Fiction in a Fictionalized Society

Joseph Brooker

Raymond Williams' inaugural lecture at Cambridge in 1972 was entitled 'Drama in a Dramatized Society' (Williams, 1984). Williams' title is resonant for thinking about fiction in the twenty-first century. Its implication is that drama – on the formal stage of the theatre – now takes place in a much more crowded context of dramatic action and representation. For Williams these certainly include cinema and television, which have meant that 'drama, in quite new ways, is built into the rhythms of everyday life' (Williams, 1984: 12). An average person, he reflects in the early 1970s, will now 'watch simulated action, of several recurrent kinds, not just occasionally but regularly, for longer than eating and for up to half as long as work or sleep'; this, Williams asserts, must be 'a new form and pressure' (Williams, 1984: 12). As television viewers we seek word from '"out there"': 'not out there in a particular street or a specific community but in a complex and otherwise unfocused and unfocusable national and international life, where our area of concern and apparent concern is unprecedentedly wide' (Williams, 1984: 14). 'In the simplest sense', Williams avows, 'our society has been dramatized by the inclusion of constant dramatic representation as a daily habit and need' (Williams, 1984: 15).

Williams' thoughts are suggestive for an attempt to describe the world in which contemporary fiction makes its way. Such fiction takes its place in a world already full of fictions, of diverse kinds. The im-

mense generalization of textuality and self-expression facilitated by the Internet has altered the reading environment since the mid-1990s. To draw on Williams' lecture to explore this point brings an evident initial irony. Williams was writing forty years ago. By definition, what he describes cannot now be new. But it can give us an emphasis for the contemporary moment, while also cautioning us against reinventing the wheel and imagining that our condition is unprecedented.

New fiction enters a world crowded with fictions. Literature itself is a mine to be quarried. Intertextuality within literature is accepted. Texts bounce off other texts and gain traction from them. The historical novels of A. S. Byatt and Pat Barker depict worlds known partly from the literature of the earlier eras that they reconstruct. David Mitchell, often keen to take things further than his peers, has constructed an intratextual world of his own. Characters from *Ghostwritten* (1999), *number9dream* (2001), *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and beyond cross into each others' books, knitting the writer's hefty novels into a universe of their own. Texts from the past also inform our sense of life now. For many of us, that past includes the early twentieth century. One of the most dynamic areas of criticism in contemporary fiction studies has concerned what David James has dubbed the legacies of modernism. Henry James, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf are part of how we see and how we read: and they also inform how many contemporary novelists write (see James, 2012a, 2012b).

Fictions surround every writer and reader. We see fictional feature films at the cinema, on television, on computers or on other portable devices. Television drama, in its extended American forms, is routinely referred to as the major art form of the twenty-first century, or as having actually beaten the novel at its own game and supplanted it for cultural importance, emotional depth or social insight. Indeed this is a rather surprisingly high-toned rerun of an old rivalry, between page and screen, which would once have more likely centred on the displacement of prose fiction by televisual trash. Television – watched through various technological means – continues to contain such diverse forms of drama. They include comedy, soap opera (now stripped across the British week in a way unthinkable when *East-Enders* was launched in the mid-1980s), cartoons. Taking Williams'

sense of drama as an extended practice, reaching across social life, we could go further. The narratives that we consume also include advertisements (which Williams used as an example of the porousness of drama, in an age when an actor on TV might also appear in the commercial break [16]), the news and its analytical and satirical satellites, sport, public opinion.

None of these is straightforwardly fiction. Most of them significantly contain facts. But they are hard to insulate from fiction. It is difficult to say that Sky Sports' Premier League, or discussions of the public perceptions of political leaders, are just stonily factual. They also involve elaboration, narrative, projection. This was perhaps more clearly true of one of the major televisual experiments of the 2000s. Reality television was sold in part as being more real than drama. But it was life manipulated and mediated, rather than an actual slice of life that any of us could recognize. Its participants have fictionalized themselves. Those who were already celebrities, and those who have become celebrated for being on reality TV, have alike collaborated in forming caricatures of themselves. These have in turn been kept afloat week by week in another sea of fiction: the media of gossip and celebrity news.

The author who made the most deliberate effort to integrate fiction and reality, novel and news, was Gordon Burn. His very original book *Born Yesterday: The News as a Novel* (2008), braided together news stories from the summer of 2007 like the disappearance of Madeleine McCann and Gordon Brown's succession of Tony Blair. Burn suggests patterns and narratives in the news, and highlights the way that the media define and construct what is news at all. The best-known novel of the news in the last decade, though, was that peculiarly divisive novel, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005). The book retains interest as an attempt to render the contemporary, or the immediately recent past: an attempt less original than Burn's, but still distinctive. In McEwan, the media is a background noise or mood music, the News 24 screen a pulse or leitmotif as Big Ben was for Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

Digital technology is the factor that has most evidently distinguished twenty-first from twentieth-century life. The sequence now includes the personal computer; the broadband connection; the

mobile phone, and latterly the smartphone; the travelling Internet, interactive map, photos that can instantly be despatched around the world. The Internet has meanwhile generated its own textual forms. They include the mailing list; the weblog; the messageboard; the podcast. Then the social network, one after another, perhaps reaching an apotheosis, at the time of writing, with twitter's particular way of covering the world in instant words and pictures. Even in real life – or IRL – new formats of behaviour have accompanied digital development: from flash mobs generated on railway concourses, to the social movements famously coordinated online, in Cairo or San Francisco.

