The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

Lecture 6:
Rewriting History: Subjective and Medial Turns

1) The Novel and the History of the World: Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (1987)

2) Media History and Modernization: Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992)

Coda: Hilary Mantel, *The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy* (2009-)

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1) The Novel and the History of the World: Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (1987)

The Novels of Penelope Lively:

The Road to Lichfield (1977)	*City of the Mind* (1991)
Treasures of Time (1979)	*Cleopatra's Sister* (1993)
Judgement Day (1980)	*Heat Wave* (1996)
Next to Nature, Art (1982)	*Spiderweb* (1998)
Perfect Happiness (1983)	*The Photograph* (2003)
According to Mark (1984)	*Consequences* (2007)
Moon Tiger (1987; Booker Prize)	*Family Album* (2009)
Passing On (1989)	*How It All Began* (2011)

(+ 6 volumes of short stories and 31 children's books)

+ memoirs and non-fiction monographs,

e.g. *The Presence of the Past: An Introduction to Landscape History* (1976)

Moon Tiger (opening):

'I'm writing a history of the world,' she says. And the hands of the nurse are arrested for a moment; she looks down at this old woman, this old ill woman. 'Well, my goodness,' the nurse says. 'That's quite a thing to be doing, isn't it?' And then she becomes busy again, she heaves and tucks and smooths – 'Upsy a bit, dear, that's a good girl – then we'll get you a cup of tea.'

A history of the world. To round things off. I may as well – no more nit-picking stuff about Napoleon, Tito, the battle of Edgehill, Hernando Cortez … The works, this time. The whole triumphant murderous unstoppable chute – from the mud to the stars, universal and particular, your story and mine. I'm equipped, I consider; eclecticism has always been my hallmark. That's what they've said, though it has been given other names. Claudia Hampton's range is ambitious, some might say imprudent: my enemies. Miss Hampton's bold conceptual sweep: my friends.
A history of the world, yes. And in the process, my own. The life and times of Claudia H. The bit of the twentieth century to which I've been shackled, willy-nilly, like it or not. Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing. The history of the world as selected by Claudia: fact and fiction, myth and evidence, images and documents.
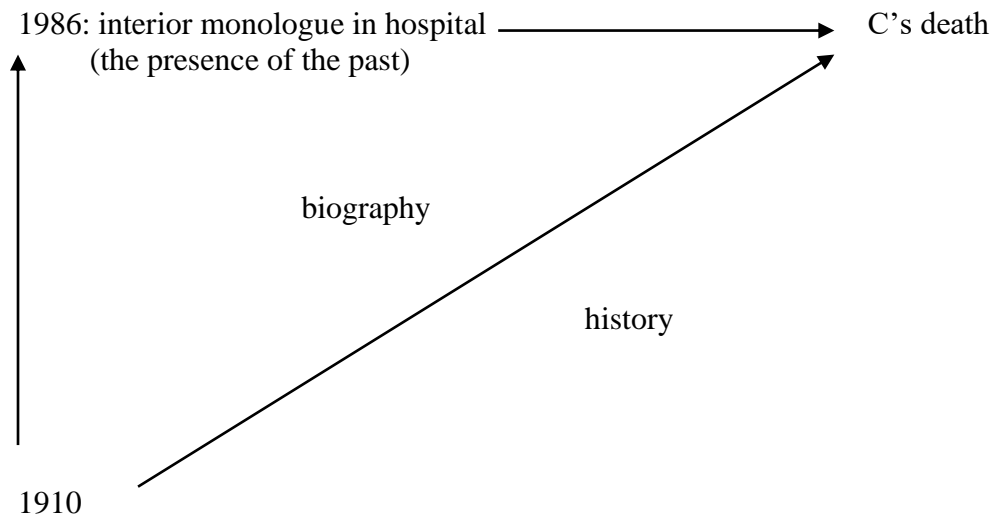
[…]

The voice of history, of course, is composite. Many voices; all the voices that have managed to get themselves heard. Some louder than others, naturally. My story is tangled with the stories of others – Mother, Gordon, Jasper, Lisa, and one other person above all; their voices must be heard also […] So, since my story is also theirs, they too must speak – Mother, Gordon, Jasper … Except that of course I have the last word. The historian's privilege.

