

Novelising New Labour

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During the 1997 election, the Tory propaganda poster of 'Demon Eyes' Tony Blair caused more mirth than anxiety. It seemed, somehow, inappropriate and desperate; with the supreme irony being that a decade later, the identification of Blair with dark forces would be commonplace. It is not so much the popular representation of Blair, but the changes in his popular representation that differentiate him from Thatcher, Clinton and Bush. TV drama has attempted to dramatise the agonised and deluded Blair (in, say, Alistair Beaton's *The Trial of Tony Blair* for Channel 4); cartoonists have 'retconned' their imagery (Martin Rowson's blood-stained Bambi springs to mind) and satirists have made much of such early pronouncements as 'pretty straight guys'. As early as December 1997, British comic *2000 AD* ran a strip featuring B.L.A.I.R. 1, a robotic prime minister whose radiant smile belied its lethal nature, and whose eyes went red whenever 'Doctor Spin' took control of him.

Revealing though these are, I will concern myself with Blair's less ephemeral depictions and self-depictions. After broadly situating the debate in terms of how ideology and cultural production inter-relate, I will discuss the novelistic apparitions of Tony Blair.

While Literary History and Political History may not march to exactly the same beat, there are frequent periods when they fall into step with one another. 'Victorian Literature' is convenient shorthand for a vast array of post-Romantic and pre-Modernist poetry; novels of social examination, propagandist intent, saccharine fantasy and idiosyncratic whim; histories and counter-histories; public pronouncements and private letters, all of which can be collapsed into a retrospective and descriptive term. The accident of birth of a minor princess, never thought in 1800 to be the monarch in 1850, and various other accidental deaths, creates a historical sheath into which the literature of the time can be contained. Similar claims could be made for 'Elizabethan', 'Jacobean', 'Restoration', 'Edwardian', 'Augustan' and even the brief and unsuccessful attempt to promote a 'New Elizabethanism' after the accession of the present Queen.

The idea of such a convenient taxonomy was snapped by Modernism, and immediately frayed into multiple, disputatious, anxious debates. Was Modernism aligned to Fascism or Communism? Was Post-Modernism exemplified by Thatcher or Subcommandante Marcos? Was Post-Modernism, or Post-anything-ism anything other than a group of cliques speculating over the colour of Godot's shirt?

The identification between cultural practice and ruling dynasty is, of course, constructed after the event (this is best seen in the apocryphal Hollywood anachronism, 'Don't you understand we're in the goddamn Renaissance now?'). Thus, the combination of a heterogeneous diversity of cultural practice (among contemporary trends we might single out Dirty Realism, Magic Realism, Maximalism, OuLiPo, Postcolonialism, 'the literature of exhaustion', the McSweeney's aesthetic and McOndo) and our own proximity to events make it difficult to discern any clear and unambiguous parallels between the rise and premiership of Tony Blair (1997–2007) and the literature of that period.

From the age of the self...

Difficult, but not impossible. To step back a generation, there is plenty of evidence for a literary engagement with Thatcherism and Reaganomics. From the aptly named John Self, anti-hero of Martin Amis's *Money* (1984), to the serial-killer and serial-consumer Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991); from Iain Sinclair's psychogeographical mapping of the emerging Docklands in *Downriver* (1992) to John Updike's increasingly embittered Harry Angstrom novels (especially *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)), there is a perceptible engagement with issues of wealth, social dis cohesion, upward mobility and the alienating effects of late capitalism.

These works, usually oppositional in stance, questioned whether, as in Thatcher's phrase 'There is no such thing as society' or, in Gordon Gekko's speech in the 1997 film *Wall Street* 'Greed is Good'. At the same time examples can be found of novels lauding indomitable enterprise (Jeffrey Archer's 1979 *Kane and Abel*), anti-Communism and American military supremacy (Tom Clancy's 1984 *The Hunt for Red October*, initially published by the US Naval Institute Press) and the joys of unbridled affluence (Jackie Collins' *Hollywood Wives*, 1983).

