

# **The Introduction to**

## ***The New Puritan Generation***

by

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### **1.- The birth of a new sensibility**

Reading the assessments on British fiction that were regularly published in the 1990s a certain sense of complacency can be gleaned, as if the novel published in Britain at the time had reached its prime, having left behind previous accusations of provincialism, introspection and lack of adventure.

There were reasons to be satisfied. The writers who had emerged in the late 1960s and in the 1970s flourished in the following decade, producing some of their finest pieces by placing themselves outside outdated modes of narration (Fay Weldon, Beryl Bainbridge, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Rose Tremain...). The new writers of the 1980s had added vigour and freshness to this scenario, contributing with unusually rich forms of invention (Jeanette Winterson, Hanif Kureishi, Ben Okri, Alan Hollinghurst, Kazuo Ishiguro...). It seemed, then, that a

healthy and modern form had at last become consolidated. The British novel had somehow come full circle starting with the brilliance of Modernism in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and ending in the 1990s with a fresh surge of creativity. In the words of Malcolm Bradbury, writing in the first issue (1992) of *New Writing*: 'Aesthetically, it [British fiction] is equally plural, ranging freely from one genre to another, from the detective story to science fiction, the historical novel to the post-modern pastiche, reviving forms of writing from the past while experimenting with the often media-based forms of the future' (1992: 9). Things had been done properly, a dignified status had finally been achieved and the reward was justly earned, and consequently Bradbury spoke about new writing characterized by 'its variety and pluralism, its multiplicity of expression, its breadth of voices' (1992: 8).

Three years later, in the same publication (*New Writing 4*, 1995), A. S. Byatt shared Bradbury's views on the good quality of British fiction in the early 1990s and the excellent prospects for the novel in the years to follow: 'I do think the British novel at the moment is full of truly inventive writing – new forms are being discovered, old forms are being subtly altered, there is a sense that anything is possible and, moreover, anything has a chance of being taken seriously' (1995: 439). Critics and scholars were basking in the glow of the roaring fire fed by a variety of fiction: writers from the Celtic fringe of Britain were producing outstanding works, women's writing had never been such a prominent part of the mainstream as it was then, 'new voices' from countries which had once belonged to the Empire had undoubtedly enriched and energized British fiction. Even repulsion and abjection in sexual matters, including descriptions of physical violence by

the boldest of novelists was perfectly admitted, and of course playing with history was a readers' favourite.

However, one cannot help noticing that there was a residual sense of belletrism in the critics' assessment of fiction published at that time in the British Isles. A. S. Byatt celebrated the 'excitingly *mongrel* nature' (1995: 441 – emphasis in original) in the finalists for the 'Twenty Best of Young British Novelists' (1993) for which she was a member of the panel. It was good to be hybrid as long as it was framed in a good novel.

Malcolm Bradbury himself could not help feeling the ennui that sometimes accompanies the feeling of having been well nurtured and satiated. I had the opportunity to interview him in the mid-1990s and he told me that the established writers of the day were very much living on the surge of energy of the previous decade, when powerful ideas had triggered the writers' imagination. For him, the world had changed radically

after the collapse of Communism, but British authors were continuing with old forms, unaware of the fact that the approaching end of the millennium demanded a new literary conscience: 'The world has changed far more than writing has and we haven't yet generated the new writing' (cited in Fernández, 1998: 225). What he was looking for, he said, was someone who could

describe the world that follows this [the fall of the Berlin Wall], and describe it not just in terms of its habits, and not some commonplace facts, but a story that was really about that great sense of difference, and who could actually articulate this as the writers of the Romantic Movement did after the French Revolution. (cited in Fernández, 1998: 225)

Bradbury did not complain about the absence of good writers. There were plenty of gifted artists: that was not the point. What he found missing was the

'magician' of the moment, someone to grasp the spirit of the confusing, heady times they were living at the end of the century.

It is fanciful to imagine a new Milan Kundera or an updated version of Václav Havel disregarded by critics and unknown by the general public, but let's imagine that the new writer had not just been released from prison in Eastern Europe, or that he/she had not secretly been writing their big novel in some miserable bedsit while working part-time in an obscure administrative job. Perhaps the new writing, the literature that encapsulated the hollow excitement of the times had not one but multiple faces and could be found just round the corner, in the shopping centres, the disco-clubs and in the streets of suburban neighbourhoods. Perhaps in the 1990s no coherent concept of culture could be encapsulated anymore by just one single style or an encompassing worldview

because 'Everything had gone all slippery, like spilt mercury; and when the tweezers of criticism tried to pick up a trend or a product or an event it seemed to split up into cunning little sub-sections of itself, scattering hither and thither with a wanton disregard for any singularity of purpose – any one meaning' (Bracewell, 2002: 2).

Times had changed indeed and they did not have the shape anyone would have predicted for a grand finale as befitted the end of the millennium. There was a sense of provisionality in all spheres of life, and the new urbanscape was not downtown Manhattan nor a semi-detached house of the professional middle-classes in Chelsea, Hampstead or St John's Wood, but places like the Old Pier in Weston-Super-Mare, the epitome of English tackiness, where the protagonist of Matt Thorne's novel, *Tourist* (1998), dresses up as a cabaret artist in an attempt to revive the fortunes of a seedy

music hall venue. Sarah Patton, the protagonist of Thorne's first incursion into long narratives, was more a representative of the cultural atmosphere of the 1990s than any frustrated over-intellectualized fictive writer going through a self-destructive middle age crisis. 'I'm twenty-seven years old and I don't know who I am' (Thorne, 2001: 231), says Sarah reflecting upon her own life. She earns her living in a low-paid job, searches for meaning in a number of personal relationships finding sex instead, goes out to pubs or clubs ending up in other people's houses and is as devoid of cultural referents as the rest of her friends, with video-games and bowling alleys as the main highlights in her daily drudgery.

