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THE SUBTLE ART OF JANE GARDAM

Despite the numerous awards for her fiction, Jane Gardam's name does not always make it onto lists of the illustrious literary figures of our time. In A.N. Wilson's opinion, this may be due to what he appreciatively calls Gardam's quiet voice.¹ Whether it speaks to the reader through short stories or novels, it carries a special, gentle Gardamish quality notwithstanding the various fashionable postmodern elements which constitute the author's will to experiment. Gardam weaves her experimental line through characterisation, her quaint characters' and narrators' (often rolled into one) perceptions and through the shifting focus of perception aided by literary allusions. Her far from traditional plots are packed with action, but also with social issues and echoes of the contemporary women's discourse.

Not surprisingly mostly female, Gardam's protagonists tend to be solitary creatures, both by circumstances and disposition, and therefore uncommunicative but thoughtful and intense. Whereas there is more variety to the pattern of characterisation in Gardam's short stories, the above paradigm fits all of her novels. What is more, the age of the heroines of the first three of them places them in the category of the ever popular "growing up" novel, of late exemplified by Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) or, more recently, Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996). Gardam's Marigold or "Bilgewater" of her first novel of the same name (*Bilgewater*, 1976) tells her story of growing up motherless in a boys' boarding school. In *God on the Rocks* (1978) the narrator's omniscient powers seem to work most effectively through the mind of the eight-year-old girl Margaret, whose curiosity about the world and its ways is both fired and justified by her stifling family background. *Crusoe's Daughter* (1985) turns out to be a memoir written by an octogenarian with surprisingly fresh memories of her childhood and youth lived, like the rest of her life, in an old yellow house, marooned on the marsh. Although Gardam's two 1990s novels abandoned the

¹ "Small voice, huge talent", *The Spectator*, 19 June 1999, 46-7.

childhood and adolescence scene altogether, the sense of isolation, loneliness and aloneness pervades them both despite their being rather different pieces in all other respects. *The Queen of the Tambourine* (1991) on the whole adheres to Gardam's well-tryed paradigm: the idiosyncratic heroine trying to make sense of her life amidst her not quite commonplace middle-class surroundings. Only this time there is somehow more of everything: Eliza Peabody is middle-aged, without a family or close friends, gradually succumbing to manic depression. Not only is there more drama and more poignancy, even Gardam's humour, which is not missing, feels darker. *Faith Fox* (1996) differs from all the previous novels by being much more populous and not having one main heroine. The eponymous Faith Fox hardly plays a role other than that of a significant prop in a generally familiar middle-class setting alternating with the defamiliarised scene of a religious retreat in a derelict Yorkshire monastery. The protagonists include several elderly women figures, reassuringly Gardamish, a youngish, arty odd-one-out who seems to be a threat to everybody concerned, and a sweetly charismatic priest cum retreat leader, sympathetically portrayed as is the case with most of Gardam's male figures.

While the psychology of Gardam's characters is no doubt intriguing, the literary aspects of their psychology are no less so. It is not the self but the perception of the self that Gardam's heroines have to negotiate, whether in a first-person narrative or by means of a third-person narrator. "I am Bilgewater the Hideous, quaint and barmy"², is how the seventeen-year-old Marigold Green sees herself, still very much as the bespectacled little girl with a reading problem that she was, rather than the not so hideous sixth former with top A-levels and a good prospect of going to Cambridge that she is now. Throughout the novel, Marigold/Bilgewater battles with this ingrained image of herself, which she also believes to be confirmed by the others.

In *The God on the Rocks* the perception of the self is complicated by the shifting focus of the narrative voice. Although there is no "I" voice, the narrative for the most part adopts the tone of an eight-year-old. The portrayal of Margaret Marsh's child mind, its exploration and discovery, convinces, just as her freedom-loving opposition, rebellious spirit and the naughty glossary of her inner monologue amuse. The shift in the narrative perspective becomes more palpable in the case of the dying Mrs. Frayling, who we encounter first through Margaret's eyes and later in the very intense scene of her death, where we are afforded access into her ailing mind and, in turn, her mistaken perception of Margaret as "Ellie—the child who visits the garden".³ The time gap at the end of the novel—the people and places revisited some ten years later—with the aid of typical Gardamish revelations, results in a final shift of perspective and exposes the uncertain nature of perception. The "Epilogue" to *Bilgewater*, when twenty years on Marigold interviews Terrapin's daughter for Cambridge, has the same effect.

² *Bilgewater*. London: Hamish Hamilton 1976; London: Abacus 1985, 12.

