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MANCHESTER AND ITS MEANINGS: TOWARDS A CULTURAL POLITICS OF DEVOLUTION

In *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (Gare 1995), the cultural philosopher Arran Gare provides the outline of a post-Vicovian metaphysics, based primarily on the work of Henri Bergson, A. N. Whitehead and subsequent developments in the philosophy of process. Gare's aim is to provide the foundations for an alternative to what he views as the rampant nihilism presented by the dominant cultures of global capital in the late twentieth century. His programme for the future includes a briefly sketched political dimension which lays particular emphasis on the significance of both inter-regional relationships, at the sub- and supra-national levels, and on the significance of narratives in the maintenance and development of coherent, productive cultures.

A question for the student of literature and related aspects of cultural production, in the context of such a project, is what role might be played by poetry, the novel and other artistic forms in the development of a more ecologically sensitive, place-sensitive world. This has been an issue in the British context for a long time, but the recognition by recent Labour administrations of regional-national aspirations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in the form of referenda and the subsequent creation of representative bodies, as well as the development of Regional Development Agencies in the English context, has provided the possibility of a new boost to progress in this area.

The development of those philosophies which Gare sees as having particular relevance to the current situation, that is to say those developed by Bergson, Whitehead and Heidegger, to name the three most prominently featuring in his argument, was paralleled by developments in literature and the other arts. If one considers British and American writing in English, the poetry of Pound, Eliot, Williams, Yeats, McDiarmid, Jones or Bunting might first come to mind, as well as that of a slightly later generation, including Charles Olson, J. H. Prynne, Alan Fisher. All of these poets present a philosophically informed poetic project which tackles questions relating to place and capital. The problem with virtually all of them, apart from some disturbingly direct entanglements with fascism in some cases, is that of a tendency to produce a difficult, potentially elitist form of discourse which runs the risk of neglecting the advantages which have accrued in the development of modern, liberal, democratic cultures. A similar relation,

and similar problems, might be traced in some aspects of the twentieth century novel, though perhaps because the historical development of the novel is more immediately intertwined with that of modernity, such problems are less pronounced. If one takes the example of twentieth century Anglo-Welsh novels, the epic series produced by writers such as John Cowper Powys, Raymond Williams and Emyr Humphreys, all have a strong bardic element to them, but one which rarely becomes excessively obscure.

In England, one might draw a parallel with novels written directly about London. Here the primary innovative figure has been Iain Sinclair, Scottish by name, educated in Ireland, heavily influenced by American film and literature, but Welsh by birth and upbringing. The baroque intensity of Sinclair's prose (again not without a disturbing nod or two in the direction of Poundian arrogance) is somewhat modified by related writers with comparably ambitious projects such as Peter Ackroyd and Michael Moorcock. When one moves beyond the capital, however, philosophically ambitious fictions with a strong sense of place, would seem to be relatively thin on the ground. Before addressing this problem further, however, I want to return to questions of political as well as cultural devolution and ways in which they have been considered in aspects of British cultural studies and cultural geography.

Kevin Robins "Endnote" essay in the Routledge *British Cultural Studies* volume (Morley & Robins 2001), "To London, The City Beyond the Nation", makes a number of interesting points about the problematic nature of ethnic-cultural based national identity and focuses on the more productive potential of the city as a 'cognitive model' for more open and differential forms of collective cultural identity. His own preferred cognitive model in relation to the British experience is, as his title indicates, London. He observes that:

London provides a vast space – bigger in some senses than the nation – in which cultures can be differently imagined and conceived – and differently imagined and conceived by all who are engaged with its reality. And it is a space, consequently, in which the relation between the diversity of cultures might be reimagined and re-conceived on a more complex basis. (Robbins 2001: 491)

This might be seen as a variation on the theme of Keith Hoggart's claim, also justifying the study of London rather than another place in Britain, that "What happens in London does not have to end up happening in Hartlepool, but what starts in Hartlepool has only a slight chance of becoming fashionable in the capital" (Hoggart and Green 1991: 6). While there may be a good deal of truth in both of these claims and my intention here is not to find fault with Robins's preference for a national politics based on the city, there is perhaps a case for some caution in presuming that this should take the form of the metropolis, or indeed any one, or any one kind of, city or area.