The appeal of Blairism and anti-Blairism

Of course, thought Richard, yeah of course. Gwyn was Labour. It was obvious. Obvious not from the ripply cornices 20 feet above their heads, not from the brass lamps or the military plumpness of the leather-topped desk. Obvious because Gwyn was what he was, a writer, in England, at the end of the 20th century. There was nothing else for such a person to be. Richard was Labour, equally obviously. It often seemed to him, moving in the circles he moved in and reading what he read, that everyone in the land was Labour, except the Government. All writers, all book people were Labour, which was one of the reasons why they got on so well.

Martin Amis, *The Information* (1995, 21-22)

At the 2007 Edinburgh International Book Festival I noticed a curious phenomenon. Both the right-wing novelist and commentator A. N. Wilson and the left-wing novelist and commentator Will Self were heartily applauded when they attacked Tony Blair and the Labour Government. This broad-spectrum disillusionment had an obvious cause: the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. As such, the quote above from Martin Amis seems peculiarly apposite in reminding us of the wave of popular support that ushered in his government ten years previously.

On November 24th 1996, Tony Blair appeared in BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*. The book he chose, along with the Bible, Shakespeare and his personal luxury item of a Fender Stratocaster, was Sir Walter Scott's 1819 novel *Ivanhoe*. It was a clever, and bizarrely prescient, choice. (Incidentally, it was also the favourite novel of Ho Chi Minh). In terms of spin, it was a canny rebuttal to John Major's admitted love, on the same programme, of Anthony Trollope's 1864 *The Small House at Allington*. In place of nostalgia, Englishness and domestic drama (and a self-effacing hero, John Eames, who works in the Income Tax Office), Blair's choice emphasised progress, national unity (*Ivanhoe* famously

ends with a Norman-Saxon marriage) and even Unionism (a novel about the creation of British identity in medieval England written by a Scottish novelist). It even hinted at an identification between Blair and the returning, *deus ex machina* monarch, Richard Coeur de Lion.

Scott's novels take place on, and in some cases create, a national canvas. His work, like that of his contemporary John Galt, can be described as 'theoretical histories of society'. A novel like *Waverley* or *The Heart of Midlothian*, encompasses all the divided aspects of Scottish (and British) society in terms of class, geography, political persuasion, language, ethnicity and sexuality. They prefigure what would become known as the 'Condition of England' novels of the high Victorian period (Dickens' 1852–3 *Bleak House*, Charlotte Brontë's 1850 *Shirley*, Gaskell's 1854–5 *North and South*, Disraeli's 1845 *Sibyl*, or *The Two Nations* and Charles Kingsley's 1850 *Alton Locke*).

Around Blair's resignation, there was a flurry of novels which the press quickly billed 'State of the Nation' novels (1). The central dilemma of these novels was not so much a prognosis of the contemporary, but a diagnosis of how the enthusiasm of 1997 became the jaded disaffection of 2007. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the nebulous rhetoric of Blair policy (communitarianism, the third way, the stakeholder society) could have been used to animate a novelistic structure. Blair's legacy was not one of artistic inspiration ('Cool Britannia' being a thankfully passing tawdry phase), but artistic introspection.

Protest against the invasion of Iraq had an immediate, and some might say, expedient mirroring in fiction. Works such as Alasdair Gray's *Old Men in Love* (2007) and Alison Miller's *Demo* (2006) both contained descriptions of the 'Stop the War' protests in Glasgow. A. N. Wilson's *My Name Is Legion* (2004) has a glancing reference to a bible-reading but hypocritical Prime Minister. Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) was set entirely on that day (February 15th 2003) and took up an agnostic position: the narrator, a successful neurosurgeon, fears terrorists but has reservations about the efficacy of the protests. A plot device involving his treatment of an Iraqi allowed for condemnation of the Saddam regime to balance the other voices in the novel, and the narrator, Perowne, muses at one point that Blair could be 'sincere and wrong'. The final lapse into aesthetic sentimentality (a criminal decides against rape and murder after hearing his victim recite Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach') mars the overall effect – one presumes that McEwan was hoping for some resonance with Arnold's theories of the morally improving nature of literature.