My point is that a new kind of fiction which never reached the bestseller lists was lurking in the shadows of mainstream publishing in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that it contained the seeds for the

narrative of the new millennium. The literary novel, understood as an artistically ambitious work of fiction, more than 30,000 words long, not commercial and not genre (Jack, 2003: 11) was seen as an outmoded form by a new generation of writers who thrived on sub-standard literature and who lived in a consumerist world. Tony White put it succinctly when, thinking on the motivation for putting together his anthology of alternative writing *britpulp!* (1999), he said: 'Just developing the idea about the writers who were emerging in the mid-nineties, who seemed to be ignoring any orthodox "literary" canon, and taking some kind of cue from popular fiction of the sixties and seventies. The ones who were any good, that is. It felt like an important moment that no one was picking up on' (cited in Marshall, 2002).

Most of the new writers who did not fit into the prevailing pattern of high literary standards did not go

to the lengths of Tony White in his first novel, *Road Rage!* (1997) when he imposed himself the rules of not spending more than two weeks on its composition, not doing any research and not forgetting to include at least one scene of sex or violence in every chapter (cited in Marshall, 2002), but it is nevertheless true that they wrote against the canon, or rather, they did not care about following the tradition of their elders, which was already showing signs of jadedness.

The dominant literary novel, different voices complained, was more concerned with plunging into the past, following the classic 'what went wrong' theme, trying to make sense of a country dealing with decline as a worrying yet comfortable topic. Speaking in 1994, J. G. Ballard compared English writers with the regular customer at a restaurant, going back again and again to the same flavours: 'What happened twenty years ago, or thirty years ago, or even half an hour ago

tends to be the subject matter of most English fiction; it is profoundly retrospective' (cited in Self, 2006: 28), he said. Similarly, Ian Jack complained of the stress on self-examination so characteristic of English novels of the mid-1990s. They were not necessarily historic fictions, but they all dealt 'with the country and people that seemed to be there a minute ago, before we blinked and turned away' (Jack, 1996: 8).

Whatever its merits, or lack of them, the fiction that could not find an outlet in established printing presses was furiously located in the present time, proudly wearing the badge of modernity as teenagers flaunted the names of fashion designers on the elastic bands of their underwear. It was simply the arrival of a new concept of writing that was gradually expanding among younger authors, a fresh approach to literature by youths who were not ashamed of their long hours in front of the TV or of the time they spent playing with

their Nintendo. The house of literature was treated as one treats any other house, not as the sacrosanctum of their forefathers. That was the new spirit that was being adopted by a then unknown generation of writers. It is significant that at the beginning of his apprenticeship as a writer Toby Litt counted among his guiding principles: 'Most particularly, to trust the contemporary. Not to hedge. Not to try and write something that looks like literature, smells like literature, etc.' (cited in Mahoney, 2000). For many, like literary agent Jonny Geller, this meant 'a scaling down of ambition', the English novel being turned into a 'kind of contemporary sitcom' (cited in Cowley, 1999: 13). At the other end of the spectrum, an editor of alternative short stories like Sarah Champion believed that the porous quality of the new fiction was something natural; fiction could receive the influence of disco music just as the Beat generation in the fifties had been

affected by jazz (Champion, 1997: xiv).

The new attitude in young British fiction was not of course something that appeared overnight. There were forerunners, signs that predicted a change in literary perceptions, early flashes of a changing mode in the way literature could be understood. Since the 1980s some American writers had been using a style characterized by its complete immersion in consumer society. What was generally termed as 'blank fiction' featured a set of motives that now sound familiar when examining radical British fiction of the 1990s: furiously contemporary texts in which the young, idle scions of an affluent middle class showed more than simple curiosity in gratuitous violence, repulsive scenes and sexual perversions. The narrators were normally the youths themselves, casting a morally empty glance at what surrounded them, their own world clearly defined by television programmes, cult movies and

video games. Bret Easton Ellis appears as the high priest of the neutral school of writing, with his characteristic ambivalence between high and low culture, his interest in shallowness and his metafictional devices. Ellis, too, represents an oblique form of social criticism that has frequently been overlooked: 'Blank fiction writers have an exceptionally sophisticated apprehension of the excesses of our culture and show them from within, posing a criticism which is not directly voiced through a narrator but through the textual implications and the excesses that are satirized in their blank writings' (Baelo-Allué, 2011: 35). Ellis' debut novel, *Less than Zero* (1985), and particularly his third novel, *American Psycho* (1991), set the course for a whole generation of budding writers to follow. Douglas Coupland was not far behind; his novel *Generation X. Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) brought into prominence the lives of

underemployed, highly educated youths with few perspectives for a promising future.