This perspective is partly supported by an earlier article in the collection to which Robins's functions as epilogue. Peter J. Taylor's essay, "Which Britain?"

Which England? Which North?" (Taylor 2001) begins by summarising the problematic nature of both Britain and England as homogeneous entities then moves on to a more detailed consideration of the problem of northern England. Like Robbins he sees advantages in framing identity in terms of post-imperial, city-based, heterogeneous, cosmopolitan citizenship rather than nostalgic, homogeneous, socially repressive, nation-based subjection. He sees the development of a place-sensitive global consumer economy, notably characterised by writers like Manuel Castells, as providing an opportunity for escape from the stereotypical notion of 'the north' as an amorphous urban-industrial, socio-economic dustbin. At the same time, Taylor observes that problems remain in terms of choices between the new kinds of space available for development:

In Britain, this choice of spaces is epitomized by two campaigns for constitutional change: the *City Region Campaign* and the *Campaign for a Northern Assembly*. The former campaigns for a middle-layer of government which is city-centred, the latter for an assembly for the official Northern Region. This is a territory defined by central government consisting of the five most northern counties of England. It is not at all clear how any new sense of identity can be developed in an area whose main sense of communality seems to be remoteness from the state officials who defined it... (Taylor 2001: 141)

As his comments indicate, Taylor favours the first approach to further political and economic devolution, looking to alliances between networks of less privileged city-regions operating, in a Castellsian 'space of flows', both in the immediate, British and broader, European contexts, to offset the over-dominance of the regional economy by premier league cities like London, Paris or Frankfurt. In a comparable vein to Robbins, he concludes by observing that "A multicultural Britain needs to identify with its cities" (Taylor 2001: 142).

One city of this kind, first division, perhaps rather than premier league, is my own home town, Manchester. Manchester's attempted transformation from post-industrial disaster area to venture capital playground has been documented in various fashions by a number of different writers, many of whom have considerable reservations about the degree of success achieved by the city's miracle managers (see Peck et al. 2000). The changes which took place during Graham Stringer's reign as head of the Labour dominated city council are seen as anticipating in many ways the kind of transformation later undergone by the Labour party as a whole. Manchester has become a byword for aggressive self-promotion but also something of an exhibition centre for architectural enterprise, a leading sporting and pop music city, and home to a world-famous gay village. But in addition to Madchester, Funchester, and Gaychester one also needs to acknowledge the equally evident existence of Gunchester, Badchester and Sadchester. Manchester has a history of enterprising innovation in various fields but always inextricably twinned with one of exploitation, violence and radical social inequality. John Parkinson-Bailey's architectural history of Manchester (see Parkinson-Bailey

2000), while drawing attention to recent, encouraging innovations, emphasises the centrality of ruthless nineteenth century business enterprise in the development of the city's architectural landscape. Dave Haslam, former disc jockey at the Hacienda, also notes the primary significance of deprivation and hardship as contributory factors to the creative escapism involved in Manchester's pop scene and other, related forms of popular culture (see Haslam 1999).

Publications such as those by Haslam, Parkinson-Bailey, or Peck and Ward might themselves be seen as part of a developing tendency to celebrate and promote the city-region but also to critically explore its past, present and possible futures. This applies not only to historical and sociological analyses but also to fictional dramatisations, whether in the form of serious or popular novels or film and television drama, or pop lyrics. The most obvious area of development in this respect, apart from the song lyrics of Morrissey and others, has been that of the detective novel or television series. The most famous example in this respect has probably been *Cracker*, scripted by Jimmy McGovern, though one might also mention the more recent examples of *Cold Feet*, or *Clocking On*.