By far the most splenetic variant was Robert Harris's 2007 novel *The Ghost*, which was widely regarded as a *roman à clef*, featuring the fictitious 'Adam Lang', a morally compromised former premier who approved of the incarceration of British citizens in Guantanamo Bay.

It should be noted that there was nothing in British literary culture equivalent to the American obsession with 'the 9/11 novel'. Not only established cultural figures – John Updike in *Terrorist* (2006), Thomas Pynchon in *Against the Day* (2006), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) – but young avant-gardiste writers (Safran Foer, 2005; Kalfus, 2006) felt a need to articulate the 'meaning' of September 11th. Strategies ranged from a kind of Jamesian dissection of pre-9/11 mores (Messud, 2006) to surreal reworkings of paranoia and terror (Bachelder, 2006). Though widely condemned for referring to the attacks as a 'work of art', the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen made it exceptionally clear that art would have to deal with the event.

Blair as the fox

Having left office, Blair could become a character in 'State of the Nation' fiction. Two key novels were Blake Morrison's *South of the River* (2007) and Richard T Kelly's *Crusaders* (2008). The epithet has also been applied to work by Helen Walsh (2008), Philip Hensher (2008), Hanif Kureishi (2008) and Ian Rankin (2007).

In an essay to publicise his novel, Blake Morrison asked the question 'Is there something about Blair that defeats the imagination?': a question previously raised by satirists anxious that the supposed rejuvenation of Britain in 1997 had rendered satire superfluous (*The Guardian*, 31.03.2007). Morrison, predictably, concludes there is not. In *South of the River*, there are two persistent leitmotifs – an urban fox and Blair himself. Morrison explicitly links the two in the essay – the fox is cute and cruel; authentic and devious.

South of the River opens on the day after Blair's 1997 victory, and then presents a day in the life of the principal characters for each year up until 2002, each section separated by a text produced by one of the characters. Morrison seasons the narrative with very specific and well-researched placements of musical, marketing, culinary, technological and cultural trends, from mobile phones with cameras to the rash of St George's Crosses around the Football World Cup. Despite this attention to detail, the dominant mode of the narrative is a form of retrospective irony, evident in the novel's opening sentences:

Half a decade later, as she stood by a high window ready to throw herself out, what Libby would remember of that day wasn't the dinner-table conversation with her husband, or the footage of Tony Blair waving to the crowds, or even the interview with the man who would become her lover. It was the fox she saw at first light...

Life, as Kierkegaard observed, is lived forward and understood backwards, and Morrison usually eschews tampering with the linearity of the novel's unfolding. The fissure between the concerns of the characters and the reader's wider historical perspective is the space where the novel's irony operates. This is seen most clearly in the section dated '30 December 1999'. As the characters worry about the Millennium Bug, and various BNP ultra-ists unleashing an apocalyptic attack, Blair is heard on Radio 4 saying 'We will never be a run-of-the-mill people doing run-of-the-mill things' (230). The reader's awareness of the imminence of the September 11th attacks, and a government moving far, far, away from 'run-of-the-mill' politics, adds a necessary dimension to the scene. Indeed, in a later scene (261) a character imagines the non-existent computer virus: 'Computer screens shatter, televisions catch fire, clocks melt like Dali watches, skyscrapers collapse'.

One clever nuance of Morrison's novel is the development of the fox theme via the bill to outlaw hunting. It creates a shudder in the reader to remember how important that debate seemed (with the Countryside Alliance staging the largest popular protest in Britain prior to the anti-War marches). The bill represented a challenge to whether or not Blair would honour a manifesto pledge. In a moment of supreme irony, the arch-Blairite MP Rufus Huish gives a speech in favour of the bill, which ends 'Ladies and gentlemen, I have a dream tonight. A dream of trust between people and animals ... a dream of the lion lying down with the lamb' (451). The rhetoric of Martin Luther King and the Biblical prophecy of universal peace are co-opted, rendered banal and misapplied.