Back in Britain, the novels and short stories of Irvine Welsh showed that powerful narratives could be built out of the lives of underprivileged characters, and furthermore, that the use of expletives and slang would be an integral part of them. *Trainspotting* (1993) was more than a referent for the generation that would start publishing at the end of the decade. Welsh's fluency and apparent carelessness in matters of style, his unashamed breaking down of genre barriers and his refusal to be dragged down by boredom or complacency created a powerful impact on younger artists: anything was possible, anyone could write, any story was valid. If Martin Amis complained at the time of literature having turned into 'the great garden that is always there and is open to everyone twenty-four hours a day' (Amis, 2002: xiv), the young writers were



squatters in that carefully maintained garden, having jumped the fence and peed in the hedges.

## **2.- An elusive literary generation**

This, in broad terms, is the breeding ground which favoured the publication of the anthology of short stories *All Hail the New Puritans* (2000), edited by Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne, chosen here as the representative collection of a whole style of writing and a particular moment in English literature. The act of defining a generation is fraught with perils, particularly in this case when all of those who took part in it characteristically disavowed the whole enterprise somehow or other. When asked about the collection years after its publication, most of the writers dismissed their contribution to it, denying being part of a group and playing down its importance as something episodic, circumstantial and inconsequential:

I think the general consensus on the *New Puritans* is that we were all a load of wankers with an over-inflated sense of what we were doing. If I hadn't been part of it, perhaps I would have thought that too -- after all, I'm not sure we put across what we were trying to do in the most diplomatic way. But I can't resist a manifesto, and it was a good idea ... But being referred to as "New Puritan, Scarlett Thomas" does wind me up. As they say, you shag one sheep... Anyway, it was years ago and it was an experiment. (Scarlett Thomas cited in Purbright, 2005)

Curiously enough, their transitory gathering together for the book made them typical of the prevalent attitude of the times; their indifferent, casual approach to the whole affair was what marked them as members of a contradictory, ephemeral but nevertheless distinguishable literary movement. Four women and

eleven men, most of them born in England, contributed to the collection: Scarlett Thomas, Alex Garland, Ben Richards, Nicholas Blincoe, Candida Clark, Daren King, Geoff Dyer, Matt Thorne, Anna Davis, Bo Fowler, Matthew Branton, Simon Lewis, Tony White, Toby Litt and Rebecca Ray. At the time of the publication of the book they were in their late twenties and early thirties, and most of them had already published a couple of novels. Geoff Dyer was the eldest, 42, and the most experienced writer of the group – his first novel, *The Colour of Memory*, went back to 1989.

The claim for the participants in *All Hail...* to be grouped as a literary generation needs further consideration. They certainly shared some of the above-mentioned attitudes common to anti-establishment writers: they were commercially focused, colloquial-language adepts, furiously contemporary and, above all, willing to take part in a

playful and stimulating adventure like writing a story for a book with a manifesto stated from the outset. In any case, a generous amount of artistic licence can be taken if one belongs to the vanguard of a literary movement, and tools like a manifesto can later be disowned if need be. The manifesto, furthermore, can be interpreted both as a question of nailing their colours and as a gesture in itself, a mark of their existence.

When the book was launched, they were met with a storm of criticism and the problem of the harsh antagonism that they found was that the critics took the initiative at face value, not realising that it was in part a strategic move by two intelligent editors in order to find an outlet for a good idea: they had wrapped themselves up in a movement to accompany the publication of a book of short stories. Among their many contrasting features, it must be said that the

movement was very much a virtual one; no press conference was announced to issue a declaration, no final document was passed around for the participants to sign, but it is nevertheless true that the contributors enjoyed doing what they were asked to do. Their atypical features can be best exemplified if the concept of a founder is applied here: any literary movement has a leader, someone who clearly imagines the future and designs its ideology. But the symbol of a founding figure is not perhaps appropriate in a group of people who belonged to the same cultural milieu and drew on the same temper. Besides, editors Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne were also contributors to the volume with one story each. Like the writers whose stories they commissioned, they were at the beginning of their literary careers too. Apart from that, the spirit of the experiment was very much equalitarian: 'Fifteen writers; ten rules' (Blincoe and Thorne, 2001: vii).

If the New Puritans can be compared with a canonical literary generation, that is, any of the families of the poetic avant-garde in the first decades of the twentieth century, there are grounds to claim their belonging to a group, diffuse though it may be, diffuse as all groups are. As radical young writers, they considered themselves at the forefront of literary experimentation and as a demonstrative gesture that they had arrived, a ten-point declaration was boldly printed on the first page of the book. This would count as the birth of any movement in classical terms: 'In the case of groups that intend to be considered avant-garde, this process often involves a joint declaration of purpose or manifesto that identifies members and enemies' (Strong, 1997: 7).

The New Puritan manifesto, later to be discussed in detail, was not the product of a joint discussion of the participants in the collection of short stories; it was

solely conceived and written by the two editors of the collection, Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne. But then all the writers they had approached sensed that it meant something new and not distant from their creative interests. Besides, they surely understood that it provided them with a trampoline for public recognition. As Beret E. Strong argues, 'participation in a group empowers poets most when they are trying to make a name for themselves' (1997: 8), and he adds: 'As a tool that helps recently launched writers become known, the avant-garde group is useful for a limited time only and is then often dismantled as systematically as it was created' (1997: 8). According to this authoritative opinion, the New Puritans could be considered a literary movement even if their members had only gathered for this particular occasion and if the movement had later to be disowned.

