

20TH CENTURY POPULAR CULTURE MEMORY IN LAD AND FEMINIST LITERATURE

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Abstract: *The paper argues the case of the contemporary novel genre, emphasising its culture-bound function, conspicuous in the thesis novel. In the postliterate age of the late 20th century, narrative fiction recorded and openly politicized human experience. This message is fictitiously delivered and particularly explicit in the lad and feminist English novel of the century's last decades. The British cultural inventory and partisan construal of social reality is the subject matter of Fever Pitch (1992) by Nick Hornby and The Passion (1987) by Jeanette Winterson. The representation of the people who narratively think of themselves in terms of a community is indebted to the language of folk memory. The aesthetic discourse circulates the public idiom of pop culture clichés, popular sweeping-statements and examples of normative behaviour. Conclusively, gendered recollections of the past are provided for the cultural use of readers who plot to read literature in the social interest, ideological advantage and political benefit of the same sex members.*

Usually, the novel genre is considered a traditional literary (and, sometimes, cultural) practice, independently of current evidence from the usage the contemporary readers make out of it. If part of a popular, or at least, current cultural paradigm, each novel introduces versions of private narratives to folk memory. That is to say, storytelling is inclusive, not idiosyncratic. Stylistically and functionally, narration is part and parcel of the mainstream discourse and its end-product is shared by individuals who narratively think of themselves in terms of a community. For that reason, the genre sets a benchmark, identifiable in the public representations of social reality – the conception of what exists, as determined by the rituals and opinions of the community (Featherstone 2009). Most, if not all, stories chronicle the intellectually learned behaviour, prescribed to individuals in the name of propriety and normalcy.

Such over-generalizations have always been true of the socially committed novel genre. Yet, I find them particularly conspicuous in the popular beliefs about gender identity. Notions of sexual category mis/construal are exemplified by narrative differentiation and formalization procedures. They are the standard reasoning manner of the contemporary popular culture's exploits (Storey 2003). I mean the most influential 20th century communication, the TV series, the cinematography, the (e-)media and, by and large, all public story-telling. They are the channels of memory transmission that

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effectively police identity patterns handed over to the reader of literature. They tend to forget that, most of the times, the screen pictures the copyrighted content of an original literary text. Indeed, the aesthetic discourse is converted into a script in the attempt to produce the grand cinematic narrative, which took over the traditional work of humanities in documenting human life. This is a case in point example of novel commodification that accounts for the existing (mal)function of the novel genre, a fact definitely occurring after the introduction of the electronic communication.

I intend to track down and summarize the rhetorical strategies and partisan perspectives employed by the literary text's reading of the gender topic in *The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson and *Fever Pitch* by Nick Hornby. Their historical embeddedness is blatant, for instance, in the inflammatory advocacy of political rights. To be exact, the cultural performance of identity permeates the literary discourse and boils down to the invention/retrieval of gender roles. The best examples of politicised aesthetic language are generally lad¹ literature and feminist writing, not to mention the other common version of the latter that grossly oversimplifies it – chick literature. In other words, this literature is heavily indebted to both popular culture – i.e., to the current mainstream customs and beliefs, summarized by the public notions of respectability and normality, and to its commodified version – i.e., the pop culture industry of fashion driven novelties. The theoretical approaches on the issue of novel genre production and reception I use range from postclassical narratology to literary cultural studies. Their ability to highlight the public service that the fictional narratives reputedly perform may very well be doomed to failure. Yet, this perspective rationalizes the social commitment of this literature. That is, its skill to express and prompt to action on behalf of the difference between “ourselves, the we-group, or in-group, and everybody else, or the others-groups, out-groups” (Sumner 19).

