

# A Barking Dog?: Manchester Writing and English Regional Culture

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The aim of this paper is to present a small contribution to the poetics and cultural politics of place both in Britain and in the broader context. The work of the American poet Charles Olson has provided both poetry and issues of place with renewed significance but his work, like that of his most obvious forerunner, William Blake, tends towards a form of tendentious obscurity which limits its audience to a relatively tiny minority. In the field of poetry this tendency has been intensified by followers of Olson's approach, such as J. H. Prynne and Allen Fisher, to name two of the most eminent examples. A rather more accessible form of development has appeared in the London novels of writers such as Iain Sinclair, Michael Moorcock, and Peter Ackroyd who manage to dramatise the specificity of London places in ways partly comparable to Olson.

Many of the British writers, particularly the novelists, adopt a less directly antagonistic stance towards the depredations of global capital, though elements of such a position are still clearly identifiable. Here, though, I wish to make a further link between British writing of a more widely accessible nature and the work of writers such as Olson by briefly examining some aspects of both the development of Manchester as a late twentieth century post-industrial city-region and some of the detective fiction which has accompanied and represented that development. My intention is to suggest that connections need to be made between various forms of place and their written and other forms of representation in order to develop more equably differentiated forms of social space at regional and other levels, both in Britain and beyond.

About ten years ago, in the days of deepest Thatcherism, the Scottish historian and British Studies specialist Christopher Harvie wrote an essay entitled *English Regionalism: The Dog That Never Barked* (1991). He began his essay with reference to a number of discussions in the media of his adopted home country Germany about developments in British regionalism. He observed that while plenty of references were made to the development of Scottish nationalism during this period:

the *politics* of the English provinces were summed up by one of the Manchester Rockers saying that his ideology went as far as his trousers. Whatever European salience the English regions have achieved in fashion or entertainment (think of Liverpool in the 1960s) this has never extended to politics. (Harvie 1991: 105)

Harvie then went on to suggest that the Manchester rocker had a point and to develop an argument about the problem of centralisation in British culture and the difficulty but not the impossibility of developing an active, more self-defining and creative English regional culture to match those of his own native country, Scotland, and those of many other European countries. The English problem, as Harvie saw it, was that of 'the Lake District treatment',

which rejected particularism in favour of projecting regions as 'politically-innocuous cultural divisions of the national community' (Harvie 1991: 110).

Ten years on has anything changed? In some ways the answer would certainly have to be yes. Britain is now governed by an administration which would seem to be more sympathetic to the politics of devolution, given developments including the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies. In addition to this, London now has a Lord Mayor and a substantial degree of control over its own affairs. In addition to this, eight R.D.A.s (Regional Development Agencies) have been created to encourage economic development in the regional areas that make up the rest of England.

In another essay, published last year, and entitled *Which Britain? Which England? Which North?* the cultural geographer, Peter J. Taylor, returns to the question of British and English regional identity (Taylor 2001). Taylor presents his argument in the context of Manuel Castells's influential survey of the development of the 'network society' and his conceptualisations of relations between a late twentieth century 'space of places' and 'space of flows' (Castells 2000). The best future for successful regionalism, in British, European and other contexts, Taylor suggests, is not in 'territorial' versions of regionalism usually defined and administered from a dominant centre. What is required is the development of 'city-regions' whose centres will be 'lower-tier' cities (as opposed to giant global cities such as London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Frankfurt and the like) and which will be able to network with one another effectively in a culture of global flows more sympathetic to such relations. He focuses on the cities of northern England and their potential for developing relations in such an environment:

London versus Newcastle or Manchester is no contest but co-operation between cities in different strata could well even things up politically. Manchester, Newcastle, and Leeds, with Birmingham, Glasgow and Edinburgh, might find they had common interest with the likes of Bordeaux and Marseilles, Cologne and Stuttgart, Seville and Valencia, Venice and Turin, and so on, against London and the rest of the apex. Such leagues of cities might create a very new European balance of power in a world space of flows. (Taylor 1991: 142)

However remote a possibility such 'leagues' or their equivalents might be, the prospect of developing a substantially regionalised England involves not only economic and political but also cultural considerations.