The writers of the collection had been chosen

because for the editors they shared certain 'modern' requirements. They were the representatives in British fiction of 'an international turn away from a baroque literary sensibility to something cooler and essentially prose- and narrative-driven' (Blincoe, 2011). Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne perceived that there was a new style struggling for recognition; recent experiments in alternative fiction (*Children of Albion Rovers*, 1996; *Disco Biscuits*, 1997; *britpulp!*, 1999) had proved successful. Blincoe and Thorne were part of that environment and they were well-connected. They simply presented in one bold move what was already there in a dispersed way: fiction which addressed the quotidian in a prosaic way, as if following a call to arms by the captain of disaffected suburban youth, Morrissey, when he had sung a few years before that the music played by the DJ no longer had the power to express the sense of his reality. They felt that a new

vocabulary had to be invented.

### **3.- The making of the book**

The actual process of edition of the book was as follows: early in 1999 Nicholas Blincoe came up with the idea of translating into fiction what had been successfully made on film by Danish director Lars Von Trier and his *Dogme 95* project. Von Trier had envisaged a new kind of film production in which all unnecessary elements were reduced to a minimum. The basic idea was to record the work of actors set in the present and in real locations, without recourse to special effects, additional lightning or music. In 1995 he and his colleague Thomas Vinterberg developed the ten rules of what they termed ‘The Vow of Chastity’, or the foundation of the new movement. All of these rules reinforced the idea of austerity in film making and by the end of the decade several productions, including

the much acclaimed *Festen*, Jury Prize in Cannes Film Festival in 1998, were made following the trend initiated by Von Trier.

Nicholas Blincoe talked to his friend Matt Thorne about the project and they decided to go ahead with it. The title for the book was Blincoe’s idea, taking the cue from a ballet by Michael Clark he had recently seen: *Hail the New Puritan* had been a collaboration of Clark with post-punk group *The Fall*, and Blincoe liked it for its iconoclastic attitude. The starting point was the writing of the manifesto itself. There was something imposing, continental, authentic, reminiscent of the surrealist movements of the 1920s and 1930s in the drafting of a manifesto. In the case of Blincoe and Thorne’s, it was meant to be not only prescriptive, but also encouraging, that is, it was meant to promote the kind of narrative that they admired: ‘The initial concept was to come up with a list of restrictions (*à la Dogme*

Vow of Chastity), but as we thought about it, we decided that the list would be a combination of qualities we recognized in the fiction we liked by contemporary writers and deliberate restrictions' (Thorne, 2011).

The editors then drafted a list of anti-formalist rules that fulfilled different functions: they set the standard for the stories in the anthology, they expressed their reaction against the previous generation of 'literary' writers (in the subsequent discussion after the manifesto, *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis and *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, were mentioned as the kind of literature they reacted against) and by this set of rules they announced to the world the official birth of the new sensibility:

#### THE NEW PURITAN MANIFESTO

1.- Primary story-tellers, we are dedicated to the

narrative form.

2.- We are prose writers and recognise that prose is the dominant form of expression. For this reason we shun poetry and poetic licence in all its forms.

3.- While acknowledging the value of genre fiction, whether classical or modern, we will always move towards new openings, rupturing existing genre expectations.

4.- We believe in textual simplicity and vow to avoid all devices of voice: rhetoric, authorial asides.

5.- In the name of clarity, we recognise the importance of temporal linearity and eschew flashbacks, dual temporal narratives and foreshadowing.

6.- We believe in grammatical purity and avoid any elaborate punctuation.

7.- We recognise that published works are also historical documents. As fragments of our time, all our texts are dated and set in the present day. All products,

places, artists and objects named are real.

8.- As faithful representations of the present, our texts will avoid all improbable or unknowable speculation about the past or the future.

9.- We are moralists, so all texts feature a recognisable ethical reality.

10.- Nevertheless, our aim is integrity of expression, above and beyond any commitment to form.

The spirit of the whole enterprise was both serious (some rules had to be obeyed) but also playful (it was fun to experiment with writing, to play the game). The ten rules certainly curtailed the writers' freedom of choice, but it was liberating at the same time to tell a story pure and simple. In any case, it was obvious that the participants would take the manifesto as a guide, not as an inflexible set of commandments:

The manifesto was the point but should never be

taken too serious. It could be interpreted on a number of levels – as a literary clarion call, as well as a very strong publicity bomb to throw amongst the critics. It raised some interesting ideas about fiction; it was also interesting to parallel fiction with the DOGME film discipline. But in the end, none of the writers took it particularly seriously and broke the rules at will. (Hollis, 2011)

When the book was published in September 2000, one of the most remarked-upon features of the anthology was that the stories covered more ground than was initially outlined: 'Even at the time,' novelist Richard Beard remembered, 'I felt the manifesto didn't match the contents of the book. The stories in the book are far more varied in style than the manifesto declares so stridently they ought to be' (Beard, 2011).

But going back to the initial stages of the book,

once the manifesto was written and revised (a technical restriction, for instance, urging contributors to write two rough drafts and a polish, was dropped), the idea for the book was sent to different publishing companies. It was actually very well received, with seven major publishers bidding on the rights. Blincoe and Thorne finally accepted the offer of Fourth Estate. The idea of the manifesto was thought to be good for advertising, it was timely and at the publishing house they found that the collection would enhance British fiction in their catalogue, which they felt was underrepresented. Surely the benefits in terms of cohesion provided by the initial ten rules did not go unnoticed to the publishers, as Paul March-Russell states: 'The manifesto, then, overtly demonstrates how anthologies attempt to bind individual short stories to an overall purpose and identity' (2009: 63).

