III. Voices from British Literature

On Art and Life

An Interview with Rose Tremain

by Gilles Menegaldo

Rose Tremain was born in 1943 and graduated from the University of East Anglia. She has published seven novels and three volumes of short stories as well as having had numerous radio and television plays performed. She won several literary prices including The Sunday Express Award for Restoration *and the Angel Literary Award for* The Swimming Pool Season. *She was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1989.*

Rose Tremain teaches on the MA course in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. She also is a literary critic who reviews regularly for press and radio. She is a convinced francophile who spent a year at the Sorbonne and also lived in Dordogne. Her latest novel is set in Paris.

East Anglia, a rural area of Britain, is the setting for most of Rose Tremain's novels. She enjoys its landscapes which convey an ambivalent feeling of beauty, wildness and even fear. It is also for her a land of secrets and discoveries. She tends to focus on seemingly minor or marginal or even dull characters, such as that of Ruby in A Letter to Sister Benedicta. *She is concerned with their predicament, their problematic relation with the outside world. The story takes the form of a quest for identity which usually entails conflict with the family surroundings or society in general as in* Sacred Country *where the heroine Mary Ward wishes to become a boy. Indeed another feature of Rose Tremain's fiction is an exploration of the unknown, of the unfamiliar which often implies a transgression of various boundaries, either social or sexual. As she herself states: "We all have a person inside us we wish to be and we spend our lives trying to discover it". She has an uncanny ability to identify with the other as in* Restoration, *where, following the career of Robert Merivel, a student of anatomy, she inhabits the body, heart and mind of a seventeenth century man, capturing his language and his idiosyncrasies. In* Restoration, *her best known novel, she indeed reconstructs very convincingly a remote and little known*

historical period, featuring some major dramatic episodes (The Plague or the Great Fire of London) or characters such as King Charles II, while most events are filtered through the consciousness of the main protagonist who gradually becomes aware of the existence of authentic values and is thus "restored" to a more positive image of the self.
Rose Tremain's novels are indeed an experiment in terms of narrative voice. She easily shifts from first-person narration to a more polyphonic strategy in Sacred Country *where most protagonists are also concerned with a problem of identity in a time of post-war changes. In* A Letter to Sister Benedicta*, Rose Tremain experiments with another device which enables her to play upon a fragmented structure and interwoven narrative lines while unravelling little by little the secrets of an ordinary life. The letters have a kind of cathartic function for the main character and help her to cope with isolation and a state of psychological crisis. In her latest book,* The Way I found Her*, the writer again seeks a different fictional territory and adopts a new voice, that of a thirteen year old boy. Thus, most of her fiction, including the short stories, is concerned with a voyage (outer and inner) which brings to her characters a better awareness of who they are and where they stand. Rose Tremain makes them live for us through grim or tragic situations where the pathos is often alleviated by humorous touches and where a certain form of redemption remains possible whatever the circumstances.*

Could we start with your first emotions as a reader of fictional literature in general?

Gilles Menegaldo is Maître de Conférences at the University of Poitiers. Conducted in Poitiers in November 1996, the interview was completed in September 1997.

My first year at school in England—I was sent to a boarding school in England—I think we didn't read anything after about 1945; the literature programme then in the 1950s, early 60s, was very basic, it was the classics really, and nothing contemporary at all. And so, I think my contemporary reading really began later. It probably began with Lawrence Durrell, whom I read at the age of about 15 or 16. I don't particularly admire Durrell now, but then I saw that Durrell was doing something very rich, something very different with language, and I couldn't have been precise about what at that time, but I felt inspired; I remember thinking about these books not just as texts, but as objects that I wanted to ingest in some way, I wanted to eat them. So that was a key moment and then, later, when I was at university, I had as one of my professors Angus Wilson. There was no writing course running at the university at that time, but he was teaching seminars on Dickens and

Dostoevski, the writers that he most loved, the big 19th century writers; and he talked about the characters in Dickens and Dostoevski as if they were the people down the road, as if they were the neighbours, and so it was wonderful to learn from him, this idea about treating literature as if it was part of life. It had never really occurred to me then that literature was life, that literature was what we were thinking about and dreaming about and doing day by day, and it was not until then that I really understood this. So those were sort of key moments in my reading, I think.

Apart from your reading, obviously there were other reasons for you to become a writer, especially concerning your family background?

Well, yes. My father was a writer, and we grew up in London and a great deal of reverence was given to the *act* of writing. I remember there was this little study where my father worked, and we always used to be told by my mother "shhhh, your father is working, be quiet..." when we were little. He was a playwright and his plays were put on in small theatres in places like, I don't know, Colchester or Watford, and then there was a moment in about 1956 when he wrote a play that almost came to London. There was a management interested in it and everybody was very excited, and then the actor who was going to play the main part pulled out at the last minute and so it didn't come. And there was a terrible disappointment and so I think I grew up with this idea that writing was a very honourable thing to do, but that it was also doomed... And then in fact, soon after this disappointment, my father left home, which was a bad moment and I was sent off to boarding school. And that's when I started writing really. In retrospect, I think I was probably writing as a kind of therapy because I was very miserable there for the first year anyway. I was writing little stories and poems, not exactly about my situation but just about things. And I think from that point on, from the age of eleven say, I was always a writer in my mind anyway.

Your first published book is Sadler's Birthday. *What gave you the idea for that book which seems to me, maybe I read it too quickly, a curious subject matter for a first book?*

People said that at the time but it was strange. I was about 28 when I wrote it. The central character is a man of 76 who lives alone and who is thinking over his past life. There are two timescales in that book: the day in question which may or may not be his birthday, that's the title, and then he does a sort of a looking back over key things that have happened in his life. In a way it is odd but it also draws on certain things that happened in my own childhood. They're very displaced in that novel but I think they're

there. For instance, where we lived, we had quite a small ordinary little house in London, but in the holidays, we used to go and stay with my mother's parents, my grand-parents, who had an enormous house in Hampshire in the countryside, a very beautiful place it was, a sort of paradise really. My grandfather was a farmer and he owned I don't know how many thousands of acres. So we went from this very ordinary life to this extremely rich life for about three weeks each holiday. And this house was run like an Edwardian household... there was a butler, and there was a cook, and there were maids, and there were gardeners, and the whole big thing, you know. And of course then the years went by until I was a university student when all of this had to be re-examined and questioned and tortured. If you had a kind of background like that, you felt in the 1960s, that you needed to atone for it. So I think what I was doing in that book was reversing the role. The central character is the butler, who by a quirk of circumstances inherits the big house, and he has nobody to leave it to, so eventually it has to be left to the state. So we could say it's quite a socialist novel, but I think all that sort of rich life that I experienced as a child is in there, I think done with some affection but also with a little bit of anger about it; I think that the house owner, this colonel and his wife, are slightly based on how my grand-parents were... So there are autobiographical elements in that book even if there is no character in it like me.

What about the butler's relationship with the boy?

I was thinking about this book the other day and I think now one might see it as almost an abusive relationship. But I think in 1975-76, when the book was written, I certainly didn't intend it like that. I didn't think it would seem like that. This is somebody, the man Sadler, who has been effectively deprived of love. His mother, who loved him, dies very young, he's always been in this role of servant—"serviteur"—and then there is this one moment of deep affection, deep love—the fact that the love expresses itself physically. If I was writing that book now, I might have thought twice about that happening, but I don't see it as abusive actually. The child doesn't feel abused by it, he feels protected by it, and there is a great kinship between him and Sadler. In a way, as somebody pointed out to me recently, which I think is true, Sadler is also making amends for the child that he didn't have.

You said that you wish to be "elsewhere" when you write. Elsewhere doesn't mean simply in space of course but also in time, in terms of borrowing other people's identities in a way. Restoration *is an obvious case in point, and even* Sacred Country*: it starts in the 1950s, and even*

though it corresponds to your own personal experience, it is obviously displaced. Your latest novel is set in Paris, and you wrote something about Sicily. Could you tell us about this displacement in time and space. We could either start with time or space. How do you select landscape? What's your relation to landscape? You said once that you find it difficult to write about landscapes you knew, for instance the landscapes you knew when you were a child.

I think I find it difficult to be detached about the landscapes that I loved as a child, in other words certain parts of London, and exactly this landscape in Hampshire where there were these just brief sort of paradise years. I find it difficult to write about those landscapes in a detached way because I feel very passionate about them, very deeply attached to them. A lot of my books have some location in Norfolk, in East Anglia, where I now live and I didn't encounter this landscape until 1967, when I was a student, and so therefore it's not a landscape out of my childhood. I feel ambiguous towards it. As you know, it's a kind of flat region of England, rather wild; when I was a student there, almost no roads led from London to Norwich. They led up to Cambridge but not really out to the East as far as Norwich. So it felt like a sort of lost part of England, and I liked that because it felt like a place where, in a small country, anything could still happen. I sometimes envy American writers this great vast landscape that they've got to write about, where little towns can feel "lost". Every foot, every inch of England is known and charted, and I think it is known and charted in a literary way also. East Anglia as a sort of inspirational landscape has served me very well. As I said, I feel ambiguous towards it. There are moments when it is really beautiful and others when it's kind of dark and gothic and quite frightening and wild. I have made it a kind of landscape with my imagination in a way, and it keeps recurring.

Graham Swift also uses this notion of something being archaic or gothic about places.

Yes, he uses it. Graham Swift's *Waterland* is set in a very, very particular piece of landscape. It's a piece of landscape that is very flat really. It used to be unusable marshes. I think it was actually in the 17th century that drainage started to be done, and so it started to be an area that could be cultivated, the Fenland, and it is in that area in fact that I have set the middle section of *Restoration* where the character goes and helps his friend work in a bedlam. Again it's this question of a landscape which is "outside" of the rest of the country, in fact outside the orbit of the court, almost outside consciousness. It's in fact as if landscape didn't exist in

people's minds because few people have come there... So it's perfect for that.

Since you are referring to Restoration*, why did you choose this historical period which is not very well-known, at least for French people?*

I started with the notion of something contemporary, but I didn't want to talk about some of the things that I found really oppressive in the 1980's. Being a child of the 60's or a student in the 60's, I sort of grew up with this idea that things were going to get more equal, that society was going to go in a certain way which had to do with equal opportunities, all those things that we believed in the 60's, and of course would be absolutely proved wrong in the 1980's, particularly if you lived in England under Margaret Thatcher. People wanted to show off their cars, their designer clothes, all their material possessions. There was a sort of terrible parade going on in the 80's, the vestiges of which are still with us. That said, I don't think I'm taking an extreme moral stance against things, and I think, as a group, writers were just as guilty as anyone else, they wanted to be paid better, etc. That was enough to make me think I want to explore a period of time where these things are going on, and how does the individual survive in them? Does the individual sort of float up, can he hold on to what he believes in or is he lost? And I didn't want to write about contemporary England; it seemed to me that a lot of people were doing that already. So when I went back to the Restoration, which is a period of history that I knew quite well, I found some parallels which were enough to get me going. It seemed to me that at that time, the King was a sort of almost mesmerising light that people watched, everybody had their eyes on the same thing; they wanted something of this light to fall on them. And I thought this was a very good metaphor for how we regard money, so the story came out of all my thinking about that, and then it broadened out way beyond that into I hope more universal things about time itself, about a tendency, when things become painful, not to want to see them. There's a moment in the book when Merivel, the central character, says "you know I've seen the night—his work as a doctor has been very dark, very painful to him—I've seen the night, and now comes the morning," and from then on, he doesn't admit that night is ever going to fall again, and he gives up medicine and starts redecorating his house, which was sort of the pattern of some people's lives at that time. And then of course, he realises that the darkness will come again and it's getting to be a darkness much more frightening than any he's ever seen.

A number of characters in your novels have problems concerning physical disgrace or some difficulties to cope with life. Merivel is disgraced

physically, as is forcefully asserted by himself at the beginning of the novel. Mary Ward is also in a way a kind of ugly duckling, and the heroine of Sister Benedicta *is not exactly favoured by nature either. Some other characters. for different reasons, are also marginalized. So why do you choose that kind of characters?*

I could say anything, couldn't I? Writers often rationalise tendencies that they have, and say "Oh well, I did this for a particular concrete reason." One doesn't necessarily know, in the kind of concrete way that readers hope, exactly why something is so in a novel. Maybe one can see it more clearly later, not necessarily at the time of writing. It has to do with a feeling that I have that people who are not valued or are marginalized or experiencing difficulties vis-à-vis mainstream life in some way are likely to have a more unique and original perspective on life. And I believe that's what I'm after, this voice which is coming in from the wings, "dans les coulisses," looking at things, emphatically not on the main stage but from this kind of... tangent, a little bit like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern look at *Hamlet*: the play is going on but they as minor characters are getting quite a different vision of what is happening both to them and to the supposedly central protagonists. I think it's what I'm striving for. With the character Ruby in *Sister Benedicta*, the reader probably starts off by thinking that he or she is going to get very weary of the company of this rather fat woman who tramps round this little area of London and doesn't do much, is not educated and all these things. And I think that actually, on the whole, this character is greatly loved and quite soon into the book, because through her humour, which is quite intense and quite sharp, and through her self-deprecation, you get a view of London, of her life, of her treatment by her family and so forth, that you don't expect. She redeems herself from inside out, so by the end of the book you have come to feel some affection towards her. In some sense, it's a small salvation but she's found it... This idea of the thin person inside the fat person that is trying to get out, I think there's some element of that. And the certainly huge element of the "trapped" person inside what the world sees in both Ruby in *Sister Benedicta* and obviously in Mary Ward.

To turn to Restoration*, how did you deal with documentation, with research work, how did you manage to free yourself from a mass of sometimes rather fascinating information, in order to create fiction or to transmute it into fiction?*

Well I started with the Pepys diaries which, if you're going to write about that period of the 17th century, is the only place to start. The thing about Pepys is that he had an appointment at the naval office, and so he

had access to the king and therefore to everything that was going on at court.

So he's a wonderful spy, if you like, into 17th-century court life. But he's also very interested, and interesting, about every facet of life, from the river to the theatre, to what's going on in the musical world, to various trades and industries. He's a man of intense curiosity, intense energy, and if you try to follow Pepys, he takes you everywhere, he takes you right through English society at that time... So I followed him for a while. And then, once I had decided what my story was, there were all those areas of research that I had to do, research into medical treatment of that time, research into how mad people were cared for, research into sort of simple things like food, dress and costume and how the court was arranged and all that. So I had a long period of research which I mainly did in America actually. I was working in America for a term, and actually it was at Vanderbilt University: they have an absolutely brilliant library there. So a lot of this material that I use in my book I actually found in the Vanderbilt library. I did probably about a year of reading and just sort of making card files and notes and then... This is a thing I believed in: if you're going to fictionalise a historical time, you need to do this research in a very thorough way. I'm not a very scholarly person, so I wouldn't do it as marvellously as a university professor, but I did it as well as I could do it for me, which was reasonably thorough, and then I think it's important to throw it away really... You've got your notes, you've got your index, you've got enough data... Because something else has to happen between taking on board this information and then being able to write the novel... I've described this as a kind of alchemy, a transformation which has to happen between the raw material, which is what you've researched, what you've found, and the imaginative thing. And I think that period of time also needs to be quite long, you need to sort of partly forget the research and yet be inspired by things that you've found to invent other things. And in *Restoration*, I played a kind of game with the readers, because a lot of the things that I found were very extreme, even just simple things like what people ate, very peculiar things, like boiled lettuce and cream and radishes for breakfast... There are some strange things which we think were really odd in our society going on, and so, for every strange thing that I found I thought I would invent some other thing, and I bet the readers would not be able to tell which is true, which is invented. And indeed they often think that the things I had invented were the ones that were true and vice-versa...

Could you give an example?

One classic example is the scene, quite early on in the book, where Merivel and his friend actually witness this man who has had a terrible

accident. There's a hole in his chest, and the beating heart is visible. And he invites Merivel and his friend to actually put their hands into the thoracic cavity and touch his heart, to discover that they could hold it quite firmly, almost squeeze it, and the man doesn't feel any pain... Which is an absolutely beautiful metaphor of something I wanted to say... but everybody believes that this is purely invention. In fact I was reading a life of William Harvey, the 17th century physician who discovered that blood circulates—actually, it was very interesting because there was no microscope, he couldn't see the capillaries, he couldn't just make the chain join up, but he realised that this had to be how it happened, without being able to verify it. I was reading this life of Harvey—not an autobiography but a biography—and it recounted this incident where Harvey exactly encounters such a person and is invited to put his hand in. I got onto a friend of a friend who is a heart surgeon and I asked: "Is this true that if you are able to touch an internal organ, the person does not feel pain?" He said "it's not that you don't feel any pain, you feel much less pain than on your external organs." The internal organs are not so sensitive to touch as our eyes, or our hands, or whatever. So this incident which appears extraordinary in the book is actually based on something which is allegedly true. Part of me wondered if I could believe it. I had it verified by the heart surgeon, but I would have used it anyway even if he had said no, this couldn't possibly happen.

But you didn't know that?

I did know that, yes. It's very well accounted for in Harvey.

Could you give an example of what you invented or what you added?

