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"NO ESCAPE FROM THESE WORDS"

Review by Paul March-Russell

Barker, Nicola. *H(a)ppy*. William Heinemann, 2017. Novel.

Despite winning the 2017 Goldsmiths' Prize for experimental fiction, Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY* has, apart from brief praise by Nina Allan in *Strange Horizons*, received little or no recognition from the Science Fiction (SF) community. This is a pity, sparking off echoes of Jonathan Lethem's lament in 'The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction' (1998) for a lost experimental SF that (in his alt-history scenario) saw Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* triumph at the 1973 Nebula Awards over the real-world winner, Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973).

Echoes only though.

For Lethem's essay relies upon the simplistic binary opposition between a nebulous 'mainstream' literary culture defined in relation to – and serving to cement the otherwise porous boundaries of – a supposed ghetto of genre fictions. As I have argued in *Modernism and Science Fiction* (2015), there was always data-bleed between these two constituencies. One of the most important of such instances was the experimental fiction of Christine Brooke-Rose, to whom *H(A)PPY* is most of all indebted.

Echoes also since the linguistically innovative tradition in which Barker's novel operates was itself marginalised by the New Wave SF that Lethem praises. Although he mentions a handful of women writers from within the SF genre, the only text that Lethem cites that was actually published in *New Worlds* is Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" (1967). The fact that this story is so often cited by critics as the archetypal *New Worlds* text, and the point at which the SF avant-garde met feminist politics, only emphasises how little else published in the magazine in the late 1960s actually achieved these ambitions. Although the magazine was read by female avant-gardists from outside the community, most notably Angela Carter, Michael Moorcock's editorship failed to significantly increase the number of women writers who wrote for *New Worlds*. Instead, experimental women's fiction largely existed on the peripheries of genre SF, often combating the more bullish members of the male avant-garde, such as the novelist and polemicist B. S. Johnson.

For contemporary SF readers to glance over *H(A)PPY* and its reclamation of an entire tradition of women's writing is therefore to leave unchecked the misogyny and hypocrisy that silenced such writers in the first place.

Nevertheless, channels between *New Worlds* and the female avant-garde can be charted. The novelist, Ann Quin, worked as a secretary at the I.C.A., bringing her into the orbit of J.G. Ballard, Eduardo Paolozzi and the then-Director of the I.C.A., Mike Kustow. (Famously, she won a short story competition organised by Ballard and Martin Bax at *Ambit* in which she described the hallucinatory effects of the contraceptive pill.) Both

Ballard and Quin admired the work of Anna Kavan, whose 1967 novel, *Ice*, was subsequently marketed as Science Fiction by Brian Aldiss. At the same time, Aldiss was publishing his own Science-Fictional foray into the *nouveau roman*, *Report on Probability A* (1968). Such experiments were not only influenced by the ideas of Alain Robbe-Grillet but also by the translations of his novels; Brooke-Rose's translation of *In the Labyrinth* appeared in the same year as Aldiss's novel.

In *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), Brooke-Rose is viewed by Brian McHale as a key figure within, what he terms, the feedback loop between SF and experimental fiction. The sheen of postmodernism, however, glosses over Brooke-Rose's deeper indebtedness not only to the high modernism of James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf but also to the interfaces between myth and history, technology, and culture, to be found within their work. As the titles of novels such as *Amalgamemnon* (1984), *Verbivore* (1990) and *Textermination* (1991) indicate, Brooke-Rose is not only committed to language as experiment but to the word as the means by which we make the world. A similar inventiveness is also to be found in *H(A)PPY* although, in terms of setting, Barker looks back to an earlier novel by Brooke-Rose, and her first foray into recognisable SF tropes, the post-apocalyptic *Out* (1964). Barker's utopia arises from a millenarian end-time that she summarises as "the Floods and the Fires and the Plagues and the Death Cults" (1).