³ *God on the Rock*. London: Hamish Hamilton 1978; London: Abacus 1981, 198.

In this context, Polly Flint's (*Crusoe's Daughter*) rather commonplace sigh of resignation—"so much never to be known"⁴—takes on a special significance when placed in the gap between what is said/written and what is meant. And yet with the very few people around her, Polly might seem to find herself in a less problematic position than most. But Polly Flint is not a person of many words, however her memoir may contradict it. The essence of her life is silence filled with (self)reflexive perception against the backdrop of the yellow house on the marsh imagined to be like Crusoe's desert island in the sea. Knowledge about life, first about her own body and then about her family history, comes to her coded and jumbled and has to be painstakingly pieced together.

With *The Queen of the Tambourine* it is mainly the reader's perception that Gardam puts to the test. All along there are no clues for the reader to suspect that Eliza Peabody's letters to Joan, of which most of the novel is composed, are not genuine, or rather that they have actually mostly been written, but to a phantom Joan who never existed. The reader has no reason to imagine that the overenthusiastic, overenergetic Eliza is in one respect not just an ordinary, intrusive busybody and that her letters, sane and matter-of-fact as they sound, are in fact an acute call for help. It is not until the ghostly scene on the lake when Eliza almost drowns a baby that the reader begins to wonder whether she may be teetering on the brink of sanity. The layers of perception in terms of reality and fantasy to be negotiated between Eliza and the other characters and Eliza and the reader only acquire distinct contours towards the end of the novel. However, the revelation about her manic depression and its shocking cause in turn play havoc with the reader's previous perception of the comic aspects of Eliza's behaviour. Fortunately, and as usual with Gardam, the reader's misgivings are allayed by the reassuringly positive ending. What is more, this seems to be the way Gardam intends her characters to be perceived—"with their ridiculousness as well as their pathos".⁵

As *Faith Fox* does not have a central character comparable to the aforementioned heroines, it may seem less ambitious with regard to the depth of insights into the perceptual processes of the individual protagonists. The balance is redressed by a larger canvass of characters and the wider social and geographical scope of the novel and therefore, inevitably, by perceptions of class and regional identity. The elderly Pammie Jefford and Faith Fox's reluctant grandmother Thomasina, both upper-middle-class and South, could be sane(r) versions of Eliza Peabody from *The Queen of the Tambourine*. They also bear resemblance to Binkie Frayling from *God on the Rocks* and other minor female figures of the same type: class conscious, with busy social and parish lives, slightly comical in Gardam's generously humorous way, "[s]omeone who *consciously, fiercely* strives after sanity, after an image of sanity—a person with perhaps not enough

4 *Crusoe's Daughter*. London: Hamish Hamilton 1985; London: Abacus 1986, 212.

5 These are Gardam's words in appreciation of Penelope Fitzgerald's biographical novel *The Blue Flower* in her review "The professor and the flower", *The Spectator*, 23 September 1995, 38.

to do, someone with a real sense of being an example to the rest of us—such a person is at terrible risk” (*God on the Rocks*, 150). Britain’s North-South divide also figures here as a matter of class and geography, something deeply imbedded in the mind: “the two main tribes ... above and below the line from the Wash to the Severn, the language-line that is still not quite broken to this day”.⁶ The perceptions of regional tribalism deal in stereotypes that are none too friendly. “Up North” and “Talking North” (40) are strongly disparaging descriptions. Conversely, to be “South, posh and daft” (398) is probably the ultimate expression of contempt on the part of a Northerner. Nevertheless, Gardam’s comic vein, running throughout the novel and sometimes verging on the farcical, subverts the hostile edge of such perceptions.

As has been pointed out by Kathleen Wheeler, Gardam’s prose “focuses the reader’s attention on the very processes of perception”.⁷ Among the different tools she employs to capture the shifting and sliding nature of perception, literary allusion plays a prominent role. Used in a variety of manners, involving various writers’ works and views, this is how (literary) perception is debated, tested or contested.

Bilgewater enthusiastically ponders Thomas Hardy’s view that “a novel should say what everybody is thinking but nobody is saying” (*Bilgewater*, 40) and perceptions of what is true in the novel (“True like a theorem”, 40), which she then links to her admiration for Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Gardam herself seems to heed Hardy’s maxim by giving her characters a great deal of freedom of expression and thought throughout her prose in a plethora of naughty or subversive repartees and unspoken remarks. In *God on the Rocks* the intertextual allusions are to the Bible, with a playful rather than serious impact. Similarly to Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges*, the child heroine Margaret grows up in a family of religious fanatics, a sect called Primal Saints, where the Scripture is quoted in a constant flow of parables and admonitions as part of the everyday:

The Saints were not even allowed a wireless set. Spectacles of all kinds were suspect, even God’s own. Mind the Book and not the sunset.