The ideological assessment of the gender gap/b(l)ending concern, present in the British society, roughly at the time of Thatcherism (Hutchinson 2008), is superimposed on the pop culture memories of the folk tales about football and French imperialism. These two novels are culture-bound in the sense that they recall distinctive situational contexts, alleged in their claim of experience-based language. Specifically, they symbolize what nowadays is thought to be characteristic of the United Kingdom's 20th century last decades. I find them determined and limited by the “regular occurrences in the humanly created world, in the schemas people share as a result of these, and in the interactions between these schemas and this world.” Conclusively, “when we speak of culture, then, we do so only to summarize such regularities” (Strauss and Quinn 7). I believe they best express the consistent repetitions and contrasts that structure the cultural meaning customarily attached to social reality. In other words, the authorial discourse supposes implicit certainties – marketed as if mere snapshots of the past – thereby intimating their unconditional truth-value. The strategy is doubtful and yet effective. I

¹ Lad lit does not have the academic counterpart of chick lit – feminism – and, as such, it is the only available, formalized retort of men, in the gender war that fuels the novel's social relevance.

think so because it manages to both circulate and instill ideological meaning: these gender-obsessed novels tacitly equate their awareness of the issue with social reality in the dramatization of the gendered author's beliefs. Eventually, the reader faces the specious conclusion that not only these beliefs are true, but also that their corresponding facts exist indeed. Moreover, beliefs, facts and the truth are all in stern compliance with their competent narrative composition. I suppose it is not the case, considering that the hypotheses the two novels share are mutually exclusive. Namely, simultaneously oppressed females and males cannot possibly exist without a third (undisclosed so far) party, liable for pulling the strings of the persecution. Similar views are consequential for the purposes of narratology, to the extent to which they spill over into the matter of fact fictional output, as ideologically phrased devices of authenticity.

The traditional plot curve, the metafictional undertone, the character (female and male respectively), assassination strategy, the revisiting of the fairy-tale/bildungsroman convention are some of the features these gender-bound novels display. Conspicuously, they all plagiarize the prevailing public phraseology of the time. The achievement of the novel genre is the enactment of situational contexts able to conjure up celebrated images of pop(ular) culture. For instance:

...there is a real resonance in the Gus Caesar story: it contains a terrifying lesson for any aspirants who think that their own unshakeable sense of destiny (and again, this sense of destiny is not to be confused with arrogance - Gus Caesar was not an arrogant footballer) is significant. Gus must have known he was good, just as any pop band who has ever played the Marquee know they are destined for Madison Square Garden and an NME front cover, and just as any writer who has sent off a completed manuscript to Faber and Faber knows that he is two years away from the Booker (Hornby 197).

These are cultural props for the narrative comprehension of the past. The late 20th century, United Kingdom focused, everyday stories these two novels deliver focus on the literary devices and ethical avowals mentioned earlier. The aesthetic texts document for the present-day readers, in terms of memory-instilment and meaning coding, the figments of folk memory imagination. Basically, the narrative fiction taps into this collective imaginary and delivers coherent plots that make sense instantly. On the other hand, the logic of the fictional output is somewhat circular. It is safe to say so, considering at least three of the features displayed by the authorial discourse, i.e., its redundancy (the characters and the circumstances are exhibitivite and interchangeable), its causal inconsistencies (the experiential rules of social intercourse, as represented by literary fiction, should be triggers of cultural emotion if not action proper) and its inbuilt contradiction (if the authors are right, the Western world is about to implode and yet it indulges in the present aesthetical exploits, which threaten to become social protest). The above-mentioned specifics are common to the daily communication routine of the average end-user of fiction. This feat of narration has everything to do with the circularity of reasoning at its worst: provided all the members of the community understand social reality in the same manner, social reality is the story told by the community. The celebrity culture (the contemporary media endorses) patterns

the characters (Napoleon, George Graham, or the protagonists themselves) on the example of the heroes in the spotlight of glossy magazines. The reporting on gender b(l)ending/retrieval breaks the scandal of Villanelle and Nick to the world. The coherence of the report is modelled on the gossip routine: the authors relish pondering over what, they emphasize, is private if not sensational (for example, the transgending or incestuous hints). The inherent cause of the fictional effects we read depends for intelligibility on the empirical representation of behavioural and psychological traits, typically associated with sexual character in mainstream public discourses. What I mean is that, focalization, characterization and narration are linked together by means of inference rather than deterministic associations. I suspect these two novels share the same cultural relevance, unfortunately achieved at the expense of the proficient storytelling, which traditionally was the trademark of the novel genre. *The Passion* and *Fever Pitch* are examples of anecdotal texts, fit for instant public consumption, whose address is tailored and trimmed to accommodate a political agenda.