My invention in that scene is really not so much what happens, but the kind of astonishment and terror that surrounds it. It's an extremely useful moment for establishing something important in the character of these two people. Merivel is the one who does dare touch the heart, and his friend Pearce who is morally superior in every way, is the one who is afraid. What Harvey did was just a sort of gentle touch, whereas they put their hands right inside the body of the man to actually take hold of the heart... I invented taking it further, that's all. The other inventions just have to do certainly with food and house decoration and medical cures. There are various lists of ingredients that were used in medical cures and I invented others. There are also a lot of anachronisms in that book. I still occasionally get letters from Ohio or somewhere saying "this had not been invented by that time, you should take it out." But I don't mind them being there.

I don't mind either; it's not a historical novel.

No, it's not a historical novel, exactly. Soon after that book came out, people started to ask me to review serious scholarly books on Charles II or the 17th century, which would have been quite inappropriate. It's called *Restoration*, it's set in the Restoration, but it's my restoration, it's imagined.

Did you invent the episode concerning the medicine that the King gives Merivel to reveal the truth?

It's partly invented. The King did have this laboratory and he was interested in dissection; there is a famous scene there where he dissects a toad. In parenthesis, I think in England what most people remember about Charles II, is that he had an affair with Nell Gwyn, that he was a great womaniser, that he was very handsome, and that is all. The minute you start to research his life, you find somebody much more interesting: he was very restless, he was very clever, he was terrible with women. It was part of his restlessness. Good things happened in that time, as regards buildings, as regards music and so forth. The creative side of him established this laboratory. So I was interested in the work that he did there. There's an account where he states that it would be a marvellous thing if he could make this concoction: a truth-revealing substance in people. He would then be able to know who was plotting against him, and there were a lot of plots against him as you know. Maybe if he does it to somebody as susceptible as Merivel, it's going to work, and it does.

Obviously, an important aspect of Restoration *is science, new scientific discoveries leading to a new world outlook. Couldn't we say that Merivel partakes of two approaches, an old one, that of his time, (and its limitations), but also a modern one. How far have you conceived him as modern, I'm referring to what he says about psychiatry, the treatment of mad people, but also to his relation to art, to painting; why try to capture the essence of nature even though he cannot manage to express it fully?*

There has been a great deal of argument about this, because the 17th century specialists rightly said that this is completely unhistorical: how could these ideas have come to him, there was no precedent? How could he suddenly have gotten quasi impressionist ideas of how to render the view from his window. It was also told that his ideas about the treatment of his patients were too far in advance of their time. He is a modern man in certain ways, but the way that I defend this is to say, "wait a minute, what I've established here is somebody you can despise if you wish because of

his excessive nature”. He is excessive in all senses, he is greedy, lascivious, he is not tactful. And it came to me that if this sort of excessive person, this restless nature, took up painting, which Merivel does in a sort of amateurish way because he is bored, he would not follow the rules of perspective, the idea of classical painting that prevailed at the time. He would try to find his own expression of his own internal chaos. His painting is an expression of Merivellian chaos and likewise with the cures that he proposes for the people incarcerated in the bedlam. At that time the main, really barbaric cure, was blood letting, and the letting out of body liquids of all kinds, and he logically points out, “why not let out sweat and why not let out weeping, shouting?” So he thinks that if you could get people to dance, they would make themselves very hot, and then they would sweat and you would be letting out supposedly the sort of bad humours, which is the idea behind blood letting. And also, if you played music and let them dance and sing and scream if they wanted, you would be letting out internal anguish in another way. It’s not that he’s suddenly leapt two hundred years and arrived in advance of Freud. It seems to me these were exactly the kinds of things that a man of that nature would think of. He thinks them up and they all think he is crazy, which he is in a way.

He is in a way ahead of his time...

He is ahead of his time, and I agree that there is some license taken there. People have taken me up on that point quite reasonably enough. That’s my response to it. I can’t stand it in novels where characters that you’ve grown to be accustomed to suddenly start to act out of character. What’s more important to me is that these things he invents or suggests, are perfectly in character with all the rest of his chaotic behaviour.

The idea of spectacle is interesting. The fact that he involves the insane people in a kind of dance. Dance has a lot of symbolic implications as well. But in Bedlam*, the Mark Robson film, the mad people are led to put up a show to entertain the nobility, in a rather grotesque, ridiculous way, to make them appear as no less than animals.*

Sort of like a circus with the fat woman and the bearded lady.

Yes, like a circus, exactly. So it’s the exact reverse approach that Merivel uses.

Yes, because they’re not a spectacle. It’s for them, the dance.

How do you establish that distance between Merivel and his age? Are there any specific literary devices that you use in terms of character approach?

I don't know whether I would dignify them with the name of devices exactly. My approach to that book was a difficult one in that I started with the idea that I would write it as a third-person narration. I did something like about fifty pages written in my voice, and it just seemed to me to be banal; it sounded like every other historical novel. I don't know about France, but in England, the term historical novel is quite pejorative really. It's a genre that one equates with superficial romance, it's not ever a genre that is deemed to be inquiring into anything. *Restoration* is a historical novel but it does not quite take the usual form of the historical novel. So that was a false start. I'm sure the quest for the voice of stories and novels relates to this search for a perspective from the edge of mainstream life. And then I had a second idea: to tell the whole story from the perspective of a minor character, the painter who becomes a spy by the middle of the book. I felt a spy was quite a good character to try and see everything. But then there were terrible logistical problems with telling the story from that perspective. I thought in fact, I had to have the courage to throw myself into being a character, into *being* Merivel. He is a man, and he lives in the 17th century. When I told people I was embarking on this, they said "you're crazy. How can you come by this? How can you imagine yourself into this mind?" I thought, well, it's like walking on a high ledge or something like this. Don't look down and just keep going. Once I had decided to do that, I thought I was just going to keep going because I was enjoying this. It seemed to me to be very enabling actually to be in the first person. It is a narrative device, or form, or mode that I like very much. In the book that I have just finished, I had exactly the same thing, again a false start: fifty pages written from an authorial, classic third-person narrator perspective. I hated it, I thought it was dull. My new narrator is also masculine, but a young boy. People also have said to me "well, you're mad again. How can you think yourself into the psyche of a thirteen-year-old?" But again, I've enjoyed it. This kind of displacement seems to be in my case quite enabling.

Merivel is very convincing, or you're very convincing as Merivel.

I wondered when the book came out if the women readers would say "yes, it's fine" and the male readers would say "no, you've got this wrong, and you've got that wrong", but it hasn't proved so.

The other male characters are foregrounded: Pearce the Quaker in particular is a very striking, very effective character, acting as a kind of

moral conscience for Merivel. Conversely the women characters are on the whole rather ill-treated and mostly reduced to the status of sexual objects.

They were ill-treated. Some people said to me "Why did you have to have a male?" I said, "well I wanted my character to be a doctor, to be a physician". There weren't any women physicians. They could be nurses, they could be helpers in medical professions, but they weren't physicians because nobody would train them to be doctors. They weren't able to have professions. Out of necessity they are a little bit fragile and in the background. But when we get to the middle section, this sort of dark section in the Bedlam, the women there, Eleanor and Hannah are quite strong characters. In fact—this is historically accurate—the Quakers, who didn't believe in religious hierarchies or hierarchies of any other kind, were very advanced in the way they treated women in their societies. The women were very much treated as equals. And the women, Hannah and Eleanor, do the same work as Pearce, Ambrose and all the others. They're all part of what we would consider as this contemporary-style team of people, all sharing responsibilities and duties. Those women are strong, and the strength and simplicity of those two people at a certain moment does strike Merivel as very important. And it does make him think, vis-à-vis his own child who turns out to be a little girl, that he will educate her to have an existence of her own which is not simply dependent on lovers or husbands. Whereas Celia, who is the King's mistress, the root of all the emotional turmoil in the book, is treated extremely badly by everybody. That's how it was.

She's also a rather negative character in a way. At one moment you seem to hesitate to transform her into a more congenial one, and finally you choose not to.

I didn't really want her to be negative exactly. She's a pawn, she's the little pivot around which this saga revolves, and then she floats out of the narrative. I felt quite tender towards her; she's an innocent really, and she doesn't have a very happy life. She's the false focus of the book, and I didn't want her to be too vivid. When this book was recently turned into a movie, this was the one element that caused the great difficulty. They wanted the character of Celia to be central, so, in a way, they turned the story into a romance, and it isn't a romance.

At one point you can see that maybe things will change. She is a sentimental girl, in a way, and the death of the bird is one element in the book that brings them together. And then again she becomes as

cruel as ever to him, and finally she's dropped out. The film is probably doing something wrong if it sets her as central character.

I think it is doing something wrong; it unbalances it, and then how do you end it? If she's the focus of the story, where does the story then go?

What part is played by Pearce in terms of Merivel's redemption?

As you said earlier, Pearce is very much his moral conscience right to the end. Pearce dies about two-thirds of the way in the book, and he bequeaths him this silence. We all need silence in which to make decisions, and at the beginning of the book Merivel is a very noisy man. He's never even had a second of silence, and so the greatest gift his friend bequeaths him by dying, is for him to learn silence, for him to put himself into a space where he can think. At the beginning, he acts before he thinks, but at the end he's thinking first.

Why did that theme, that motif of insanity become so important in the book, as specific locus, but also in terms of symbolic significance?

It's important simply for a story-telling reason. That's where Pearce chooses to do his work, and he has a very paternalistic view of the insane; he thinks that they're like children—he has a sort of Christ-like view of them—that they're little children to be protected, not harmed, whereas as we know, mainly in the 17th century, insanity was equated with evil, and people who were crazy for one reason or another were deemed to be possessed by the devil. And my research has yielded the fact that the Quakers had a slightly more humane attitude to the insane. The conditions of the bedlam are still very primitive, and you still have the worst cases who were chained up and so forth. In the first third of the book, I think the reader is inclined to think that Merivel himself is slightly crazy, not seriously mad, but excessive in a crazy way. And then when he gets to this place, you start to see that his own craziness is actually a beneficial kind of craziness, he becomes a kind of Sainted Fool.

You were talking about the coherence of the character. I think it's a much better choice to have him relapse in his faults, in his physical shortcomings, indulge in the pleasures of the flesh so to speak. If he had steadily acquired some kind of sanctity, it would not have fit with the image we have of the character.

It's quite interesting in the course of the book that my emotional plan for him changed. When I was planning this out, I insisted on the influence

of Pierce, and the moral strictures that he places on the behaviour of the Stuart King. He endlessly says to Merivel: “Look! don’t trust in these people, they’ll betray you. They’re not to be trusted. You must rid yourself of this ridiculous affection that you’ve got for the king because it will cause you grief, it will bring you to no good”. I thought: “Yes! That’s what he’s going to learn. That’s the way the book is going to go.” Then I realised at a certain point—I don’t know where exactly—that in fact I had created somebody whose attachments were very deep. And that’s something that I think one likes about him, that he’s incapable of ridding himself of that affection. And it’s with him till the end, to his dying day.

Indeed, if Merivel is fascinated by Charles II, you also give a rather positive image of that king. Is it simply to respect historical truth, or do you share that fascination?

Well I think once you begin to really look at his life, you do find somebody who’s actually clever who has a very broad-based mind: scientific enquiry, artistic enquiry, all balanced against his sort of reckless behaviour, treating women very badly, a sort of evasiveness vis-à-vis the government. People were not paid, issues that needed confronting were not confronted. But almost on a just scholarly level, you find somebody who really is very sharp, very aligned with what’s going on, who wants to do things, who wants progress to happen, who wants to create beautiful new buildings, who wants England to be in the forefront of scientific discovery and so forth. And I became quite seduced by him in the course of researching him. The book only concerns the beginning of the reign. Things get much bleaker later on; he gets lazy again, and then he gets entangled in the wars with the Dutch, which is a disaster. He can’t talk to the government, and politically it becomes disastrous really. But at that point he’s a very interesting man I think.

So you don’t idealise him?

Oh yes, he’s idealised completely in the book. He has to represent three things to Merivel: he has to represent the father, who dies very early, and that’s a very important moment in the book, the father who dies in the fire, then the King himself, and all that the King represents at that time, which is so new for people. Merivel tells the reader that he’s lost his faith in God very early on, partly because of the death of his good parents that he sees as a sort of terrible act of cruelty. So the King for him becomes a kind of God-like figure. But this does not mean that he became a God-like figure for me! I think the reader feels that way very strongly, that the king is deified.

At one point Merivel comes back to prayer.

Yes he does, but it doesn't work for him. He's trying to imagine this sort of prayer going, and all he can see is this tiny little blip of light. But he thinks his prayer is a bit feeble, which it is.

He seems to come back on his refusal of the notion of transcendence in the way he expresses it at the beginning of the book.

Yes. In terms of being able to write that book, it was important to me that he does lose his faith early on, because I thought the most difficult thing about writing a story set in the 17th century, particularly a first-person narration like that, is that people's mind were very very informed by faith, and it, I think, influenced all the decisions they made, the way they behaved, the way they thought about the world, everything. So in order to be able to see, to imagine Merivel in a truthful way, I had to dismantle that, to a certain extent anyway.

Contrary to Restoration, Sacred Country *is a polyphonic novel which alternates between an omniscient, almost authorial, voice and various subjective voices. Could you comment on this shift in your strategy?*

It's a very complex story, and I wanted a complex way of telling it. It's a story about a little girl who believes she's not a girl but a boy. And so, the central strand of it is that she undergoes this thirty-year struggle to alter her gender. And the complexity of that story alone, some of which I gathered in fact in my research period by talking to transsexuals, and that extraordinary layer upon layer of agony they suffered, was just bewildering and striking. It almost made me believe that I couldn't encompass this subject. Then I thought that I'd do it because I wanted to do it, because I saw it as something very interesting in itself. So I wanted to find a form where this complexity not just of Mary's life but of all the things surrounding Mary, would be echoed. So I chose a three-voice narrative, one of which is Mary's, straightforward. Not that it is quite straightforward, but it is Mary talking, right from her childhood till the end of the book, when she's about 30. And then the second voice is me, if you like. It's a kind of knowing voice who's able to flit from place to place, and see everything and understand what people are feeling and thinking and looking like. So it's a kind of locating voice for the reader. And then the third voice is the voice of Mary's mother, who's the character Estelle, who again is not completely mad but has a very fragile sensibility, and in the course of the narrative, she's put in and out of a mental asylum. And so the idea with her is that she always functions like a Greek chorus, as a crazed commentator,

not only of the actions, of what's going on in her family, and how she perceives Mary's life, but on what's going on in England in those times between 1950, when it starts, and 1980, when it ends, which is a significant period of my own life. There are acute changes in the landscape, in the way people saw the world, their access to what's going on and so forth. So I thought with these three voices perhaps I could convey some of the complexity of this dilemma.

Are you happy with the French translation of the title? What did it mean to you originally? Because the problem is not only with Mary, all the characters are seeking some kind of sacred country.

It was explained to me that the literal translation, "Pays sacré" or "Terre sacrée," would suggest something just uniquely religious, so that was not what I wanted at all with the title in English. It has three meanings really: the country of the self, body-soul, which is in Mary's case abused by people and by life, but remains sacred to her and she has to undergo this alteration in order for it to be made whole. So there's that, the sacred self. There is this other question which relates to England, to one's own country about which one feels ambiguous. Things haven't gone too well in the late 20th century, indeed they haven't gone well for any of us in Europe really. Yet, it's very difficult to get rid entirely of one's feeling, of this sort of preciousness or sacredness of one's own country to which one is, despite everything, extremely attached. There is also this element which is much more kind of light-hearted, of country music, which is a slightly weird element in the book but in fact very important. Walter, the character who's also destined supposedly to live in this little village for the rest of time, discovers that he's got this wonderful voice and actually makes this kind of pilgrimage out of England to America, to become a country western singer. By circumstance, he also, through his journey, enables Mary to go there and start a new life as Martin.

It seemed a bit strange to introduce that story of someone who wants to become a country musician, but in fact, it enlarges the scope of the book, which might have been too closed otherwise.

I think it would have been closed and also very glum (this is the word that my editor really finds amusing, "glum"). This gives it a surprising little edge somewhere. I was listening to country music when I spent some time there—in fact that period of time when I was doing my research for *Restoration* in Tennessee—and that part of me just wanted to use this country music material. But I think that country music is still so popular because it concerns very raw, basic emotions about love, about betrayal,

about loss, which do inform everything. There are very raw things happening in that book, and country music is an appropriate expression for these things.

"The Cupboard" also is a story about closure. Why do you favour that theme?

I am interested also in the idea that we have one life and it goes on a certain direction which is determined mainly by things completely beyond our control. But we also at certain moments have a very acute sense of the person inside, the person we would like to be, who is more intelligent, wiser, more circumspect, whatever we want to be, funny, or clever. All these things you want to be. And there are moments in life—I think that most people would probably agree with this—where this person, the interior person, is present in the room. And there are many moments where that person is buried, is enclosed exactly. So the idea that my characters make these journeys, often quite painful, not always, but often quite painful, which lead them towards realising or getting nearer to the person they would wish to be, is I think an eternal subject.

In some stories, you deal with the relation between art and life, with art being presented positively as in Restoration *for instance. In "The Garden of the Villa Mollini," the garden represents artistic creation or the recreation of nature, at the expense of the life of the artist. How far do you see that as a metaphor?*

It's really an observation on the lives of artists. By artists I don't necessarily mean painters but all people who create, writers or people who give themselves to one art or another. Very often, these people in their personal dealings are quite cruel; creativity is sometimes bought at a great price. There is a lot of dereliction going on and around artist's lives and in fact their work is absolutely superb, but their personal life is affected, other people are suffering and so forth. So the story is a look at that really, it's a look at the way in which things and other people are sacrificed in order for artists to produce.