At the beginning of the novel, the journalist Harry taunts the failed author Nat saying 'That's why you're so keen on Blair ... He's not interested in politics either' (18). This theme is reprised (380) once Nat is now disillusioned with Blair. 'We all voted for him. No, some of us voted for his party. Or what we thought was his party. On the grounds that it wasn't the other party. *You* voted for him'.

The identification between the adulterous Nat and the duplicitous Blair is, however, the aspect of the novel that sabotages its political intent. Over the course of the novel, Nat cheats, lies, betrays, fails and compromises – indeed the whole network of friends succumb in different ways to apathy, and fail to live up to their ideals or their promises. In a way, Blair becomes part of the domestic tableau. Insisting on the parallel between the personal and the political becomes an odd act of exoneration. Blair, in the final analysis, is just another mid-life screw-up.

Blair appears as a character only once in Richard T. Kelly's *Crusaders*, but the novel's structures, themes and concerns are infused with Blairite resonances. Set in Newcastle in 1996, the novel is concerned with an Anglican minister and life-long Labour supporter, John Gore, attempting to 'plant' a new church. Again, the precise dating (immediately before the 1997 victory) sets up a series of ironic echoes (and indeed Blair's most commonplace satirical depiction is as the Rev. A. R. P. Blair in *Private Eye*). Gore is concerned with not creating sermons of rhetorical blandishment, for example. The concerns with the inter-relationship between a fissiparous church and internecine party politics are slightly too obviously signalled.

Blair's cameo appearance is similarly wry. Arriving at a party meeting in 1982, he 'looked as if he might have been en route to a Genesis gig'. The business of the meeting is to counter the Militant Tendency – again, setting up ironic echoes with Blair's later wars on 'militants'. But Kelly is astute enough to realise that dealing with Militant was a key step towards making Labour able to gain power. Whatever the later concerns, the initial impulses are depicted as laudable.

At an event as part of Glasgow's 'Aye Write!' festival, Kelly spoke about the importance of the north of England in the Blair project, citing the fact that many of his closest allies (Mandelson, Prescott, Straw, Milburn) represented seats in that region (although he was curiously quiet about the Scots elements). If Morrison's implicit dichotomy is between the rural and the urban, Kelly's is between the regional and the metropolitan.

Another significant difference between the novels is class. Whereas Morrison remains firmly within the middle-classes, Kelly highlights the connections between classes. Gore is forced into uneasy coalitions with an aspiring Labour politician, a single mother and a local gangster – it is almost a 'communitarian' novel, despite Kelly's nods at Dostoyevsky and (ironically) Trollope.

Dostoyevsky kept opposing ideologies in suspension in his greatest novels. Kelly's attempt to imitate this strategy occasionally becomes ambivalence, or fence-sitting. As one character observes: 'If you find yourself changing your mind on things – is that cos you're a slippery sod? Or is it cos you've kept your eyes open? Seen how the world changes?' Throughout *Crusaders* there is a 'yes, but' attitude: urban regeneration in the north-east was necessary, even if it became infected with chicanery. Blair's restructuring of the party was necessary, even if it belied later compromises. Even the crusaders of the title kept within that excusable space: these are not the contemporary crusaders exporting an

ideology to the middle-east, but the praise-worthy evangelists of social and socialist improvement.

If there is a common ground between Kelly and Morrison, it may be in the significant date of Morrison's final chapter – May 2nd 2002. Harry is participating in a radio phone-in. One caller says 'Before Blair was in charge, when we had people like Barbara Castle, we didn't have these problems'. Harry muses

a 34 per cent turnout showed how apathetic the British electorate had become, and as Derek rightly said in the heyday of Barbara Castle, whose death yesterday, he, Harry, was sad to read about, too, there'd been much more passion in politics and it would be good to get some of that passion back.

What the 'State of the Nation' novels implicitly assume is that the key to understanding Blair, and hence the contemporary ideological field, is not to be found in his period of high office. A great many of the novels – *Crusaders* being the most obvious, but Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* and Kureishi's *Something To Tell You* are also relevant – locate precisely in Thatcherism.