The verbalized ambition of the two novels' respective genres, the lad literature and the feminist fiction, is to acknowledge a sense of shared cultural makeup. For *Fever Pitch*, the celebration of "ourselves" points at the code of conduct the supporters on the "North Bank" of the Highbury stadium showcase at least once a week:

...now looks like the last of the sort of game that comes to represent the football experience in the memory: floodlights, driving rain and an enormous, rolling roar throughout the match. [...] football crowds may yet be able to create a new environment that electrifies, but they will never be able to recreate the old one which required vast numbers and a context in which those numbers could form themselves into one huge reactive body. (Hornby 76)

The Passion documents the same bellicose record of an in-group's sense of belonging. The text can be construed as an incitement to actively consider mutually exclusive gender-roles. The text actually instances several cases that verge on misogynistic conditioning. In the unfolding of the plot, notions of belonging amount to the reverse discrimination of all the feminist novels:

...without women, with only our imaginations and a handful of whores, we can't remember what it is about women that can turn a man through passion into something holy. Bible words again, but I am thinking of my father who shaded his eyes on those sunburnt evenings and learned to take his time with my mother. I am thinking of my mother with her noisy heart and of all those women waiting in the fields for the men. (Winterson 27)

Culturally, they dwell on the singular and consistent memory of the mistreatment perpetrated against the mass of disenfranchised individuals whose mouthpiece our authors suggest literature should be. This formalization process oversimplifies the multiple and contradictory conceptualization that the gender is bound to be, if one takes into the account the very demonstration these propagandist novels tell to the world. If not, I fail to see why the cultured 20th century audience trusts the indiscriminate lectures on discrimination delivered by the gender apostles from the transparent pulpit of gendered

self-righteousness. Formalization is the main differentiation procedure feminist and lad fiction employs in the attempt to convey successfully its legitimation. Contrary to common sense, this literature claims that it does not have anything to do with the broadcasting of discrimination against the opposite sex, although the subject matter it boasts consists in slandering the other gender. The contentiousness of the testimony given by *The Passion* and *Fever Pitch* openly aims to legitimate their biased reading of the social order. The literary texts structure notions of reality in keeping with the missionary zeal of acrimonious gender differentiation (Fuchs Epstein 64), and particularly, with the vernacular prescriptions regulating its understanding and function. The theme of the aesthetic productions in hand secures their ready availability, because it is famous public double-talk: the battle between the sexes is a standing joke among both parties.

Consequently, the narratives essentially attempt to boost the use-value of male chauvinism versus female sexism in language. The reliance on explicit attribution of gendered identity and, implicitly, of social role, typecasts the characters as abused figures, vindictive heroes, etc., with a view to reinforcing the already existing folk conditioning of the reader. The brand of discourse these stories favour features: emphasis on gender specific terms (i.e., the overstatement of masculine pronouns' generic use; notion discrimination according to change determined in words syntactically associated to them), exclusively male imagery in authority depiction, gender-neutral versions of the above-mentioned examples. This only comes to magnify the intrinsic fictitiousness of social role-playing. The reader is invited to judge for him/herself such discursive practices, but, mostly, to agree with what the narrator already knows: his/her beliefs are objectively better than the actual people who oppose them. Conversely, it follows that the people who agree with the preached (fe)male self-righteousness are also better (by comparison with others). The binary differentiation technique formalizes the somewhat loose profiling of the other in the cautionary tale of a closed system of thought. To be precise, bonding rituals lead to loyalty instilment and recall the tribalism signalled in private jokes, identity badges, codes of behaviour. Even if the novels supposedly stage opposing points of view, in fact, they both focus on listing the credentials of allegiance to one's gendered self-perception. Consequently, both the lad literature example and the feminist novel exemplify the same procedure, which replaces the subject matter with the implied reference term of the same over-analysed contrast, male versus female. The novels set out to over-interpret the events and circumstances from the angle of (gender) role-reversal and, of course, (gender) role-taking. The assumption of a culturally informed performance, which is the opposite of the one customarily undertaken by the (fe)male character, is the course of action the authors choose in order to exemplify the thesis.