It is the same theme which is dealt with by Poe in "The Oval Portrait."

Yes.

A few words about your last book, The Way I Found Her*?*

I wanted to write an urban novel. I know *Sister Benedicta* was set in London, but it's a very small area of London for this enclosed little story. And I didn't want to set another novel in London. The other two cities that

I know quite well are New-York and Paris. And Paris seemed to me to be perfect for the two things I wanted to express, perhaps the two things that actually draw people to cities. One is the enchantment in life, the richness of experience in cities; the other is this terrifying aspect of cities. So this is a story about a boy who is taken to Paris. He's thirteen, in other words, one toe in childhood, one toe in the adult world. And it's exactly at this moment that he arrives in Paris, and certain things happen to him which are extremely significant, and which can change his life forever.

Wasn't it difficult (foolish) to think that you could write from the perspective of a 13 year-old boy?

Not to me. Isn't this one of the prime tasks of the novelist, to empathise sufficiently with people unlike herself to be able to 'become' them in a narrative? And we can all remember what adolescence is like: the fragility of one's knowledge, the terrifying swings of mood, the loneliness... and this was a way the story had to be told—from the point of view of the 'confused innocent', the boy from rural England, who arrives in this glamorous world of the 8th Arrondissement in Paris knowing nothing, and learns, in two months, more than he's ever learnt about the world in fourteen years.

I also decided that the kind of *acceleration of time* that one experiences as an adolescent (everything happening faster and faster, so that one is almost never in control either of one's feelings, nor of events as they unfold) was perfect to how this narrative unfolds, with a kind of 'roman policier' at its centre, with the boy, Lewis, acting as amateur detective.

This said, I believe this book draws the reader in only if that reader can believe absolutely in Lewis and forget about me, his creator, entirely. Readers who aren't able to do that won't be interested in the book. The voice is nine-tenths of the whole—as it was in *Restoration*.

Where will you go next? Have your struggles with this adolescent voice worn you out?

Not really. I think I will always be tempted by the first-person narrator who is distant from me in age or place or time. My next novel is going to be set in 17th century Denmark, in the reign of King Christian IV. It will have a young musician as its protagonist and will be a novel about how, in the wake of lost love, the human mind is disposed to embark on a philosophical quest for meaning within human existence.

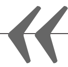
"Saved by Literature"

An Interview with Dirk Bogarde

by Georges-Claude Guilbert
University of Rouen

The interview was conducted in November 1984. The actor/writer Dirk Bogarde was in his early sixties. He had written three autobiographical books and three novels. I was very kindly admitted into his study, a secluded room attached to the mas provençal on the outskirts of Grasse where he was then living. Hundreds of photographs (notably of his good friends Judy Garland and Charlotte Rampling) were pinned or taped to the walls. Before I departed, I asked him if he would mind my getting this interview published at some stage, even though it was meant to be only part of my research. He answered: "Well, maybe in about ten years". Since then, Dirk Bogarde has written five more autobiographical books and three more novels. His latest novel, Closing Ranks*, was number five in the* Times *best-seller list in May 1997, at the time this introduction was written.*

Georges-Claude Guilbert is Professeur Agrégé at the University of Rouen.



First of all I'd like to ask you about the origins of your literary career... I know you were solicited by a publisher, but you had started writing before, hadn't you?

Yes, I always wrote. I used to write plays. My mother was an actress, her father was an actor, and his father was an actor. Three generations! So when I was a child I wrote plays, for *me*. It was very simple, I just wrote people's words. And then I wrote poetry, in the war. War is such an

extraordinary experience, a horrid experience, it can lead you to writing, and you just write. And usually you write poetry. I wrote terrible poetry. Three of my poems were published in an anthology of poetry written during the Second World War. I was twenty-one, and very pleased with my poems. Afterwards I became an actor, and all that, but I still wrote. I wrote scenarios. Some of the scenarios of the films I was in were so bad!

You re-wrote scripts?

No, not the scripts, I only re-wrote my own lines.

I see.

I only wrote the words that *I* had to say, because they were terrible.

So you did not stop writing between say your twenties and your fifties?

No, I didn't.

Because that's the impression one gets from your autobiography, it seems that you wrote plays as a child and then nothing until you reached your fifties.

Well I never wrote a novel or anything like that, until this company, Chatto & Windus, a very chic publisher, what would the French equivalent be?

Gallimard, Flammarion, perhaps?

Anyway I was asked by them to write. So I did.

But hadn't you started to write about your childhood before they asked you anything?

No, only a little bit. I used to write to this American lady, who was my correspondent...

Oh yes, Mrs X.!

Mrs X., yes. She made me write. She said, "all the things you told me about your life, put them all together and write an autobiography. Write about your childhood, with your sister, and Lally," and I did. Because she was in pain, she was dying, and it was one way of keeping her interested; she had something which...

She was looking forward to your letters.

Well she was looking forward to the "construction" of my work, I remember sending her the first bits, and she said, "It's terrible!," and then she made notes all over the pages and sent them back. She said, "try again, get back to the boy inside you, write as if you were twelve".

This is what's so extraordinary about your first book, you re-create your childhood so convincingly, and the period...

Well that's one of the reasons why it can't be translated well, because of the kind of dialogue, the kind of words that were used, fifty years ago, a long time ago. The vocabulary is typical only of that time. It's now archaic English. People don't speak like that anymore. And it's the same with *A Gentle Occupation*, which takes place in 1945, people don't speak like that anymore. Or very few, very few, some of the old brigade; maybe you've met them.

And maybe the vocabulary is not only typical of the period, but of a certain class as well.

Yes, the book is entirely class-conscious, and that's why it doesn't work so well in French, that's why I find it so difficult to explain to French people. In France there are no classes, there are supposed to be no classes, at any rate differences don't show so much in speech.

Yes, differences in terms of accent and vocabulary are certainly more limited here.

Right, whereas in England you can tell someone's background after five minutes; after five minutes of conversation with someone you know *exactly* what his social origins are. And that's why *A Gentle Occupation* is impossible to translate accurately: the humour, the wit, the cruel wit are so English, it's practically incomprehensible outside England. And it's been published in about fifteen countries! Can you imagine what it sounds like in Finnish? In Portuguese? I correct the French translations, but none of the others. But it's very difficult because I don't know the equivalent balance of slang or whatever.

Well there is no equivalent I suppose.

That's right, you're right.

Talking about A Gentle Occupation*, you say in your autobiography that you actually discovered literature in the army...*

Yes, in the War. When I was at school I couldn't be bothered, I found books very boring, many people do at school it seems.

One doesn't usually associate soldiers and barracks with book reading.

Well again it's a class thing. At first it was only the soldiers of a certain class who bothered reading. The rank and file had never been taught to read. But then that small nucleus of people who read influenced others, and then you had all kinds of people reading together, the upper class, the middle class, the lower class, we all read in the same room, and talked about books, and that was marvellous; that's how young men got ideas. They discovered ideas, and writers. The people who didn't read, who just lay on their bed scratching their genitals and farting and talking about banging women, they found it difficult to survive. Those who read survived. I don't mean this literally, obviously, you can't stop a bullet with a book; although indeed it happened on occasions, sometimes we put a book in our pocket here before getting into action...

Close to the heart.

Yes, and very often the bullet would hit that and not go through. You'd be very bruised and you'd be very hurt, and maybe you'd crack a rib, but sometimes you were saved.

Saved by literature!

Yes, and it was often the Bible!

Tremendous literature.

Yes, and it's a thick book too.

Indeed. So would you say that you became a literary man, so to speak, in the army?

Yes, well, I wouldn't say that. I would simply say that I discovered literature, I discovered words. I read everything, I read the classics I'd never bothered to read before, I read Trollope, Chaucer, Jane Austen, the Brontës... I read everybody, everything; also contemporary novelists, like

Evelyn Waugh, who was new, and who was still alive. My father used to say, "never read novels!"—contemporary novels, that is.

What was one supposed to read, then?

Only the classics, Scott and everyone. Just before he died, which was some ten, twelve years ago, I had begun to convince him that he could read novels, that he might find them worthwhile.

I suppose he had retained some of the prejudices of his generation, and of his class.

Absolutely, he thought novels were written for shop assistants, or for women, like my mother, who were...

Sentimental?

Sentimental, yes.

Maybe he thought all novels were like those Victorian three-volume novels written by women...

Well my father was a very strong Victorian, Edwardian really, I think he was born in 1892, and he...

The Victorian era had left deep scars.

It still affects us now, at least people of my age.

To come back to your autobiography, we were talking about the re-creation of your childhood; something struck me in A Postillion Struck by Lightning*, it's the way you constantly refer to your sister as precisely "your sister," you practically never call her by name. Does this mean something about the way you saw her with your childish eyes? She had no identity of her own?*

Yes, she was just my sister. I was better. I was *me*. It was always me, me, me. She was my sister, who was horrible to me or nice to me, but she was just my sister, she hadn't got a name. She only started having a name as I grew older; before that she was simply "my sister," and my parents were simply "my parents". The only person in my life who did have a name was Lally; and the people in the village had names, Mrs Fluke, the witch... They all had names because they were people who obviously had an

existence of their own. But my sister, she was just like my leg, like a limb, just a part of me, d'you see what I mean? When a person is so close to you... It's like an appendage, it hasn't got a name anymore than your arm has...

Yes, this is marvellously rendered in the book, I suppose that's one of the reasons why it was so successful.

It's now in its sixteenth or seventeenth edition, it's become a classic, it goes on and on being printed.

Yes, the paperback editions seem to...

As I said, sixteenth or seventeenth edition.

In Britain?

Yes, in Britain. I don't know how many times it went into print in America.

So, you explained how it all started, with Mrs X. and all that; but did you not choose to write about your childhood simply because it was the easiest thing to write about? The material was at hand. I don't mean to be offensive.

No, you're absolutely right, it was at hand, it was a period that I remembered with affection, and so did Elizabeth, "my sister". We were both very happy... And what is strange now is that I get letters from people who read it, and... Well most people had an *unhappy* childhood, and many of them find that—oh it's that awful word—they can't *identify* with my happiness, even though they are my age, they were children when I was a child. I get letters from people in Singapore, the Himalayas, Canada, Greenland. That book has gone all over the world, to the strangest places. On the other hand, it reminds some people of parts of their childhood, it's never exactly the same, but we did things that they did, with their own brothers and sisters, there's a kind of familiarity.

I wondered about this when I read it for the first time, because autobiographers' efforts so often begin with wretchedly unhappy childhood recollections, and millions of people write to them saying, "oh

I suffered so much, just like you did!," and in your book your childhood is so blissful, I wondered if people were going to identify with you at all.

Well they did, but only to a certain extent. For us it was a very happy period, after the First World War, until up to 1934, and Hitler's rise to power and... Well that's History, but those things were happening far away anyway, we did not know about them. We were just happy children.

A sheltered life?

No, not a sheltered life, it was a simple, primitive, peaceful life in the country. We had no telephone, no television, there was only one motorcar in the village and that was my father's. We lived like *paysans*. We didn't know what was happening in the world, even fifty miles away; London was fifty miles away.

You have always been known as a rather "secretive" person, someone who doesn't like to see his private life disclosed in the media; don't you feel that writing your autobiography under the circumstances was something of a contradiction?

Well people shouldn't have the right to pry into my private life.

Indeed, so isn't there a contradiction somewhere?

There should be, and I was very worried about this when I wrote *A Postillion*, but I gave nothing away of any importance about my private life, except my happiness, and it had such an enormous rebound, such an impact on my readers, it gave them such pleasure, that I thought, "well maybe I'm helping people;" there you are, "explaining" your life to people, you're someone who's lived an *extraordinary* life, as opposed to an ordinary life, which most people have to put up with, and they're surprised to find that you do the things they do, you have the same fears, you have the same pains, and if you cut yourself, you bleed!

"If you prick us, do we not bleed"? You're a human being, in other words.

Yes, and that's why I wrote my autobiography, and the three volumes of the autobiography are by far the most important. They helped people. Sometimes even people who are much older than me, say eighty-five, derive tremendous happiness from the books, because they remember things that I've written about, it takes them back in time. I only did it

because... Well I saw no reason to write about me and say, “Ha ha, look, I’m a film star, see how marvellous my life is,” which I haven’t done.

Well you certainly don’t glorify yourself at all.

No I certainly don’t, because it’s just my life; it was my life. I don’t write to say, “Oh I knew Jayne Mansfield or...”

Judy Garland?

Or Judy Garland, for example. The piece I wrote about her... I know, and the American reviewers have said, that it’s the best piece ever written about Judy Garland; well, that’s simply because it’s all true. It is absolutely true. She was maddening, impossible, but she was a real woman. Everybody’s written a lot of rubbish about her, but I described her exactly as she was!

You don’t go in for glamour at all.

No, I just described her as she was, and people discovered what she’d been like, even people who’d never heard of her, or maybe knew just her voice.

Well I for one had certainly never read anything about her which conveyed such a vivid picture. But to come back to what you were saying, about your autobiography being your most important work, that may be the case from the human point of view, but from the point of view of literature, aren’t the novels more important?

Well I don’t call my novels literature, Georges, I’m really very bad at writing. I’m still a novice, an amateur, and I have to practise all the time. I write and I write and I write... There was another wonderful woman, after Mrs X., called Norah Smallwood, who helped me a lot. She was the boss of Chatto & Windus. She died recently. And even now I write entirely with her in that chair, and hear her voice all the time, saying, “that’s good, that’s no good, you must do this, you mustn’t do that...,” she taught me so much. “You mustn’t use too many adjectives, you mustn’t use too many adverbs, you mustn’t write anything which offends the ear, or the eye”. So I re-write everything constantly, and it takes so long! With the novels I tried three different ways of writing. *A Gentle Occupation*, my first novel, was a war story, it was a bit autobiographical, but it was real fiction; then I wrote completely “romantic” fiction, a story which takes place here, on the Côte d’Azur, a totally different story. I wasn’t going to write a second book about

the war, even if that's what I'm doing now, you can see the typewriter there. And the third one I wrote entirely differently, with no description at all. So I tried three different styles of writing; and the English critics, and my English readers, were very surprised.

Yes I was surprised myself. As you say there are no descriptions in West of Sunset*, and the style is rather cinematographic.*

I suppose you could say that, but what I wanted to do was to try this different style, with this book, which has all these elements of "bizarre". If you concentrate on the dialogue, you don't have to describe everything. People talking, as I know and you know from the cinema, can "describe" a place better than the narrator would.

This is certainly the case with West of Sunset.

It's very much harder to do, but it adds a dimension to the book, it's up to the reader to invent the surroundings and everything, and create his own Los Angeles. The American cover is awful, look (showing a copy of the American hardback edition of *West of Sunset*). The colours are so awful.

Why didn't they keep your drawing?

The drawing was a kind of pastiche too, a pastiche of Los Angeles.

This is typically American isn't it?

Yes, it's vulgar, and it's anonymous, it could be any book. There are too many colours anyway.

Coming back to the war, would you say that you discovered literature in the army as Rooke learns what life is in A Gentle Occupation*? There seems to be a parallel in the concept of initiation.*

Well I learnt life in the army too. I was once interviewed about *A Gentle Occupation* by a young journalist, he was twenty-one, and he said, "I *think* I like the book, but I can't identify with Rooke at all," and I said, "well, it's no good talking about it, the war is over and I'm three times your age," and so on. And he said to me, "but do you mean to say that I have to go through a war before I become really adult?," and I said, "well, yes, in a way, maybe it's not necessary for you, but it was for me". It's a very quick way of growing up. And you're never the same afterwards, nothing's the

same. So Rooke only comes of age in the war, he's an idiot, and the war changes him. If you want to use this analogy, life and literature, well you certainly always gain something from the war, and if you don't learn life in the war, then it's hopeless, you just lose it.

Did you choose not to write about the war in your autobiography in order to save the material for a novel?

No, only because I found it very boring to write about the war, and there was a certain number of things that I didn't want to remember. I didn't want to write about them, even the liberation of Paris. But when I finished the autobiography, the first or second volume, Norah Smallwood said, "why don't you write a novel?," I said I couldn't invent a plot, but she said, "try it, how about it?," she said, "listen, you haven't done anything about the war, you only touched upon it".

Yes, you only describe the training camp in... was it Yorkshire? But you don't go into details at all when it comes to the Java sea.

Yes, so she said, "why don't you write about the war? About your war, you have a lot of experience, you were in the war for six years!". So I did. The book was successful, and I was rather surprised, because I find it very boring to read about somebody else's war. So at first I thought that to write about mine wouldn't be a good idea.

Yes but it's different from the usual war novels.

That's right, yes, and it's a civil war too. *I* think it's very good. I read one the other day and I thought, mine is better!

Have you formed a particular conception of heroism? War heroes, heroes in novels?

Not particularly, no...