If we move to the case of written fiction in book form, whether popular detective novels or more complex forms, then it would seem to be clear that an increasing number of writers are focusing on Manchester, or Greater Manchester, as something more than a topical backdrop. Though how much more might still remain a moot question. Among the fictions one would want to include Mike Hamer's Manchester Murder Mysteries, Frank Lean's Dave Cunane novels, Cath Staincliffe's Sal Kilkenny novels, Karline Smith's *Moss Side Massive* (1995), Nicholas Blincoe's *Manchester Slingback* (1998), and Val McDermid's Kate Brannigan series, as well as others of her novels. All of these writers, in one way or another, seek to name, comment on, and sometimes analyse in greater detail the actual areas or even individual streets and buildings that make up Greater Manchester and its surrounding region. *Moss Side Massive*, a Manchester variation on the London 'guns-and-ganja' detective novel, is, in particular, more than a relatively routine representative of its genre, but all of these novels, especially those of Lean, attempt a considerable degree of active mapping of specific areas of the city-region, so that readers familiar with the areas in question can directly identify them and see them as part of a developing history and geography which has been provided with at least some form of public acknowledgement. This is where the local novelist-historian can, and does, play an active role as cultural confidence-raiser.

For more searching and ambitious cultural analysis one might turn to the writing of Glyn Hughes, a novelist with a much broader historical and geographical (as well as social and poetical) range, whose name suggests Welsh connections. Hughes is well-known as the author of the Pennines trilogy of historical novels, *The Hawthorn Goddess* (1984), *The Rape of the Rose* (1987) and *The Antiques Collector* (1990). He is not a writer whose work is focused primarily on Manchester but on the region of which it forms a part, as the main commercial centre of a multiplicity of smaller centres. The focus of these novels is the culture and geography of the cotton and woollen industries that were the foundation of the

modern industrial and cultural life of the area, also profoundly analysed, recorded and represented by E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Hughes shares with Thompson a profound, intelligent attention to both the radical political potential and repressive social and sexual elements contained within the multiplicitous varieties of Protestant nonconformism in the area. He also, though, makes connections to older forms of belief than Christianity and the role they might play in challenging forms of sexual, social and political repression and in providing elements of alternative, preferable forms of existence. In this respect, connections might be made to the kind of approach adopted in a novel set south-west of the western Pennine region, in North Wales, namely John Cowper Powys's Brythonic-Pelagian romance, *Porius* (1951), whose concerns find echoes in another writer of the north-west, Melvyn Bragg and his 'dark ages' religious romance, *Credo* (1996). Hughes, though, shares with the detective novelists a tendency to name particular places, a tendency which can of course be found in earlier Manchester fiction, going back at least to Mrs Linnaeus Banks's *The Manchester Man* (1876).

There is not room here to explore such connections in greater detail. My basic aim here is to suggest that city-regions like Manchester and the north-west need to have their forms of cultural production, literary or otherwise, analysed and extended to a greater extent than at present, with the emphasis on city as much as country in both senses, if Manchester and towns and regions like it, are not to be given what Christopher Harvie termed 'the Lake District treatment' (Harvey 1991: 110) in his critique of the limitations of English regionalism in the 1980s. Indeed the proximity of Manchester to the Lake District suggests the pivotal contribution the right kinds of cultural production and analysis might make to a more serious attempt at cultural, social and political devolution, an area in which writers like Jimmy McGovern, Frank Lean and others have offered at least the outline of a precedent. The urban multiplicities of Manchester and cities like it offer a range of meanings more complex, democratic and challenging than can simply be provided by the valuable but relatively rarefied regional pastorals of most modernist and neo-modernist poetry and, in many cases, fiction. One of the first lessons that might be learned from studying 'the city beyond the nation' is, yet again, the need to pluralise, to look not just at *the* city but at cities, regions, and cultures and their inter-relations, stretching partly beyond and complexly embedded within the national.

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