Narrative Technique and Structure:

1) hospital scenes: heterodiegetic narrator (covert), zero focalisation;
    emphasis on scenic presentation in present tense with short passages of internal
    focalisation (nurse, doctor, Claudia, Lisa)
2) Claudia's interior monologue:
    homodiegetic narrator, fixed internal focalisation; emphasis on experiencing I
    reflecting on the past
3) episodes from Claudia's past:
    heterodiegetic narrator (covert), multiple internal focalisation (Mother, Gordon,
    Sylvia, Jasper, Lisa, Laszlo)
4) Tom Southern's story:
    a) homodiegetic narrator, zero focalisation;
       emphasis on narrating I in Tom's life story
    b) homodietic narrator, internal focalisation;
       emphasis on experiencing I in Tom's war diary

Claudia Hampton (1910-1986)

1986: interior monologue in hospital ————————————▶ C's death
       (the presence of the past)

biography

history

1910

Moon Tiger (ending):

It is late afternoon. Claudia lies with her eyes closed; she breathes loudly, an irregular rasping that makes the bed from which it comes the focal point of the room, though there is no one but Claudia to be aware of this. But she can feel it, drifting in and out of some pounding sea that is full of the din of her own existence. She comes to the surface, opens her eyes, and sees that it is raining. The sky has darkened, and the room with it; the window is struck as though by tiny pellets and water slides down it in bands so that all beyond is distorted – the branches of a tree and through them rooftops and more distant trees. And then the rain stops. Gradually, the room is filled with light; the bare criss-crossing branches of the tree are hung with drops and as the sun comes out it catches the drops and they flash with colour – blue, yellow, green, pink. The branches are black against a golden orange sky, black and brilliant. Claudia gazes at this; it is as though the spectacle has been laid on for her pleasure and she is filled with elation, a surge of joy, of well-being, of wonder.
The sun sinks and the glittering tree is extinguished. The room darkens again. Presently it is quite dim; the window is violet now, showing the black tracery of branches and a line of houses packed with squares of light. And within the room a change has taken place. It is empty. Void. It has the stillness of a place in which there are only inanimate objects: metal, wood, glass, plastic. No life. Something creaks; the involuntary sound of expansion or contraction. Beyond the window a car starts up, an aeroplane passes overhead. The world moves on. And beside the bed the radio gives the time signal and a voice starts to read the six o'clock news.

Rewriting History:

the postmodernist genre of historiographic metafiction (cf. Hutcheon, Nünning, Kotte)

- subjective experience vs. objective reality
- discursive modes of appropriating reality/history
  ('scientific' vs. artistic/literary strategies)
- the question of power: a feminist history of the world?

  → revisionist fictions, alternative historiography

2) Media History and Modernization: Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992)

The Novels of Adam Thorpe:

Ulverton (1992)
Still (1995)
Pieces of Light (1998)
Nineteen Twenty-One (2001)
No Telling (2003)
The Rules of Perspective (2005)
Between Each Breath (2007)
The Standing Pool (2008)
Hodd (2009)
Flight (2012)
Missing Fay (2017)

(+ two volumes of short stories, six radio plays and six volumes of poetry)

Ulverton:

the history of the fictional village Ulverton in the South-West of England from the 17th century to the present → continuity of place, 'collective protagonist':

"Im Falle Ulvertons manifestiert sich der kollektive Protagonist in der Dorfgemeinschaft, die sich selbstverständlich im Laufe der Jahrhunderte im einzelnen wie im ganzen verändert, dennoch aber durch die Konstanz des Raumes und die Zugehörigkeit zu diesem als ein Einheit aufgefaßt werden muß. Wie bunte Fäden in einem Gewebe tauchen an verschiedenen Stellen des Romans immer wieder die gleichen Familiennamen auf. Auf diese Weise kann der aufmerksame Leser aus den verstreuten Referenzen in jedem Kapitel ganze Genealogien erstellen und nachvollziehen, wie sich das Leben der Familien von Ulverton im Spannungsfeld von Tradition und Fortschritt verändert." (Galster 2002, 344f.)

Formal Discontinuity/Hybridity (overview):

ch.	title	year	
1	Return	1650	shepherd story (first-person narration)
2	Friends	1688	confessional sermon by village priest
3	Improvements	1712	farmer's diary
4	Leeward	1743	letters by young mistress of Ulverton Hall (→ epistolary novel)
5	Dissection	1775	letters by illiterate Sarah Shail, written by village tailor
6	Rise	1803	old joiner's anecdote related in pub to gentleman
7	Deposition	1830	trial transcripts, letters to fiancé by clerk
8	Shutter	1859	descriptions of photographic plates
9	Stitches	1887	interior monologue of old field worker (→ modernist fiction)
10	Treasure	1914	excerpts from memoirs of retired colonial civil servant
11	Wing	1953	diary of secretary, transcript of radio broadcast
12	Here	1988	post-production script of TV-documentary

Summaries:

Ch. 1 (1650):

Shepherd William tells the story of Gabby who returns from the Civil War after years of absence not knowing that his wife Ann has married Thomas Walters in the meantime. William does not warn Gabby about this state of affairs. Gabby vanishes. William indicates his suspicions and Ann becomes his mistress until she dies.

Ch. 2 (1688):

Reverend Crispin Brazier tells his parish in a sermon about the death of Curate Simon Kistle who was acting blasphemously during a snowstorm while sheltering with Brazier at Devil's Knob.

Ch. 3 (1712):

Embedded in extended musings on husbandry, a farmer describes the illness and death of his wife and his affair with the maid which results in a daughter in his diary.