You wouldn't call Rooke or any of the other characters in A Gentle Occupation *a hero I suppose.*

No indeed. They are just characters. All the characters in *A Gentle Occupation* are doomed. For instance I knew when I started writing the novel that Emmie and Rooke would never make it. Rooke is given a warning by the General. The General says to him, "it won't work, you can't marry a half-caste," that was such a strong thing in those days. So they get

married, but it doesn't work, and I made sure that it didn't in *West of Sunset*; in *West of Sunset* you find out that they died, between the two novels. But there are elements in the first book which show that they're doomed. Rooke is such an idiot, he's naive; after the end of the novel, after 1945, they go to England, and I knew it couldn't work. I know what the English were like. She's a foreigner, she's half-coloured, that's the worst thing you could be. Anyway he's an idiot, and she's a bore. And her daughter Lea, who appears in *West of Sunset*, is just as boring as her mother. She has no sense of humour, people of mixed blood often don't, they have too many things to worry about, so they take things very seriously. And I know perfectly well that Lea and Jonathan in *West of Sunset* are just as doomed as Emmie and Rooke. Look at Jonathan's record, who trails after Alice, and marries that wretched girl and it doesn't work, and then he meets Lea... He's pretty weak; he can't fight anything, he can't even fight the American producer Shapiro.

Do you know that the producer of Dynasty *is called Shapiro?*

They all are.

In the novels you present your characters in a more sympathetic way than in this interview.

Well it depends how you read them. If you read them once, quickly, and then forget about them, yes, But on the other hand if you read them carefully, you discover the *strata*. The books are much more complex than they seem, that's why it's so difficult to translate into French.

Yes I suppose there's just one level in the French translations.

I thought the translation of *Voices in the Garden* wasn't bad actually; but you see, it's very difficult to translate. Even in England it's hard for some people to imagine that a woman like Cuckoo, in *Voices in the Garden*, existed, or indeed exists. I know three Cuckoos, and two of them served as models for mine. They're both still alive, one is seventy-five and the other one is ninety. They're very *Ancien Régime*. They *are* like that, they speak like that; but you can't recapture it all in French, the happy surface and the sadness underneath, the despair, the misery. In English it's fine, it works very well, I get letters from people saying, "I hate the book, but why am I sitting here in floods of tears because I discovered that Cuckoo is going to die?" I love it, it's a very big compliment. And I get these from *young* people.

Well it is *very moving.*

It's supposed to be.

And would you say that there is no hope for Leni and Marcus either?

That's right. They are finished. Leni will go back to Germany, and Germany will be practically reunited. You know what's happening in politics now, and I wrote the book years ago. East and West are beginning to come closer. I know Germany very well. Leni will go back to the family estate, go back to her life there. And Marcus couldn't exist there. He has no talent, he has nothing. What has he got?

A body.

A body, yes. And he's got no intelligence. He doesn't even realise that Cuckoo has fallen deeply in love with him. He vaguely feels that something has happened, but he's never quite sure what. He walks around looking beautiful, wearing a *cache-sexe*, but that's all he's got; that and a second hand furniture shop. If you work it out carefully from that point of view, there's no future for them at all. And Leni is much too tough anyway, she's a sensible girl really. She tried to get away, but she has a much stronger family *pull*, she has a base. Marcus has nothing, he's got stupid parents and no education to speak of... He's just a perfectly *nice* young man, and he'll end up being like his "uncle".

"Nice" is a horrible word, isn't it?

Yes, it is a horrible word, precisely.

But you don't impose this view on the reader, do you? You are aware of the fact that many readers will believe that your characters will marry and have lots of children and live happily ever after.

Of course, I'm perfectly aware of it.

Good novels should always be open to more than one interpretation.

Yes. I always want to be a bit ambivalent. Not everyone is bad, not everyone is good, but I don't believe that you think, in your heart, you Georges, that Leni and Marcus are going to be happy, or that Emmie and Rooke are going to be happy, or that Cuckoo isn't going to die and Charles isn't going to be all alone. Life isn't like that, life is *triste*.

Yes, they are very sad books.

They are, I must try and do something about it.

We were talking about Marcus, and his beauty, but all your main male characters are blond and blue-eyed, long-legged and broad-shouldered, does this correspond to any particular aesthetic ideal of yours?

No, it's simply based on Michelangelo's David, and all that. Generally speaking, in the Anglo-Saxon world, a beautiful boy is nearly always blond and blue-eyed. A dark, Spanish-looking or Italian-looking man, with brown eyes, has a different connotation for the English reader; a connotation of passion.

The Latin lover.

Yes.

Well, they're successful as well.

Yes, but not in the same context. I don't remember describing Marcus so much.

Oh you do, in fact the whole book revolves around his being blond and blue-eyed, because he looks like l'Aiglon.

Oh yes, that's right. That's why there's l'Aiglon there (pointing to a picture on the wall). I had to describe him looking exactly like l'Aiglon. He *couldn't* have dark hair.

Does this correspond to any particular historical interest of yours?

Yes, I've always been fascinated by the whole of the Napoleonic period, like Charles in the book. The story of l'Aiglon is so appallingly sad. I went into the palace, at Schönbrunn, where he spent his life. We were allowed to visit it. We were in costume and the chap showed us all the rooms, and the room where l'Aiglon died. He had a little sparrow that he'd tamed and it was his only friend, he'd trained it to come on his shoulder and he fed it. And his tutor and everybody were trying to get rid of him. They poisoned him in fact. The sparrow is still there today, stuffed, in a little glass thing. And I thought, "God, the months in this room with this tiny sparrow as his only friend, his only contact with the outside world!" That's

romantic you see, I find it very romantic. That's why I wanted to put l'Aiglon in the book.

Well it does seem to be a favourite interest of yours.

You can only write about what you know, you have to use the limited area of your own experience. I can't invent things altogether, so I have to write about things I know, and that's limited.

Does this mean that all the characters in your novels are based on real persons?

More or less, yes. Some people are not very happy about this. But you take a bit of someone, and a bit of someone else, you mix them up... You pick up lines that you hear, you see someone do something. It's an actor's eye for observation. I keep notes, I've got piles of them, notes and notes and notes.

So your acting career has influenced your writing.

Oh yes, of course. After all as an actor you have to observe, and then you have to apply to yourself the things you've observed, you "regurgitate" it. As an actor I did everything from observation.

It does show in your books, and as I said West of Sunset *is I think very cinematographic.*

Yes I suppose it's a bit in the form of a script. But as I told you before I wanted to experiment, I wanted to use strictly dialogue, to convey everything, and build up a story only through what people say, and show certain aspects of Los Angeles. It was a part of LA I'd never been to, until two years ago. I discovered Venice, and I saw the place where all those people had lived. Stravinsky, Brecht, Lenya, Isherwood, they'd all gone as far as they could get away from Germany. But the moment the war finished they all left.

Apart from Isherwood.

You're right, yes. I met him, and I said to him, "have you been back to Berlin?"

You like his Berlin stories?

Oh yes, and I went to Berlin many times, like four years ago when I was working with Fassbinder. And Isherwood said he'd never been back.

Since the thirties?

That's right. He knew that it had changed so much. Nothing remains of the Berlin he'd known. Then I realised that he'd been there all these years, sitting up in his room with his lover, and he was terribly out of touch. They're all like that. Mrs Miratova was like that. She's dead now, but her daughter is exactly the same!

That's no real name, is it?

No, but the woman existed. Miratova is the name of the woman who played the lead in the original version of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

But hasn't Isherwood come close to the vision of California that you express in West of Sunset*, in some of the books he's written in recent years?*

Well he knows about California very well.

Yes, and also some of the sordid aspects...

Oh that he would know, yes.

You describe many of them yourself.

Well I was an Englishman, and it never occurred to me that I couldn't walk in Venice, and I went there, and I went to the black quarters, and it was very strange. I talked to people and I said, "good morning".

As opposed to "Hi!"?

Yes, and they said, "you're British?," and then it was a whole new scene. I realised then the amount of hatred that there is in California. They hate the Jews, they hate the Poles, they even hate the Pope! They hate everybody! They're all terrified, they all live in cages, they really do. The cage Mr Shapiro lives in is based on Bob Wagner and Natalie Wood's house. Bob has left it now, and Natalie is dead, but they lived like this. And Natalie was in despair. She felt terrible. She would say, "I can't even cross the street to the mailbox!". Natalie was Russian, well, her parents were

Russian, she wasn't born in America. And she was very European. She used to say that the biggest treat for her was to put a scarf over her head and go to the movie house and eat pop corn. She wanted to get the kids out of this cage, and move to a quiet farm, and bring them up the way they should be brought up, as she'd been brought up. But she was waiting for Bob to finish his television series. And then she died. It's all real, and it *is* sordid. It's awful.

I suppose there are as many sordid aspects in rich people's lives as in poor people's.

Yes. I remember talking to a very old woman in Palm Springs, and she said, "oh it's so long since I saw you, what are you doing on Sunday?," I said, "on Sunday I'm going down to Venice". There was a terrible silence, and then she said, "Venice, where's Venice?," and I heard myself saying, "it's west of Sunset," and she said, "there is nothing west of Sunset, you mustn't go there, it's a terrible place. I don't even know where the fuckin' place is and I've lived in Hollywood for forty-five years".

Why are there always sordid elements in your novels? Why is there for instance always a sadomasochistic character in them?

Is there? Well you can't write like Jane Austen today, can you? You can't write sweet, charming novels.

There are contemporary novels which don't necessarily deal with such characters. West of Sunset*, for instance, revolves entirely around that man, Hugo, who's dead, and who had the most extraordinary sex life.*

Well everybody thought he was such a nice person, and then they discover what he was really like. And it shows how the city can corrupt people, how Los Angeles can corrupt people, destroy people.

Corruption is at work in Voices in the Garden *as well.*

The only corruptive force in *Voices in the Garden* comes from the people who arrive in the yacht, it's the outer world. Cuckoo is living in a world of pretence, Leni is living in a world of pretence, she's pretending that she's Leni. And she knows perfectly well that once Marcus meets the people on the yacht he'll find it all irresistible; and she doesn't want him to find out that she's really the Countess von Lamsfeld. But the people on the yacht are the destructive force coming in.

Yes, and the conclusion of it all is highly moral, isn't it? Marcus could have gone along with the Italian director. He could have gone along with Grottorosso's scheme, but instead he refuses, and even teaches Grottorosso a lesson, it's all very moral!

Oh yes it's perfectly moral. He realises that the man has destroyed people, that he would destroy him too, that he would do anything to get what he wants. It is moral, because Grottorosso is the one who is destroyed. The evil is destroyed by the good.

Precisely, and I wondered how deliberate this was.

Oh perfectly deliberate. I lived in Rome for two years, before I came to live in France, and there the corruption was everywhere, I don't mean only sexual corruption... Corruption was everywhere, every contract you had, everything you did... It was impossible. The evil, the corruption was unbelievable; for me anyway, but then I lived as a perfectly ordinary Anglo-Saxon idiot. I believed that you had to tell the truth, be honourable and pay your debts. That's the way I was brought up.

So your books may not have real happy ends, but they do have moral ends, at least I'm convinced that this is how many of your readers see them.

Yes I suppose so; all the sheep have gathered together, they're all safe in their little worlds. If you read the book at face value.

I wondered how aware you were of this possible interpretation.

I'm very well aware of it. But sometimes, out of the blue, I get a letter which is different from all the others, a letter from someone, somewhere, who knows what I'm talking about, and understands my novels, and that's fine. I got six or seven of them, in years. On the other hand I *am* writing for an audience who went to see me in the movies for more than thirty years; a female audience, they wear hats like *meringues*, and they're very sweet and they think I'm lovely. They love *A Postillion* but they hate the novels...

Perhaps because of the sordid elements I was talking about.

Oh it's not that they find them sordid, they just don't understand them, that's all. But I don't see that there's anything particularly sordid in *A Gentle Occupation* for instance.

Well what about Weathersby and his weird sexual habits?

Oh, he's just a silly little wretched creature. Two months ago, in the papers, a man and a woman made the headlines, a couple in their late forties. The only way they could have sex was if he put on a raincoat and a hat to look like Humphrey Bogart, and she would wear a Lauren Bacall wig. This is all true. She would say, "play it again Sam," and then they'd have sex.

Maybe she said, "you got a match," as well.

Yes. Well, you see what I mean? Even the most ordinary people... They were perfectly ordinary people from Stockport or somewhere, So one day he got fed up with the game, he didn't want to do it, so she hit him, and killed him. Now if that's what you mean by "sordid," then all right Weathersby *is* sordid.

Don't get me wrong; when I use the word sordid, it's not even especially derogatory or anything; I'm not setting myself up as a moraliser.

Well, maybe we don't apply the same meaning to the word. The war is sordid, a civil war is sordid. Very much like that miners business, they stoned a man to death, like Saint Stephen. That's sordid. On the other hand, life would be very boring if it didn't have sordid elements, life is not all nice and sweet. All kinds of funny people do all kinds of funny things. And all I tried to do in my novels was to try and remember as many things as I could, things I'd been through, things I'd seen. I said to myself, "this is who we are, this is what we do". And out of this mixture of good and evil, ugliness and beauty, I got the material for my novels.

And you don't think there's any hope for any of your characters...

No I didn't say that, I said there's no hope for Leni and Marcus, for example, as Leni and Marcus; maybe Marcus will go off with a rich American lady or something, and Leni will go her own way, but there's no hope for them together. There is no hope for Emmie and Rooke either; they're romantic, and it's all happening in the middle of a chaotic war, but when they go to England, they will have to face all the things that General Cutts warned them about. They will have to face people like Mrs Bethell-Wood, who still exist.

Yes, Mrs Bethell-Wood is horribly representative.

She is, yes, and people like that still exist. Being the writer, I knew that they wouldn't survive. I had written three other chapters, at the end, but I was told it was too long and I had to leave them out; but it's enough to know that Miss Foto goes away... She's based on a real woman, you know. In fact that woman is still alive, she's married to an Englishman! I met a man at a party five or six years ago, his name was Rowlands or something, and he said to me, "I believe you met my wife, a long time ago, she speaks very well of you". And I said, "Mrs Rowlands... No I don't think so," and he said, "oh yes, but you knew her by the name of so and so". My heart absolutely sank. I didn't want to see her again. And she knew better than to come and see me. I had to do to her what Rooke does to Miss Foto, I had to make sure that she got out of the island.

So when you started writing the book you knew that Emmie and Rooke wouldn't survive?

Oh yes.

But did you know then that you were going to use the character of Nettles again, and explain that Emmie and Rooke had died?

No, I only did this because one day Norah Smallwood said to me, "why don't you use Nettles again, you haven't killed him off in *A Gentle Occupation*, and he's one of the best characters in the book. He's an amusing, adorable character". I said to her, "well, he's a very *peculiar* character". She was a very respectable English lady, you know. But she knew he was a peculiar man, she said, "yes, but he's a very cultured man, with a lot of charm".

And kindness too.

And kindness, yes, so I brought him back, and some people wrote to say, "oh it's lovely to find Nettles again!"

This is the only vague glimmer of hope in your novels, in the most sentimental sense of the word. Nettles is back on the scene, alive and well, and he's found some sort of happiness.

Ah yes, but he loses it, because Lea is going to marry Jonathan.

Ephemeral bliss, yes; but it is encouraging, and Nettles is a very endearing character.

Well yes and he's very brave too, especially when he forces Rooke to shoot "The Boy," he forces Rooke to break his youth and do that one thing which will make a man of him. He *makes* him become an adult at last. He says something like, "for God's sake, shoot, come of age!," doesn't he? He doesn't want to shoot "The Boy" himself, he wants Rooke to do it.

Isn't it also because he particularly wants Rooke to save his life?

No, I don't think so.

Well he's still in love with him.

Yes but he's lost Rooke anyway, he's lost him for ever. It will never be a physical love anymore. I like the scene when Nettles comes into Rooke's bedroom and trips over the stuffed crocodile, and Rooke thinks there's a terrorist in his room. It makes me laugh tremendously. I'm afraid it doesn't make the ordinary reader laugh, though, he takes it very seriously. And Emmie is just a few yards away shutting her windows. They're just a little way from each other all the time.

Could you tell me something about the titles of your novels? The title A Gentle Occupation *is a pun which works on several levels, isn't it?*

Yes, *A Gentle Occupation*... It's ironic. I think Nettles says it, he says, "my war is a gentle occupation". It applies to the occupation of the Japanese as well. The Japanese did arrive back there on a Saturday night at the dance, and there was not one shot fired. And they were very nice for one year. It was a gentle occupation. It's only a year later when the war was going badly for them that they put people in concentration camps.

Doesn't it apply to the British as well? The Indonesians felt they were being occupied by the British...

Well yes, and so did the Dutch. The title works equally well when it comes to Miss Foto: she ran a bordello during the war, and hers was a very gentle occupation.

What about the title Voices in the Garden*? There's a book by an American novelist, John Sedges, called* Voices in the House...

Well yes there's also the book *Statues in the Garden*, but *I* got it from the poem by Robert Browning which I used as an epigraph. As for *West of Sunset*, we already talked about it; there is nothing west of Sunset, it's a book about "negativity," you see.

You once said it was a Gothic novel...

Yes. I mean by Gothic novel that's it's dark and strange, it has some of the traditional elements of a Gothic novel, and it has the structure of a Gothic novel to a certain extent.

Were you influenced by any writer in particular?

I have been influenced by some writers, of course, who isn't? But I don't want to be too influenced. I never read when I'm in the process of writing, I'm terrified, that I might be too influenced...

Well there isn't any really traceable influence in your books. Your style changes each time, but each time it is quite individual.

