they have learned to accommodate life. The story is a simple one but it compels and convinces. We share the parents' fears for Joanna. Yet the little bit of steeliness in Joanna offers some hope as well. Another story might show the way Joanna would be quite capable of looking after herself. Damian might in fact get his comeuppance. After all, the history of comedy is strewn with the methods by which old men are ruled and punished by very young wives.

28 If this final story of the collection offers a kind of balanced suspension of judgment, the title story, “After Rain”, offers extremely beautiful moments as well as the melancholy story of loss. Harriet, deceived cruelly by her lover, has cancelled their planned holiday on the island of Skyros and instead gone to the Italian *pensione*, known to her for years, because of family holidays spent there with her parents, before their marriage broke down. Harriet, dipping into Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864), reads an ironic sentence about a bleak Valentine's Day and cannot get involved with this bit of the novel (*After Rain*: 90). She is fascinated, though, by the anonymous Annunciation in the church of Santa Fabiola. As she leaves the church insights come to her “mysteriously” and “from nowhere” (*After Rain*: 92). She recognizes the truth of the revelations that have come to her: love affairs do not restore one's faith in love; she has cheated in her own love affairs. She relishes the freshness of the air after rain and realizes that in the annunciation the angel, too, had come after rain. What Harriet gains is insight into her condition and acceptance of it, giving her the strength to leave and begin her life again:

“She has been the victim of herself: with vivid clarity she knows that now and wonders why she does and why she didn't before.” (*After Rain*: 95).

29 Mysteriously, we are sometimes our own worst enemies. Mysteriously, suffering can lead to revelation, insight, and a new resolve. In this story, as elsewhere in his works, Trevor's economical prose at key moments attains the tension and the rhythm of poetry:

She hears the swish of the cleaner's mop in the church of Santa Fabiola, she hears the tourists' whisper. The fingers of the praying woman flutter on her beads, the candles flare. The story of Santa Fabiola is lost in the shadows that were once the people of her life, the family tomb reeks odourlessly of death. Rain has sweetened the breathless air, the angel comes mysteriously also. (*After Rain*: 96. My arrangement of the prose into linear verse.)

30 Although *Death in Summer* suggests by its title the malignity of Trevor's fictional world, the novel offers not just acceptance, insight, balance, but the hope that comes from the mystery of goodness. Albert, Pettie and Bev are orphans. Whereas Bev joins the wrong crowd and “goes astray”, Albert has a way of helping people. He gets a lowly job on the underground erasing the graffiti of London's vandals and hooligans. He helps people to cope with old age, illness, distress. Pettie is “a tearaway” but under Albert's influence she tries to keep her jobs as babysitter or helping in the house. When she fails to get the job of nurse to a baby in the large house of a recently bereaved widower, Pettie is convinced of two things: first, the dead wife's mother wants to look after the baby and thus was responsible for not hiring anyone; second, Pettie is in love with the bereaved husband and believes –wrongly– he has felt something for her. She thinks of a way to get back to the house, pretending to have lost a ring when she attended the interview.

She also watches the mother-in-law's movements. When the old woman sleeps in the garden near the baby, Pettie quietly steals it away, hiding it in the now derelict orphanage, where she once lived with Bev and Albert. By these means she hopes to show the incompetence of the grandmother and get hired by "rescuing" the baby. She sees herself as then being able to marry the father and look after the child. But things go wrong. She is seen carrying the baby by some boys. She realizes she cannot now appear as a saviour. In fact, true to his nature, Albert, when she confides in him, helps to restore the baby to the parent. Pettie, however, dies in the demolished orphanage, like a piece of debris. Albert sums her up, like an epitaph, as her own worst enemy. Bev gives up the people she has been with and returns to find Albert, who helps her. The baby and the future have been saved. In an earlier phase of Trevor's fiction, Pettie might have created havoc; the baby might have died. Has Trevor's vision gone soft in his old age? I do not believe so. He has lost none of his sharpness about people, none of his ear for the nuances of different speech registers, educated and uneducated. He has remembered, though, that one of the thieves was saved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonaccorso, Richard. "Not Noticing History: Two Tales by William Trevor" in *Connecticut Review*, 18: 1 (Spring 1996): 21-27.
- . "William Trevor's Martyrs for Truth" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, 34: 1 (Winter 1997): 113-118.
- Crompton, Richmal. *Just William*. London: Newnes, 1922.
- De Botton, Alain. *How Proust Can Change Your Life*. London: Picador, 1998; (1st. ed. 1997).
- Dickens, Charles. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Fyvel, T. R. *Insecure Offenders*. London: Penguin, 1969.
- Gitzen, Julian. "The Truth-tellers of William Trevor" in *Critique*, 21: 1 (1979): 59-72.
- MacKenna, D. *William Trevor: the Writer and his Work*. Dublin: New Island Books, 1999.
- Mellors, John. "Secret Lives" in *London Magazine*, 31 (June/July 1991): 93-98.
- Morrison, Kristin. *William Trevor*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Parkin, Andrew. "Reading Trevor Reading Turgenev" in *The CUHK Journal of the Humanities* Vol. 1 (1997): 175-196.
- . "The Outsider in the Novels of William Trevor" in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 21: 2 (December, 1995): 1-18.
- Paulson, Suzanne M. *William Trevor: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Sansom, Ian. "New Fiction: Reading Trevor" in *Salmagundi*, 123: 32-40.
- Thomas, M. W. "Worlds of Their Own: A Host of Trevor's Obsessives" in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 25: 1 and 2 (July/December, 1999): 441-482.

Trevor, William. *After Rain*. London: Penguin, 1997.

—. *Death in Summer*. London: Penguin, 1999.

—. "Joy comes for the morning and stays for a generation" [review of P. G. Wodehouse and C. H. Bovill, *A Man of Means*] in *The Spectator* (Vol. 271, No. 8628 ; 20 November, 1993): 50-51.

—. *The Children of Dynmouth*. London: Penguin, 1984.

—. *The Collected Stories*. London: Penguin, 1993.

—. *The Old Boys*. London: Penguin, 1965.

Trollope, Anthony. *The Small House at Allington*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991

AUTHORS

ANDREW PARKIN

Andrew Parkin was educated at Cambridge and Bristol. He has taught at the University of British Columbia and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, of which he is Professor Emeritus and an Honorary Senior Tutor of Shaw College. Currently living in Paris, he continues to publish academic works on Irish drama and literature. As a poet he has given readings in many countries in Europe, Asia, and North America. His latest book, in collaboration with Laurence Wong, is *Hong Kong Poems* (1997 ; rpt. 1999). He is now preparing his fourth book of poetry.