One of my aims here is to consider some elements of relations between political, social and cultural developments in the city which Harvie focuses on as emblematic of the difficulties facing the growth of English regionalism, namely Manchester. Since 1972, Manchester has been not merely a city but a conurbation which includes the neighbouring towns of Ashton, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport and Wigan and their surrounding areas, (though not the more affluent areas to the south which provide a home base for many of the richer elements of Greater Manchester's working population). Even so, with an official population of 2.4 million, Manchester is close to being the size of Wales, demographically speaking, and the population of north-western England, to which Manchester (and to a lesser extent, Liverpool) acts as centre, is the size of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland put together. This in itself would seem to suggest some claim to a greater degree of political independence, as well as cultural self-confidence.

Part of the problem, however, is perhaps precisely a lack of cultural self-confidence. Scotland and Wales have no problem in appealing to cultural histories lasting a thousand years or more, nurtured over the last two hundred years by developments in modern nationalism. During the latter period, towns like Manchester have merely begun to come into

being. Their histories and cultures are not framed in terms of modern appeals to ancient pedigrees. Manchester is most distinguished in its history by virtue of being the world's first industrial city. Its roots are in the development of capitalist modes of social and economic production. Its founding cultural figures are figures connected to radical economic and social thinking, whether sympathetic or antipathetic to the development of modern, capitalist, industrial technologies and cultures, as in Bright, Cobden, Engels and Gaskell. As writers such as Donald Horne and Martin Wiener have argued, northern, industrial towns like Manchester represent not so much a confident alternative to Englishness, such as that presented by Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but a dark, urban side which is not the 'real' England of village greens and country squires (see Wiener (1981: 41-2) for both Wiener's views and elements of those of Horne (1969).)

Margaret Thatcher partially challenged this positioning by her championing of many of the "northern" values characterised by Horne, particularly those of 'enterprise' and 'rational, calculating, economic self-interest', but combining them with a form of English nationalism whose base was firmly in the south-east of the country. Declining post-industrial cities like Manchester tended to be treated as "inner-city" problems, bringing themselves to sharp attention in rioting modelled on that in south-east England's treacherous "inner-city" heart, London. The solution in many cases was the bulldozing of troubled areas and their replacement by a mixture of relocation, better-housing and enterprise zones which even offered accommodation to tempt the money-makers away from their country houses in the Home Counties or Cheshire for at least some of the time.

The economic and accompanying social problems of northern English cities cannot, of course, simply be attributed to the policies of Margaret Thatcher and her governments and it would be equally churlish to deny that some of the initiatives promoted by those administrations had positive effects. During the later 1980s and the 1990s there were signs that Manchester's star was perhaps creeping into the ascendant, although there is much to suggest that the hype far outstrips the reality. But the kinds of change which occurred partly recall a traditional element in the city's identity, a particularly powerful combination of economic enterprise and social deprivation accompanied by related forms of social and economic thinking and cultural production.

What then are these developments of the later 80s and the 90s? The story of provincial versions of Docklands developments has been recorded in numerous publications (see Middleton 1991 for an introductory survey). The most obvious morale-booster in this respect was the opening of the "Metrolink" light rapid transit transport (a.k.a. tram) system in 1992 after ten years of negotiations. The permission to provide such a system, finally granted in 1989, was itself indicative of improved relations between national and local government and a change of approach on the part of the latter. The change has been characterised as one from the "municipal socialism" which emerged in local governments opposed to Thatcherism to the more entrepreneurial approach of the "new left" represented by new Council leader Graham Stringer and nationally by what subsequently became known as New Labour or Blairism (see Steve Quilley's article 'Entrepreneurial Turns: Municipal Socialism and After' (in Peck & Ward 2002: 76-94). Other "flagship developments" included the Bridgewater Hall, the Lowry Arts project, the Olympic Bid and subsequent hosting of the Commonwealth Games, and the rebuilding of Marks & Spencer and part of the city-centre, after the detonation by the IRA of a bomb which might have killed 80,000 people had it gone off an hour earlier (unfortunately, notoriously, the bomb failed to do any lasting damage to the Arndale Shopping Centre or the Piccadilly Plaza, both strong candidates for the title of ugliest building in the history of British architecture). In addition to these projects (accompanied by the bulldozing and rebuilding of the Hume and Moss Side housing estates), the club culture scene, whose flagship was the Hacienda club and the groups who played in it, and the gay village, made Manchester an

attractive venue for other forms of entrepreneurial initiative. Manchester assumed a variety of identities—from ‘Madchester’ to ‘Gaychester’ to ‘Glamchester’- but continued to retain strong elements of an older, Coronation Street style ‘Glumchester’ and to develop an other element of its identity, namely, as ‘Gunchester’. One of the results of all of these developments was the more visible appearance of writing, of various forms, coming from and concerned with Manchester. Here, I want to focus on just two kinds, that of academic or factual studies which succeeded in reaching a wider audience or market, and crime and detective novels set in the area.