Well I do want to find my own style, yes. I didn't know that I was going to write other books when I finished *A Postillion*, that's why I stuck that last chapter at the end.

Yes it's not entirely welcome.

I had no idea that I was going to write other books.

That's very interesting from the point of view of your creative process, to see how it developed.

Well that's just the way it happened. I had to put that chapter at the end because the people who bought the book wanted to know about the film star. So I had to stick it at the end to show what happened to the child I'd written about.

It's a bit like throwing a bone to the wolves.

Yes, and I wish I hadn't, now that I wrote the two other volumes. And it's been printed so many times! Every time I ask them, "please take that last chapter out!," but they refuse, they say it would be too short without it.

So isn't there a writer in particular, someone you admire tremendously?

There are many, I have many favourite writers, but I try very hard not to be influenced by them too much. I want to write in my own style, which is *essential*. I didn't think it would "take off," as they say, it never occurred to me that I'd become a writer. Now I'm trying to be "honourable," and find my own style. Of course I am *taught* all the times by better writers than me, and I try to "distil" what they have done for themselves, and see how it can help me. If I read Evelyn Waugh, or Graham Greene for example... The economy of Greene is so incredible, he can give you a complete picture in such few words! I myself want to cut to the bone; but unfortunately the average readers want more, their minds are not equipped...

They lack imagination?

Yes, they have to have *everything* written down for them. It's rather like those seed packets [pointing to a couple of seed packets on a table], you have to tell them exactly how to go about things. You can't infer, you can't suggest. As you say they lack imagination, or they're too lazy to use it.

Well it all depends on whether you address yourself to an élite or to the masses, doesn't it?

I address myself to both, but the "masses," as you call them, only buy my books because I'm a film star.

Do you really think so? Do you think that if you hadn't been the celebrated actor Dirk Bogarde your books wouldn't have sold?

That's right, the autobiography sells because it's about *me*, the movie star.

Yes but now you're entirely accepted as a writer, and not only by the critics.

Yes, I suppose so. *West of Sunset* was number two or three in the best-seller lists.

Yes I saw the lists in The Times*, it was number two.*

You mustn't trust *The Times* for that sort of things, you must read the lists published in *The Bookseller*. Anyway *The Jewel in the Crown* for example was number one only because it had been adapted for television. Paul Scott was never a best-seller before. I wrote to him, you know. I'd never written a fan letter to a writer in my life, and he'd read *my* book! We were supposed to meet but he died soon afterwards. All that time he'd been writing superb books; but he was never on the best-seller lists. It's only when he was on bloody television!

Even Jane Austen's novels become tremendous best-sellers when they're adapted on television.

Yes, so do Trollope's.

How would you feel about your novels being adapted for... the cinema, rather than television?

I don't think I'd like the result. Some People wanted to make *A Gentle Occupation*, but it's too expensive, there are too many characters, and the locations!

Well, Voices in the Garden *would make a good film, and all you need is a villa in Villefranche and a yacht.*

I would have liked to have made *Voices* here in France, as a French film, with Danielle Darrieux as Cuckoo.

But isn't she rather too Gallic?

Ah yes, but we could have changed all the characters to French characters, and Marcus would not have come from London, but from Paris or even Lyon. Except Archie would have *had* to be English, he couldn't possibly have been French.

No, he's too quintessentially English.

That's right.

Talking about cinema, how does it feel to have one's picture on paperback editions of Death in Venice*?*

I've never seen one! I don't know, Thomas Mann is probably furious, turning in his grave.

Well, you have become von Aschenbach in the eyes of millions of people...

Yes, well, the paperback that Visconti gave me had a lovely cover, it was a picture of Venice, with a gondola, it was perfect.

And what about Despair*? Being a writer yourself how do you feel about your portrayal of Nabokov's character, Hermann?*

Nabokov is probably turning in his grave as well... *Despair* was not a very successful novel. So much so that Nabokov *gave* his son the rights to his book, I can't remember his first name, he works in the opera... Anyway, Fassbinder bought them and Tom Stoppard wrote a very good script. In fact Nabokov's son when he read it said, "this is as near to my father's work as can be". But things went wrong with the film, Fassbinder changed a lot of the scenes, he got bored with the film, it just didn't work... Now Pinter is somebody whose lines I never wanted to change. Because he's a genius, his dialogues are perfect... If you read his scenarios, they're just a straight line of dialogue, they're perfect. As for Thomas Mann, we shot the book, *Death in Venice*, there was no script. We used the dialogue of the English edition. The only thing that Visconti added was the bit with Schönberg, the artistic discussion. I only saw the film once, but I thought it would have been better off without it, it was a waste of time. Just take that out and it would be perfect. As for *my* books being filmed, I've seen what they've done to too many books.

Has anybody asked to buy the rights?

Yes, a few times, but I ask for thousands of pounds, and it discourages them.

***

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« Conservative Radicalism » : le roman catholique britannique contemporain

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À partir d'un corpus réunissant les plus représentatifs des romanciers catholiques britanniques, des années 30 jusqu'à nos jours, ce travail s'efforce d'évaluer les modalités de l'évolution idéologique et littéraire de cette production. Après une période d'orthodoxie morale et religieuse qui s'exprime par une conformité parfaite au canon du roman catholique (dans les années 50 et 60), les romanciers catholiques, dès le milieu des années 60, se révoltent contre l'autorité de l'Église et représentent leur désir de transgression au moyen de procédés distanciateurs empruntant largement à l'arsenal métafictionnel, afin de mettre à distance le modèle littéraire auquel ils s'étaient jusqu'alors identifiés. Cependant, avec les années 80, on remarque un retour vers la promotion de valeurs plus conservatrices (inhérentes à un regain d'orthodoxie), et les expériences métafictionnelles radicales sont mises au service d'une démarche conservatrice, dans un retour vers la communauté et ses valeurs spirituelles, selon les règles d'une esthétique de la discrétion et du détour.

L'histoire de la Grande-Bretagne est riche de tensions et de conflits avérés opposant catholiques et réformés, de rébellions et de complots alimentant les sentiments antipapistes, de décrets et autres lois pénales condamnant

les membres d'une minorité souvent persécutée à la clandestinité. Les dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles voient de ce fait une disparition de la culture catholique. Seuls quelques bastions résistent dans le nord du pays, autour d'une poignée de grandes familles de récusants, repliées dans ce qui est généralement connu sous le nom de « mentalité de l'assiégé ». Le dix-neuvième siècle démarre avec un mouvement inverse du pendule, dû à l'afflux de main-d'œuvre irlandaise venant s'établir dans les pôles industriels. En 1829, à l'époque où le Parlement vote l'abolition de l'esclavage, les catholiques britanniques reçoivent leur émancipation. La hiérarchie catholique sera rétablie en 1850.

C'est dans les années qui précèdent cette date que la culture catholique connaît un renouveau fulgurant, grâce aux artisans du Mouvement d'Oxford, et notamment à l'œuvre de John Henry Newman. Le nombre de convertis appartenant aux classes cultivées (certains d'entre eux illustres, comme Newman lui-même) ne cessant d'augmenter, une pression culturelle se fait jour, qui entraînera, avec Pugin, une vogue pour l'architecture gothique, et qui contribue à la mise en place d'une tradition littéraire, dès les années trente. C'est ce que nous enseignent les spécialistes de l'époque et du sous-genre du roman catholique dont les germes apparaissent dans la première moitié du dix-neuvième siècle.[1] Le lecteur contemporain a peu de chances d'avoir jamais entendu parler des œuvres de Grace Kennedy, de Mrs Inchbald, ou de Mrs Sherwood, auteurs de proto-romans catholiques qui contribuent à l'élaboration du canon tel qu'il sera défini, quelques années plus tard, sous la plume des Digby Beste, de lady Georgiana Fullerton ou encore de Newman. Les caractéristiques de ces romans sont celles d'une littérature d'édification qui confine au prosélytisme. Qu'il s'agisse de romans historiques (vision rétrospective et idéalisée des balbutiements du christianisme à Rome ou de l'époque de la Réforme), de récits ostentatoirement sentimentaux empruntant largement aux conventions du mélodrame (et censés être rédigés par des « lady novelists » s'adressant à un public féminin en mal de pâmoison), de textes satiriques tenant largement du pamphlet et traversés d'un élan polémique, le *corpus* de l'époque semble être caractérisé par un *topos* fédérateur, épine dorsale de la plupart de ces récits : la conversion. En fait, malgré les potentialités dynamiques de ces œuvres qui proposent une option progressiste (voire radicale) comme échappatoire au matérialisme ambiant et à l'assoupissement du sentiment religieux anglican, l'attachement à une tradition historique et religieuse, à travers la mise en place d'un retour à une tradition culturelle prônant elle-même un repli vers une communauté et vers un bercail (ces textes sont rarement exempts d'un souci de propagande), semble invalider les velléités progressistes des valeurs communautaires. Tout dans la littérature catholique de cette époque est héritage de la mentalité de l'assiégé, tout est subordonné à une

résistance au monde extérieur, tout est repli dans le sein de la Sainte Mère l'Église.

La fin du dix-neuvième siècle et le début du vingtième sont caractérisés par l'élaboration et le raffinement du canon. Des romanciers tels Montgomery Carmichael, Robert Hugh Benson ou encore Frederick Rolfe (plus connu peut-être sous le pseudonyme de Baron Corvo, auteur de *Hadrian VII* dont l'adaptation théâtrale connut un franc succès à Londres, dans les années 1970) préparent la venue de Maurice Baring, de Hilaire Belloc et de G.K. Chesterton (peut-être l'un des auteurs catholiques les plus lus grâce à l'immense succès de la série des *Father Brown Stories*), figures de proue de la littérature catholique britannique, avant que ne s'imposent les voix d'Evelyn Waugh et de Graham Greene, porte-parole incontestés de la communauté, des années trente aux années soixante, qui ont influencé les romanciers de la jeune génération, et dont le souvenir se retrouve jusque dans les romans catholiques postmodernes.

En Grande-Bretagne, les années cinquante et soixante sont en effet marquées par une vogue insolite pour le roman catholique et, comme l'explique David Lodge dans une évocation de cette époque, pour le caractère exotique de la communauté : « to identify oneself as a Catholic at University College London was to strike a rather interesting almost exotic pose before one's peers. » [2] C'est l'époque où *Brideshead Revisited* d'Evelyn Waugh, *The Power and the Glory, Brighton Rock, The End of the Affair* ou encore *The Heart of the Matter* de Graham Greene fournissent au lecteur un complexe de personnages, de situations, de motifs et autres *topoi* à travers lesquels se construit une identité catholique reconnue par le lectorat et partagée par d'autres romanciers, qu'il s'agisse d'auteurs influents tels Anthony Burgess et Muriel Spark, ou de romanciers plus discrets comme Auberon Waugh (fils d'Evelyn), ou de certains jeunes gens en colère tels le John Braine de *The Jealous God* et le David Lodge de *Ginger, You're Barmy*. De nos jours, après une période de déclin relatif au cours des années soixante-dix et quatre-vingt, le roman catholique est désormais associé aux noms de Piers Paul Read, de Muriel Spark, de David Lodge, de Michael Carson, ou encore de Peter Ackroyd, pour ne citer que les plus célèbres d'entre eux.

On peut toutefois se demander ce que l'on entend par la dénomination « romancier catholique », tant elle semble étrangère à certaines œuvres de David Lodge ou de Peter Ackroyd. Une définition se fondant sur trois critères (appartenance, contenu, attitude) peut toutefois être envisagée. Les romanciers catholiques appartiennent ou ont appartenu d'une certaine manière à l'Église, qu'ils aient été élevés dans la foi catholique (*cradle Catholics*) ou qu'ils se soient convertis (c'est le cas de la plupart des auteurs les plus célèbres, tels Newman, Waugh et Greene). Le contenu de leurs œuvres peut être explicitement ou

thématiquement lié à la culture et aux réalités communautaires, ou bien transpirer sous forme d'allusions, souvenirs, voire structures récurrents (ce qui revient à poser le problème de la reconnaissance explicite ou de la suggestion). Par ailleurs, l'attitude ou position idéologique de ces romanciers (reconstruite d'après les informations biographiques qu'en possède le public, ou bien à travers la perspective d'un auteur implicite) peut varier considérablement sur le spectre qui va de l'orthodoxie religieuse, communautaire et culturelle la plus rigoureuse à des manifestations hétérodoxes débridées (ce que Graham Greene formulait dans l'opposition entre loyauté et déloyauté). Il s'agit certes d'une définition très lâche qui, malgré son caractère apparemment panoramique, se fonde sur un critère fondamental, celui de la différence catholique, différence du membre de la minorité religieuse refusant de se fondre dans la masse anglicane et/ou sécularisée, différence de l'habitant du ghetto qui perpétue le complexe de l'assiégé et voit dans le monde la province du mal, différence du conservateur replié sur son expérience et sur les rangs de sa communauté et pour qui toute autre religion, confession, mythe ou idéologie prend des allures de radicalisme potentiellement apocalyptique.

Ce conservatisme religieux (et surtout socio-communautaire) trouve des prolongements dans ses manifestations et émanations culturelles. Être fidèle à une communauté et à une culture passe souvent, dans les romans des années cinquante et soixante, par une conformité au canon du roman catholique. Cependant, dans une période de bouleversements sociaux et épistémologiques majeurs, cette attitude se trouve menacée, dès la fin des années soixante, par certaines crises internes à la communauté (le concile de Vatican II qui se termine en 1962, et surtout la publication de l'encyclique *Humanae Vitae* qui, en 1968, réaffirme le caractère prescriptif des enseignements de l'Église en matière de morale sexuelle), ou par un processus de sécularisation général, si bien que certains romanciers catholiques n'hésitent pas à rejeter publiquement les valeurs qu'ils avaient jusqu'alors épousées, bafouant l'autorité de l'institution religieuse et tentant de subvertir les conventions du roman catholique traditionnel.

C'est cette oscillation permanente entre acceptation et rejet qu'il nous semble pertinent de développer dans les pages qui suivent. Nous tenterons de montrer combien la redéfinition du roman catholique britannique contemporain se fonde sur un parcours qui, d'une position éminemment conservatrice, passe par une phase de violent radicalisme pour se stabiliser, au cours des deux dernières décennies, autour d'un radicalisme conservateur, à savoir un radicalisme qui sert de voile à un conservatisme constitutif, selon les règles d'une esthétique du détour.

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Que convient-il d'entendre par « position conservatrice », lorsque l'on évoque les romanciers des années cinquante et soixante ou, en d'autres termes, quelles sont les modalités de mise en place de ce conservatisme dans leurs œuvres ? Il semblerait que le *corpus* qui nous intéresse soit caractérisé (ce qui est en parfaite conformité avec l'esthétique de l'époque) par un parti pris foncièrement réaliste dont l'objet est de promouvoir la représentation scrupuleuse d'une communauté, de ses valeurs et de ses pratiques. Cette évocation est censée souligner une identité, à travers la description d'un milieu. Le lecteur catholique est ainsi séduit, en reconnaissant un univers familier, alors même que l'on offre au lecteur non catholique un univers potentiellement exotique et attirant, différent certes, mais privé de toute potentialité menaçante. Comme on peut le constater, les romanciers catholiques tendent à mettre en place une rhétorique particulière, c'est-à-dire une forme de persuasion insidieuse destinée à créer une illusion de réalité, à emporter la conviction du lecteur, à lui livrer un type d'enseignement de nature sociologique et religieuse pour, au-delà, resserrer la structure du tissu communautaire, voire mettre en place les conditions d'une édification.

Le succès des romans catholiques d'après-guerre tient certainement à leur évocation de situations extrêmes et exotiques, dans des pays éloignés, de préférence sous les tropiques, comme c'est le cas de *The Heart of the Matter* de Graham Greene, dont l'action se déroule en Afrique. Dans ce texte, la défamiliarisation liée au déplacement géographique offre un corrélat au mélodrame théologico-spirituel dans lequel sont pris les protagonistes. L'extrême éloignement évoque l'étrangeté, au même titre que le paradoxe sur lequel se fonde l'intrigue, selon lequel péché et sainteté sont deux aspects inséparables et complémentaires de la nature humaine.[3] Le roman historique retenant moins les grâces du lectorat, à cette époque, le dépaysement ne peut être le produit d'une rétrospection, mais Evelyn Waugh, en situant l'intrigue de ses romans dans le milieu de la haute bourgeoisie et de l'aristocratie catholiques, propose une forme d'exotisme tout aussi efficace, comme l'atteste le succès de *Brideshead Revisited*,[4] dont les protagonistes appartiennent pour la plupart à une grande famille de récusants, jouissant de l'amour, de la richesse et de la beauté. Ces ingrédients sont vraisemblablement destinés à flatter le goût pour l'exotique inaccessible du lecteur moyen et utilisent de ce fait les recettes rhétoriques fondamentales sur lesquelles s'appuie le succès des séries télévisées jouant sur le désir de prestige du spectateur.