Ch. 4 (1743):

A.C. of Ulverton Hall writes letters to her lover William Sykes in London over a period of six months. After having given birth to a boy who she believes to be Sykes' she is held in her room. The affair comes to an end, Sykes sends back gifts which leads to the arrest, beating (and possible hanging) of two servants.

Ch. 5 (1775):

Illiterate Sara Shail dictates letters to the village tailor John Pounds. Her son is in prison in London and in danger of being hanged for stealing a hat. The tailor begins to interfere and is horrified when the son is finally pardoned.

Ch. 6 (1803):

In a pub, Samuel Daye tells a gentleman about his life as a joiner and carpenter under Abraham Webb. Daye was always loyal but one day in 1775 he imitated the voice of God in order to make Webb less strict with his subordinates.

Ch. 7 (1830):

Depositions of the townsfolk on the Luddite uprising at Ulverton, interspersed with letters from the clerk to his fiancé.

Ch. 8 (1859):

Notes by a woman photographer on her plates depicting scenes from Ulverton and Egypt.

Ch. 9 (1887):

Jo Perry walking about in Ulverton and thinking about changes and episodes which have their place in the oral traditions of the village.

Ch. 10 (1914):

Writing in 1928, the retired colonial civil servant Fergusson remembers how he took part in an archaeological excavation after his return from India (and on the eve of WWI).

Ch. 11 (1953):

Secretary Violet Nightingale's typed version of a transcript of a radio broadcast by self-styled artist and cartoonist Herbert Bradman on the end of rationing in England and her typed diary ('My Life under Herbert E. Bradman') which reveals her sabotage of Bradman's pompous 'planting' of his autobiography on the occasion of the coronation of Elisabeth II (to be opened on the 2nd June, 4953).

Ch. 12 (1988):

Post-production script of a TV-documentary on the history of estate agent Clive Walter's failed development project in Ulverton ("A Year in the Life: Clive's Seasons").

→ the novel comes full circle:

- the dead body discovered on the building site seems to be the soldier Gabby who was murdered by his wife and her second husband Thomas Walters (!) as hinted at in ch. 1 of *Ulverton*
- ch. 1 turns out to be a fictional story written by Adam Thorpe, a 'LOCAL AUTHOR & PERFORMER' from Ulverton in the 1980s, as part of a book project on regional history ('a whole series of stories on shepherds') and published in the local newspaper, *The Wessex Nave.*

The Literary Coherence of *Ulverton*:

- self-reflexive framing/closure
- recurrent themes:
  sheep breeding, infant mortality, sexuality, the tension between religion and morality on the one hand and between religion and individuality on the other, the interplay between progressive and traditional forces (cf. Nünning 1995, 356)
- leitmotifs:
  bedwine and red ribbons (cf. Galster 2002, 347-349)

Rewriting History:

- acknowledging the ways in which various media shape the apprehension and appropriation of reality and history
- public sphere (sermon, trial transcripts, radio, TV)
  vs.
  private sphere (diary, letters) + intermediary forms (memoirs, literature)
- orality vs. literacy (orality > literacy > secondary orality?)
- writing vs. visual culture
- questions of access ↔ (social) mobility
- the multiple perspectives of history
- history ↔ fiction?

→ the novel as a reflexive medium for 'putting things up against each other' (Thorpe) *within* history, open for processing all kinds of memorial and discursive practices between orality and literacy *in writing*

→ the novel as a reflexive medium for observing the complexity of the world from an increasingly 'ex-centric' position which can, however, draw upon the accumulated experience of its former centrality

Coda:

Winner of the 2009 Man Booker Prize:

Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*

At first glance a straightforward historical novel (as opposed to the overall trend towards historiographic metafiction observable in the category of 'literary fiction'), *Wolf Hall* is set in the 1520s and 1530s and focussed on the historical figure of Thomas Cromwell and his rise to power at the Tudor court of King Henry VIII. Of no position or name, Cromwell first became Cardinal Wolsey's man for all purposes, and then, after Wolsey's fall from grace, Henry VIII's chief minister. In this role he oversaw the Henry's break with Rome, the dissolution of the monasteries and Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn. Widely hated in his lifetime and traditionally seen as a scheming and opportunistic villain, Cromwell is presented in a much more sympathetic way in *Wolf Hall*. Especially through its subtle manipulation of perspective – the overall authorial narrative situation is, as it turns out, strictly focalized through Cromwell – the novel thus provides a corrective of this negative view and casts Cromwell in the role of one of the first emphatically modern men.

Sequel: *Bring Up the Bodies* (Winner of the 2012 Man Booker Prize)
(3rd volume *The Mirror and the Light* announced for March 2020; cf. Johnston 2017)

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
Scales:	external/environ-mental reference illusion 'real' comm./ character comm.	←——————————————→			internal/sys-temic ref. anti-illusion lit. comm./ narr. comm.	auto-referentiality
'Programs':	(Avantgarde)	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism
Orientations of Meaning:	obj. (subj.) [(lit.)]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit.→lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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