

M. J. Hyland, *This is how* (Text Publishing, 2009)

The young man is dangerous, though nothing might come of that if he's fortunate enough to be given time to grow out of it. Patrick Oxtoby, the protagonist of *This is how*, isn't fortunate. The strength of his arm surprises him. The adjustable wrench he takes up seems weightless. It falls as though in a natural trajectory as it comes down, once, against the head of Ian Welkin, a co-tenant in the rooming house to which Oxtoby has exiled himself, in retreat from disappointment in love and an averagely-indifferent, properly censorious, family.

Hyland keeps returning to Oxtoby's disbelief at what he has done, and we're certainly meant to come into step, if not sympathize, with his puzzled attempts to assemble his feelings about his 'mistake with the hammer', as he puts it. Somehow, he's been implicated in something he never intended, and which does not mean him, as he finds himself after the fact. 'I just want you to know that I didn't want that man to die', he writes to his parents. 'I liked him. He would have been my friend if I'd given him a chance. That might sound mad to you, but it's also the truth' (227).

Oxtoby's is the detachment of the childish consciousness from the adult self it might yet become, an exemplar of the post-catastrophe vacuity of every amygdala-challenged under twenty-five who has killed a friend by cornering too fast behind P-plates, or glassed the girl he loves in a bar. And that is what is so harrowing about Hyland's novel: Patrick, in a way it is impossible to get around because it is everywhere around us, in some sense we must ignore, really isn't responsible for the murder he commits. Yet it was he who picked up that wrench, and brought it down upon a sleeping man's head.

In focusing unrelentingly on a particular incident, and the engagement with that incident of a handful of unexceptional, highly particularized, *dramatis personae*, the novel puts under a microscope some insoluble questions about responsibility, justice, and the matter of what, exactly, 'condign' might mean, in the phrase 'condign punishment' – the fact being, that societies, to remain orderly, must behave as though they do know exactly what it means, whereas, often, they can only guess. The epigram from Nietzsche at the beginning of the book: 'Everything unconditional belongs in pathology', brings to mind another, from *Human, All Too Human*, associated by the action of the novel, and most of all, Hyland's treatment of the events she describes: 'All things are subject to interpretation'. By which we understand that the sense we make of such choices as Patrick Oxtoby's is interpretative, not veridical.

Prison marks the continuation of Oxtoby's schooling because it is there he begins to comprehend through relationships struck quickly in the service of survival that the right to live requires a daily – in his case, an hourly – negotiation with degrees of unsavouriness far beyond the humiliation he experienced at Ian Welkin's hand. From the sleazy warder Farrell, through Walsh the 'snout baron' ('if you cross Walsh, you'll wish you were dead') through the suicidal Stevenson, to whose struggles with madness he must bear close witness, through Gardam, who 'slightly enjoyed killing his wife', to the apparently impeccable and existentially void Lumsden (not related), the prison house proves much more valuably educative than had his home. Here is an excerpt from the letter written to Patrick by Sarah, his almost-bride, after he has been sentenced to life imprisonment:

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*I'm glad we didn't get married and it's strange that suddenly you change from somebody who can't make up his mind and you decide to make up your mind to do something dreadful and I'm glad I wasn't your victim. I'm sorry but that's how it is. I do feel sorry for you and I don't hate you and you must be having a terrible time but I've met up with your mum a few times and she said (and my friends all said) I should tell you how I feel and that it might help me if I get all this off my chest.*

*Sarah.*

*p.s.*

*You are in my prayers. (296)*

And Gardam's judgement on this?

'Isn't she the one with the big scar on her face you was going to marry?'

'Birthmark'.

'You shouldn't have wasted your time. She's a right fucking cow'.

...

'It's like a joke,' I say. 'You couldn't make up something that awful'. (297)

Hyland's striking manner in her presentation of the prison as combination seminary and finishing school keeps her from cliché. In her acknowledgements, she refers to 'the awful and wrong-footed early drafts' of her book, but this is little short of astonishing, so sure-footed is her narrative, so disinclined to lead the reader by an elbow. If you think of Hemingway without the extraneous detail, you get a sense of *This is how*, but hardly of the ever-mounting tension based on a growing conviction that something terrible is just about to occur, an unease built up from a series of innocent-seeming exchanges. (Though nothing of the dramatic force of the murder occurs in them, the prison chapters draw on the same pared-down manner the reader has already experienced as 'paying off' in Welkin's killing.)

'Well, I'd better get on with it', I say.

He doesn't bother to ask what I've got to do.

'Surely you've got time for a drink', he says.

'No thanks. Maybe tomorrow night'.

'Listen, Patrick. I think you've got me the wrong way. Can we call it a truce?'

'What for?'

'I don't want you thinking ill of me'.

He holds out his hand and I shake it and I know he notices I've got a lot of sweat on me. He lets go too quickly. (98, 99)

Nearly four hundred pages of such selective work make this point on the pulses: that ordinary life can be perilous; that perfectly ordinary people are always unpredictable and might, at any point, prove treacherous; that quiet conversation can turn catastrophic without preamble. It is, among other things, a view of language in relation to personality Hyland provides here, marvellously.

## **Robert Lumsden**

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