“It is the noise of them that sing do I hear,” said Moses, “he saw the calf and the dancing and Moses’ anger waxed hot.” Where?

‘Exodus,’ said Margaret.

...

‘Exodus where?’ (39)

The father’s excess of religious fervour and the constant drill causes the biblical text to become interwoven in Margaret’s innermost thinking: “Her feet were on the earth and her life yielding fruit Genesis one eleven” (72). “She knew that the drinking fountain was disgusting, germ-laden, corrupt, Leviticus five three—if

⁶ Faith Fox. London: Sinclair Stevenson 1996, 49-50.

⁷ Kathleen Wheeler, *A Critical Guide to Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*. Oxford: Blackwell 1997, 238.

he touch the uncleanness of man whatever uncleanness it be..." (83). Here, even less than in the following *Crusoe's Daughter*, Gardam is not really concerned with matters of faith but explores the intertextuality of perception.

In terms of playfulness with literary allusion *Crusoe's Daughter* remains the most ambitious of Gardam's novels and the one that has gone the farthest along the road of postmodernity. Underlying the whole novel is *Robinson Crusoe*, a book cherished by Polly, the heroine and narrator. She believes that her lonely existence in the yellow house resonates with Robinson's, who plays for her the parts of a hero and a model. Eventually, Polly teaches the novel to school children, translates it into German and, in the hour of her death, appears with Robinson in a dramatic dialogue about writing. In this way, *Robinson Crusoe* is employed as a major tool of self-reflexive comment upon the creative process. Besides, Gardam's experiment with its dash of the fantastic is accompanied by numerous other references to canonical texts in a more traditional vein. Polly learns most of the facts of life from novels, whose characters and situations she compares to real people and events. Conversely, she is astonished at the realisation that literature is a two-way process, that people and places from the real world may get into fiction.

In both *The Queen of the Tambourine* and *Faith Fox* Gardam seems to have abandoned the more visible interaction with the classics of English literature and their novels, but retains the self-reflexive, metafictional element. With the partly epistolary form of *The Queen of the Tambourine*, she tries a novel way of using this traditional frame. By disclosing the fictionality of Eliza's letters to Joan in the end, she turns their author Eliza into a writer of fiction who then comments on her own creative process. The same, more or less, albeit in the mind only and not even planned for the page, is done by Pammie in *Faith Fox*, when she is "editing" for her friends in the South the description of her memorable journey with Baby Faith to the North:

[H]er mind was executing something like a triple fugue. There was first the theme of the north, the foreign country and culture into which the little scrap was to be translated. 'The North' as Pammie imagined it. Then there was the factual 'north' as it was unfolded to her between London and their destination. Then there was the account of both norths that Pammie's mind was automatically preparing to take back to Surrey again. (51)

Pammie is aware of translating her experience into words, "wondering like a novelist whether to substitute 'civilised' or even 'marvellous' for 'decent'" (52).

Gardam's acknowledgement of the endless intricacy of perception is also anchored in the plots of both her novels and short stories. To quote Anita Brookner, her "no-nonsense approach [...] is a convenient cover for so many untoward happenings"⁸, which perhaps implies that the approach is not quite so inno-

8 "Appearances to the contrary", *The Spectator*, 3 September 1994, 36.

cently no-nonsense after all. Written in the second half of the seventies, *Bilgewater* and *God on the Rocks* can well show some influence of the then fashionable revival of the Gothic novel. Bilgewater's late-night, chance visit in the tower of Terrapin's crumbling Hall has all the attributes, including the tenor, of romance. The ghostly atmosphere of the storm passages in *God on the Rocks* recalls Muriel Spark's 1970s experiments beyond reality and perhaps even Angela Carter's incipient magic realism in her early novels. Gardam, like Spark,⁹ seems to be attracted by the idea of fluid transition between life and death and returns to this image again in *The Queen of the Tambourine* and in the collection of short stories *Going to the Dark House* (1994), where dead people go on living, as it were, at least for a short time after their death. Elsewhere in Gardam, however, such experiences have religious overtones.