Both novels profess to represent faithfully, in accordance with the prescriptive values they embrace, the legitimate claims of their in-groups: "Our ancestors. Our belonging. The future is foretold from the past and the future is only possible because of the past (Winterson 62)". In doing so, they provide the audience with the recollection of the essential ideas, prominent among the other now forgotten worries, of the time's cultural policy. The escapist settings of the plots are, once more, anecdotal in their

depiction of the Arsenal Football Club and Napoleon's followership. The detailing of these militantly sociocentric communities' characteristics – of the Gunners (the Arsenal supporters), and of the French Army (and society) – is the means by which the apprehensions of the mainstream, public discourse are submitted to the readers of these two thesis novels. Literally, they convey their sense of frustration with the world and set out to discuss and prove the evidence that upholds their beliefs in an obvious instance of circular reasoning. Once more, the community seems to legitimize a very idiosyncratic stand on social reality: "It's extraordinary, knowing that you have a role to play in all this, that the evening wouldn't have been the same without you and thousands like you" (Hornby 187).

Several such popular cases in point narratively structure the logic of the literary discourse. For example, the dislodging of centralized authority figures from their iconic posturing, otherwise privileged for the patriarchs of these two stories, is the formalization routine against which characters evolve. Authoritarianism and its ethical consequences are at the core of Thatcherism and this subject matter is literarily negotiated. The achievement of the novels is that they plot the circumstances able to conjure up images of folk memory. Irrespective of their aesthetic credentials, these are public narratives, which make cultural sense. For example, a number of men are in the spotlight. One of them is George Graham, the successful Arsenal team manager, "George is my dad, less complicated but much more frightening than the real one" (Hornby 36). His reassuring assertiveness brings him next to Bonaparte. If it were not for their paternalist demeanour, the association between the football executive and the French Emperor would be farfetched. Yet, they turn out to be the obvious choice the stories use to epitomize the oppressive male figure: "[he] always claimed he knew what was good for a people, knew how to improve, how to educate" (Winterson 103). Furthermore, the narrative voice of *The Passion* lists God, Christ and Satan, probably to prove the phallogentrism of the British culture. The reference to the father figure sets a benchmark for the narrative. The religious frame of reference is effective although *Fever Pitch* rejects such metaphysics in favour of a down to earth indictment of the same absentee. In so many words, the author states: "None of this was intended to punish my father for his absence: I really thought that I would be happy to go anywhere with him, apart from every single place he could think of" (Hornby 20). A dysfunctional family is provided for characters in both texts in order to fit the stereotyped profile of the deranged popular hero. This is pop culture psychoanalysis at its best: "He was my father. I never knew him because I wasn't born when he disappeared" (Winterson 50). The framing of the plot in similar concerns is peculiar to the stock characters and narrative episodes employed in order to highlight the true to life quality of their address.

Verisimilitude is the claim meant to contextualize the exotic characters (the compulsive football fan, the 18th century gender bender) used to dramatize the thesis of the stories. The ordinary plot curve relies on cause and effect sequencing of events, chronology and familiar history (characters and occurrences already featured by film adaptations or docudramas, diffuse ethnographic cross-reference, etc.). Obviously,

these realist trappings argue the case of belief and perception in the outlining of the aesthetic discourse. For folk memory, storytelling is a means that patterns meaning on the public consensus about the truth, while the artistic side effects are circumstantial. Literariness is deemed irrelevant for the purposes of gender programming, if not grounded in the memory-institution procedures of conventional infotainment. The novel genre is significant of the formula-ridden, commonsensical social environment these two texts refer to. They attempt to quote accurately, in accordance with the widespread 20th century political correctness, the known dramatization of gender. From conflicting perspectives, both novels make a point out of over-scrutinizing individual conduct. This narrative rationalization takes place for the sake of their doctrinaire demonstration, which the plot diligently exemplifies. As a result, the literary representation is hypersensitive about the biological versus the educated discernment of the self versus the other. Differentiation is a matter of backgrounding the comparison term of otherness and foregrounding the inferred righteousness of the narrating ego: "I'm never tempted by God but I like his trappings. Not tempted but I begin to understand why others are" (Winterson 63). The metaphorical technique of narration consists in having the latter's marginality, in both cases the gender role, juxtaposed to the former's centrality. The already mentioned first part of the simile is different from but analogous to the second one. Of course, the association between the culturally aware and the socially abusive ones is eventually reversed in the unfolding of the events. Then, the nonconformity of the self is acclaimed as being of interest (in fact central to the storyline and culturally legitimate), particularly when exposing the hegemonic status of offensive alterity, always manifest in the opposite gender.