Blair, Dr. Who and the house of Hogwarts

Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war.

Tony Blair, speech at the signing of the NATO-Russia Security Pact, 27th May 1997

Although Blair's appearances in literary fiction offer important insights into conceptions of his time in office, popular fiction may sketch out the broader links between his premiership and the zeitgeist. In the BBC science fiction show *Doctor Who*, a fictitious MP called Harriet Jones was introduced in the episodes *Aliens of London / World War Three*. At the end, the Doctor praises her, mentioning she will go on to win three elections and usher in a 'Golden Age' of Britain. However, in the later episode *The Christmas Invasion*, she is brought down with the words 'don't you think she looks tired' after firing on a retreating vessel (with shades of the sinking of the Belgrano and overtones of Blair's increasingly drawn appearance).

The cultural phenomenon of the Blair years is undoubtedly the Harry Potter series of novels. Indeed, there is a strange synchronicity between Rowling and Blair. The first in the series was published in June 1997; the last in July 2007. Rowling and Blair were the only guest stars, and both voiced themselves, in the *Simpsons* episode set in the UK ('The Regina Monologues'). As I am a literary editor at a newspaper, rather than an academic or specialist, it might be prudent to point out that at times, over the next few paragraphs, my tongue will be partly in my cheek.

The initial book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, begins with the hero effectively imprisoned by grotesque, narrow-minded, suburbia-dwelling relatives (almost stereotypically 'conservative') until a tidal wave of letters (votes) ushers him into a new, magical world of private education, private education, private education.

But this new era of opportunity has to have its opponents, and the key point about Harry's nemesis, Lord Voldemort, is that he has already been defeated. A key rhetorical

strategy of Blair was to invoke the potential resurgence – one might say resurrection – of the Tory Party; a point in some ways exacerbated by liberal cartoonists who would frequently use the motif of vampires or zombies to invoke the unnatural return of Thatcher, Tebbit or Howard. The ideology of the ‘New’ is necessarily constructed against some perceived, anti-progressive recidivism. Blair famously denounced Michael Howard with the words ‘He is not the hope of a Tory future because he is the *reincarnation* of a failed Tory past’ (my italics).

Yet by the end of the Harry Potter novels, despite a few politically correct rather than politically aware plotlines concerning the un-radicalised working class in Hogwarts (the house elves); a depiction of the ‘Goblins of Gringotts’ that apes the ‘Gnomes of Zürich’ envisioned by Harold Wilson, not least in its unthinking capitulation to traditional versions of anti-semitism; and some vague animal rights material that elides fox-hunting, dangerous dogs and an ‘Olde England’ love for pets, there is only one natural conclusion: war.

Voldemort resurgent infects all levels of bureaucracy, from bus-drivers to civil servants, with a militaristic, intransigent and paranoid ideology. Civil liberties are restricted, punitive ‘first strikes’ are deployed, and a hate figure is created (non-magical humans, who go about their everyday business oblivious of this pseudo-theological battle). If Blair’s accession mirrored Harry’s enthusiastic acceptance of a rescue, his resignation made Harry a fictional cheerleader of, and for, the multitude opposed to that government.

Rowling is not immune from critical analysis, or analogy. Her work leans heavily on previous stories (Greek and Norse mythology; *Star Wars*; C. S. Lewis and many others): just as Blair cherry-picked bits of free market economics and former socialist priorities, and eventually slumped into the ‘Project for a New America’ trough. Rowling is Blair’s triumph (single Mum becomes billionaire) and dark mirror.

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Notes

1. Andrew Holgate in *The Times*, 1.04.2007; D. J. Taylor in *The Guardian*, 7.04.2007; Rachel Cooke in the *New Statesman*, 22.11.2007; Adrian Turpin in the *Financial Times*, 12.01.2008; 'Bookworm' in *Private Eye*, 6.04.2008; Richard Bath in *Scotland on Sunday*, 30.04.2008