These technologies have not necessarily created novels – though some have done. In that category we can name Jennifer Egan's *Black Box* (2012), published on twitter; and E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), an immensely successful sequence that grew from online fan fiction. The Internet has also spurred people to write novels who would not otherwise have done so. NaNoWriMo – National Novel Writing Month – takes place each November, and despite its name is international. Clearly this vastly expands the number of novels and novelists. More precisely, it surely expands the number of *bad* novels. There is a general penchant for quantity over quality here: NaNoWriMo's website proclaims that the word count for 2011 is 3000 million, but has no interest in telling us how many good sentences were produced or what they sound like. But in this instance, at least, the World Wide Web is encouraging not just alternative literary forms but more novels in their own right.

Literary forms and digital technology will continue to interact and combine. The blog can be a way of writing a novel; and the weblog itself, by an individual or many hands, can perhaps be considered a new literary form, insofar as it has stretched the essay or the meditation sideways and lengthways, opening it out laterally across hyperlinks and horizontally through the time of a writer's life. Indeed the temptation is to see older texts and forms on the model of new technologies. Geoff Dyer's *The Colour of Memory* (1989) was written long before weblogs, but could otherwise be one gathered into book form. Ezra Pound's *Cantos* may currently be viewed as a poetic Tumblr account, stuffed with bits he liked and wanted to pass on.

We inhabit, some of the time, a state of speed, of flow, of information and matter too extensive and proliferating ever to be fully imbibed and apprehended. The critic Tom Ewing has talked of that space of contemporary distraction as *the stream*: 'that ceaseless flow of information we access every time we use social media'. He notes that a cultural text might now be 'something you see sandwiched between other status updates, tweets, or posts, fighting for attention with every other picture, stray thought, polemic, or advert'. He further defines a *nanoculture*, which he says 'encompasses the streams we create, curate, and consume online, and the stories that flow through them, and the things we do to that stuff: sharing it, liking it, reviving it, changing it, arguing over it.' (Ewing, 2011).

In a sense much of this material *is* a kind of fiction: not at the level of the novel – but the hit and run scale of avatars, personae, jokes, parodies, and exaggerations. Would such a state, such a world of buzz and background noise, make it harder to focus on novels? If novels are adrift in a stream of generalized textuality, how do they stay afloat? The answer may be structurally similar to one that could be identified in earlier epochs. In the Modernist era of mass literacy, of a new tabloid press, *Tit-Bits* and the first few decades of film, literature can be found seeking an *alternative* to that world, seeking a bulwark or to shore something against the ruins of cultural value. Or, just as plausibly, it can be seen as sometimes participating in that world, forming a continuum with the proliferation of text and media, and, as most famously with *Ulysses* (1922), incorporating it directly into the highest forms of literature itself. We may wish to see contemporary fiction on similar lines. It can be an alternative, an escape, a cabin to hide out from a blizzard of information: the novel as a long form that might maintain our attention span against shorter and shorter, more and more transient forms. Laura Miller, in an insightful piece on fiction and the Internet, characterizes the view thus:

> The further literature is driven to the outskirts of the culture, the more it is cherished as a sanctuary from everything coarse, shallow and meretricious in that culture. It is the chapel of profundity, and about as lively and well visited as a bricks-and-mortar chapel to boot.

> Literature is where you retreat when you're sick of celebrity divorces, political mudslinging, office intrigues, trials of the century, new Apple products, internet flame wars, sexting and *X Factor* contestants – in short, everything that everybody else spends most of their time thinking and talking about. (Miller, 2011: 2)

But the contrary can also be true. Equally, Miller states, the novel can be viewed as ineluctably part of that world, contributing to it, talked about within it, sometimes incorporating new kinds of information from it, and bringing us news.

In the former category, the historical novel is important. Byatt, Sarah Waters and, most imposingly, Hilary Mantel would be cases in point. Compared with Angela Carter's 1899 in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), or John Fowles' nineteenth century in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Mantel's latest work seems to represent on one hand a withdrawal from reflexivity and self-consciousness, into a narrative whose diegesis is relatively untroubled by anachronism and winks at the present; and on the other hand, in her deployment of the present tense, a vivid sensory immersion in the past, a sense of the past as present rather than as a period being rewritten now.