In many respects, Barker's utopia is familiar territory to seasoned readers. After the descent into barbarism, a technological society is reborn in which the inhabitants, the Young, must keep their emotions in check, aided either by algorithms (the Graph), surveillance (the Sensor), therapy (the reassurance of a Neuro-Mechanical pet), educational workshops (the Kora Group that the protagonist, Mira A, attends), or the administration of drugs. Little of this is foreign to readers of Huxley, Orwell, or Zamyatin, but Barker immediately pulls a couple of tricks. First, Mira A is not only content with her society, she actively blames herself for not being happy enough. Unlike the protagonists of *Brave New World* (1932), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or *We* (1924), who awaken to a new-found – although brief – consciousness, the agony that Mira A experiences come not from her new self-awareness but from her perceived failure to fit in. In actively seeking to re-harmonise herself with her society, she only succeeds in falling further and further away. This lends her story an ironic, rather than a tragic, arc. Second, as indicated in the quotation above, Barker colour-codes certain words dependent upon their emotional content. These act as trigger warnings for the Young: words and thoughts that have to be approached carefully or expunged altogether. Language, then, is the medium through which the social order conducts itself, and it is through the re-routing of language that Barker's novel not only deconstructs itself but also the social structures of her utopia. In this respect, Barker's novel most resembles *We* in that, as with Zamyatin's use of mathematical discourse, the form of her novel most perfectly integrates with the content of her society. The word both makes and un-makes the world of Barker's imaginings.

The glitch arises, however, not from some insurgent like Julia, the Savage or I-330 but from Mira A's own researches into the history of the South American guitarist Augustin Barríos. Whereas the Folk music of other cultures, such as the kora, is appropriated and instrumentalised by the System, so as to temper the emotions of the Young, the music of Barríos – a supposed primitive who was inspired by J. S. Bach – opens-up for Mira a range of feeling and technical expression that, in the discourse of her society, represents an 'EOE' (Excess of Emotion). Not only, then, are the individual pages of the novel active and dynamic, constantly pushing at the boundaries of their instrumentality through the playfulness of Barker's language and the extraordinary

range of typographical devices, but her narrative is also deeply musical, sometimes literally becoming a score.

Whilst, on the one hand, Barker's novel aspires to a Paterian emphasis upon musicality that also inspired Joyce (the 'Sirens' chapter of *Ulysses* (1922)), on the other hand, Barker attunes this emphasis to a feminist perspective. As an explicit reference to Jacques Lacan in the penultimate chapter indicates, Barker, like Brooke-Rose before her, is well-versed in French post-structural theory. It is therefore not too much of a leap to suggest that the kora can also be read as the *chora* which, for Julia Kristeva, represents the mobile and undefined source of semiotic pulsations that seep up from the realm of the Imaginary into the Symbolic Order. As Mira A burrows further into the musical history of Paraguay, not as a dissident act but as a good and happy purpose to fulfil, so she uncovers a range of expression that inadvertently 'declare[s] war on the System' (250) by introducing 'random information' (245) into its operation. Like other contemporary writers, such as Sarah Hall and Eirnear McBride, who have been drawn back to the avant-garde theories and practice of the 1960s and '70s, Barker's novel represents a newly-inscribed *écriture féminine*, an outburst of *jouissance* that deliriously destabilizes the patriarchal encoding of her utopia.

And yet, despite this all-too-happy affinity for post-structural discourse, what gives Barker's critique its full gravitas is Mira A's rediscovery of Paraguayan culture. In particular, her uncovering of a colonial past that sought to silence the indigenous population just as the System now seeks to restrict the emotional and intellectual expression of its citizenry. Barríos's example represents an instinctive *détournement*, a reversal not only of the Western classical model of Bach but also of the Western tendency to exalt and exoticise the primitive. But it also represents the coming-into-being of a hybrid identity that speaks both from and to the effects of colonialism upon the subaltern class. The disambiguation with which Barker's novel commences heralds the translation of the master discourse into its subaltern other; the gaps and silences not only within the narrative but the visible ruptures and blank spaces within the text articulating the very suppression of the colonial subject. It too, like Barríos's music, is the entry into a new literary identity.

To say, then, that *H(A)PPY* is a major achievement is an understatement. In the expanding world of Fantastika, it demands our attention.

BIONOTE

Paul March-Russell teaches Comparative Literature at the University of Kent, UK. He is the editor of *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* and the *SF Storyworlds* series (Gylphi Press). In 2018, he is judging the Arthur C. Clarke Award for the second time.