À l'opposé de ces situations extrêmes, gage d'adhésion pour le lectorat en mal de dépaysement, certains romanciers des années soixante, séduits par le parti pris de réalisme social mis au goût du jour par les « Angry Young Men », se consacrent à l'évocation de la fraction laborieuse et urbaine de la minorité, pour se faire les champions d'un réalisme de

l'ordinaire communautaire.[5] Les procédés fondateurs de ce réalisme communautaire sont ceux mis au jour par les théoriciens du réalisme[6] : cohérence temporelle et spatiale, effacement de la source d'énonciation et démodalisation du discours, mise en parallèle de l'histoire des individus et de celle de la communauté ou de la nation, motivation psychologique, motivation des noms des personnages, etc. Parmi les procédés de prédilection, il convient toutefois de souligner le recours à la description, qui n'est certes pas l'apanage du récit réaliste, ni certainement du roman catholique contemporain, mais qui s'appuie, selon l'expression de Philippe Hamon, sur l'utilisation d'un « discours technologique ».[7] C'est ce qui apparaît à travers l'évocation de décors typiques, qui puise dans le vocabulaire de l'hagiographie et met en avant l'obsession communautaire pour le culte des martyrs, comme le suggère ce passage tiré d'un roman de John Braine :

> *Paul's eyes wandered [...] to the engraving of the martyrdom of the Blessed Edmund Campion which hung over the mantelpiece. The soldiers at the foot of the scaffold had all the same face, moustached and bearded and impassive; the masked executioner towered over Campion and over the minister who was pointing to an opened Bible. There was a smoking cauldron and an array of knives on the block.*[8]

Ailleurs, comme dans *The Picturegoers*, premier roman de David Lodge, le lecteur est gratifié d'incursions dans la vie quotidienne d'une famille nombreuse d'extraction irlandaise. L'accent y est régulièrement mis sur les pratiques pieuses et liturgiques, le discours technologique embrassant le bric-à-brac d'images, statues, bénitiers et autres chapelets (détails métonymiques garantissant la mise en place d'un effet de réel), mais aussi la phraséologie et le latin des prières. Ici, le discours technologique peut devenir métadiscours par citation et, surtout, réitération, procédé essentiel de la mise en place d'une rhétorique particulière.[9] Dans les exemples mentionnés ci-dessus, la volonté d'exhaustivité caractérisant la description réaliste est illusoirement respectée, à travers le recours à des scènes ou vignettes récurrentes qui prennent valeur de synecdoques et se transforment en emblèmes (on serait tenté d'ajouter en blasons, tant ces arrêts-sur-image textuels savent mêler le pictural et le métonymique) d'une culture communautaire. C'est en utilisant un discours technologique fondé sur la métonymie que les romanciers catholiques aiguisent et satisfont la curiosité d'un lectorat profane, en dévoilant certains des aspects de la vie de la communauté-citadelle. Les églises, presbytères, confessionnaux, chambres à coucher et écoles catholiques sont ainsi partiellement investis, révélant un peu pour cacher beaucoup et dissimulant pour mieux attiser la curiosité, comme l'attestent les chapitres d'ouverture du premier roman de Piers Paul Read,

Monk Dawson, consacrés à l'existence de jeunes gens, dans une *public school* catholique, vers la fin des années cinquante.[10] Toutefois, ce réalisme socio-communautaire n'est que l'émanation d'un réalisme générique moins destiné à établir une illusion de réalité qu'à reproduire une norme et ainsi promouvoir la conformité à un canon : celui du roman catholique.[11]

Le canon du roman catholique s'appuie sur quelques grandes constellations de *topoi* que l'on peut regrouper en cinq catégories : relations avec le monde, morale sexuelle, vertus, souffrance, foi et espérance. Les relations de la communauté avec le monde sont thématisées par divers traits qui ont en commun une forte valeur polémique, voire antithétique. L'objectif est en effet de définir la communauté comme essentiellement différente. Or la différence et l'exil catholiques, pour plaisamment exotiques qu'ils puissent paraître, se définissent par opposition à une norme, celle de la société et du monde : antianglican, anticommuniste, mais aussi antibourgeois pour être avant tout antimatérialiste, le roman catholique ne cesse de marteler le caractère essentiellement exclusif de l'identité catholique, et revêt de ce fait une coloration propre : celle d'un repli frileux sur la communauté. Cette tentation centripète peut prendre diverses formes, de la défensive jusqu'à la revendication. Toutefois, même lorsqu'un exotisme de surface en apparaît comme le trait caractéristique potentiellement connotateur d'originalité, il ne fait que voiler un conservatisme patent afférent à l'ancrage et au retour vers des valeurs communautaires, comme l'atteste l'évocation d'un pèlerinage dans le Londres des années cinquante, tirée de *The Picturegoers* : « It certainly was a curious experience to flaunt one's religion in the face of London [...]. It is such a bizarre situation, that it is difficult to believe that one is really there, really carrying a wooden cross through bustling, irreligious, unreflective suburbia. »[12]

Il est évident que les romanciers catholiques accordent une place de choix à tout ce qui concerne la question épineuse de la morale sexuelle (ce avant même l'avènement de la phase de permissivité et de subversion déclenchée par les décisions pontificales, dès le milieu des années soixante). Ils semblent de fait autant préoccupés par tout ce qui est lié au difficile respect des enseignements de l'Église en matière de continence, voire de chasteté, que par tout ce qui a trait aux mystères de la foi. Les romans posent systématiquement le problème du caractère irrésistible du désir et de la nécessité de la frustration ; ils sont peuplés de stéréotypes féminins figurant des Ève ou Marie-Madeleine tentatrices, de protagonistes masculins en proie à des dilemmes insolubles, tant il est vrai que, chez les romanciers catholiques, le péché de chair est le plus souvent représenté comme l'essence du péché, son strict épitomé. Les grands romans catholiques attestent une obsession pour tout ce qui concerne la morale

sexuelle et les relations entre amour divin et amour humain. Dans *The End of the Affair*, Graham Greene utilise le motif du pacte avec Dieu (une femme adultère s'engage en prière à renoncer à l'homme qu'elle aime, si Dieu prête vie à ce dernier) pour introduire la thématique du sacrifice sexuel.[13] Dans *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh met en scène la liaison d'une catholique et d'un incroyant, pour mieux souligner le retour à la foi et au bercail de Julia Marchmain et la conversion de Charles Ryder, le narrateur-protagoniste agnostique.

En outre, la valeur exemplaire d'un comportement vertueux est sans cesse mise en avant. Humilité, chasteté et responsabilité sont prônées à chaque page de récits qui chantent les louanges de la discipline et de la porte étroite. Les contrevenants à cet idéal de vie sont récompensés par une obligation au renoncement éternel (c'est le cas du narrateur de *Ginger, You're Barmy*, le deuxième roman de David Lodge), modalité d'un retour au bercail ou d'une conversion fulgurants : nombre de héros convertis marchent sur les traces de Paul, avançant sur le chemin de Damas. En effet, l'une des structures récurrentes est celle de l'agnostique converti, de l'hédoniste devenu ascète. Dans la plupart des cas, les évocations du péché, du vice et de la luxure (en dépit de la fascination potentiellement complaisante qu'elles impliquent) ne sont que prolégomènes à un amendement, faisant office de pur faire-valoir de la vertu triomphante.

Par ailleurs, le pas qui sépare vertu et souffrance est allégrement franchi. Comme le suggèrent les lignes précédentes, renoncement, frustration et sacrifice sont au cœur de la littérature catholique et entraînent dans leur sillage une attirance trouble pour la contrition, la culpabilité, l'expiation (le sacrement de Pénitence fournit la matrice de nombreux récits). Le renoncement et la frustration physiques, métaphores d'une souffrance morale et spirituelle, sont constamment exploités.[14] Ils sont le plus souvent subordonnés à une obsession pour le mal, un pessimisme antihumaniste qui voit dans la société la manifestation d'un monde déchu, une fascination pour la mort et pour diverses considérations de nature eschatologique.[15]

Ce pessimisme radical est bien sûr le plus souvent utilisé à des fins édifiantes, dans la mesure où la stratégie du faire-valoir consiste à souligner le mal pour rendre plus irrésistible la promesse du bien, à noircir le tableau, pour mieux mettre en scène la lueur de l'espérance et la lumière de la foi. En effet, le *topos* fédérateur du roman catholique (et qui par ailleurs en sous-tend le plus souvent la structure) est bien celui de la conversion. Qu'elle soit liée à une vocation, à un long conflit entre raison et foi, à la connaissance intime du péché, à la médiation de l'amour humain (le *topos* de la femme médiatrice de la Grâce est fréquemment utilisé, comme c'est le cas dans *Brideshead Revisited*, *The End of the Affair, The Picturegoers* et *Ginger, You're Barmy*), la conversion offre toujours

l'occasion d'explorer le mystère de la foi et, selon l'expression consacrée, les voies du Seigneur.

À travers l'utilisation d'un discours contraint propre au réalisme qui, à bien des égards, et notamment en favorisant l'adhésion et la crédulité du lecteur (par effacement de tout renvoi aux conditions d'énonciation et par le martèlement d'un discours technologique), devient discours de la persuasion et de la contrainte, les romanciers catholiques des années cinquante et soixante s'inscrivent dans une tradition précise et volontairement contraignante. Le respect d'un réalisme générique (garant d'une conformité au canon du roman catholique) atteste par ailleurs, par le biais de la répétition permanente de *topoi*, un désir d'immerger le lecteur dans un univers de valeurs communautaires (qu'elles soient morales ou spirituelles) afin de maintenir son contact avec la tradition ou de le solliciter. À cet égard, et même s'ils le font de manière voilée et euphémisée, les romanciers contemporains apparaissent tels les héritiers des propagandistes du dix-neuvième siècle. L'élément de conservatisme centripète est subordonné à une rhétorique efficace, qui brosse un portrait plaisamment exotique de la communauté, en créant (en parfaite harmonie avec les règles de la métonymie qui dominent l'esthétique réaliste) un ailleurs contigu, installé dans l'ici et dans le maintenant, suffisamment différent pour être mystérieux, mais assez proche pour rester rassurant. L'efficacité de son évocation est intimement liée à un parti pris réaliste dont le monologisme ne connaît pas de faille. À l'instar de Father Brown, le héros détective des nouvelles de G.K. Chesterton, la perspicacité catholique conduit toujours à la découverte d'une vérité unique et inébranlable. C'est cependant contre ce mur de suffisance que certains vont s'élever, en chevauchant le *Zeitgeist* radical et permissif de la fin des années soixante.

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Comme nous l'avons suggéré plus haut, et comme le répètent nombre de romanciers catholiques de la jeune génération, les décisions du Vatican qui réaffirment un quasi-*statu quo* en matière de morale sexuelle (concile de Vatican II et encyclique *Humanae Vitae*) entraînent force bouleversements parmi les rangs des catholiques. C'est autour de la question de la contraception, pierre de touche de l'autorité pontificale et institutionnelle, que s'affrontent partisans de la seule méthode du rythme (conformément aux prescriptions officielles et au respect de la loi naturelle) et adeptes de la contraception artificielle. La crise qui frappe la communauté et transforme l'attitude des fidèles, ouvrant la porte à tous les rejets et

déloyautés, entraînant de nombreuses apostasies, est longuement évoquée dans les textes des années soixante. Avec *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, David Lodge est l'un des premiers à s'intéresser exclusivement à ce problème, exploit qu'il réitérera beaucoup plus tard, au début des années quatre-vingt, avec *How Far Can You Go?*.[16] Dans ce dernier roman, Lodge se livre à une chronique de l'évolution de la communauté catholique, des années cinquante à la fin des années soixante-dix, pour mettre en évidence l'ampleur des bouleversements survenus au cours d'une trentaine d'années, et souligner le passage d'une mentalité conservatrice (celle de l'assiégé) à une culture de la révolte hétérodoxe. C'est ce qu'explique très clairement le narrateur envahissant – que les anglophones qualifient d'*obtrusive* –, tout au long du chapitre quatre (intitulé « How They [Catholics] Lost the Fear of Hell ») en s'adressant directement au lecteur pour le gratifier d'un exposé théologique sur un ton extrêmement didactique, et analyser clairement la disparition de la peur eschatologique garante d'une obéissance aveugle.[17]

Par ailleurs, de même qu'ils s'étaient appliqués à évoquer leur conformité de manière réaliste, les romanciers catholiques se transforment en témoins scrupuleux de la rébellion. L'apologie laisse la place à la satire, dans l'évocation des pratiques et valeurs communautaires. Certes, l'élément satirique existait dans les textes conservateurs, mais son utilisation circonstanciée était généralement destinée à souligner certains des travers les plus apparents de la communauté, de manière à créer une illusion de discernement, à écarter tout soupçon de complaisance, chez le lecteur profane. Désormais, la communauté et ses représentants officiels sont pris pour cible : anticléricalisme, désobéissance et rejet sont promus. David Lodge ou Piers Paul Read se plaisent à évoquer l'assoupissement du sentiment religieux, et ce que les sociologues de la religion appellent le processus de « banalisation » (dont on trouve un des symptômes les plus caractéristiques dans la superstition).[18] Dans *Monk Dawson*, c'est l'aspect actuariel des pratiques religieuses qui est fustigé sans ambages, au moyen de la métaphore mercenaire :

> *We all knew that most of us would end up as soldiers or business men but each one understood that above all these banal vocations there might be, just possibly, a call from God. It was not made quite clear to us that not all saints are priests and not all calls are to the clergy. It may be that the recruitment problems of the Church do not allow for such frankness and detachment: all armies have used press-gangs, and seminaries in Italy are happy to take boys from the age of eight. How many mothers are in heaven for the sale of their sons?*[19]

La satire prend également pour cibles les vecteurs de l'autorité et de la frustration. Il s'agit du clergé, comme nous venons de le souligner, mais

également des parents et de la famille, utilisés en tant qu'entraves aux velléités égoïstes – voire hédonistes – de l'individu (Adam Appleby, le protagoniste de *The British Museum Is Falling Down* est sans cesse déchiré entre son sens de la responsabilité familiale et son désir d'accomplissement personnel, et le fait que ses hésitations soient envisagées sur le mode humoristique, dans un roman délibérément comique, n'enlève rien à leur valeur de témoignage). Cependant, c'est peut-être Auberon Waugh qui s'élève avec le plus de véhémence contre les travers de la communauté, en jouant de l'ironie et du sarcasme dans une satire dont le ton confine souvent à la cruauté, pour dénoncer ce qui lui semble être la tare essentielle de la communauté, à savoir son hypocrisie, sa prédilection pour les bondieuseries mensongères et sa bigoterie. C'est le personnage de Lady Foxglove (peut-être l'héritière de la très pieuse et rigide Lady Marchmain, personnage de *Brideshead Revisited*) qui cristallise la haine du narrateur de *The Foxglove Saga*. Il brocarde ce stéréotype à grand renfort de zeugmes et s'attache à souligner la nature délétère du personnage à travers le *leitmotiv* de l'odeur de sainteté, dans lequel le sacré est dégradé par le matériel, l'abstrait par le concret, comme l'indique le passage suivant : « On the wall outside his window the magnolia was beginning to open, but its scent was drowned by Lady Foxglove's expensive odour of sanctity. »[20] Il convient toutefois de préciser que l'arsenal satirique utilisé dans la phase de révolte est constitutif d'un dynamisme polémique s'exprimant à travers une écriture du rejet et de l'antithèse.

Paradoxalement, il semblerait qu'une des formes génériques les mieux adaptées pour rendre compte de l'élan polémique soit celle du *Bildungsroman*, sous-genre qui permet de thématiser et de métaphoriser la remise en question de la filiation et de l'autorité. En effet, le bouleversement que connaît la communauté dans les années soixante et soixante-dix s'accompagne du rejet d'une autorité morale et spirituelle dont il convient de faire table rase pour lui substituer un mode de fonctionnement approprié. L'accès à l'âge adulte est régulièrement figuré par le biais de structures d'initiation, dans le cadre de romans d'apprentissage où l'évolution de l'individu semble être utilisée comme métaphore de l'évolution de la communauté. Avec *Out of the Shelter*, roman paru en 1970,[21] David Lodge s'intéresse aux aventures d'un adolescent londonien qui échappe à l'atmosphère confinée de sa famille catholique en se rendant sur le continent pour passer des vacances en compagnie de sa sœur, dans un Heidelberg encore occupé par les forces américaines, au tout début des années cinquante. Dans ce récit à la facture extrêmement traditionnelle, le protagoniste quitte l'abri familial, reçoit une initiation sexuelle, fréquente un monde différent du sien, et revient sur les nombreux préjugés dont l'a imprégné son éducation au sein du ghetto. Non

seulement il rejette les contraintes du passé, mais il s'invente un mode de vie hédoniste tendant à remplacer la culpabilité catholique par une innocence retrouvée, en dépouillant le péché de chair de ses associations peccamineuses. En conformité avec la structure fondamentale du *Bildungsroman* telle qu'elle a été identifiée par Jerome H. Buckley,[22] il met un terme à son apprentissage en retournant au bercail pour faire triompher les valeurs qu'il a choisi d'épouser, remplaçant notamment les certitudes de l'enfance communautaire par un scepticisme radical. Avec *Out of the Shelter*, Lodge utilise la forme traditionnelle du *Bildungsroman* pour, dans un récit aux apparences parfaitement univoques et policées, faire triompher l'incertitude épistémologique et une forme d'hésitation dialogique caractéristique du radicalisme de ces écrivains.