In other words, the two novels mirror each other. They implicitly vilify the opposite (sex) of their counterpart's leading man or woman, respectively. *The Passion* and *Fever Pitch* mutually indict each other on gender misrepresentation charges. The polarized identity is a matter of narrative self-image the literary text assembles out of rhetorically proficient depiction of empirical evidence. I.e., the legitimation of the authorial complaint results out of fictional episodes staged in order to propagate the belief in the author's worldview. This leads to the delineation of over-gendered protagonists, compulsively in the grip of self-awareness. Gender stereotypes are shown to be engaged in the functioning of cultural communication. In the last instance, the same cultural practice develops literary symptoms, for example the two novels we read. Alongside the focus on authority, instantiated by fathers/patriarchs (be they English premier league managers or French emperors), the discourse enlarges on the Freudian catchphrases, now part and parcel of standard popular taste.

With the help of lad and feminist novels, the reader discovers that the function of literariness in the gender conditioning is quite systematic and structured. Literature advances the patterns of action and emotion that instruct on proper gendered conduct. The anecdote imitates social intercourse, although claiming artistic intention, and only accidentally the ideological practice blatant in the cultural contextualization of the plot. The authors supply readers with biased discourses specific if not belonging to one of the

genders. Insidiously, they suggest a mapping between their account (what we agree literature is) and the prevalent social policy of the social reality. *The Passion and Fever Pitch* amount to public narratives that signal a correspondence by which literary aesthetics is associated with openly admitted cultural habituation (on gender performance), implemented according to the expectations of interested parties. The narrative voices of the thesis novel genre demonstrate one set of beliefs when they act on their idealistic promises of emancipation. Not surprisingly, another contradictory set of beliefs is obvious when they set out to enforce their principled stand against the perpetrators of social injustice. These propagandist texts, examples of gender informed literature, follow the same rhetoric routine; only the offended party is nominally different. Otherwise, the formalization procedure is identical. Both the lad literature and the feminist novel are empiricist. They hold that knowledge is experiential and that narration is one of the most effective means of meaning coding. The thesis novels insistently claim a solid objective basis meant to legitimate their political statement. Empirically, the novel genre is another formula of public reporting on social reality. On aesthetic grounds, this meaning of literature is somewhat dismissed, although always considered in terms of side effect. However, stylistically and functionally, the reader is exposed to classic propagation of an ideology as far as *The Passion and Fever Pitch* are concerned. Literary feminism argues for the hard-fact neutrality of its questions about social reality and prosecutes the answers western culture has historically given to them. In the face of the present momentum gained by the feminist inquiries, lad literature is the reactionary backlash of male-oriented pop culture. Both of them negotiate the invention of gender roles as a means to produce easily recognisable public discourse and target a niche audience in need of political representation. The success of the enterprise certifies that the novel genre is alive and kicking in a contemporary culture revolutionized by the advent of the electronic media. In conjunction with authority disparagement, which introduces to the narrative formalization the psychoanalysis vernacular too, the pop(ular) culture memories of the late 20th century narrative quotes at length the attitude and the rhetoric of the day. The thesis novel summarizes the past with a view to accommodating the standard stereotypes of the present.

The opportunity to promote the interests of your in-group, in connection with gender policies, by resorting to narrative fiction, is seized in *The Passion and Fever Pitch*. The major legitimization strategy is the mapping of the past in order to retrace the folk memory of gender engineering, obvious in the mainstream, British public discourse of the 20th century last decades. The contemporary English thesis novel – specifically the lad and the feminist literature, hijacks the identity-conferring language of the public discourse. The literary text quotes the phrasing of pop culture industry and the jargon of gossip, of gender invention/retrieval, of the authority (governmental, paternal) figure. These literary quotations ground the aesthetic text in the collective negotiation of cultural and social goods that differentiate and formalize conflicting versions of the 20th century reality in the best interest, ideological advantage and political benefit of one in-group or another.

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