Here the name of Leo Hollis enters the stage. A

young and dynamic editor at Fourth Estate, he already knew Blincoe and Thorne and reacted favourably to the list of potential contributors that accompanied the manifesto. Of the initial twelve names, two of them, Douglas Coupland and Haruki Murakami, declined the invitation (Murakami had originally sent a story which would have not been accepted anyway, because it broke some of the rules), and new names, this time all British, were added to the list as both of them, Blincoe and Thorne, read more work from recent young authors. Leo Hollis supervised the process but did not intervene until the end, when all the stories had gone through Blincoe and Thorne, and he did a general edit of the whole collection. He worked with the book as with any other publication, without taking into account the rules of the manifesto. Only a limited amount of editing was done on the stories, normally by the editors in collaboration with the writers themselves so that



they fitted the set of rules. For Blincoe, it was important to bring to life intelligent, beautiful stories without excessive intervention. For Leo Hollis this was a point he disagreed with: 'I felt that the stories could have been worked on far harder than they were in the end' (Hollis, 2011).

Finally Blincoe and Thorne wrote the introduction to the collection, which took the form of a dialogue of the editors although, as Nicholas Blincoe admitted to me, the dialogue form with two voices was 'slightly artificial. There was a process of joint editorship so nothing that is said, could be attributed to either one or the other with one hundred percent certainty' (Blincoe, 2011).

The fictitious conversation between Blincoe and Thorne is full of enthusiasm for the new trend and makes a strong case for pure story-telling as the *raison d'être* of the anthology. The editors made sweeping

statements that relegated all other forms of writing to the paper bin: 'without narrative the most attractive constellations of words or the most carefully poised sentences are nothing but make-up on a corpse' (Blincoe and Thorne, 2001: viii). But of course they had to be provocative, bold, embattled, as befits the crusading spirit of the leaders of a cultural revolution. Other examples of this attitude, which did not really match what was on offer, included:

- 'Today, fiction should be focusing on the dominance of visual culture...' (ix).

- 'Poetry is so different to prose, it has nothing to offer or to teach the prose writer' (x).

- 'It is impossible to write verse without turning life into artifice' (x).

- 'Flashbacks are a cheap trick' (xiii).

But the introduction also offered fresh, thought-provoking and exciting ideas, particularly for young

writers:

-‘Narrative is essentially flexible, it is flexible at its very core. In the end, stories resist any attempt to categorise them’ (xi).

-‘The truth is not that fiction can be escapist, but that fiction embodies a desire for freedom’ (xi).

-‘The bond between writer and reader is one of contemporaries, of peers, not master and initiate’ (xvi).

-‘[F]iction writers should at least be the ones who legislate what is and what is not fine writing’ (xvii).

The introduction to the book is savvy and smart, and maybe it played its part by generating such an angry response in some quarters. Statements like ‘British fiction is currently among the most exciting in the world’ (vii) or the anthology being ‘a chance to blow the dinosaurs out of the water’ (vii) sound too ambitious for just a collection of short stories, and it was bound to meet a negative reaction. As Nicholas

Blincoe admitted many years later: ‘We tend to pontificate and also to leap off from each rule to make wider social comments. Maybe we could have focused more on the key idea: what is prose fiction? Why does it work? And what makes it beautiful?’ (Blincoe, 2011).

#### **4.- The reception of the New Puritans**

The critical response to the anthology once it was published was in many cases fairly negative, even outrageous. One cannot help thinking, when reading the reviews, that Blincoe and Thorne gave many hostages to fortune when they drafted the manifesto and particularly when they wrote the dialogic comments on their common venture.

Criticism was not directed against the stories themselves, which in general were praised as interesting instances of narrative. There was general agreement on the remarkable poignancy of some of the

pieces, particularly on the stories written by Anna Davis ('Facing the Music'), Geoff Dyer ('Skunk'), Alex Garland ('Monaco'), Nicholas Blincoe ('Short Guide to Game Theory') and Toby Litt ('The Puritans'). It was also agreed that first-class standards were approached when 'the writers were not at work with a photocopied manifesto tacked up above their desks' (Clark, 2000: 29), that is, when the rules of the manifesto were overstepped. It was also generally admitted that the collection as a whole was not very different from similar anthologies published at the time (March-Russell, 2009: 64).

The first line of attack on *All Hail...* is the direct result of their being fairly good stories, but that there were no grounds to announce that this was the ultimate collection that the editors proclaimed it to be. Alex Clark, for instance, insisted on the average quality of the stories of the anthology: 'It is, however, difficult,

verging on the impossible, to see any of them as the beginning of a new wave ... this project seems to favour clubbability rather than iconoclasm, and chin-jutting adolescent defiance rather than an engagement with form or content' (Clark, 2000: 28). Sean O'Brien took the argument further claiming that the poverty of the approach made the editors' enthusiasm difficult to share: 'The arid here-and-now of much of the material admits no sense of context. History, politics, economics, race and class are loudly absent; the result is banal and reactionary – an accurate snapshot of contemporary Britain, perhaps, but one which is imaginatively dead' (O'Brien, 2000: 8).