Un autre romancier contemporain, Michael Carson, a publié avec *Sucking Sherbet Lemons* le premier *Bildungsroman* catholique dont le héros est homosexuel.[23] L'itinéraire du jeune protagoniste est caractérisé par la découverte de son identité sexuelle. La première partie du roman est consacrée à la vie du jeune Benson qui s'est réfugié dans un séminaire et a épousé la voie de la prêtrise pour tenter de régler les problèmes afférents à sa sexualité. Son initiation aux plaisirs de la chair et la rencontre d'adjuvants libéraux lui permettent, dans les dernières pages du roman, d'accomplir sa quête et de retourner dans le foyer parental pour mieux répudier tout un complexe de frustrations et métaphoriquement dévoiler son identité à la communauté. Dans la scène finale, la danse dionysiaque libératrice du protagoniste figure son rejet de la communauté. Sa détermination est soulignée par la fin radicalement ouverte qui refuse de gratifier le lecteur d'une clôture rassurante. L'*excipit* promeut une homologation parfaite entre violence représentée (la rébellion du personnage) et représentante (la frustration des attentes de clôture du lecteur). Or, cette transgression d'une convention littéraire, illustration d'un malaise idéologique, n'est qu'un exemple parmi tant d'autres de la manière dont les romanciers catholiques métaphorisent la subversion d'une autorité religieuse par la transgression d'une forme littéraire traditionnelle, celle du réalisme.

Avec *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, David Lodge écrit un roman comique qui prend ses distances envers ses premiers textes scrupuleusement réalistes et adopte une démarche à bien des égards expérimentale. Ce roman, qui rapporte les tribulations d'un jeune père de famille catholique angoissé et impécunieux, se fonde sur une série de parodies ou pastiches de textes connus de la littérature britannique. On peut dénombrer une dizaine de passages utilisant des décrochages de nature hypertextuelle, et il est intéressant de constater que la majorité d'entre eux est consacrée à des auteurs catholiques : Graham Greene, James Joyce, Baron Corvo, Evelyn Waugh, G. K. Chesterton et Hilaire

Belloc. Le jeune Lodge fait parfois fonctionner ces allusions hypertextuelles en tant qu'hommages (en ce qui concerne Evelyn Waugh et James Joyce notamment), mais il n'hésite pas à utiliser les potentialités ridiculisantes et satiriques de l'humour[24] pour mettre en perspective la tradition dans laquelle il s'était fidèlement reconnu et inscrit jusqu'alors. Dans le chapitre six, où le protagoniste est en proie à une expérience cauchemardesque dans les magasins de la British Library, l'accent est mis sur l'obscurité et l'aspect labyrinthique des lieux. Les allusions au milieu des malfrats et autres marginaux chers à Greene abondent, ainsi que le thème de la poursuite, omniprésent dans des textes tels *Brighton Rock* ou encore *The Power and the Glory*.[25] Le passage recèle également une aspérité stylistique aisément identifiable tant elle est associée à la prose greenienne, à savoir la comparaison sylleptique qui associe le concret à l'abstrait en un étonnant raccourci : « He grasped the bannister like salvation. »[26] L'imitation, de par la concentration des traits distinctifs sélectionnés, prend un tour hyperbolique qui la fait pencher vers la caricature. Le ludique frôle le satirique pour signifier une prise de distance envers l'un des pères du roman catholique contemporain. L'admiration semble faire place à un désir d'affranchissement figuré par une mise en perspective, un doute qui envahit l'espace hypertextuel. La rébellion contre les enseignements de l'institution et de la communauté se trouve ainsi métaphorisée par une mise en avant de ce que Harold Bloom a qualifié, dans un essai devenu célèbre, de « anxiety of influence ».[27] En utilisant les potentialités rabaissantes et subversives du pastiche et de la parodie, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* s'en prend de manière discrète au mode réaliste, chaque décrochage hypertextuel pouvant être identifié en tant que tel par le lecteur, ce qui entraîne une subversion de l'illusion de réalité. Il ne s'agit toutefois que d'une des modalités de subversion du canon, forme parmi d'autres de rejet radical d'une institution, d'un système de valeurs et d'une tradition littéraire.

Une manière de mettre à distance le canon consiste à métaphoriser la subversion par rapport au genre en la déplaçant sur un autre conflit, celui qui oppose réalisme et métafiction. Pour s'affranchir des règles du « discours contraint », il est possible de violer la consigne d'impersonnalité associée au discours réaliste. Traditionnellement, auteur et narrateur doivent se montrer d'une extrême discrétion et masquer la source d'énonciation du récit. En effet, toute intervention intempestive du narrateur, dans le cadre d'un récit à la troisième personne, ne manquerait pas d'entraîner un débrayage et de réduire à néant toute prétention à l'illusion de réalité. Or, certains romans catholiques aux aspirations radicales et subversives n'hésitent pas à enfreindre les règles les plus élémentaires du *decorum* réaliste, par le biais de narrateurs à la présence pour le moins envahissante. C'est le cas de *Hearing Voices*, de

A. N. Wilson, dont la structure narrative instable repose sur le recours à deux narrateurs, l'un homodiégétique, et l'autre extradiégétique et hétérodiégétique qui ne cesse de mettre en avant sa fonction de régie, posant de ce fait à l'organisateur tout puissant du récit, à l'instar des narrateurs à la Fielding (« Besides, our narrative makes no claim to omniscience, certainly not to the divine omniscience with which the Pugh novels made such play. »[28]). Cette tendance à s'adresser au lecteur par-dessus la tête des personnages (« gentle reader », « gentle Catholic reader ») apparaît de manière plus ostentatoire encore dans *How Far Can You Go?*, de David Lodge, où le narrateur n'hésite pas à interrompre le fil de son récit pour se livrer à de longues digressions, sous forme d'exposés théologiques. Il se plaît à affirmer sa maîtrise de l'univers diégétique, en créant, nommant ou faisant disparaître ses personnages de manière ostensible, s'arrogeant les privilèges de l'omniscience et de l'omnipotence pour mieux mettre en avant l'artificialité du texte : « Let her be called Violet, no, Veronica, no Violet, improbable a name as that is for Catholic girls of Irish extraction, customarily named after saints and figures of Celtic legend, for I like the connotations of Violet—shrinking, penitential, melancholy [...] »[29] Dans ce passage, la convention réaliste selon laquelle les noms des personnages sont motivés, convention souvent respectée, mais ce dans la plus grande discrétion, est désignée en tant que telle pour souligner le statut du texte en tant qu'*artefact*. Ce roman, ainsi que celui d'A. N. Wilson précédemment cité, affiche un désir de transgression insigne, dans la mesure où il s'attache à juxtaposer les caractéristiques du discours traditionnel qu'il dresse contre les manifestations d'une déviance métafictionnelle patente, dans le cadre d'un même espace textuel. Chez A. N. Wilson comme chez David Lodge, les transgressions représentées qui envahissent l'univers diégétique (rejet de l'institution et de ses représentants) ont pour corrélat celles, représentantes, qui opposent deux types de récit, deux esthétiques. C'est ce qu'explique Patricia Waugh, au début de *Metafiction* : « Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to the ostensibly “objective” facts in the “real” world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality. »[30] Dans sa phase radicale, le roman catholique contemporain joue des valeurs d'une subversion représentée qu'il double et prolonge au moyen d'une subversion représentante. Il est en ceci en parfaite adéquation avec la définition de Linda Hutcheon pour qui le postmodernisme consisterait en une déconstruction d'une culture ou d'un système de valeurs de l'intérieur de cette même culture ou de ce même système, soulignant ainsi leur artificialité et leur statut de pures constructions.[31] C'est l'autorité morale non fondée ni totalement légitimée par les croyants qui est déconstruite de manière radicale, par le biais de décrochages métafictionnels notamment. Toutefois, il faut se garder de généralisations hâtives, et prendre en compte

la tendance à la réversibilité de la démarche métafictionnelle : derrière le radicalisme ponctuel (voire apparent) peut en fait avancer (masquée) une stratégie conservatrice.

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Le radicalisme conservateur des romans catholiques les plus récents (ceux publiés au cours des deux dernières décennies) mais dont les germes peuvent se trouver dans des textes antérieurs, se fonde sur l'utilisation de procédés textuels radicaux (comme la métafiction, sous toutes ses formes, qui permet de proposer une prise de distance par rapport au mode réaliste et d'en interroger les valeurs ou d'en réévaluer les potentialités) pour promouvoir indirectement une forme de conservatisme, sous forme de retour à des préoccupations morales et spirituelles que n'auraient pas reniées les membres de la minorité assiégée. Or, les temps ont changé. La société a connu de multiples crises, la communauté également. Par ailleurs, le lectorat a évolué : finie l'époque glorieuse où le roman catholique constituait une force littéraire avec laquelle il fallait compter, à l'intérieur mais aussi à l'extérieur de la communauté. Waugh et Greene sont passés de mode, la thématique du bien et du mal ne fait plus recette, pas plus que l'évocation de conversions et autres interventions de la Grâce. Par ailleurs, alors que les systèmes sociaux, politiques, économiques et spirituels semblent en proie à une crise sans précédent, à l'heure où tout semble lié à une instabilité radicale, vers quel centre amorcer un retour, et de quelle manière s'y prendre pour ne pas aliéner un lectorat potentiellement sceptique et blasé ? La réponse des romanciers catholiques semble passer par la mise en place d'une esthétique du détour.

Divers degrés de discrétion sont toutefois mis en œuvre dans l'entreprise conservatrice. Le retour peut en effet s'inscrire dans les textes par le biais de la structure du *nostos*, ou retour vers un point de départ (la fin de *L'Odyssée*, où Ulysse retrouve Ithaque, en constitue le paradigme). Ainsi, le *nostos* tend à métaphoriser sinon un repli vers le bercail, du moins un retour à la foi. C'est bien ce mouvement qui semble fasciner David Lodge, dans *Paradise News*,[32] dans la mesure où le roman s'intéresse aux modalités d'un départ et d'un retour dans lequel le strictement référentiel (départ pour Hawaï et retour en Grande-Bretagne) vient surdéterminer la dimension thématico-symbolique (le protagoniste est un prêtre défroqué qui amorcera un retour vers la foi en cours de voyage pour bénéficier d'une révélation divine dans la clausule). Dans *Paradise News*, le départ ne semble être utilisé que comme amorce de retour, et l'esthétique du détour

fonctionne sous couvert d'une métaphorisation de la (re-)conversion, à travers un itinéraire symbolique.

La même prédilection pour le *nostos* apparaît dans l'œuvre de Piers Paul Read qui, dès ses premiers romans, semble fasciné par les modalités de l'apostasie comme strict prolégomène à un retour au bercail. La structure de la plupart de ses récits peut se synthétiser de la manière suivante : un homme respectueux des enseignements de sa communauté (catholique) rejette les valeurs qu'il avait épousées dans son enfance (par le truchement d'une aventure extraconjugale, comme c'est le cas dans *Monk Dawson* et dans *A Married Man*, ou bien en raison d'événements extérieurs traumatisants, comme le montre *Polonaise*[33]) pour amorcer un amendement, un retour vers la communauté, voire vers sa foi originelle, dans les dernières pages du roman. Ailleurs, c'est la métaphore du parvenu qui prend valeur d'évocation discrète d'une conversion. Dans *The Upstart*, le parvenu social devient la pure image du parvenu spirituel qu'est le converti, la valeur négative du mot s'inversant radicalement dans son acception métaphorique.[34] Dans tous ces cas, l'accent est toutefois mis sur un conservatisme centripète, même si les modalités en sont évoquées au moyen de métaphores garantes d'un fonctionnement euphémisé.

En outre, il convient de s'attacher aux liens qui unissent métaphores et décrochages métafictionnels, dans le *corpus* qui nous concerne. Ce que l'on a coutume d'appeler la métaphore théâtrale, et qui correspond de fait à une métaphore du rôle, apparaît de manière récurrente dans les romans de David Lodge, de Piers Paul Read, ou encore de Muriel Spark, dans des circonstances censées souligner moins l'hypocrisie des personnages que leur artificialité, à savoir leur statut en tant que fonctions dans une intrigue, qui les transforme (et modifie métonymiquement, par contagion, l'univers diégétique) en *artefacts*. *The Comforters,* premier roman de Muriel Spark,[35] s'ingénie à déconstruire les conventions du roman traditionnel (et, très ostensiblement, celles du roman policier et du roman d'espionnage) en se fondant sur un paradoxe narratif selon lequel le personnage protagoniste, spécialiste du roman contemporain, est en proie à des hallucinations qui lui donnent à penser qu'elle est elle-même le personnage d'un roman, en d'autres termes qu'elle joue un rôle dans une intrigue organisée par une instance ontologiquement supérieure et potentiellement divine. Cela est largement suggéré au moyen de métalepses fulgurantes qui font fi de l'illusion référentielle et soulignent l'artificialité de l'intrigue. La multiplication des coïncidences troublantes (généralement utilisées discrètement et rarement en tant que telles par le récit réaliste) vient également appuyer le caractère convenu et préfabriqué du texte, mais moins pour s'opposer aux conventions du réalisme et s'élever contre une tradition littéraire que pour, au bout du compte, générer le doute chez le lecteur, en suggérant, au moyen de ce que certains théoriciens ont qualifié

d'« effet Borges-Brecht », que le lecteur peut être un actant dans une intrigue providentielle.[36]

Un procédé similaire est utilisé par David Lodge, dans *How Far Can You Go*?, à travers l'analogie entre narrateur omniscient, auteur, et Dieu, analogie qui se met en place par le biais de prolepses ostentatoires, d'intrusions narratoriales métaleptiques, etc. Les divers procédés convergent pour engendrer l'illusion d'une perspective différente, ontologiquement supérieure, virtuellement divine, et ainsi favoriser les interrogations de type métaphysique. On retrouve par ailleurs cette démarche chez Piers Paul Read, et plus particulièrement dans un de ses romans les plus aboutis, *Polonaise*, qui relate l'histoire individuelle et familiale d'un catholique polonais et la met en parallèle avec l'histoire de son pays et de l'Europe, au cours du vingtième siècle, et notamment pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale et les années qui la suivirent. Stefan Kornowski, lui-même auteur de romans, ne cesse de s'interroger sur la frontière ténue qui sépare fiction et réalité : « Everything could be invention—a case of a writer trapped within his own story. What a trial it was to be a writer—never to know what was real and what was imagined, like a blind man... »[37] L'analogie génératrice de trouble apparaît tout au long du roman, le personnage-auteur s'interrogeant sur les problèmes des fins de roman et de la fin de l'existence, et faisant part de ses obsessions téléologiques et eschatologiques au lecteur : « At death I may know how to end a story, but by then it will be too late to write it down. »[38] La fin du roman offre cependant une surprise de taille, dans la mesure où le personnage-auteur se dévoile pour révéler (fort discrètement au demeurant, et dans un seul passage, contrairement aux romans de David Lodge et de Muriel Spark, qui soulignent avec insistance leur obsession métafictionnelle) qu'il n'est autre que le narrateur impersonnel qui avait assumé, jusqu'à la dernière page, l'énonciation et la régie du récit :

> *What is the happiness that my characters unknowingly pursue? What is their innocence? Why is the narrator so sure that there is one way, one truth? That the other is evil and wrong? Is it a random preference with no significance beyond the gratuitous choice? Then why does he sit on the stone steps of the spiral stairs? Why does he dance the polonaise on the cliff top?*[39]

Le narrateur auquel il est fait allusion dans ces lignes est le narrateur hétérodiégétique du roman, mais aussi celui, homodiégétique, qui a toujours été identifié au personnage de Stefan Kornowski, l'auteur des remarques ci-dessus, consignées dans un journal. La dernière page introduit un renversement : celui qui n'avait qu'un statut de personnage devient aussi narrateur et révèle sa volonté et sa fonction organisatrices qui avaient été masquées jusqu'alors. Le texte dévoile, en dernière instance, la présence de deux niveaux narratifs là où le lecteur n'en avait identifié

qu'un, et cette forme de métalepse relance par contamination le processus d'interrogation métaphysique caractéristique de l'effet Borges-Brecht, dont les visées conservatrices sont renforcées par la conversion *in extremis* (au sens littéral du terme) du personnage principal, dans le dernier paragraphe du roman. L'objectif de *Polonaise* est certainement de mettre en place une perspective différente, liée à l'évocation oblique d'un niveau ontologique supérieur à celui du personnage et, partant, du lecteur. La métalepse, fer de lance de la démarche métafictionnelle, est ainsi utilisée à des fins d'investigation métaphysico-spirituelle, pour amorcer un retour vers un centre stable (le numineux) dans le contexte d'une extrême instabilité postmoderne. C'est pour cette raison que l'on pourrait parler d'une récupération et d'un retournement de la démarche métafictionnelle, originellement utilisée de manière subversive, ici mise à profit dans l'exploration d'une échappatoire à l'instabilité régnante. Dans le cadre de romans concernés par les *topoi* du *nostos* et de la conversion (même s'ils sont présentés de manière métaphorique), la métafiction est mise au service d'une démarche conservatrice.

