
Joseph Brooker’s study *Literature of the 1980s After the Watershed* comes as the ninth volume in the Edinburgh History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Great Britain series, which in its essential disposition apparently follows what Ian Jack characterised as ‘our entire contemporary tendency to slice time in ten-year cycles’ (209) that are so neatly ordered on the historical trajectory of literature in Britain, perceived as linear.

In the Introduction to his survey of the decade whose long-lasting influences were being examined while the decade itself still lasted and whose contemporaries allegedly shared the uncanny yet poignant feeling that it may never be truly over, Brooker states his intention not only to offer an account of different literary texts and their authors that defined the 1980s, but also to bring forth ‘the historical and social contexts that shaped writing in this period’ (1). In response to these influences, of which, as Brooker will demonstrate, there was an abundance, the authors of the decade reacted with prolific production of various modes of writing. Although in his analysis Brooker, in a detailed and reader-friendly approach, deftly separates these various forms, focusing first on the novels and subsequently on poetry, drama and screenwriting, he by no means omits the unifying factors that serve to emphasise unity and coherence of any given literary period, even one this short – that is, the themes around which all these literary expressions are gathered. These dominant themes are organised under separate headings (titled Generations, Disaffections, Modes, Belongings and Commitments) in which the author follows dominant trends, philosophies and poetics of the period.

However, despite all the said diversity and literary richness, the most ‘pervasive, almost inescapable’ theme Brooker recognises is that of the profound and all-encompassing ‘influence of the Conservative governments that administered Britain for the entire decade’ (2), which he tackles and dissects in the Introduction. Thatcherism is thus deconstructed in terms of the historical perspective and its associations with enterprise, market, and freedom-related issues, but also in terms of the ostensible and undisputed contradictions pertaining to the cultural change, deterioration in Britain’s moral standards and repressive measures that affected the everyday life of the nation.

Parallel to the intended change these political forces envisaged for the historical trajectory of the British society, changes were taking place in terms of the literary trajectory as well. In Chapter One, Brooker discusses the issues of succession on the literary scene as he strives to pinpoint the watershed and distinguish between post-war generations and the contemporary one, subscribing in this demarcation to Philip Tew’s view. This context-specific cohabitation of the generations admittedly writing from different perspectives revealingly signals the alterations that both British literature and British society were facing at the time, the changes evident even on opening any respectable and bar-setting literary magazine of the period. Investigation of generational identity is followed by the analysis of class identity, which together with the account of working-class and regional writing comprises Chapter Two of the study. As the cultural label of the late twentieth-century Anglophone world, postmodernism and its poetics are analysed in Chapter Three, both in their theoretical and practical expressions. Dubbing the decade ‘postmodernism’s temporal heartland’ (100), Brooker offers the overview and functional analysis of the novels of Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift and Alasdair Gray, but also focuses on tracing the legacy of modernism, especially in poetry. Another legacy is

examined in Chapter Four – that of British imperialism, which in the literary discourse gave birth to the exploration of the issues of nation and ethnicity, or, as Brooker says, ‘the matter of Britain’ (141). The increasing interest in the concept of Britishness drew attention to the writers that are typically associated with multiculturalism and multivoicedness in contemporary British literature. It is precisely in this light that the oeuvre of Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi and Fred D’Aguiar, for example, is presented. Brooker makes feminism, that ‘emphasized gender as a significant category of analysis, a modality of experience shaping social life, let alone art’ (173), a focus of Chapter Five.

What perhaps comes as a surprise is that this study of the penultimate decade of the twentieth century, organised around the central concepts presented from socio-historical and cultural perspectives, features not only illustrative literary texts of the decade that support its claims, but also texts created in the subsequent decades that are read as the significant fictional retrospectives on the 1980s (for example, the novels of Jonathan Coe and Alan Hollinghurst). On a similar note, in Conclusion Brooker explores the legacies of the 1980s in terms of literary and cultural production, as well as the whole subset of contemporary retro-culture inspired by the textual, visual and aural cues of the 1980s as exhibited in ‘replays’ and ‘remakes’, ‘two kinds of revivalism’ (211) appearing across various media in the present-day world.

In Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed Joseph Brooker analyses not only British literature, but more importantly and more astutely British life, with all its social, historical, political and economic complexities that served as the ‘triggers of the decade’ and that set the scene not only for the literary production of the period but, according to the author, for literature in Britain as we know it today, in the second decade of the ‘new millennium’, itself heralded, hailed, scorned and disparaged by many of the works created in the 1980s. Recognising the overall cultural and ideological climate as crucial for any artistic output, Brooker sets forth Thatcherism as the central fact about Britain in the 1980s that inflected all other aspects separately discussed in the five chapters of the study. He aims to unmask inherent connections between the discordance of the revolutionary and reactionary rhetorics utilised by the period and the richness of literary texts originating in response, and in that endeavour he was refreshingly successful. The decade that started off with the unease surrounding the proclaimed death of the novel as a form and the English novel as its subspecies, and the decade that managed to revitalise and transform it, giving birth to the new literary establishment, in Joseph Brooker’s work gains its full context and shines with all its (acrimonious) colours.

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