The second line of attack focused on what was termed as the making a virtue out of necessity: the emphasis that the editors placed on reducing the literary language to a minimum, the avoidance of all elements that departed from an austere conception of

style in favour of a story simply told, in fact, revealed that they could not work with the language the way accomplished writers could. The New Puritan's explicit rejection of tradition and also their ambition to make their narratives resemble film or TV did nothing but reinforce this feeling: 'It flourishes the possibility of a new kind of fiction, but in fact it represents a kind of hidden shame about literature, and an embarrassment that fiction is not more like film. It is really a manifesto for the New Philistinism' (Wood, 2000).

A third line of attack consisted of denouncing the blatant use of the manifesto and 'The Pledge', as the introduction was called, as a marketing ploy, a gimmick to sell more books and enhance the literary careers of the participants in the experiment. For fiction writer Richard Beard the commercial motives were uppermost on the list of priorities of the New Puritans, thus explaining their leaning towards economically

profitable forms of writing, like screenplays:

But if the book says anything about the general panorama of British fiction at the time, it announces a growing cynicism about what writing is. For some writers, it was less about the writing than the marketing, and New Puritans was a bold self-promotional vehicle rather than a project of genuine literary value. (Beard, 2011)

James Wood continued in this vein at the time of the publication, remarking that what the New Puritans really craved for was the success obtained by movies, and what posed as an artistic declaration was in fact a commercial strategy (Wood, 2000). Similarly, Alex Clark condemned the publicity that had surrounded the anthology even before its publication, being a book 'whose very existence was devised to elicit maximum coverage at the same time as furthering its editors' and contributors' careers' (Clark, 2000: 29). Less harshly,

Boyd Tonkin took the question of publicity lightly as a logical side-effect of the book publication; theirs was simply the latest instalment of a recurrent call in literature for an unobtrusive approach to any subject matter: 'But why bother to take a gang of publicity-hungry young contenders at face-value? ... the media-friendly New Puritan postures will, inevitably, go the way of all flash. But they testify to a perennial – and fundamentally healthy – desire to clear the clutter out of culture' (Tonkin, 2000).

Negative criticism on the book had, among other consequences, that of the book being talked about and creating a stir and, subsequently, the opening of a debate about the kind of fiction people wanted to read and the state of British fiction at the time, and it helped to shake off the complacency that had surrounded English letters for more than a decade: 'But why is it that the roster of British literary heavyweights has not

changed for 20 years? Have no new stars emerged to challenge the gilded quartet of Amis, Barnes, McEwan and Rushdie – or do we lack the curiosity to find them?' (Moss, 2001: 2). The author of this opinion was journalist Stephen Moss who, in a two-page article published in *The Guardian* a year after the publication of *All Hail...* tackled the question of the jaded state of mainstream literature in Britain. Basically what he put forward in his analysis was that the group of established writers mentioned above had made of the literary novel their stronghold, blocking the entrance of new talent. Consequently, young writers were turning to genre fiction or the middle-market. The new writers were explicitly anti-canonical, 'wearing their ignorance of literature as a badge of honour, more interested in Limp Bizkit than lit crit' (Moss, 2001: 3).

The existence of an undercurrent of change in English Literature had been registered, and *All Hail...*

was heralded as the most relevant offspring of that restlessness. In the article by Moss, Matt Thorne was quoted as saying: 'It is not a fight for writers or readers. The anthology was a way of democratising writing, an attack on the inflated self-worth of writers, a war on egoism' (in Moss, 2001: 3). A few years later Suzanne Keen placed the book edited by Blincoe and Thorne in a current which rejected the past and embraced 'the contemporary as a proper subject' (Keen, 2006: 181), implying its being at the spearhead of a change of direction in English fiction.

### **5.- Assessing the impact of the New Puritans**

The forces of democratisation in literature, to use Martin Amis's term, were pushing hard. New collections of short stories emerged in the following years which clearly shared the minimalist aesthetics of *All Hail the New Puritans*. The influence of Blincoe and

Thorne's book, for instance, can be clearly seen in books like *Piece of Flesh* (2001), a collection of pornographic short stories edited by Zadie Smith. She counted on the work of four New Puritans: Daren King, Toby Litt, Rebecca Ray and Matt Thorne. In her introduction there is something reminiscent of the matey, straight-forward attitude of 'The Pledge' that Blincoe and Thorne had shown:

Hello. So here I am editing a book of five pornographic stories. Well, when I say *editing*, I mean that at the suggestion of the ICA I invited five bright, young writers with a healthy clutch of novels between them, all more or less friends of mine, to write stories of a pornographic nature for which they would receive £250 each. In effect, I paid my friends to write about sex for me. (Smith, 2001b: 7)

The same nonchalant, casual tone can be detected in another collection also edited by Zadie Smith that same year, *May Anthologies*. The contributors were Oxbridge graduates chosen by Smith herself and in her introduction, again, the example of *All Hail...* is clearly at work, particularly in Smith's recommendations to would-be writers on the need to focus on simple prose, a distinguishable plot line and a neat description of things: 'let's try walking before we start running' (Smith, 2001a: 7). When in 2007 Smith edited a new collection of short stories, *The Book of Other People*, echoes of Blincoe and Thorne's project were still appreciable. Not only were the stories commissioned with an explicit request (in this case to invent a character and to name the story after them), but in her introduction Smith also stressed the joys of 'simply writing', reminiscent of the return to pure fiction advocated in 'The Pledge': 'It is liberating to write a

piece that has no connection to anything else you write, that needn't be squished into a novel, or styled to fit the taste of a certain magazine, or designed in such a way as to please the kind of people who pay your rent' (Smith, 2007: ix).