On the other side of the equation, how has the novel engaged with the living stream of the contemporary? To stay with the example of technology, Mez Packer has proposed that 'literary fiction' has a poor record of representing the digital communication, which is part of most readers' everyday lives (Packer, 2012). She notes that such technology dates quickly and will stand out in a narrative within a couple of years. Many writers, Packer suggests, effectively flee to a past that cannot date, and are often rewarded for it by being listed for prizes. We need not view the historical novel with such suspicion, but we can wonder, with Packer, how the newest generation of 'digital natives' will write of a technological environment they can take for granted. Science fiction, though, has been a place where not merely contemporary technologies are represented, but as yet inexistent ones are imagined. This is one reason for the growing prestige of science fiction within and without the academy, as hierarchies of value around genre are restructured in contemporary criticism. It is worth asking

how the writers discussed in this book are engaging with the experience of twenty-first century life, whether or not they turn to science fiction to try to understand the present.

Digital technology has also had a different, powerful effect, on cultural markets. It has become harder to make substantial money out of culture, because most things, in digital form, can be more easily copied and redistributed for free. Film, television, and especially the press: all are threatened. The music industry has been profoundly challenged. Profit margins from recorded music have plummeted; proceeds from live performance have tended to replace them as a major income stream.

Has something similar happened in literature? Thousands of novels are still printed, but released into a world where the status of print has changed. Print suddenly seems newly expendable, at risk of being a waste of space, about to be superannuated. E-readers are becoming standard. One productive response to this situation has been the reassertion of physical formats. The emergence of the digital offers a space to estrange and rethink the more conventionally material. In music, the obvious case is the relative rebirth, or at least the dogged persistence, of vinyl records. Meanwhile, some writers and designers have explored deliberately elaborate physical media for writing: taking their cue from the earlier example of B. S. Johnson and from the more recent model of *McSweeney's*, the deluxe US quarterly that takes a different form each issue.

Another obvious parallel with music arises. The decline in value of recorded music sales has partially been compensated by a boom in live music, and inflation of prices for concerts and live events. The literary world can tell a related story. Even twenty or thirty years ago, it was newly noticeable that writers were asked to tour and read in public – and hence that they needed to be presentable. This trend has only increased – especially with the importance of literary festivals, from Edinburgh to Hay-on-Wye. More than ever, the book world now sells itself to us as a gregarious, live world. To be a major author you need to be able not just to write good sentences but also to sit in a tent talking to Andrew Marr or James Naughtie over a bottle of mineral water. And if you want to run a bookshop, you cannot just stock books: you

probably need to buy some wine and get people in to listen to authors, or at least talk to each other in a book group.

Writers themselves are live in another sense: they are online, running their own websites, responding to fans and critics, tweeting adverts for their own readings or opinions on riots, the coalition or Katy Perry. The figure of the writer has subtly changed this century: perhaps metamorphosing slightly into a member of the public, in a Bakhtinian abolition of the footlights separating performer and audience. Can an author aspire to the same status as 20 or 30 years ago? The first *Granta* list of 1983 contains several names who would still figure on a list of major British writers today. It is hard to picture such long-standing status for the 2013 list – which is no judgement of intrinsic literary quality, but one of cultural status and accelerated turnover.

Twenty-first century fiction subsists in a world of fictions of many kinds, from which it draws and with which it competes. It may offer a refuge from the stream of distraction that floods the contemporary, prompting a slower form of attention or historical insight. But it may also chase the news or seek a way to encapsulate that stream of novelties in prose. It does so as the status of paper and print themselves change, perhaps more radically than for centuries; and at a time when the novelist needs to be freshly resourceful, multitasking between genres and jobs as between tabs in an Internet browser. The first name on *Granta*'s 1983 list, Martin Amis, wrote of a character 'addicted to the twentieth century' (Amis, 1984: 91). Even if we do not feel addicted to the twenty-first century, we are presently dependent on it, unable readily to escape it. The essays that follow describe how a number of the most interesting novelists in Britain today have met its challenges thus far.

Works Cited

Amis, Martin (1984) *Money*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Ewing, Tom (2011) 'Take me to the river', *Pitchfork*, 9 December, accessed 10 May 2013, http://pitchfork.com/features/poptimist/8724-take-me-to-the-river/

James, David (ed.) (2012a) *The Legacies of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, David (ed.) (2012b) *Modernist Futures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Miller, Laura (2011) 'How novels came to terms with the internet', *Guardian*, 15 January, *Review*, p. 2, accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/15/novels-internet-laura-miller.

Packer, Mez (2012) 'Techno-phobia and the modern writer', *Writers' Hub*, 5 March 2012, accessed 10 May 2013, http://www.writershub.co.uk/features-piece.php?pc=1380

Williams, Raymond (1984) *Writing in Society*. London: Verso.

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY
British Fiction

TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY
British Fiction

edited by
Bianca Leggett and Tony Venezia

Gylphi

Contents

Part V: Forms