Un autre procédé métafictionnel (fort discret cette fois, dans la mesure où il se fonde sur la mise en place d'une ironie décelable selon les compétences ou appétences du lecteur, sans pour autant lui être assené, comme c'est le cas pour les métalepses) est lié à la mise en place d'une intertextualité générique obsédante. Elle trouve ses racines dans les formes traditionnelles de la *comedy* et de la *romance*, toutes deux exploitées pour leurs affinités traditionnelles avec la littérature religieuse et avec les manifestations du spirituel, voire du divin. Comme le souligne Northrop Frye, la structure de la *comedy* qui aboutit immanquablement à une clôture euphorique, est au cœur de la littérature chrétienne et permet de métaphoriser le thème du salut (c'est cette structure qu'utilise Dante dans *La Divine Comédie* notamment).[40] Or, la plupart des clôtures des romans catholiques les plus récents, même si elles présentent parfois un élément de suspension, sont le lieu de triomphes éclatants que les protagonistes atteignent au terme d'une série d'épreuves dont le caractère initiatique est clairement suggéré. C'est le cas des romans de Piers Paul Read, qui se terminent dans la plupart des cas par un retour euphorique du personnage vers son épouse (*The Upstart*, *A Married Man*) ou vers sa religion d'origine (*Polonaise*), comme nous avons eu le loisir de le souligner plus haut. Dans ces textes, les conventions de la *romantic comedy* sont mises au service de la dimension religieuse pour illustrer métaphoriquement un retour vers un système de valeurs communautaires et religieuses. La notion d'intégration, comme le précise Northrop Frye, étant au cœur de la *comedy*, c'est bien dans sa communauté d'origine que revient s'intégrer le protagoniste aliéné (voire apostat), et les dénouements aboutissent le plus souvent (même si c'est parfois de manière apparemment nuancée) à une franche clôture

euphorique. Tout se passe en fait comme si le *happily ever after* social servait de véhicule à un *nostos* spirituel, dans le cadre d'une métaphore du pardon et du salut, gage d'espérance et de foi en l'existence d'un schéma providentiel.

En outre, le conservatisme oblique et voilé de la métaphore du salut est également utilisé dans le cadre de récits qui empruntent largement aux conventions de la *romance*. Depuis Nathaniel Hawthorne, il est généralement convenu d'opposer *romance* et réalisme, pour souligner combien ce genre s'accommode d'excès, en matière de sentimentalisme, de manifestations du surnaturel et du fantastique et, dans le cas des romanciers catholiques, du spirituel.[41] L'utilisation de certaines conventions de la *romance* permet de mettre à distance le réalisme social et phénoménal du roman, pour suggérer diverses manifestations du spirituel et du providentiel. C'est ce que fait David Lodge dans ses romans les plus récents, *Paradise News* et *Therapy*,[42] au moyen de scènes parfois critiquées pour leur mièvrerie et leur manque de plausibilité, qui mettent volontairement en danger l'illusion référentielle dans le cadre de romans essentiellement réalistes. Ainsi, dans *Paradise News*, la structure comique qui fait triompher l'amour des protagonistes et garantit leur union dans la sérénité s'accompagne de manifestations miraculeuses : le motif du vieil oncle d'Amérique trouve ici un avatar par le biais de la vieille tante hawaïenne qui lègue, de manière fort inattendue et opportune à la fois, une fortune considérable à son neveu, lui permettant ainsi de mener la vie de ses rêves. Dans *Therapy*, la dimension surnaturelle est introduite par le *topos* du pèlerinage qui permet de faire se retrouver les protagonistes longtemps aliénés sur le chemin de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle, où sont mises en scène plusieurs coïncidences aussi miraculeuses qu'invraisemblables.[43] De tels procédés, qui abondaient dans le roman victorien sans pour autant aliéner la crédulité du lecteur, se trouvent forcément mis à distance dans le roman postmoderne. Cela implique une perception ironique des conventions génériques qui se révèlent en tant que telles. Cette stratégie atteste paradoxalement un conservatisme à la fois culturel, moral et religieux qui, poussé à l'extrême (et surtout lorsque ces procédés ne sont pas consciemment repérés ni analysés par le lecteur) ressortit à l'effet séducteur d'une rhétorique et tend indirectement à chanter les louanges d'une communauté en en réaffirmant les valeurs (de manière oblique, voire insidieuse). En d'autres termes, les romanciers catholiques les plus contemporains procèdent à une ironisation du discours réaliste, à l'aide de décrochages métafictionnels, qu'ils soient strictement narratifs (métalepses) ou intertextuels (utilisation des conventions de la comédie et de la *romance*[44]), pour contribuer au dialogue entre mode réaliste et littérature religieuse. En pleine époque postmoderne, après que le canon du roman catholique a été radicalement déconstruit, le réalisme

traditionnel semble toujours convenir pour l'évocation de catégories strictement socio-communautaires ou morales, mais doit être dépassé en accommodant des stratégies métafictionnelles apparemment radicales, de manière à concevoir les modalités d'une interrogation de nature plus précisément spirituelle, elle-même subordonnée à un retour vers des valeurs communautaires longtemps rejetées. C'est de cette manière que, dans les romans les plus récents, le radicalisme est mis au service d'un conservatisme discret parce que suggéré.

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Les romanciers catholiques britanniques, dont les préoccupations et les choix esthétiques sont intimement liés à l'histoire de leur communauté et, au-delà, de leur Église, apparaissent, au fil de leur évolution, comme les héritiers d'une tradition clairement définie, qu'elle soit rejetée ou bien épousée, de manière ostentatoire ou discrète. Ils ont certes pu être taxés de radicalisme en raison de leurs options sociales et morales d'une part (comme l'atteste leur goût pour les manifestations de la permissivité notamment), ou de leurs choix esthétiques d'autre part (par adoption de conventions métafictionnelles largement caractéristiques de la littérature postmoderne). Cependant, il semblerait que leur conservatisme l'emporte, dans la mesure où ils utilisent généralement des outils radicaux à des fins conservatrices, comme nous l'avons souligné dans les pages précédentes, pour promouvoir, de manière certes détournée, un retour vers un système de valeurs communautaires (au moyen de la métaphore centrale du *nostos*, figuration des *topoi* du salut et de la conversion). Par ailleurs, leur conservatisme peut être qualifié de strictement littéraire, dans la mesure où les romanciers catholiques postmodernes ne cessent de s'interroger sur les valeurs, les aménagements et la viabilité du mode réaliste. Leur évolution au fil des quarante dernières années révèle en effet le passage d'une esthétique globalement métonymique, subordonnée à l'évocation réaliste d'une communauté obéissante ou révoltée, à un parti pris plus résolument métaphorique, à travers le recours à des procédés de distanciation métafictionnels garants d'un dépassement du mode réaliste et de ses préoccupations strictement morales permettant le passage à une démarche d'investigation spirituelle.[45]

Les romanciers catholiques semblent effectivement se reconnaître dans une tradition conservatrice d'édification, quand bien même elle est euphémisée à travers la figure du *nostos* et de ses variantes formelles et thématiques. À l'instar de certains romanciers postmodernes britanniques mais non catholiques, qui mettent en avant la faillite morale et

épistémologique des sociétés contemporaines et soulignent un sentiment d'instabilité radicale (c'est notamment le cas d'auteurs tels Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, ou encore Graham Swift), les romanciers catholiques s'intéressent à la représentation d'une instabilité envahissante (dans l'histoire du vingtième siècle pour Piers Paul Read, dans la faillite de la société contemporaine pour John Braine ou David Lodge, dans la relation au transcendant pour Muriel Spark), mais ils font œuvre de conservatisme en promouvant un retour vers une forme de stabilité, à travers les notions chrétiennes (et vertus théologales, dans le cadre de l'Église catholique) de l'Espérance et de la Foi. C'est en postulant implicitement l'existence d'un noyau dur de stabilité (et, partant, de sens) à trouver dans l'expérience de la foi (en d'autres termes dans l'existence d'un principe transcendant, certainement d'origine divine, et ayant vraisemblablement les traits du Dieu chrétien et catholique) que les romanciers évoqués au cours des pages précédentes font paradoxalement preuve tout à la fois d'originalité et de conservatisme.

La discrétion de certaines manifestations du religieux, dans le cadre des romans catholiques postmodernes, par gommage de toute conformité directe à la tradition et recours à des moyens d'investigation et stratégies nouveaux, pose toutefois le problème de l'identification de ces manifestations, et de la viabilité de l'esthétique du détour. La décontextualisation peut en effet entraîner une forme d'opacité, faute de références culturelles adéquates chez un lecteur non initié. C'est toutefois la voie de la discrétion que ces romanciers, encore potentiellement imbus de la mentalité de l'assiégé, et héritiers d'une tradition d'apologétique et de prosélytisme, ont choisie pour reconquérir un lectorat qu'il convient de former discrètement afin que triomphe à nouveau la mode du roman catholique.

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Notes

1. Pour de plus amples informations à ce sujet, voir Thomas Woodman, *Faithful Fictions : The Catholic Novel in British Literature* (Londres : Open University Press, 1991).
2. David Lodge, *Write On* (1986 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1988) 60. Dans un entretien accordé au magasine *Les Inrockuptibles*, l'auteur revient sur le prestige culturel de la littérature catholique, à une époque où se préparait la mode du roman catholique, en d'autres termes dans les décennies où Greene et Waugh formaient un lectorat spécifique : « Quand j'ai grandi, dans les années 40 et 50, le catholicisme était un élément très à la mode et très prestigieux de la vie littéraire ». David Lodge, « La culture des pauvres », entretien avec Sylvain Bourmeau, *Les Inrockuptibles* 42 (décembre 1992) : 70.
3. Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (Londres : Heinemann, 1948). Le dépaysement semble fonctionner de la même manière dans un des premiers romans de Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, dont l'action se déroule au Mexique. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (1940 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1985).
4. Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1962).
5. Le conservatisme de ces romanciers catholiques est d'autant plus remarquable que l'on pourrait s'attendre à ce que l'élément d'orthodoxie religieuse entre en conflit avec le radicalisme affiché par les jeunes gens en colère. Cependant, chez John Braine comme chez David Lodge, l'élément catholique permet de souligner une différence, d'amplifier le sentiment d'appartenance à une minorité défavorisée : ce qui est ailleurs utilisé de manière subversive devient ici modalité du conservatisme. Cette tendance apparaît clairement dans *Ginger, You're Barmy*, second roman de David Lodge, où l'un des protagonistes,

jeune homme très en colère, appelé du contingent et catholique fervent, déserte pour rejoindre les rangs de l'IRA et s'attaquer à l'armée, métonymie de l'autorité et du pouvoir de l'*Establishment* contre lequel s'élèvent Alan Sillitoe et Kingsley Amis notamment. David Lodge, *Ginger, You're Barmy* (1962 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1984).

6. Philippe Hamon, « Un discours contraint », in Roland Barthes *et al.*, *Littérature et réalité* (1971 ; Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1982) : 119-81.
7. *Ibidem* 147.
8. John Braine, *The Jealous God* (1964 ; Londres : Pan Books, 1967) 79.
9. De nombreux passages illustrent la tendance à la citation de bribes de discours religieux et attestent la récurrence de cette pratique dans David Lodge, *The Picturegoers* (1960 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1993) 50, 83, 107-12.
10. Piers Paul Read, *Monk Dawson* (1969 ; Londres : Pan Books, 1978).
11. Pour plus de précisions sur la notion de réalisme générique, voir Oswald Ducrot et Tzvétan Todorov qui analysent ce concept en termes de « conformité au genre et [...] conformité au type ». Oswald Ducrot et Tzvétan Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1972) 334.
12. David Lodge, *op. cit.* 177.
13. Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (Londres : Heinemann, 1951).
14. Un exemple de cette utilisation métaphorique de la souffrance physique est proposé dans le roman déjà cité de Piers Paul Read, *Monk Dawson*, dont une partie s'attache à évoquer l'existence monacale du personnage éponyme : « On top of the chest of drawers which contained his clothes there was an ordinary safety razor with the cheapest kind of blade. This blade was expected to last him a week—though some of the older monks with tougher beards were allowed to change their blades more often. Dawson, whose growth was strong, found that the blade pulled and pinched towards the end of the week but in this age when corporal penance was not permitted by the hierarchy, when hair-shirts were forbidden by the rules of the Order, he was glad that there was at least this slight pain to offer joyously to the Lord ». Piers Paul Read, *op. cit.* 39. En dépit de la tonalité satirique de ce passage (partiellement fondée sur la litote et la reprise ironique de la phraséologie communautaire), le protagoniste, après une excursion dans le monde de l'hédonisme séculier, rejoindra le bercail du monastère dans le dernier chapitre du roman.
15. Une illustration de cette vision eschatologique est fournie par le protagoniste du roman de John Braine, *The Jealous God* : « "I was brought up on it," he said. "We always have to live as if we were going to die the next moment. Once you realize that, you're free, you're more

than an animal walking upright, you're a human being." » John Braine, *op. cit.*174.

16. David Lodge, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (1965 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1983).
17. David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?* (1979 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1981) 113-27. Julian Ramsay, le protagoniste de *Hearing Voices*, d'A. N. Wilson ne rechigne pas non plus à former son lecteur : « They [Catholics] thought the Church had a specific teaching authority, given it by Christ himself and enshrined in the teaching *magisterium*, particularly though not exclusively in the Papacy. This was the reason for all the hullabaloo in '68 when the Pope finally published *Humanae Vitae* outlawing the use of any contraceptives, even the Pill [...]. This was what caused the row—the conservatives insisting on the Divine Guidance promised by Christ to the Church, and the liberals taking the view that the Church was only a human institution which might pray for illumination, but which *might get it wrong* ». A. N. Wilson, *Hearing Voices* (1995 ; Londres : Mandarin, 1996) 13.
18. Pour plus de précisions sur ce phénomène, traduction de l'anglais *trivialization*, voir Michael Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991).
19. Piers Paul Read, *op. cit.* 27.
20. Auberon Waugh, *The Foxglove Saga* (1960 ; Londres : Robin Clark, 1984) 28.
21. David Lodge, *Out of the Shelter* (1970 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986).
22. Jerome H. Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1974).
23. Michael Carson, *Sucking Sherbet Lemons* (1988 ; Londres : Black Swan, 1989).
24. Nous adoptons, pour cette brève analyse des pratiques hypertextuelles, les définitions et classifications de Gérard Genette qui, dans *Palimpsestes*, postule l'existence de trois régimes hypertextuels : le ludique (parodie et pastiche), le satirique et le sérieux. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1982). *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, roman comique annonçant les œuvres plus tardives qui assureront la renommée de Lodge, fonctionne essentiellement sur le mode ludique, même si ce régime peut donner lieu à des formes de rabaissement et de mise à distance potentiellement satiriques.
25. Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (1938 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1975).
26. David Lodge, *op. cit.* 90.
27. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1973).

28. A. N. Wilson, *op. cit.* 94.
29. David Lodge, *op. cit.* 15.
30. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (Londres : Routledge, 1984) 11.
31. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (Londres : Routledge, 1992).
32. David Lodge, *Paradise News* (Londres : Secker and Warburg, 1991).
33. Piers Paul Read, *Polonaise* (Londres : Secker and Warburg, 1976) et *A Married Man* (1979 ; New York : Avon Books, 1981).
34. Piers Paul Read, *The Upstart* (Londres : Secker and Warburg, 1973). On pourrait déceler dans cette métaphorisation sociale de la conversion une tendance présente dans les premiers romans de John Braine, même si ces derniers, publiés à une époque où triomphait le mouvement des « Angry Young Men », sont largement antérieurs aux textes qui nous concernent plus précisément. En effet, dans *Room at the Top* et dans *Life at the Top*, le schème de l'ascension (mis en exergue dès le titre) renvoie non seulement à une destinée sociale, mais encore, aussi paradoxal que cela puisse paraître, à un rejet du matérialisme qui fait triompher les valeurs du cœur et garantit le sauvetage moral du protagoniste. John Braine, *Room at the Top* (1957 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1959) et *Life at the Top* (1962 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1965).
35. Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (1957 ; Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1963).
36. Pour plus de précisions sur ce procédé métafictionnel promoteur de vertige ontologique et déclencheur d'interrogations métaphysiques, voir Gérard Genette, « Discours du récit », *Figures III* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1972) 245, et Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (Londres : Routledge, 1987) 197-8. Pour plus de précisions à ce sujet, voir notre article « Personnages en quête de lectures : *The Comforters* de Muriel Spark », *Études britanniques contemporaines* 12 (décembre 1997) : 65-82.
37. Piers Paul Read, *op. cit.* 341.
38. *Ibidem*, 273.
39. *Ibid.* 346.
40. « The theme of the comic is the integration of society [...] the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of Gods. In classical literature, the theme of acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury, and other deities who had a probation to go through, and in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation, or, in a more concentrated form, of assumption: the comedy that stands at the end of Dante's *commedia* ». Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1957) 53.

41. « When a writer calls his work a romance, it needs hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a novel ». Nathaniel Hawthorne, préface, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851 ; Columbus : Ohio University Press, 1965) 1.
42. David Lodge, *Therapy* (Londres : Secker and Warburg, 1995).
43. Pour plus de précisions sur l'utilisation des conventions de la comédie et de la *romance* dans *Paradise News* et dans *Therapy*, voir notre article « "Conservatively Ever After?" Clôture et représentation de la foi dans les romans de David Lodge », *Études britanniques contemporaines* 10 (décembre 1996) : 99-117.
44. Pour une analyse détaillée des relations entre postmodernisme et *romance*, voir l'ouvrage de Diane Elam, *Romancing the Post Modern* (Londres : Routledge, 1992).
45. Nous nous fondons ici sur l'opposition entre métaphore et métonymie utilisée par David Lodge dans *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Londres : Edward Arnold, 1977).