As we have seen, religion does have a substantial presence in Gardam's writing although in her essay "Angels and daemons—the anatomy of a novel" (1993)¹⁰ she says: "My hitherto mostly dependable Catholic faith went suddenly numb." She refers to a period of time in her life just prior to starting on *The Queen of the Tambourine*, though without enlarging on the subject. This confession may explain why, in comparison with both previous and following works, religion appears to be overshadowed in this novel by Eliza's deteriorating mental health. The fact that Eliza is a church-goer and voluntary worker in a convent hospice seems to be of little consequence for her condition. The one dramatic scene in the local church is a nightmarish rather than a religious experience. And yet in her other fictions it is religious experience and everyday religious ritual and practice that Gardam incorporates in her story telling. What she does not do (unlike Muriel Spark for instance) is debate religious faith or create a confrontation of the different denominations and so not even between the lines does her own religion become discernible. For the most part her characters are Church of England and it therefore comes as a surprise that Gardam herself is a Catholic. There is only one point that comes across clearly and that is that she is critical of excess, be it of rigid tradition or fashionable trendiness.

Gardam believes that a novel must be entertaining and that the characters must be contestable, i.e. interpreted differently by different readers. She prefers to rely on inspiration and not on theory and hopes that the reader will be able "to look after himself". She is wary of creative writing classes (she has created one in *The Queen of the Tambourine*, 86-93, with subversive humour), because she believes that writing is a mystery, "the spirit of light that wakes the imagination".¹¹ In "Angels and daemons" Gardam speaks about two instances of such flashes of imagination that left her with the image of a child walking alone on a beach, which she later used in *God on the Rocks*, and that of an obviously deeply disturbed, well-kept upper-class woman, who became the prototype for Eliza Peabody of *The Queen of the Tambourine*. The entertainment that Gardam

⁹ E.g. in *The Hothouse by the East River* (1973).

¹⁰ Clare Boylan, ed., *The Agony and the Ego*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1993, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-19.

insists a good book should provide is encoded in her rich plotting with its many surprise turns. What comes to mind is the metaphysical wit of John Donne and other 17th-century poets, for whose poetry surprise is an essential feature. The parallel may sound somewhat farfetched, but if we add Gardam's religious emotion, humour and elusiveness, it can perhaps be justified. Her recurring, multifaceted "so much never to be known" can be linked to all aspects of her writing. It may also be understood as a fitting comment on the strange meandering of love and sex, on children improbably conceived (like Polly's mother in *Crusoe's Daughter* or Alfred in *God on the Rocks*). In some of Gardam's short story collections surprise and enjoyment also come with the discovery of linkage between individual stories through shared characters¹² or similar characters between stories and novels.

Surprise could also be a keyword for the endings of Gardam's novels and short stories. For Gardam's endings are revelations, a little incomplete and limited, but always surprising. Unlike the open-ended postmodern pieces of her contemporaries, they have the quality of a full stop. Despite some clearly postmodern influences that can be traced in Gardam's fiction and particularly the overall openness to interpretation that Gardam herself favours, her endings carry a positive message of something resolved, achieved or at least accepted. Although they are resolutions of often gripping story developments, there is no trace of the spectacular or of self-satisfactory smugness about them. What they convey is usually tempered by understatement or undermined by wit. Owing to this subtlety, Gardam never seems to be moralising. Indeed she has suggested more than once that literature does not necessarily have an edifying effect or role to play.

To conclude, let us not attempt to sum up the essence of Gardam's writing in a paragraph. That would hardly be possible in the face of the ambiguity of her characters and the results of their actions, which allow different interpretations. What is more, we know that this is what the author intended and that this is also what she has succeeded in doing. The purpose of this brief inquiry into Gardam's prose was to foreground several features that enhance the pleasures of her text. The encounters with Gardam's characters afford the pleasure of meeting with both the ordinary and the unusual. Much of this experience depends on perception, sometimes allowed to go deep, sometimes withheld. Different perspectives and angles of perception are offered with the help of literary allusion. The metafictional devices in combination with a good plot and a strong story line form in Gardam a solid, dependable basis which, however, never gets stuffy. For Gardam's texts invariably hold many surprises, be it sudden changes of heart of the protagonists, perhaps following after sudden changes of fortunes, or unexpected happy endings. These may involve love or family relationships,

¹² E.g. in *Pangs of Love* (1983) the first and the last stories "The First Adam" and "The Last Adam" and also "An Unknown Child", unlike each other as they are, feature a couple of characters in common. They are minor figures and therefore the links are inconspicuous, a case of playful teasing by the author.

but also loss of faith or various unlikely reversals of events. The gentle humour which accompanies Gardam's acute observation of mostly British life in the twentieth century is a powerful tool which undermines sadness and smugness alike and contributes greatly to the subtlety of her prose.