One of the more interesting and visible cultural developments in the last ten years or so has been that between the rise, or resurgence, of Manchester’s reputation as a centre of pop music and club life and the development of cultural studies, particularly popular cultural studies, in the city, as evinced by the publications of the late Anthony Easthope, and those of a variety of writers associated with the Institute for Popular Cultural Studies. All of this work has come from Manchester Metropolitan University, (the old Manchester Polytechnic), rather than the University of Manchester, though the latter would seem to have recently persuaded Terry Eagleton, Manchester born and bred, to move from Oxford and take up residence as Professor of Cultural Studies.

It is Dave Haslam’s book, *Manchester, England: The Story of the Pop Cult City* (1999), which has most effectively represented recent developments in popular culture in the city itself by connecting them significantly to earlier aspects of its history. Equally importantly, Haslam provides Manchester with a definite, tangible cultural geography in the naming of specific streets, areas and other forms of place, which he often also provides with histories, of one kind or another. John Parkinson-Bailey’s *Manchester: An Architectural History* (2000) provides a more conventional but comparable form of historical geography, accounting for most of the major (and not so major) buildings in the centre of the city, whether they be warehouses or art-galleries, and continuing the history of the city’s architectural development right up to the present phase of dynamic change and the attempt to give Manchester the look of ‘A European City’, the title of his concluding chapter. Peck and Ward’s *Manchester: City of Revolution: Restructuring Manchester* (2001) focuses on the local political and administrative details of restructuring processes over the last twenty years and focuses even more on the problematic and limited nature of many of the changes but again provides a relatively detailed local, this time political and administrative, geography which presents Greater Manchester as more than an amorphous, northern industrial mass. One might cite other examples, most notably Taylor et al.’s slightly earlier comparative socio-geographical comparison of ‘structures of feeling’ in Manchester and Sheffield, where local voices, the voices of those interviewed during the study, play an interestingly and admirably prominent role in the text rather than being reduced to socio-geographical statistics (Taylor et al. 1996). The main point to be made, though, is that there are an increasing number of books which significantly blur the line between the academic and the popular, providing elements of a detailed socio-geographical history of the economy and culture of the Manchester area. My claim here is not that there is anything unique in this phenomenon but that it is a welcome development which one hopes is occurring in other parts of Britain and continuing to gain momentum. Also, it bears some comparison with developments in literary fiction, the last area to which I wish to devote some attention here.

The novel which most effectively managed to both dramatise the nature of aspects of Manchester’s troubled urban society and to highlight elements of its local geography has been, in my view, Karline Smith’s *Moss Side Massive* (1995). More copies of the book were, at times, available in Manchester’s principal record-store than in its principal bookshop. The novel describes elements of gang-warfare and social and emotional relations in the then notorious Moss Side and Hulme areas and avoids the more predictable hard-boiled detective

style of most of the other Manchester crime novelists. The compelling nature of Smith's novel derives primarily from its attempt to provide a sustained portrayal and analysis of specific, particularly black, communities. This is not by any means to dismiss the work of other writers, such as Nicholas Blincoe, Mike Hamer, Frank Lean, Val McDermid or Cath Staincliffe. In fact, some of these writers present a much more broad and detailed evocation of specific places in Manchester and the North-West.