Even in a collection like *Comma* (2002), edited by Ra Page, in which the efforts of Blincoe and Thorne were rebuked for being 'regressive' and for not making any explicit reference to the short story in their manifesto, the compiler made a plea for making literature accessible to the public and for letting the world get inside the stories, instead of shutting it out. Ra Page emphasized the aspect of the short story writer's work that connected it to the public: 'Not garret-bound or graveyard-seated, nor ivory towered or arcane, but common' (Page, 2002: x), which chimes with the New Puritans' interest in reflecting the contemporary as a mark of modernity.

Those involved in *All Hail...* went their separate ways after the publication of the anthology. There were still some half-hearted attempts towards a continuation of the experiment that they had initiated in the book, but with no ambition of making it last much longer. A group story, 'Bangkok Hilton', by Nicholas Blincoe, Scarlett Thomas, Tony White, Matt Thorne and Anna Davis was published in the New York magazine *Black Book* in the Fall issue of 2001, and that was the only other time when some of the New Puritans wrote under the same name, in this case 'The Players'. It was a choose-your-own-adventure style story and the playful nature of the whole thing was clear from the start.

Nicholas Blincoe's novel *White Mice* (2002), set in the fashion industry, was the only long narration written following the rules of the manifesto. But that was it. The New Puritans project, however, continued

appearing in surprising venues outside Britain. The New Puritans have often been linked to international movements by young writers who shared the same iconoclastic attitude, notably the *Crack* group in Mexico. While this literary movement, formed by writers Ignacio Padilla, Jorge Volpi, Eloy Urroz, Pedro Ángel Palou, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda and Vicente Herrasti, shared with the New Puritans a rebellious attitude toward their immediate predecessors, they also differed in many respects. For a start, their own manifesto was published four years earlier, in 1996, and their reaction was against the poor, indulgent and commercial literature that had followed the glorious Latin-American 'Boom' of the 1960s and 1970s. Their ambition was to go back to their pantheon of classic writers (Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez...) and they favoured a kind of cultivated, learned and complex literature in



which linguistic experiments were not shunned, very much the opposite of 'the lineal, direct, almost Hellenic narrative' (Padilla, 2007: 35-36 – my translation) promoted by the New Puritans.

Both groups met at an event organized by the ICA in London on 26 November 2002 with Ignacio Padilla and Pedro Ángel Palou, on one side, and Matt Thorne and Ben Richards (the member of the British team who was best acquainted with Latin American literature), on the other, and had a pleasant public discussion, as Ignacio Padilla remembers:

Everything was very correct and civilised, cleverly incensed but within a sober atmosphere, appropriate for university students fed up with their bohemian predecessors and perhaps wearied also by our own comings and goings around the world, tired of our own manifestos, blatantly playful as they were, certainly

contradictory and not as immobilized as everyone else thought them to be. (Padilla, 2012 – my translation)

The continuation of the New Puritan project came from old Europe, from a country which had just come out of a war and was experiencing a thirst for culture. Croatia was one of the countries where the translation of *All Hail...* was first produced, a few months after the book was published in English. Some of the contributors to the book were invited to a Croatian festival of alternative literature (FAK) by one of the organizers, writer Borivoj Radaković, who had in fact coordinated the translation of *All Hail...* In the FAK gatherings writers from all over the former Yugoslavia came together to give public readings of their work to an enraptured audience. These readings did not take place in institutionalized places of culture, but in pubs or clubs, and the young British authors felt enthusiastic

about the energy and high spirits of these events and were frequent guests at them.

For Nicholas Blincoe, the two groups shared the same views on literature, but they approached the matter from different perspectives. If the New Puritans reacted against historical and poetic writing for aesthetic reasons, Croatian writers had more profound motives to supersede old forms. On the one hand, they needed time to digest the recent war in the Balkans and were not prepared to look back to the immediate past, preferring instead to focus on the contemporary. On the other hand, an inclination to poetic language would imply a continuation of the bardic tradition, which has a strong nationalistic bias in Croatia, and they wanted to avoid that at all costs. Perhaps for these reasons the link that existed between the New Puritans and the FAK writers was somehow based on a 'slight misunderstanding' (Blincoe, 2005).

As a consequence of the collaboration between young writers from such different parts of Europe, a volume of short stories, *Croatian Nights*, was published in 2005, edited by Borivoj Radaković, Matt Thorne and Tony White. The anthology included stories by six New Puritans (including Thorne and White) among its 18 contributors, nine of them British and nine from Serbia and Croatia.

The stories in *Croatian Nights* do not follow the rules of the New Puritan manifesto, although they share a direct style and an interest in the present. All but one are set in Croatia. Serbian writer Vladimir Arsenijević, one of the contributors, explained in this way the affinities of the Serbian and Croatian writers with the New Puritans:

The thing is, we discovered that just like us they rebelled against the previous generations of writers and the baroque pomposity of the then

prevailing literary style and wanted to craft something which was much more simple, sharp and in tune with the times and our own general sensibility which was formed as much through music, movies, youth subcultures as through direct touch with literature. However, while our writing in the region of former Yugoslavia was by far more politically charged and anti-war at that ... they tended to be more inclined to pop culture and cultural references as well as boldly redefining elements of genre, etc. But we were both strongly drawn to return to basic storytelling and saw ourselves as something like literary punk rock as opposed to deadly boring prog-rock of the symphonic, overtly complex and self-absorbed writings of the previous generation. So, you could say that we were quite alike but we also differed greatly at the same

time and I think that this was the element which made us connect so well. (Arsenijević, 2011)

Gradually the impact of the New Puritans began to ebb away and the idea that the movement involved a close-knit generation of writers, had it ever existed, disappeared completely. In 2004 Nicholas Blincoe even published a historical novel, *Burning Paris*, the very genre they despised at the time of their seminal anthology. He had become, he said, a Renegade Puritan: 'I really strongly believe now that if you destroy everything and blow all the bits up into the air, you've got no control over the way they fall' (cited in Guest, 2004).

The kind of writing that *All Hail the New Puritans* promoted was also suffering the effects of wear and tear and it was in many ways turning into a mannerism. Blincoe, reflecting on what they had achieved, believed

that their focus on the present had led to ‘a curious affectless, almost autistic tone which can now be seen everywhere – in TV and films as well as contemporary fiction. I would characterize it as a semi-dazed aesthetic, appropriate to our times’ (Blincoe, 2011). Blincoe’s complaint about a style that was getting old strongly echoes Toby Litt and Ali Smith’s comments in their introduction to *New Writing 13*, published in 2005. Having read a large amount of fiction that was submitted for the anthology, Litt and Smith lamented the profusion of unadventurous, bland and dull writing among the typescripts: ‘we began to believe that somewhere out there is a strange, pseudo-English country called Short-Story-Land where all day long, peculiarly short-story-like things happen. We began to dread starting a story only to find we were once again in Short-Story-Land’ (Litt and Smith, 2005).

What is left of the New Puritans, then? Why a

collection of essays on this evanescent literary group? Those whom we have given the name of the New Puritan generation were a few more than a dozen writers who just got together for a short while on a common project and then carried on with their careers in their own particular way. But for a brief period they managed to suspend time and, like a mosquito trapped in an amber drop, produced a handful of stories which reveal an untainted, empty and media-orientated commercial age locked with its own obsessions, unaware of the horrors that would shortly begin. The extreme reactions provoked by that particular collection of stories initiated a debate on the future of the new literature whose implications are still resonant.

## **6.- The present study**

The purpose of this book is to study the impact made

by the New Puritans on British literature and to examine the evolution of some of the most relevant members of the group. A number of academics from Britain and Spain have elaborated scholarly essays with the aim of providing varied and stimulating insights into this current of writing. The papers collected here are assembled thematically, offering general characteristics of the group in the first half and studies of individual authors in the second.

Paul March-Russell looks into the careers of the New Puritans in the decade that followed the publication of the book. In his chapter he examines the ideological environment of the day and assesses the importance of the movement and its different outcomes, providing guidelines to understand the whole generation of writers. David Owen's polemical essay casts a dispassionate glance at Blincoe and Thorne's rules of composition in *All Hail...* He examines

the grounds on which the editors of the collection based their rupture from the past and finds in their prologue shallow motives to disregard a previous tradition. Sonia Villegas-López reads the stories of the four women writers in the collection from a genre perspective, using the notion of 'trace' as a critical tool. In her article, issues such as family dynamics, love, place, mourning and loss are analysed in the light of Feminist narratology. José Francisco Fernández traces the connections between the New Puritan movement and the dominant political project of the period, New Labour, finding that the stories in the anthology reacted dubiously as regards the model of society promoted by Tony Blair. Bianca Leggett pays attention to the two most cosmopolitan authors of the collection, Geoff Dyer and Alex Garland, and takes their forays abroad as the starting point for a disquisition on their Englishness as well as other issues, including the

blurring boundaries between travel writing and travel fiction. Sara Martín reviews the irregular and fascinating career of Alex Garland, once the rising star of a literary generation, and explores the author's search for self-expression through screen writing, graphic novels and computer games. Miriam Borham Puyal studies the features that have made Scarlett Thomas's writing so distinctive, including her transgression of genres, her penchant for riddles and puzzles and her recreation of (and reaction to) a consumerist culture. The need to understand Toby Litt's deconstruction of contemporary Englishness informs the essay by Laura Monrós Gaspar. England, Gaspar argues, appears in Litt's novels both as a perfectly recognisable and an utterly distorted entity, as befits a country in a moment of transitional identity. Finally, in his Afterword, David James considers the legacy of the New Puritans within the wide context of

contemporary literature, revealing their inner tensions and contradictions as well as the relevance of their pronouncements.

As a final remark, the anthology which has given rise to the present project should be considered as a prism which refracts a number of critical debates on contemporary fiction, which is in fact one of the aims that Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne had in mind when they published their book. As it is being considered from different perspectives, quotes from the anthology are occasionally repeated in the different essays. This is not an oversight on the editor's part, rather it reflects the impact that the prologue and the stories of *All Hail the New Puritans* were able to generate.

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