Val Mc Dermid is a highly prolific, Scottish-born, Oxford-educated, ex-tabloid journalist who has produced several series of crime novels. One of these series is based in Manchester, her current home base. Her novels range over various parts of the city and also stretch their concerns further afield, covering the north-west region of England and sometimes making connections with Europe. All of the novels are studded with self-conscious attempts to comment on and characterise specific places, streets and areas in Manchester and beyond. To take one example, in *Star Struck* (1999), we find Kate Brannigan, the detective of the Manchester series, minding a Coronation Street ("Northerners") superstar, Gloria Kendal, loosely modelled on Pat Phoenix and her Elsie Tanner character. Comments made on particular places are usually predictable, though far from inaccurate. At one point the detective-narrator finds herself in the Arndale Centre:

[T]he soulless shopping mall in the city centre that the IRA tried to remove from the map back in '96. As usual, they got it wrong. The Arndale, probably the ugliest building in central Manchester, remained more or less intact. Unfortunately, almost every other building within a quarter mile-radius took a hell of a hammering, especially the ones that were worth looking at. (McDermid 1999: 34)

One might note here the way in which the voicing of popular opinion usually to be found in popular tabloids, national and local, fits comfortably into the narrative of the local detective novel. A little earlier, Brannigan has been in the Saddleworth area and takes the opportunity, as narrator, to comment both on the property values and most luridly prominent aspect of its recent local history:

Gloria lived in Saddleworth, the expensively rural cluster of villages that hugs the edges of the Yorkshire moors on the eastern fringe of Greater Manchester. The hills are still green and rolling there, but on the skyline the dark humps of the moors lower unpleasantly, even on the sunniest of days. This is the wilderness that ate up the bodies of the child victims of Myra Hindley and Ian Brady. I can never drive through this brooding landscape without remembering the Moors Murders. (McDermid 1999: 24)

Again, this is a popular perception and here it might also be noted that many such perceptions are recorded, as in Ed Soja's Los Angeles, from the interior of a moving car (see Soja 1996 for a discussion of relations between car-travel and perceptions of the "post-metropolis").

Frank Lean's novels provide a comparable perspective on Manchester, though perhaps more detailed and original in perception, possibly because he has been a lifelong resident of the area. His novels do not have the economy and narrative drive of those by McDermid but this is partly because his priorities are often elsewhere, with the city and the details of its history and geography rather than with the provision of punchy, popular generalisations. Here, David Cunane, Lean's private-detective-narrator is making a call on a woman who lives in the south of Manchester:

She lived in Chorlton in one of an estate of identical box-like homes built off the King's Road. The estate had been put up in the 1920s as part of Manchester's urban sprawl, handy for the tram and the main roads. Space for tennis and cricket clubs had been allocated for residents with sporting interests. These still survived in the area, although several local churches had been converted into temples and mosques. Cyril and Claude had been replaced by Asif and Sanjay, but, apart from that, the neighbourhood looked much as it must have done in the '20s. (Lean 1997: 140)

The passage is taken from one of Lean's earlier novels, *The Reluctant Investigator* (1997), and betrays the interests of a writer whose enthusiasm for local history might endear him to some readers more than others. Like many of the earlier writers of non-fiction mentioned, Lean has a clear interest in relating the present of the city to its past in all sorts of ways and all sorts of places. One could go on in this vein and make numerous observations about the geographical predilections of various Manchester crime writers. My point here has simply been to draw attention to the fact that they form a substantial and significant area of discourse, one with interesting divergences in perception and presentation and one which might be compared with more "serious" forms, whether academic or literary. It might also be compared with another closely related form, that of television drama. The Jimmy McGovern-scripted series *Cracker*, whose first episode was directed by another local to the area, Michael Winterbottom, is the most conspicuously successful example of a fiction which brings Manchester to a wider public eye, though again in relatively general terms.

To conclude, the principal point to be made here is not that there is anything more special about Manchester than anywhere else but that there is an important job to be done in identifying, analysing and comparing the various elements that make up city-regional cultures and that numerous forms of written texts form a substantial part of the broader whole. What has been provided here is, of course, nothing more than an introductory sketch in relation to one city-region. None of the writers referred to here evinces the cosmological ambitions of a Charles Olson or the literary sophistication of an Iain Sinclair but this may be as much an advantage as a drawback. The development of a genuinely regionalised Britain depends on the development of intra-regional and inter-regional cultures with sufficient confidence and self-critical ability to challenge the dominance of the global mega-cities. Various forms of cultural production, including the literary, can help to mount and maintain this kind of challenge and will require a sufficiently stimulating critical environment in which to do so.

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